

## **Ethnographic Journalism**

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## ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNALISM

Ethnography is primarily concerned with uncovering meanings – in particular, the meanings inherent to a particular group and its practices. The ethnographer accomplishes this awareness through a process of immersion into the life, routines, and rituals of the social setting under study. We will describe in this chapter the principles and techniques of ethnographic journalism, but we are well aware that the method could put reporters in an awkward position in relationship to “sources.” Reporting as social immersion would seem to violate the traditional understanding of objectivity as detachment from sources and subjects. However, we placed quote marks around the word “sources” for a reason – to emphasize that the task of grafting ethnography onto journalism requires us to revisit the author-subject relationship of reporting.

We offer what we hope is a persuasive rationale as to why journalists should use this powerful tool for observing and documenting social life. As we will describe, ethnography is really not the alien concept that some in a newsroom might imagine; its narrative scheme and observational methods are close kin to long-respected journalistic practices. But in providing practical suggestions for how to conduct this type of reporting, we will contemplate some of the ethical dilemmas that arise out of this blending of social science with journalism. We conclude with a description of a case study involving ethnographic reporting of panhandlers in a Northern California community.

### Principles and Techniques of Ethnography

Drawing on the root meanings of the words, “ethno” (people) and “graphy” (describing), Lindlof (1995) explains that an ethnographer traditionally tries to describe all relevant aspects of a culture’s material existence, social system, and collective beliefs and experiences (p. 20). Thus, the more detail an ethnographer supplies and the more in-depth the encounter with a particular

group, the greater the chances for a reader to understand that group and its members' feelings, thoughts, values, challenges, and goals.

Sociologists have used ethnography as a method in the field since the early 19th century (Gold, 1997; Marcus & Fischer, 1986/99), but the best-known early study might be Bronislaw Malinowski's visits to the Trobriand Islands in the 1920s (Lindlof, 1995). In his research, Malinowski exhibited the value of sustained, firsthand experience with a group's environment, language, rituals, social customs, relationships, and experiences in the production of a truthful, authentic, and comprehensive account of that culture (Berger, 2000; Keyton, 2001; Van Maanen, 1988). Other examples include ethnographies of such groups as street gangs (Conquergood, 1994), witches' covens (Lesch, 1994), and Vietnam veterans' meetings (Braithwaite, 1997). In each case, the ethnographer was immersed in the group's activities to provide an insider's standpoint. Such "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) provides a perspective that emerges from within a group rather than being imposed from the observer's point of view. Ultimately, ethnography as exploration and investigation of a case in detail results in an analysis that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 248).

This explicit interpretation, however, is only achieved through close contact with the group being studied. Ethnographers are cautioned against imposing their own views on the data they collect (in the form of observations, conversations, and participation in the group's activities). Max Weber (1947) argued that only from a group member's perspective could an authentic account be achieved. The observed group keeps the ethnographer in check by validating or challenging the ethnographer's interpretation of events, because members of that group are considered the ultimate authorities regarding the significance of events and practices pertaining to the group (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Gamble,

1978; Gold, 1997).

An ethnographer may participate in the life of a group at various levels, either as a complete participant, a participant as observer, an observer as participant, or as a complete observer (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Gold, 1958; Junker, 1960). We discuss in a subsequent section the practical and ethical considerations of enacting these roles in journalism. The complete participant is fully functioning as a member of the scene, but others are not aware of the ethnographer's role (Keyton, 2001, p. 272). A participant as observer acknowledges her observation role to the group under study but participates fully in that group's culture or activities. The observer as participant has the primary goal of observation and only a secondary role in participation, usually because of a lack of full access to or membership in the group, as Lesch's (1994) study of witch covens illustrates. The complete observer blends into the surroundings or is hidden completely from the group. There is no participation in the group's activities by the ethnographer and no awareness of the ethnographer's presence by the group being studied.

In addition to the selection of a participant/observer role, the practice of ethnography typically entails extensive use of field notes and may additionally include interviews with group members. An extended period of immersion is usually required, although specific time frames are dependent on the situation under study and other potential limiting factors, such as money or access. Typically, data are collected over a period of several days, but in certain cases, ethnographers have devoted years to collecting information. It may take many visits to understand fully why a group does what it does or to understand the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of the members of a particular subculture. In the case of Conquergood's (1994) study of street gangs, the author decided to relocate to the neighborhood he was studying.

### A Rationale for Ethnographic Reporting

Ethnographic reporting challenges journalists' understanding of objectivity, neutrality, and balance, but it should appeal to professionals' commitment to enlighten rather than to obscure in the portrayal of everyday life. In fact, serious contemplation about the appropriateness of ethnography in journalism would suggest that the telling of authentic stories requires some rethinking about the relationships between reporters and sources.

To protect their objectivity, journalists are urged to keep some social and emotional distance between themselves and the people they write about. From an epistemological perspective, of course, the fact-value dichotomy is problematic at best. And with respect to ethnography, the principle of detachment must be revisited if journalists are to embrace this method as a way to know, in intimate detail, the perspectives of groups that are otherwise invisible or stereotypically portrayed in the news.

While maddening to academic critics who highlight its problematic – if not delusional – implications, objectivity in journalism is not a static orientation to news work; perceptions about it have evolved in recent decades as professionals have come to appreciate its limitations (Ettema & Glasser, 1998). Within the profession itself, the norm of objectivity has shifted to an emphasis on more realistic goals such as neutrality, balance, accuracy, and fairness (Durham, 1998). This is reflected in the principles identified by reporting textbooks (e.g., Fedler et al., 1997), and in evidence of increased reflection about the routines of news production (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

One advantage of ethnographic reporting is how it portrays in a responsible manner the lives and cultures of groups that are typically marginalized through mainstream journalism practices. While most journalists do not refer to in-depth feature reporting as “ethnographic,” an abiding goal of the

profession is pluralism in the portrayal of a culture's diverse groups. The Hutchins Commission, for example, advocated the "projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society" (1947, p. 26). Responsible performance means "that the images repeated and emphasized be such as are in total representation of the social group as it is. The truth about any social group, though it should not exclude its weaknesses and vices, includes recognition of its values, its aspirations, and its common humanity." The commission expressed faith that if readers were presented with the "inner truth of the life of a particular group," they would develop respect and understanding for that group (p. 27). Inner truth is a key concept because an understanding of a group on its own terms is the very purpose of ethnography.

What is still lacking from the journalistic ethos, according to Durham (1998), is the recognition that representations of the truth about a group depend on the reporter's social location. Granted, the obligation to seek out oppositional views alleviates professional concerns about the inevitability of subjectivity. Thus the recent emphasis on balance as a more realistic goal than the pursuit of objectivity as value-free reporting. In practice, however, this creates a kind of crippling relativism that enforces dominant ideologies by defining the limits of acceptable public discourse.

Durham advocates "standpoint epistemology" as an escape from "the intellectual quicksand of relativism and the indefensible territory of neutrality and detachment" (p. 126). Standpoint epistemology requires a reformulation of objectivity, directing it away from the unrealistic erasure of bias toward the purposeful incorporation of subjective perspectives. Borrowing from feminist theory (Harding, 1991) and sociological models of knowledge production (Mannheim, 1952), Durham argues that people inside the dominant social order collect and interpret information about those who are either inside or outside it:

“It is my contention here that news stories are journalistic because it is journalists who relay them” (p. 130). Geertz (1973) recognized the same problem in the ethnography of anthropological research, arguing that accounts of events or of people are ultimately interpretations of outsiders, casting suspicion on the realism or authenticity of such accounts. In response to this critique, ethnographers in recent years have become more reflexive about their social positions as observers of others, and now Durham advocates the same for journalists.

This reflexivity requires that reporters become self-conscious about their social locations in relation to the individuals and groups they write about. Autonomous reporters would realize that to pursue ethnographic journalism, they must in some ways transcend not only professional conventions and reporting habits but also their own demographic profiles. As a first step, Durham advocates “strong objectivity,” in which journalists would approach reporting from the vantage point of marginalized groups to counterbalance the dominant perspectives of mainstream news media. This approach becomes problematic, to say the least, in light of the formal education, training, and professional socialization that positions many reporters closer to the insider views of dominant groups than the views of the disadvantaged or the politically disengaged.

The context in which most journalism is practiced, in highly bureaucratic and corporate settings, further restricts the realization of strong objectivity. Glasser (1992) notes that the very purpose of professional socialization is to obliterate diversity in journalistic values and reporting practices, so that the only diversity that remains is of the token variety, with the primary concern being the ethnic breakdown of the editorial staff. What we need, Glasser contends, is diversity in the true sense of the word, so that journalists bring a wealth of cultural perspectives, not only to the newsroom itself but also to their methods of news writing. Ethnography provides what is perhaps the most effective method for

enacting strong objectivity.

Thus, one advantage of the ethnographic method is accurate portrayal of various groups in society that may not be realized when adhering to traditional methods or newsmaking criteria. Another advantage is a rethinking of the problematic notion of objectivity. However, ethnographic reporting raises some ethical considerations that are in some ways representative of the profession but also unique in the application of ethnographic techniques. We consider next common areas of concern, along with some divergence in thinking, in the ways that journalism and ethnography address ethical issues involving verification, bias, disclosure of intent to sources, and confidentiality.

### Ethical Considerations

#### Objectivity as Verification

For journalists, objectivity is typically construed as detachment from the object or persons being reported, along with the assurance of balanced perspectives. Ethnography, however, represents the antithesis of this with its emphasis on immersion and its goal of telling a story as intimately as possible from the standpoint of the group being studied. Immersion into the life of those observed can invite a certain measure of idealization. As Keyton (2001) observes, the researcher's "value and belief system becomes so integrated with the value and belief systems of those being observed that the researcher loses the ability to believe that a degree of objectivity is attainable" (p. 275). Rather than detachment, however, the purpose of objectivity, with respect to ethnography, is faithfulness to the real world under study. What is sought is the retelling of a story as it actually occurs, not as the ethnographer interprets it. Thus, procedures are used to maximize observational efficacy, minimize investigator bias, and allow for replication or verification or both of the ethnographer's observations (Gold, 1997, p. 397). Objectivity is achieved when the ethnographer's report and



the participants' experiences are in agreement.

Journalists are urged to check facts for accuracy and to protect sources if there is potential harm that might occur as a result of publication (e.g., Fedler et al., 1997). But the verification of explicit and uncontested facts is too limiting as a prescription for ethnographic journalism. If journalists are to tell stories from the standpoint of a particular group, the individuals observed must participate to some extent in verification of how the meanings of their lives are portrayed. This would require some rethinking of journalistic habits, such as the norm that reporters should not allow a source to read a draft prior to publication.

#### Avoiding Bias

A compatible goal of the ethnographic method and the craft of journalism is the absence of intended bias. Both the ethnographer and the journalist strive to avoid applying their own frame of reference to the events and people observed. Because the purpose of ethnography is to portray a group accurately and intimately, the imposition of the ethnographer's point of view would corrupt the final product.

But when applied to the organizational context of journalism, the evaluation of bias must extend beyond the individual reporter to the news production process itself. Ethnography in journalism, for instance, requires an abandonment of routines such as the reliance on official sources and the goal of creating balance by juxtaposing conflicting views of ideological elites (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1980).

#### Covert or Overt Observation

Another ethical consideration is whether to inform those being studied of the intent of the ethnographer to observe certain practices. Although one of the roles an ethnographer might assume is that of pure observer – in which the presence of the ethnographer is unknown to those being observed – such practices

are prohibited when federal funding is used to support research (Punch, 1994). Still, the necessity to receive the consent of those observed might prevent many useful projects. As Punch (1994) observes, “a strict application of codes will restrain and restrict a great deal of informal, innocuous research in which . . . explicitly enforcing rules concerning informed consent will make the research role simply untenable” (p. 90). Therefore, ethical considerations regarding covert observation should be considered guidelines and not strict rules.

A distinction is made, however, between informed consent and deception regarding one’s purpose. Deception seems to be most common when an ethnographer embarks on research intended to expose corrupt practices or to advocate for reforms. Researchers disagree on where and when to draw this line. The benefits of particular kinds of knowledge might outweigh the potential or actual harm of methods used to obtain that knowledge, according to some researchers. Most scholars agree that the rights of subjects take precedence and should guide one’s moral calculations.

Attempts to justify deception in journalism typically derive from the premise that unusual reporting techniques are necessary to expose certain types of corruption (Elliott & Culver, 1992). By contrast, we envision ethnographic reporting as a commitment to portray people and perspectives usually ignored in mainstream media. Apart from the ethical implications, deception restricts the capacity of the observer to create an authentic portrait. Concerns about privacy, along with the need to include group members in the story verification process, require that a journalist openly declare her intentions.

On the other hand, it is possible to envision ethnography used in investigative journalism with the goal of exposing corruption. Whether in conventional or investigative journalism, the motivation to conceal a reporter’s intention stems from the assumption that one’s identity as a reporter alters

naturally occurring behaviors. The immediacy and audience size associated with publication, coupled with the public's increasing cynicism about journalistic motives (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), often produces guarded or artificial behavior. Awareness of ethnographic techniques, however, could encourage journalists to think of alternatives to concealment or to outright stealth. Whereas social scientists are trained in methods that address threats to inference such as the "Hawthorne effect," journalism education provides little guidance beyond interview techniques that might put a source at ease (e.g., Rich, 2000). If journalists were trained in techniques that reduce – or at least accommodate – the influence of their presence on others, they might be less tempted to conceal their identities.

#### Confidentiality

A related concern is the preservation of confidentiality. An ethnographer's assurance of confidentiality provides some safeguard against invasion of privacy. According to Punch (1994), "There is a strong feeling among fieldworkers that settings and respondents should not be identifiable in print and that they should not suffer harm or embarrassment as a consequence of research" (p. 92). To observe this standard requires some sensitivity to what might be considered embarrassing and what might be considered public as opposed to private. Journalism entails a larger and more diverse audience in comparison to academic research, making the protection of confidentiality all the more important for ethnographic reporting. Publication in mainstream media represents a magnitude of potential harm that far exceeds the damage that might arise from private behavior revealed in a scholarly journal. A reporter should discuss with group members – and perhaps negotiate – the kind of information that should be revealed. And while a reporter might assure that an individual remains anonymous, certain actions or statements could become public, with

possible harm to the group's reputation.

#### How to Conduct Ethnographic Reporting

To illustrate the process of ethnographic reporting, we include a table that pinpoints key differences between in-depth feature reporting (the closest relative in conventional journalism to the method described in this chapter) and ethnographic journalism on three levels: conceptualization, reporting, and writing.

Table 1: Differences Between Conventional and Ethnographic Reporting

	<b>Conventional In-depth Features</b>	<b>Ethnographic Portraits</b>
	<i>Conceptualization</i>	
<u>Newsworthiness</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change</li> <li>• The unusual</li> <li>• Celebrities and elites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptation</li> <li>• Hidden meanings</li> <li>• Rituals and practices</li> </ul>
	<i>Reporting</i>	
<u>Relationship with sources</u>	Autonomous professional	“Socially acceptable incompetent”
<u>Observation</u>	Deductive	Inductive
<u>Interviewer</u>	“The miner”	“The traveler”
	<i>Writing</i>	
<u>Narrator</u>	Journalist	Group
<u>Epistemology</u>	Balance	Authenticity

### Conceptualization

In traditional conceptions of newsworthiness, journalists focus on extraordinary events and the actions and decisions of politicians, business leaders and celebrities. By contrast, ethnographic reporting aims for pluralism in its coverage of everyday people, stressing individual character and quotidian victories over bureaucratic or political achievements. The notion of change as a criterion for newsworthiness helps us to make this distinction. While a conventional journalist will look for social eruptions or gradual trends that signal change, a reporter pursuing ethnography examines change in a different sense. According to the perspective of structural functionalism, social systems do change but for the purpose of adaptation and continuity. The paradox of this dynamic becomes manifest in rituals and practices that help a group to cope with external pressures while preserving identity and values. These practices can involve hidden meanings that must be understood by a journalist if the group's story is to be told accurately.

### Reporting

A journalist interviewing for an in-depth feature would seek to establish rapport with sources while maintaining some distance as an autonomous observer and recorder. Reporters are sometimes advised to demonstrate knowledge about a topic while conversing with a source, in the hope that the interviewee will reciprocate and offer valuable insights. In ethnographic journalism, however, the reporter must not let professional expertise impinge on her effort to observe and gather information in a natural setting. John and Lyn Lofland recommend that a field researcher act as a "socially acceptable incompetent" (1995, pp. 56-57) as a technique for gaining access to groups without altering their behavior.

In conventional journalism, reporters usually have in mind the basic theme of their stories before most interviews are conducted. With space to fill and a

deadline to meet, an editor might insist that a reporter essentially have the “nut graph” (the paragraph that distills what the story is about) written before beginning research. This deductive approach – in which interviews are conducted to confirm the story initially imagined by the reporter – is not compatible with the inductive techniques of ethnography. Only after a process of discovery does the writer contemplate the meaning of what she observed.

Steinar Kvale’s (1996) portrayal of the interview as a “miner” or a “traveler” highlights how these contrasting approaches are played out during interviews (quoted in Babbie, 1998). Miners assume that their role is to dig out nuggets of information, along with lively quotes, because the source is essentially used to extract information. A traveler wanders without a map through unknown territory and asks questions “that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world” (p. 5).

Some of the best examples of in-depth and literary journalism in the United States reflect ethnographic principles (e.g., Berner, 1999; Connery, 1992; Sims, 1990; Sims and Kramer, 1995), and practitioners have on occasion explicitly described their work as ethnographic (e.g., Kramer, 1995; Sims, 1995). As explained by Walt Harrington (1997), the techniques of producing narratives of ordinary lives are similar to the ethnographic method: writing the story from the point of view of one or several subjects; gathering details from subjects’ lives; gathering real-life dialogue; gathering “interior” monologue, such as what subjects are thinking, dreaming, imagining, or worrying about; gathering physical details of places and people; and immersing temporarily in the lives of subjects (pp. xx-xxi).

Immersion and what ethnographers would call “participant observation” are the primary techniques used to gather data. For instance, Tracy Kidder watched a design team build a computer to write his Pulitzer Prize-winning book,

*The Soul of a New Machine*, and for another story, spent a year in a nursing home, taking notes and listening to conversations to collect material (Sims, 1995). In an interview with Norman Sims on the subject, Ted Conover said:

Participant observation . . . is the way I prefer to pursue journalism. It means a reliance not on the interview so much as on the shared experience with somebody. The idea to me that journalism and anthropology go together . . . was a great enabling idea for my life – the idea that I could learn about different people and different aspects of the world by placing myself in situations, and thereby see more than you ever could just by doing an interview (Sims, 1995, p. 13).

### Writing

The goal of literary journalism, according to Mark Kramer (1995), is to broaden “readers’ scans” and allow them to see other lives and contexts, thereby moving readers – and writers – “toward realization, compassion, and in the best of cases, wisdom” (p. 34). Ethnography takes this principle a step further by insisting that the subjects written about are the actual narrators of the story. The writer becomes a medium through which the group’s story is told. The close examination of a group ensures that it is not the ethnographer’s point of view but the actual experiences, values, and goals of the group that are communicated (Blumer, 1969).

In this regard, the epistemological goal of the ethnographic reporter is authenticity in the portrayal of a group’s perspective. By contrast, the knowledge produced in a conventional feature originates from attempts to create balance, whereby competing ideologies or other perspectives are juxtaposed. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) provide evidence that many journalists do realize the limitations of the concepts of objectivity, neutrality, and balance. The authors report on a study they described as the most comprehensive examination ever conducted by



journalists of news gathering and its responsibilities. “After synthesizing what we learned, it became clear that a number of familiar and even useful ideas – including fairness and balance – are too vague to rise to the level of essential elements of the profession” (p. 13). We want to emphasize that Kovach and Rosenstiel are describing a critical perspective expressed by journalists themselves, rather than a critique originating from their position as academics.

#### A Case Study: Sidewalk Standoff

How the ethnographic method might be applied is illustrated next in the description of a case study conducted in Palo Alto, where college journalists produced stories on the homeless population.

Coverage of homeless people illustrates the potential harm of conventional reporting as well as the value of an ethnographic alternative. In the late 1990s, for example, the City Council in Palo Alto enacted a ban on sitting or lying on downtown streets. Merchants had complained about homeless people hovering outside their storefronts and aggressive panhandlers scaring off customers. Local newspapers provided extensive coverage when about 200 citizens, in opposition to the ordinance, staged a sit-down protest outside downtown shops on the evening the law went into effect. But in a university town that views itself as a tolerant community, the subsequent news stories seemed to enflame outrage on both sides.

The case study described here outlines how a political communication course at Stanford University, taught by one of the authors of this essay, sought to contribute to public knowledge and constructive dialogue about panhandling. In a project that became known as *Sidewalk Standoff*, students adopted a three-stage model: They developed goals based on evaluation of prior news coverage; generated stories using ethnographic methods; and assessed the community’s reaction to the project. Ethnographic journalism obviously takes more time than

the typical deadline-oriented coverage, and the class took advantage of the 10-week academic quarter to pursue activities associated with each of the three stages. Students eventually contributed multiple features and sidebars for the *Palo Alto Weekly*, an off-campus, locally owned paper.

#### Stage One: Evaluation

In content analysis or other methods, an evaluation of prior news coverage, particularly in its depictions of a particular subculture, can provide a rationale for ethnographic approaches. An analysis of coverage may reveal that the local press virtually ignores certain groups, or that it perpetuates stereotypes despite the lack of purposeful bias. This realization is itself an important outcome of educational training for future journalists because it might counteract the common scenario in which a student's psychological need to identify with a profession fosters a rigid loyalty to conventional notions of detachment and autonomy (McDevitt, Gassaway, & Perez, 2002).

For the Palo Alto project, students noticed that news sources rarely expressed outright hostility toward panhandlers, but reporters tended to lump homeless people together: as a collective problem, as an embarrassment for the community, as a curiosity for the upscale town, or as objects of sympathy. The local press dutifully provided what may have appeared to be a balanced account of the debate between merchants and community activists, but virtually absent were perspectives of homeless individuals themselves. Students resolved to understand the meanings that homeless people themselves bring to their lives and to share these insights with readers. This became the overriding goal of the class, and the next step was to choose the appropriate reporting techniques.

#### Stage Two: Ethnographic Reporting

The class initially decided on a team approach to reporting, which seemed to alleviate the unstated but obvious apprehension of some students about

interacting with homeless people on their own turf. About a dozen students arrived together at a homeless shelter one morning to meet several men and women who were waiting for donuts and coffee. The team approach also allowed the class to distribute questionnaires efficiently to 33 homeless persons to produce data that would eventually supplement qualitative descriptions. Individual students then worked on their own to write intimate portraits of homeless people. Meanwhile, a few students tried their hands at first-person journalism by living the life of panhandlers for one day and experimenting with passive and aggressive approaches to begging.

In interviews and in observations of panhandling, students began to appreciate the diversity of life experiences and outlooks within the homeless population. In one news story, for example, a student explained that many homeless people never panhandle, consider such activity to be demeaning, and resent the negative image panhandling imparts to homeless people in general. Many of the panhandlers, in turn, described themselves as long-term, stable members of the community, and they expressed resentment toward newcomers who had engaged in aggressive begging.

In aggregate, the reporting seemed to challenge most directly the perception that homeless people were outsiders, rather than members of the community. Data from the survey distributed at the shelter supported the various narratives produced by the students. For example, the average number of years respondents had lived in Palo Alto was 15, about 55 percent of the respondents indicated that they had relatives in the San Francisco Bay Area, and 52 percent said they felt comfortable living in the area. Anecdotes from personality profiles portrayed the subjects with cultural traits, values, and parochial perspectives similar to other residents with monthly mortgage payments. Data from the questionnaires encouraged readers to come to the same conclusion.

### Stage Three: Recording Community Response

The primary goal was to contribute to readers' understanding of panhandlers, not to influence policy at City Hall directly. The class did conclude the series, however, with a roundtable discussion held at the newspaper's office, to which public officials, activists, and merchants were invited. Most importantly, from an ethnographic perspective, a member of the homeless community attended the discussion to confirm or challenge various portrayals in the students' news coverage. The hope was that insight from the published series would contribute to a constructive dialogue directed toward consensus on how to alleviate various concerns about panhandling.

The content of the newspaper's letters to the editor and of 110 telephone interviews conducted by students with residents following the coverage offered insight about the complexity of perspectives in the community. Indeed, many respondents expressed ambivalence about panhandlers: While 59 percent indicated that they had spoken with a homeless person, more than 40 percent said they would cross a road to avoid a panhandler. The class could not assert with certainty that its series contributed to this ambivalence, but if it did, this would be considered a positive outcome in light of prior research showing that the process of "coming to judgment" requires a reconsideration of assumptions prior to the attainment of a refined perspective (Yankelovich, 1991). The telephone survey design was not intended to produce inferences about the influence of news exposure on readers' knowledge and attitudes, but 55 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: The news reports "made me think more about possible solutions to the homeless problem."

A final outcome of the project concerned the influence of ethnographic reporting on the students themselves. The desire of some students to join the ranks of the panhandlers, if only for one day, and the nuanced manner in which

they portrayed homeless individuals suggest that these journalists-in-training were embracing an empathetic approach to the craft. They seemed to be experiencing journalism as a form of citizenship, in which they were coming to know, perhaps for the first time, the true complexity of their community. They had certainly stepped beyond – both physically and psychologically – the privileged setting of the university campus.

But if ethnography directs student journalists to a kind of immersion into the lives of marginalized groups, it also challenges the perception that professional autonomy is equivalent to social detachment. Students are encouraged to decide for themselves whether any ethnographic experiences they might have cross the line into advocacy. At the very least, a reflective response to this question encourages students to consider the limitations of what is typically considered objective, value-free reporting.

### Conclusion

In the construction of authentic and empathetic portrayals, journalists are aided by employing ethnographic methods in their work. Such techniques entail immersion in a community or culture to reveal as deeply and as accurately as possible group members' feelings, thoughts, values, challenges, and goals. These journalistic accounts, then, are drawn from perspectives within a group rather than interpretations imposed from the outside. Such perspectives reflect the strong objectivity described by Durham, which is not a detached viewpoint but a purposeful incorporation of subjective perspectives. It is an objectivity based on accuracy, rich description, and an insider point of view.

The aim of some community-oriented newspapers seems compatible with the ultimate goals of an ethnographic journalism – that is, to have a newspaper be of its community and let members of the community tell their stories through a journalist immersed temporarily in their culture (e.g., Hindman, 1998). While we

recognize the hazards of adopting what may seem to be advocacy journalism, we contend that journalists can adopt ethnographic methods without sacrificing the essential values of the profession. Indeed, through ethnography, journalists might recover a core, but perhaps neglected, principle of their craft. As Harrington (1997) suggests, “The stories of everyday life – about . . . people as they seek meaning and purpose in their lives, stories that are windows on our universal human struggle – should be at the soul of every good newspaper” (p. xiv).

At a practical level, we also recognize that reporters cannot practice ethnography on deadline. Like civic journalism or investigative reporting, ethnographic journalism requires a project approach based on substantial planning and management support. Indeed, it might require a fundamental change in a newsroom’s culture. Civic and investigative journalism have become institutionalized as regular practice at a relatively small percentage of newspapers in the United States. We invite students as future professionals to consider whether ethnography also provides a compelling reason to slow the frenetic pace of daily news coverage.

Educators and students, meanwhile, can experiment with a three-stage curriculum strategy that initially asks students to evaluate conventional coverage. Students should then appreciate the value of ethnographic principles as they begin the reporting stage. Finally, students reflect on how their reporting might empower not merely their subjects, but themselves as storytellers now more deeply engaged in a community.

Through ethnographic journalism, students and professionals edge closer to portraying the inner truths of society’s constituent groups (Hutchins Commission, 1947). Spradley (1979) writes that ethnography represents “the one systematic approach in the social sciences that leads us into those separate realities that others have learned and used to make sense out of their worlds” (p.

iv). But if these separate realities are systematically excluded in news coverage, journalists must rethink the methods they use to describe the social world, and they must revisit the professional values that legitimize these methods.

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