

From Interpretive Communities to Communities of Improvisation David Machin and Michael Carrithers (1996)

OVERVIEW: This paper was the product of a fourteen month ethnographic study conducted in the city of Valencia, Spain. By examining local newspaper journalists and readers, audience-media relationships, news production, audience response and the evolving views of the journalists themselves, the study critiqued existing approaches in media studies and proposed new ones.

KEYWORDS: Mutability, Landmarks, News, Reassembled Ethnography, Communities of Improvisation,

CONTEXT:

Previous to the Valencia study, media-audience relationships were analysed by grouping audiences according to their specific ethnic, age, gender, social class and occupational characteristics. This approach was based on the notion of an **interpretive community**, where a collective is taken to hold a uniform set of attitudes and beliefs, and possess a uni-dimensional set of values. The authors of this paper critique such a holistic notion, because of its inability to comprehend small scale changes and the reality of the “flux and flow of social life”. They propose a new methodology, wherein audiences are not studied according to membership or category, but by a range of influences that cut across one other. This new approach is related to two notions they propose: “**the reassembled ethnography**” and “**the community of improvisation**”.

KEY ARGUMENTS:

- I. People improvise more freely on the materials of culture, i.e. can have spontaneous statements and thoughts, based on individual experiences and contexts, than the notion of a monolithic interpretive community allows.
- II. People conduct these improvisations with a rich sense of each other in mind, and by using common tools.

Here, a sense of community refers not to shared values or qualities among a group, but the very sense that people have of one another as fellow participants in social life.

The idea of a **reassembled ethnography** deals with the idea that the notion of community is that of mutual awareness. The participants may change, but the conversation persists. Similarly, viewpoints taken by participants may change but their relatedness is constant.

KEY POINTS:

- I. Newspaper readers don't have stable responses to what they read but improvise different responses according to their circumstances and interlocutor.

- II. Newspaper journalists produce their texts through a similar process of improvisation. Hence, viewpoints in public can and do change with time.
- III. Despite the shifting, improvisational character of readers and journalists' work, there are, nevertheless, **landmarks** (themes) toward which they orient themselves, just as participants in a conversation orient themselves to topics of the conversation.

FIELDWORK AND ANALYSIS:

Four examples were produced to show the improvisational nature of readers' responses. In the study, a local man named Ignacio is shown to change his opinions about a popular murder case depending on where he is, who he is speaking to and when he is speaking. The usual location in which these conversations take place are the local cafe-bars. It is common to find newspapers in the bars that deliver the news that becomes topics of conversation in these places.

Ignacio does not have a stable response. Instead, he is improvising around certain landmarks and cultural themes. The themes may be contradictory, but his utterances are closely attuned to the attitudes and responses of those around him. What we cannot know is exactly what he might actually believe, as was sought by previous media studies.

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The way to think of Ignacio's talk is to regard him as having a changing relation to the world of affairs, agreed facts and widely known stories. Like most people, he is trying to have a realistic grasp of the larger world in which he lives while being involved in a tighter, faster cycle of awareness and response to his conversational partners.

Similarly, the authors argue that newspaper journalists produce their texts through an importantly similar process of improvisation, using a vivid and delicately responsive sense of improvisation made by their readers, while oriented by professional and institutional requirements and by the ideology of this newspaper. Without this ability to improvise in a way that is vividly sensitive to the improvisations being made by others, they would be unable to do their work. Journalists, therefore, gather a wide variety of their own experiences as interlocutors into more generalized responsiveness.

Therefore, there exists a mutually responsive feed cycle between the journalist and the public. This is what is

¹ (Image via unsplash.com)

meant by a **community of improvisation**, where there is a sense of one another as interlocutors either directly or through imagination and recollection.

The community is composed of not just, shared ideas, but also mutual gazes and mutual responses. There is a sense of **mutability** and **historicity** that runs throughout. As the conversation itself endures but both the participants, topics and attitudes can and do change continuously and mutability in the conversation occurs both on the small scale and the large.

This is typical for Valencia. Individuals will not have stable responses or opinions to news but will talk using a repertoire of culturally recognized **landmarks**. As they talk, they will be concerned not only with states of affairs and establishing the truth but also with the presentation of self in the competition and cooperation of social interaction.

TO CONCLUDE:

An ethnographic research method traditionally, through **participant observation**, collects a number of utterances in a community, from different people, on different occasions and uses them to generalize and illustrate a monolithic culture. The method suggested by the writers does not reject this **disassembly**, but instead suggests a corresponding work of **reassembly** so that details relevant and interesting are put back into the flow of experience on a small and large scale.

Along with participant observation, they recommend the addition of sensitivity to time, place and occasion, and a sense of historical time to achieve greater definition and interpretive force.

The proposed perspective is influenced by **ethnomethodology** or 'California sociology'. It suggests that to regard social life as mutable and subject to individual action, is to ignore the larger powers and patterns that demonstrably hold sway among us. There is nothing specifically Spanish in the statements and changing attitudes of the subjects analyzed. Nonetheless, there are features that stand out, and recurring themes in conversations that are distinctly Spanish, or at least distinctly Mediterranean. There are also well-worn conversational maneuvers that echo with much historical experience of power and its abuse in the Mediterranean.

Such **landmarks**, therefore, are used to navigate through social life. People improvise based on certain landmark ideas and do not actually improvise freely without restraint. These landmarks constitute precisely what is thought of as Spanish culture, and so it may seem that there are fundamental principles underlying the mutability of improvisation. But we must also be alert to regard even landmarks themselves as the products of improvisation.

“Ethnography is therefore never one of a culture in general, out of time, but of a particular set of people at a particular time.” (Machin & Carrithers, p.352)



REFERENCE:

Machin, D. and Carrithers, M. (1996). From 'interpretative communities' to 'communities of improvisation'. *Media, Culture & Society*, 18(2), pp.343–352.

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GLOSSARY:

Interlocutor: A person who takes part in conversation.

Ethnography: A method of research used in Anthropology based on participant observation to learn about lives and cultures of a particular group.

Something else you would like included in this glossary? Let us know [here](#).