
Books on media research, especially those covering content and audience effects, have reached our shelves and nourished our minds since Walter Lippmann’s groundbreaking work of 1922, Public Opinion, introduced the problem of public communication, globalization and democracy. So are more students of ethnocultural and international development expanding the advancements of “ferment” theories—the widely criticized contributions of Walter Lippmann, Daniel Lerner, Marshall McLuhan, Everett Rogers, Dennis McQuail, and Harold Lazarsfeld—through different forms of mass and international communication scholarship? As a computer-weaned generation and a new set of scholars turn to the works of those intellectual icons in order to explore the invention and habitation of new media environments, new questions on media theory and methodology must emerge that track the problematic of finding middle ground between media theory/methodology, media behaviour, and the discipline dubbed international media studies.

A quick overview of the field today points to a body of knowledge consisting of essays on ethnographic perspectives and the complications in defining culture and global or transnational power structures that Patrick Murphy and Marwan Kraidy have collected into their edited collection Global Media Studies. Despite the fact that a significant body of research have all debated nuances in the relationship between globalization, cultural hegemony and international communication research, gaps still exist between the development of ethnographic techniques and the challenges in conducting media field research.

Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives fosters the tradition of ethnographic inquiry by exploring the “theoretical and methodological challenges that are defining global media studies as a discipline.” The book is a much-needed diversion from recent studies that have traditionally addressed theories about media audiences without including the dynamics of the groups about which they theorize—the textual and rhetorical usage of ethnographic theory. Certainly, participant observation research gives ethnographic texts stronger credentials, in that it involves actual experiences and readers can easily relate experiences to facts.

Some of the contributors emphasize the relationship between globalization and local culture (or what I consider the creation of products and services for the global market but customized to fit the values of the local community), pointing to the ways in which audiences use media content, as well as contexts in different global locales, namely in Mexico, Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, the U.K., Japan, Lebanon, and Denmark.

The 313-page text is well formatted which facilitates reading and finding specific information. It is partitioned into five parts, sixteen chapters, a 6-page index, and detailed notes and references follow each chapter. In some instances, authors acknowledge assistance. So, to verify ideas, the reader does not have to leapfrog to the end and back.

In part 1, the editors introduce the subject of global media studies and ethnographic methodologies. Part 2 highlights developments in ethnography and global media research. In part 3, five different authors address the complexities in researching the local environment, using different methodological, historical, tutorial, and reflective dialectics. In two of the chapters, authors address lived experiences in Hawaii and the rural Appalachian community in the U.S. In part 4, contributors discuss the connections between globalization, ethnography, and the locale using case studies from countries in four continents—India, South Africa, Lebanon, and Mexico. Part 5 examines the local, global, and trans-local connections of media ethnography.

As regards the book’s content, I have mixed opinions. Mostly, the narrative technique for chapters dealing with fieldwork is rather casual, and the text reads more like an autobiography than a scholarly inquiry, thus distracting readers from the intellectual quality of

Reviews
ideas. There are too many personal pronouns and redundant expressions: “The circumstances through which I had come to do research in this particular place at this particular time, the specific history I shared with the women who became my informants...all influenced the way my research developed and the final written product of my work” (p. 111). Another contributor writes: “In 1999 I spent five months in Denmark. One day, I decided to visit Kornberg. What I could see, after a first gaze at the map, was that Kronberg was labeled there as Kronborg” (p. 57). It sounds like a transliteration. The absence of figures and tables may further hinder a strong appreciation of the main ideas being conveyed in this book. Additionally, a considerable number of contributors are not well known in the field. Therefore, one expects to see non-personal expressions, as this suggests personal opinion —something reserved for distinguished scholars/household names. However, the authors of chapters with case studies have experienced life within the communities under study, hence their knowledge of the terrain is an asset to the quality of information.

Some titles and research questions are poorly constructed. Chapter 4: Where is Audience Ethnography’s Fieldwork?, an examination into the psychophysical elements of audience space with reference to media reception practices in Western communication systems, inevitably begs the question. Would it not suffice to just entitle it, “An Examination of Psychophysical Space”? Even more embarrassing is the way, the chapter begins: “What is a place? What gives a place its identity?” (p. 57) If the book were written for freshmen and sophomores, this would be an excellent introduction—aimed at invoking the reader’s attention. But it is not a textbook. It does not have chapter summaries, assignments, questions/answers, and key terms are not defined. It is a reference book, written to foster research on globalization and media-audience ethnographies. If students and scholars of international communication must read a scientific version of the theoretical and methodological challenges that are defining global media studies, the text does not have to be 313 pages long. It would be shorter if the observers’ accounts of their experiences in the field were edited, leaving only activities directly related to the different audience-media reception modes and contexts, uses of media content, and audience relationships with the media.

Most books place contributors’ bios at end of the text. This sort of inclusion is aimed at impressing readers, or adding some credulity to the text. But my scholarly longings inform me that it is appropriate to place bios at the end of a scholarly text, in order to give the reader an unbiased perspective of the scholarly material to follow, not in the introductory pages. To present four pages of contributors’ bios, some with an average of eight lines per bio at the beginning, as did Murphy and Kraidy, is not only odd but also an attempt to distract the reader and deprive him of objectivity.

The book is not representative of international perspectives. There are no contributions from Black Africa or Black communities in the Diaspora, places with significant ethnographic backgrounds, capable of inclusion in a book on the challenges of media influence of globalization and ethnographic perspectives. Western Europe alone has two case studies but there are none from Eastern Europe, nor Australia, and only one on Asia and one on Africa, even though both continents are geographically larger and culturally more diverse than Europe. Those regions are ideal places for anthropological and hegemonic research because they have been heavily dependent on foreign media content for decades. The choice of countries studied and the academic backgrounds of the authors give the impression that the volume is based on invited contributions, rather than on a general invitation, which would have enabled the editors to draw more convincing articles from a larger pool of scholars. Since a comprehensive global representation is lacking in this book, its title is misleading. International Media Studies and Ethnographic Perspectives would be a more appropriate title.

Those weaknesses aside, there are chapters with eclectic arguments and thorough research. For example, in chapter 1 titled “Towards an ethnographic approach to global
media studies,” the editors include historical references almost a half century old, as when Lerner (1958) and later Wilbur Schramm (1964) opened the flood gates of cultural imperialism and modernization paradigms, to more recent references, thereby creating vistas for serious inquiry into the connections between ethnography and global media studies. Because of the absence of chapter summaries—qualities most appropriate for undergraduate students—and the inclusion of numerous sources, eclectic arguments and authors’ explanations of the methodologies used in ethnographic cases studies, the book should be most useful to international communication theorists and media entrepreneurs—those seeking sites for their products and services.

References

Emmanuel K. Ngwainmbi
Elizabeth City State University