

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a smartphone. The phone screen shows a page for 'OFF FESTIVAL' with a logo and some text. The person is wearing a dark wristwatch. The background is a light blue gradient.

Toward an Anthropology of Citizens' Media

*A proposal for an interdisciplinary approach for
researching citizens' media*

AAA Presentation, 11/2017

Foregrounding Quote:

“In January 1994 the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico inaugurated a new era of media used for dissent. Since that time, an array of dissenting collectives and individuals have appropriated media technologies in order to make their voices heard or to articulate alternative identities” (C. Rodriguez 2010).

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a white smartphone. The phone screen displays a webpage for 'OFF FESTIVAL LAJOWICE' with a logo and some text. The person is wearing a brown leather watch on their left wrist. The background is a light blue gradient.

Introduction – The Problem

- Today the Internet revolution in a few short years has spread overseas and into every corner of the globe. Teachers of higher education are utilizing web resources more every year—as the benefits of having global information and testimony inserted into classrooms becomes a widely accepted practice for creating engagement.
- There have been several edited volumes of articles defining anthropology's intersection with mass media scholarship and defining the subdiscipline of media anthropology through the lens of scholarly research.
- It is my contention, however, that the fragmentary nature of Internet media texts combined with the strategic dissemination of fallacies and propaganda now calls for a broad, interdisciplinary consolidation of methods for analyzing small scale media, or citizens' media, going forward in the discipline of anthropology.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays an app interface for 'OFF FESTIVAL LAJOWICE'. The app has a logo with a stylized figure and text including 'OFF FESTIVAL LAJOWICE', 'WYKONFIRMOWAŁEM', 'KUPUJ BILETY', and 'WYKONFIRMOWAŁEM'. The person is wearing a brown leather watch on their left wrist. The background is a blurred, light-colored surface.

The Purpose

- In this paper, I would like to outline a methodological framing borrowed from media and film studies, and social sciences that might help anthropologists deconstruct citizens' media in its diverse modalities.
- I would also like to suggest ways in which ethnographic and mass media discourse analysis might further the analysis of cultural contexts in citizens' media, to provide pathways for understanding media produced in small communities for diverse purposes and in multicultural contexts.
- It is my contention that a synthesis of small media research in the social sciences, mass communications, and film studies can be formed into a coherent multidisciplinary approach for researching citizens' media as it is practiced globally.



Orienting Concept/Reoriented Concept

In the publication of Clemencia Rodriguez' work, *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media* (2001), Rodriguez suggests Latin America is witnessing the emergence of the growth of “citizens’ media” (2001:20). For Rodriguez, this media is:

- emerging primarily from media-producing collectives that seek to enact citizenship “ by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape;” “contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations;” “empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible” (Rodriguez 2001:20).

For Rodriguez then, citizens’ media is the media of grassroots social activism

Reoriented Concept

For grassroots media analysis within anthropology, I would include this the definition but also go beyond social activist media and include:

- small-scale media produced by the average citizen in the practice of representing themselves, their viewpoints, and their culture; media often formatted into testimonial narratives—perhaps the most valuable of citizens’ media tropes for the ethnographer.



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In Framing the Research Domain...

Citizens' Media is Both a New and a Very Old Construct

- Like globalization the production of citizen's media is both a new phenomenon with new potentialities, and an old phenomenon with prevailing pitfalls.
 - The potentials are inherent in Rodriguez' definition of citizens' media—empowerment from the ground up and on a large scale. One person's experience can be broadcast to 80% of the world's population, empowering the individual as mediation becomes instantaneous, global, and more technically accessible.
 - The Pitfalls are that citizens' media can also replicate forms of tribalism and recirculate misinformation; and as we have seen, recapitulate collective ethnocentrism, insecurity, and racism.

The Research of Citizens' Media is Intersectional

- Understanding citizens' media in a broad contextualization requires an intersectional approach to explain a media producers ties to place and culture, intersecting fields such as gender studies and religious studies.

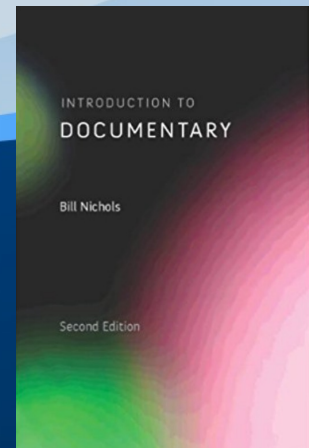
A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen shows a website for 'OFF FESTIVAL' with a logo and some text. The person is wearing a dark leather watch on their left wrist. The background is a light, out-of-focus surface.

Methodological Orientations

Suggested by Nichol's work in the three stories of film (*Introduction to Documentary*, 2001), I would submit for any one single narrative produced as citizens' media, there are potentially four stories intertwined in the media production of this media.

1. The Producers Own Story
2. The Subject/Context of the Story as Addressed -- *the topic of the story and the context of its placement in geography, culture, or history*
3. The Media Platform and Mode of Delivery -- *story of the medium in which the story is being told for example, the use and limitations inherent in using Facebook*
4. Reception -- *and finally the story of the reader/spectator and intertextual communication between producer and receptee.*

The goal of researching citizens' media is to be able to have the tools to analyze this media for its subtext/subjectivities, content/objectivities, intertext/reception – all for the overall media context.



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Creating a Research Synthesis for the Field of Citizens' Media

The Legacy of Ethnographic Representation

Innovation in Ethnographic Filmmaking

- The word *documentary* was coined by documentary filmmaker John Grierson in his review of the Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926) published in the *New York Sun* on February 8 of the same year: "The Film has *documentary* value."
- As Peter Loisos and other visual anthropologists have pointed out, the story of ethnographic filmmaking in the 20th Century was a history of innovation in the documentary filmmaking, evolving through a span of "Innocence to Self-Consciousness..." (1993). Part of this innovation in representation resulted in:
 - Experiments with event narrative (The Yanomami Films, Asch and Chagnon)
 - On location and *In-Situ* Life Stories and Testimonial Filmmaking (Marshall's !Kung/San Films, MacDougalls' Lorang's Way)
 - Experiment in Ethno-fiction (Jean Rouch's Films)
 - Post-modern Innovations in Documentary Film Representation (Robert Gardner's Films)
 - Sensationalized Reality (*Mondo Cane*, 1963).



Creating a Research Synthesis for the Field of Citizens' Media

The Legacy of Ethnographic Representation

The Quest for a non-distorted view of ethnographic reality

- Karl Heider in this book *Ethnographic Film* (2006) describes how ethnographic filmmakers can and have strived to limit distortion in the representation of people using:
 - Diegetic sound (on-location)
 - Whole bodies, and whole acts filmed
 - Developed ethnographic understanding of the film subject
 - Holism in behavioral contextualization

Ethnographic filmmaking provided a host of new visualizations of the human condition, but also a vibrant theoretical context to examine citizens' media in all of its global context and subjectivities.

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Creating a Research Synthesis for the Field of Citizens' Media

Intersections of Mass Communications and Anthropology

There have been several compilations of research outlining anthropology's intersection with mass communications (Ginsburg et al. 2002; Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005; Askew and Wilk, eds. 2002), but *The Anthropology of News and Journalism* (S. Bird, ed. 2010) outlines a few of the intersections that point to the “the era of new media” where

- “Making (Sense of) News in the Era of Digital Information” begins to be considered in anthropological terms with its emphasis on the “cross-cultural features of the contexts, meanings, and activities of journalism” (Boyer, 241).
- The lines between reportage and opinion are analyzed, a media era in which web news is “often ambiguous” (Russel, 279)
- The analysis of an era in which even “Common Sense No Longer Holds” in news production, where “ethics is hard to sell” in contemporary journalism (Vesperi, 268).
- Discourse rhetorical analysis in mass communications and cultural studies is utilized to understand media subtext, agendas, and propaganda (Chomsky et al. 2017; Taleb 2004; Couldry 2007, 2008, 2012).

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a white smartphone. The screen displays a social media post with the text 'OFF FESTIVAL' and 'LADWICK'. The person is wearing a dark brown leather watch with a silver buckle on their left wrist. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

Creating a Research Synthesis for the Field of Citizens' Media


"Cultural" Media in Communications Studies and Journalism

Small Cultural Media

- The term “small media” derives from Sreberny and Mohammadi’s investigations of cultural perspectives in mass communication studies. In the “Introduction” to *Small Media, Big Revolution* they introduce the idea of small media to explain how political pamphlets, recorded cassettes and video sermons of the Ayatollah Khomeini, disseminated under the radar of the Shah of Iran’s notice, created an underground social movement that fluoresced into wide scale revolution in Iran of 1979. Small media, they argued, can introduce counter-discourse to the “public sphere” and weave a “web of political solidarity” serving as the medium, or “carriers of oppositional discourse” (1994:xx).
- Small media practices like low budget radio-casting, flier dissemination, internet communiqués, dramatic writing and documentary filmmaking (Torres, 2010) etc., are opening up the democratic space of communication and entrées into the cultural media of place.

Ethnographic Journalism

Dudley Althaus, a reporter for the Houston Chronicle wrote a series of articles called *The Fated Forest* (2001) that recounted deforestation of the rainforests of Southern Mexico, providing an exceptional and nuanced portrait of competing indigenous interests—and a great example of ethnographic journalism.

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Potential Research Trajectories

New Challenges and Mediaspaces

New Challenges and Openings in Citizens' Media

Clemencia Rodrigues returned to Citizens' Media research in 2014 Rodriguez publishing an article titled "Four Challenges In The Field Of Alternative, Radical and Citizens' Media Research."

1. **Challenge:** neglecting historical context -- **Solution:** *adding ethnographic/historical context into citizens' media and critical media analysis*
2. **Challenge:** media analysis was being separated from its political economy frameworks --**Solution:** *analyzing the material motivations of citizen's media producers and the socioeconomic arenas of production*
3. **Challenge:** using simplistic definitions of communication -- **Solution:** *further disarticulating media production as a homogenous cultural practice*
4. **Challenge:** losing track of the field and re-inventing the wheel -- **Solution:** *sharing research between the disciplines*

Mediaspaces


Mass communications scholars have also brought the concept of mediaspaces to the discussion of citizens' media, described as "the importance of ideas of space and place to understanding the ways in which we experience the media in our everyday lives," (Couldry and McCarthy 2004). Part of this discussion also outlines ways in which the tension between grassroots media and corporate media can be framed in the global mediascape (Couldry 2002).

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Potential Research Trajectories Mediaplaces

I believe anthropologists have openings for describing mediaspaces (Ginsburg et al. 2002) but also opportunities for going further into the research “mediaplaces.” In varying degrees of urgency, anthropologists have specific opportunities for inserting their knowledge of place into citizens’ media production for the purposes of:

- Articulating hidden transcript—*mainstream media reacts like a “bewildered herd” when geographies in the world break open into public activism and violence. Anthropologists should actively produce citizens’ media sites where they can voice concern for social oppression before the onset of violence.*
- Further building out the anthropology of the individual in media—*cognitive anthropologists and life-story ethnographers have the opportunity to connect place to individual motivations in the analysis of small media production.*
- Bringing ethnographic avenues further into citizens’ media—*the innovation of ethnographic media is so far underutilized in the production of citizens’ media though journalistic programming like Vice News are beginning to utilize first-person media tropes successfully.*
- Teaching media literacy—*ethnographic media in the social sciences provides urgently needed avenues for for media literacy pedagogy in current college curricula.*

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Conclusion

Toward Narrative Holism

- Cross-disciplinary conversations about citizens' media will continue to yield new methodological and theory-based tools for connecting the many disparate threads of meaning posted onto the internet, creating whole stories and informing newsworthy events from multisided perspectives in pursuit of truth and transparency envisioned by early internet pioneers and ethnographic filmmakers.
- The post-factual global mediascape introduced to us in graphic terms over the past year has made it increasingly clear that some of the more nihilistic tendencies of postmodernism, that truth as reported is only perspectival, should instill in us a sense that media literacy as pedagogy needs to be advanced into our curriculum, and that the methods for instruction should be put in dialogue in a more urgent way.
- This paper has been in part my response to some of the more cynical exchanges between anthropologists and journalists. I have offered up some potential pathways for disentangling the internet media quagmire, and for anthropologists to get involved in building an interdisciplinary toolkit for contextualizing global media, advancing narrative holism across time, scale, and depth.