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Commentary Article

ON THE VALUE OF LONGITUDINAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY AND A RESPONSE TO POSTILL

Ece Algan*

Abstract

Ethnographic examinations of media and social change can focus too narrowly on the changes taking place at the time of introduction of a new communication technology and thus can end up being incredibly short-sighted and celebratory in their approach. Postill argues that inquiries into media's role in social change should not be done through time-constrained ethnographic methods, but rather should follow a more biographical model that better accounts for ongoing social change. In response to his essay in this issue and in light of my fieldwork experience in the same site during the past 15 years, I discuss the value of adopting a longitudinal approach to media ethnographies with focused or punctuated revisits (Burawoy, 2003) to the field.

Key Terms

longitudinal ethnography, ethnographic returning, media, social change, diachronic ethnography.

UZUN SÜRELİ ETNOGRAFINİN ÖNEMİ ÜZERİNE VE POSTILL'E BİR YANIT

Öz

Medya ve toplumsal değişimi inceleyen etnografik yaklaşımlar, araştırma objesi olarak çoğunlukla yeni bir iletişim aracının ortaya çıktığı noktadaki değişimlere odaklandığından, yeni teknolojinin dönüştürücü gücünü fazlasıyla öne çıkarma eğilimi göstebilmektedirler. Bu yüzden Postill, medyanın toplumsal

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değişime olan etkisini anlamak için belli bir zamanla kısıtlandırılmış etnografik yöntemler yerine, devam etmekte olan toplumsal değişimin altını çizebilecek biyografik bir yöntemin gerekliliğini savunmaktadır. Kendisinin bu sayıdaki makalesine yaptığım yorum, kendi uzun-sürelili medya etnografisi araştırmamdan da örneklerle ve Buroway'un (2003) sahaya odaklı ve kesintili geri dönüş yönteminden yola çıkarak, uzun-sürelili bir medya etnografisi yaklaşımının önemine vurgu yapmaktadır.

Anahtar Terimler

uzun-sürelili etnografi, art zamanlı etnografi, medya, toplumsal değişim, sahaya geri-dönüş

John Postill's article in this issue, "The diachronic ethnography of media: from social changing to actual social changes," proposes a shift in our ethnographic inquiry from the "present continuous" to the "ethnographic past tense." He argues that inquiries into media's role in social change should not be done through time-constrained ethnographic methods, but rather should follow a more biographical model that better accounts for ongoing social change. Indeed, ethnographic examinations of media and social change can focus too narrowly on the changes taking place at the time of introduction of a new communication technology and thus can end up being incredibly short-sighted and celebratory in their approach. In order to overcome such a narrow focus on "social changing," as he calls it, that treats change as "imminent (and immanent)" and lacks historical grounding, Postill (2017) suggests that we conduct a "multi-timed fieldwork" and adopt a diachronic ethnography model that "can handle the biographical logic of actual social changes." (p. 22)

While I see merit in the shift he suggests and agree that we have a "collective reluctance as a discipline to date our research" and "romanticise 'non-Western' time," I also find his reasoning that "clock and calendar time may be the most universal of all human codes" (p. 32) highly problematic and, more importantly, irrelevant to why we should be adopting a time-and-history-conscious approach into our fieldwork. After all, time is not necessarily linear when media circulate and recirculate. From the perspective of media and cultural studies, the responsibility of media ethnography should first be to abandon an "impact studies" approach that privileges media as the generator of social change. Rather, in order to more honestly account for the mechanisms of social change, researchers should conduct longitudinal ethnographies (Algan, 2013) in order to accurately situate media within ongoing contexts of social

change. This approach necessarily avoids fetishizing an “ethnographic present” that credits media with overblown transformative power in “social changing”.

While I am in agreement with Postill about the importance of a diachronic approach, I have reservations regarding how his current formulation can help us get there because his emphasis is mostly on identifying the problem of “social changing” in existing research as opposed to illustrating how a diachronic ethnography of media can help us overcome the shortcomings. The lack of such formulation coupled with the absence of actual examples of diachronic ethnography of media other than a hypothetical one Postill provides makes me wonder if countless studies and efforts aimed at remedying this problem --even if they fall short in some respects-- have been downplayed in his essay. A significant body of anthropological as well as media and cultural studies work on media, modernity, gender, religion, and national identity does what Postill would like to see which is, in his words, “to combine our existing preference for ‘emergent’ micro-processes and practices with a newly found interest in large-scale processes that have reached a mature stage in their life courses,” even if they do not capture change in such chronological fashion with a beginning, middle and an end, as Postill idealizes. Capturing social change in such a neat chronological order, as in decades for instance to refer to Postill’s hypothetical example as well as his categorization of media anthropology’s progression, is not likely to be possible in real life as my longitudinal ethnographic study over 15 years has also shown me.

What would be more helpful to me as a researcher who is always looking for creative methods for understanding people’s everyday media and cultural experiences while grounding them in larger historical complexity would be to read a thorough discussion of those existing studies successful at a biographical approach, some of which Postill has already cited and some others with longitudinal and reflexive approaches that I would like to mention. This would allow us to have a debate on what works and what does not for a diachronic ethnography. The question that still needs to be answered then is: how does or should one conduct a diachronic ethnography? If it means, inserting historical references and texts in order to provide a background for larger macro processes, how does it differ from a historical anthropological approach? If it means more than chronicling the socio-cultural and political events that shape people’s experiences with media, what does diachronic ethnography actually look like in practice? If it means a careful reading of micro experiences with larger macro processes in mind, then doesn’t any comprehensive reflexive ethnographic account that

chronicles how change in media engagement over time has corresponded to social change already accomplish it? How does a diachronic approach affect the actual research process as well as the outcome? Last but not least, what does a diachronic ethnography of *media* look like since based on Postill's hypothetical example, asking questions regarding media's role is almost an afterthought. For us media studies scholars, designing a research study whose focus and subject of inquiry is not directly related to media will certainly constitute a problem.

To refresh readers' memory, Postill's hypothetical example has to do with the villagers who switched from subsistence farming to waged labour in the 1980s and 1990s. According to him, a processual analysis of this social change and its media dimensions would first "1. start with the historical origins (or birth) of this shift, where one could interview the first villagers to make the switch to waged labour back in the 1980s... as well as other historical agents involved with this stage of the process; the media aspects of this early adoption would be woven into the interviews." Then it would "2. continue with a series of interviews with local farmers who took up waged labour in the 1990s" and "3. end with the final stage of the process, namely the point at which the practical totality of villagers have by now abandoned farming and rely almost entirely on waged labour for their livelihoods." In these steps, he states that "in addition, one could again enquire about the media forms and practices related to this middle phase but always avoiding 'media-centric' biases." So, I wonder if he is proposing that we should cease researching media directly in order to avoid being perceived as media-centric. I certainly hope not. Since his above hypothetical and other real example on the African car also does not foreground media, Postill's idea of diachronic ethnography of media becomes rather confusing. Is he prescribing a *diachronic ethnography of social change* where media should be seen only as one of the institutions that plays a role in larger social change? While I also do not think of media as a primary agent of social change but rather as tools or means that assist people in coping with everyday life and larger societal changes around them, I still think any sort of media ethnography aimed at inquiring about media's role should raise a research question that links media to a particular socio-cultural phenomenon.

Based on my own fieldwork experience in doing media ethnography, I, too, wanted to develop a better methodology that would help me situate young people's media experiences in a larger context so I could trace how media have intersected, contributed, impacted, revealed, aided or prohibited young people's lived experiences

as well as imaginations over time. I arrived at the idea of longitudinal ethnography when I returned to the field in Şanlıurfa, Turkey, and then returned again four years later so I could reflect on some of my unanswered questions that arose in my writing and conceptualization. Seeing how media use had changed despite the fact that some of the everyday life worries and social-cultural dilemmas stayed more or less the same, such as the issues of youth agency regarding decisions on education and marriage and reputational implications of media use, I wondered if my previous assessment of media's affordances in the everyday lives of youth reflected sufficiently the complexity that I had started to see once I began returning to the field and considered media's role over time. This made me aware of the necessity of adopting a longitudinal approach, where I started mapping larger societal changes against changes in media use and daily realities of youth as well as their life aspirations over a big duration of time. By doing that, I was able to illustrate how earlier social networks via old media, such as local radio, have been replaced by social media as well as the implications of this transformation in the public sphere. For instance, while YouTube has replaced local radio listenership and on-air audience interactions that were common among youth in Şanlıurfa until the mid 2000s, Facebook, chatrooms and mobile communication have replaced dating practices that involved radio song requests. Due to the personalization of youth media consumption through multiple, smaller and private networks, mobile phone and social media played a role in diminishing the publicness of youth participation that I had observed in early 2000s while also reinforcing the existing gender, class and ethnic identity politics. For instance, while girls fear using their real names and pictures on their social media profiles, and hide from their families their Facebook accounts, boys are allowed and encouraged to have a visual presence with multiple accounts and girlfriends on Facebook.

While Postill acknowledges that "revisiting a site is a long-established anthropological practice" and that "there is nothing new about historicising ethnographic research and writing," he also states that "because of its relative youth, this is yet to be a common occurrence in the anthropology or ethnography of media, but it is likely that this will become more habitual as today's young scholars reach maturity" (p. 29). I do not think we should assume revisiting the field to become a habitual practice especially when, for media studies trained scholars, ethnographic research often means following the media object rather than committing to a site, whereas for anthropologists, their attention could be drawn to a different phenomenon

during their revisit --as (Peterson, 2009) has argued, "a growing amount of 'media anthropology' is being written by anthropologists who are not particularly interested in the media" (p. 338).

Doing longitudinal ethnography necessitates revisiting the same site, as in *focused revisits*, or doing *punctuated revisits*, a method of "long-term research which the same ethnographer conducts separated stints of field work in the same site over a number of years" (Burawoy, 2003, p. 670). According to Burawoy (2003), the purpose of the revisits is "to focus on the inescapable dilemmas of participating in the world we study, on the necessity of bringing theory to the field, all with a view to developing explanations of historical change" (p. 647). A limited number of media ethnographers (e.g. La Pastina, Straubhaar, & Sifuentes, 2014; Pace, 2013) examine the relationship between media and race since the beginning of telenovelas in rural communities or long-term impact of television in the Amazons since its introduction via long-term ethnographic research. Richard Pace (2013) followed a longitudinal approach when he revisited the 5 sites that Kottak (1990) has researched with the aim of exploring the impact of media in Brazil in the 1980s and compared his findings with those of Kottak's. In an introduction to the special edition of Kottak's (2012) book entitled *Prime-Time Society*, the author uses Pace's (2013) findings along with his own account of the significant chronological changes that took place in Brazilian society and its media environment to provide a historical update on what happened following his original research in the 1980s.

While an ethnographic update such as that of Kottak's (2012) only "brings an earlier study up to the present but does not reengage it" (Burawoy, 2003, p. 646), it can still give us clues regarding what changed or what did not and where media's role lies within a variety of societal changes. Similar to Kottak (2012), Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) also wrote an introduction to the 2000 edition and an afterword to the 2016 edition of her book *Veiled Sentiments* to reflect on her revisits, update the reader on the people whose stories were being told, and discuss the changes in the media landscape along with the larger socio-cultural changes in Egyptian society, such as the emergence of the piety movement. In addition to these longitudinal media ethnographies I discussed above, a review of anthropological and sociological research on social change in community and tourism studies that take a longitudinal approach (e.g. O'Connor & Goodwin, 2012; O'Reilly, 2012; Peacock, 1968; Philipson, 2012; Tucker, 2010) could also give us clues regarding the contribution of revisits or re-studies and exemplary methods

for conducting diachronic ethnographies that have a historical and/or biographical focus.

Despite its many contributions to a biographical approach, doing longitudinal ethnography poses lots of institutional challenges for the researcher as well as personal. In an academic environment where we are judged by a number of our research outputs, returning to the same site and focusing on the same line of inquiry might not be fruitful in the short term. Similarly, we might also end up having to change our research site due to personal reasons related to health or family as well as external reasons such as wars, conflicts, lack of research permits or grants if the research site becomes close in proximity to a conflict zone during the time of a revisit. For instance, even if I wanted to revisit my field at the moment, I would have to do it without letting my employer know or applying for grants since my site bordering Syria, Şanlıurfa, has been considered high-risk due to the war in Syria and the reignited Kurdish-Turkish conflict.

Nevertheless, I find longitudinal media ethnographies to be the best methodology for those who are interested in tracing how a certain medium is adopted, when and how it flourishes, what came before that particular medium, why it has become residual or obsolete, which medium people shifted to when the earlier one became obsolete, what people used to do before the emergence of a particular medium, or how media users' everyday realities have changed in that society. Adopting a longitudinal approach to media ethnographies with timed revisits to the field can also help us evaluate the biographical nature of media and social change ourselves without solely relying on our informants' memories and interpretations of their earlier media consumption.

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