

## DOCUMENTATION AND FIELD RESEARCH IN JOURNALISM IN RELATION WITH ETHNOGRAPHY

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### **Abstract:**

Stating the experience, the theory and the ideas of practitioners in Ethnography and Journalism, this paper analyzes the common aspects related to the documentation within the two research fields as well as the elements that differentiate them. Using concrete examples, it shows how Bronislaw Malinowski's participatory observation applies in journalism, or under what conditions the journalist is at regular intervals in the same place to follow the evolution of a phenomenon like the ethnologist. The paper contains a parallel between the most important elements that make up the documentation in the two fields of socio-cultural study, treating similar concepts as name but different as ways of approach. The comparative study is not presented by a terse division between the two areas, because although there are some exclusive elements, many problems or methods are questionable and can be applied to a certain extent to the documentation in both spheres.

**Key words:** journalism, ethnography, documentation, fieldwork, participatory observation

## **Introduction**

Documentation is one of the fundamental stages of investigation in many scientific and cultural fields and is specific to both ethnographic research and journalism. As part of the documentation, fieldwork, primarily involving direct contact with people, is irreplaceable in both research areas related to the socio-cultural reality of the present or past. The present paper analyzes the importance of documentation and field work, presenting a series of techniques and methods common to both domains or specific to only one of them, through which an ethnological research or journalistic report can be made. Beyond the interpretation of the way in which the stages of the investigation are put into practice, the present research aims to analyze the extent to which people trained in different disciplinary paradigms but with a common interest in a particular subject can co-relate in order to build a credible product.

## **Collecting and Reporting Information**

Until the early decades of the nineteenth century, ethnographic research tasks were shared between the observer and the researcher. The latter did not do any fieldwork - a mission that at that time was thought to be made only by travelers or missionaries. They provided the information to the researcher, who only analyzed and interpreted them. The situation has changed with Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork. It was the moment when the ethnographer left his study room and began to combine office and field work. The division of tasks is also practiced in journalism, between the field man and the editorial staff. There are cases where the reporter goes to the field, collects information through specific methods, and passes it on to an editor who analyzes them, makes a selection of the most relevant aspects for the public and then handles the text. But this is not a rule and it is recommended that reporters should write their own texts because, by documenting a topic, they have the most information about

it and, implicitly, are the most skilled to forward the information to the public. Usually, the above solution is used either if there is a time pressure and the information obtained by the reporter must be broadcasted as soon as possible on the radio or television station or if the newspaper is near the closing of the edition and until the reporter manages to send the text precious time would be lost. A second reason for sharing activities is related to the reporter's writing talent, as one can excel in establishing relationships with some sources and collecting information, but it can be more difficult for him to express himself in writing, in which case the intervention of someone specialized in copywriting is natural. In ethnography, gathering and writing the information are made by the same person since the first decades of the nineteenth century, when the researcher concluded that direct observation is part of his work. Thus, as François Laplantine says, "a true professional ethnography is created, which is no longer content with gathering materials, but tries to understand what constitutes the specificity of a given culture." (Laplantine, 2000, 96).

Both professions require knowledge in several areas, because research means dealing with different situations. Laplantine states that the ethnologist must "have multiple skills to be able to be "good at fieldwork", to be geographer, demographer, linguist, historian." (Laplantine, 2000, 33) Similarly, the journalist must also be a detective (in order to carry out investigations, perhaps even before law enforcement) and a psychologist (in order to be able to adapt to the behavior and language of the different human typologies with which he collaborates) and a sociologist (in order to be able to analyze social phenomena and to be able to collect data or compile statistics). At the same time, any journalist must master the field or fields he / she covers at the editorial level, both from the legislative point of view and in terms of the sources whom he can call and get information.

### **Demand for Globality**

There is a major difference between the material researched by the journalist and the one documented by the ethnologist. If the former attempts to emphasize the unique and the exotic part of each phenomenon presented, the latter will cover the phenomenon studied in its entirety, "without making a difference between what is common or monotonous and what seems to be amazing and out of the ordinary" (Malinowski, 1922, 11), as theorists recommend detaching from exotism and presenting things as they are. It is what François Laplantine calls the "exigency of globality" (Laplantine, 2000, 80) according to which every observed thing must be reviewed, without "making any difference between what is banal, tern or normal, and what strikes and strikes over" (Malinowski, 1922, 67). The technique is applied both to objects and traditions, as well as to non-verbal forms of thinking: body expressions, gestures, mimics. However, this complete description of all objects is not limited to drawing up an inventory, but to establishing relationships based on concrete facts. Laplantine supports the idea, adding that: "in order to make a phenomenon understandable, one must relate it to the social totality in which he enters and, at the same time, to study it in all its dimensions. [...] Nothing is more alien to the sensible than abstract thinking" (Laplantine, 2000, 81). The anthropologist stresses the theory that, in any ethnographic description, the value of an object is rendered using any visual, auditory or olfactory information. Malinowski, for example, manages to make his readers aware of the meaning, function and purpose of the Trobriande canoe only when describing it in relation to the group that manufactures and uses it, with the magical rituals that consecrate it and the regulations that define her possessions. Not only the ethnologist uses connections and links between the various topics under investigation. The journalist also resorts to this method, especially when conducting inquiries, when making connections between information and data.

The way these descriptions are approached is also different in the two areas. In ethnography, the researcher must explain every detail, provide a clear outline of the

social organization and try to "dismantle the laws and rules of all cultural phenomena [...] If he sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only the social organization, he will remove some fields of investigation, and his work will have many shortcomings" (Malinowski, 1922, 11). From this point of view, the journalist has more freedom of approach, because he will adapt his documentation to the desired genre as well as to the extent the material he is working on. Thus, for a short story, he will try to find the answer only to the basic questions (Who? Where? Where? When? How?), while an inquiry or a documentary film will require a broader and multifaceted research of the phenomenon.

The common element is that in both cases, research will turn to unresolved or unclear issues. The situation also presupposes a pre-documentation, which, in the case of ethnologists, may consist in studying similar works, for them to be able to see which are the places that have been researched, how complex the researches have been and what has been their object. Knowing the conclusions reached by the previous researchers can form a comparative material, but also working hypotheses: it will be determined whether the research will involve a territory or a phenomenon or whether the same subjects will be studied to see their evolution, the changes they have passed through, which are "important for establishing the relationship between folkloric tradition and contemporary culture." (Pop, 1998, 113)

In journalism, studying reports on the same subject the reporter wishes to write about are due to giving him a picture of the situation at a certain time and creating a working context, but another aim is to know what is worth to be approached and documented further on. Refocusing a topic is not recommended in this area, because an article that does not bring anything new has no journalistic value, since it is based on the premise that the public is already familiar with the exposed data. In this case, there are two possibilities: either a follow-up is produced, showing the consequences of a major event or the current state of affairs, or the same subject is approached from a different

angle. The website [casajournalistului.ro](http://casajournalistului.ro) often covers public interest subjects in a different way from the traditionalist press. By using multimedia tools, journalists offer their readers different information from those which one can find in almost any other newspaper. This is how they illustrated reportages on the elections in the separatist region of Donetsk (<http://casajournalistului.ro/placinte-si-razboi-in-donetk/>) or of the Kurds trying to rebuild the province of Rojava in northern Syria, destroyed by the war between the Americans and the ISIS troops (<http://casajournalistului.ro/ne-aparam-pamantul-si-femeile/>), but also others with soft topics (human interest, life stories, or the context in which an event occurs), such as the report *Martorii lui Ponta* (<http://casajournalistului.ro/martorii-lui-ponta/>), in which one of the reporters of the site traveled three days through the country, in the PSD campaign in 2014, in order to share leaflets with other members of the campaign staff.

During this period, the journalist tries to adapt to the group he travels with towards several cities in the country, he eats with them, sleeps in the same places, does field activities and meet with the same people. In this case, there can be a parallel between this type of journalistic research and the participatory observation defined by Bronislaw Malinowski, because the journalist is directly involved in the studied group and becomes familiar with the people they are informing about. The term of participatory observation also appears in the theory of journalism, where it can appear in the form of several different nuances – “it can be a limited participation, such as the carrying out of activities with the ones involved, or a profound one” in which the reporter describes the emotions in first person, especially in case of reports. (Szabo, 2016, 105) Continuing the similarities between the two areas, the British researcher's theory, according to which, starting from a single element or custom, we can outline the profile of a society, can be applied in journalism, in the above case, on the group of PSD supporters. Of course, the proportions must be preserved if a comparison is to be made

between those two cases, because the journalist's involvement is much shorter, as is the level of familiarity with the group and implicitly the complexity of the resulting report.

Another common feature concerning documentation in journalism and ethnography is that both professions appeal to all social categories to gather information. Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, believes that in ethnography there is no noble object and unworthy object, giving the example that the jokes of a simple storyteller are just as important to consider "as the mythology expressing the metaphysical heritage of the body" (Boas, 1940, 263). By extrapolating, in order to collect as complex and accurate data as possible, the researcher must use as many sources as possible. Similarly, journalists do not take account of the social status of the source when he or she becomes an informant. Often, an institution's gate-keeper, janitor or caretaker can be better sources of information than the director or spokesman, who are interested in providing information that directly benefits them or benefits the firm they represent. Of course, the journalist has to select the information he receives from the sources according to their knowledge or ability in a given field. Often, rumors from unauthorized sources prove to be false, but there are cases when they can open new research tracks, and more, they can trigger investigations. Therefore, it is important for the journalist not to omit them. Only one item that is confirmed may be enough to start a larger documentation. In order to begin an inquiry, the journalist asks himself two questions: "Who owns this information?" and "Who is willing to transmit it?". The information needs to be deepened and the details of the context are essential. Each element in the context (numbers, tangent actions, etc.) must be verified by crossing the sources.

However, ethnography does not use the term rumor, as the ethnologist is looking at concrete things that either existed or still exist. Remaining with the informants, we must also specify that both the ethnologist and the journalist can obtain information from several types of informants. Folklore, for example, can be collected

either directly from the medium in which it has been formed or indirectly from performers, bearers, or even from witnesses to popular rituals that have left the areas in which they were preserved. This is also the case for the journalist who can obtain information directly from the "crime scene" (the most recommended version), but also indirectly from witnesses or intermediaries, if he did not attend the event.

In ethnography, an important element of the research is prospecting the field and the technical organization of work. The ethnologist will determine the composition of the research group, its equipment, the tasks of each person and the places where the phenomena characteristic to the researched area are to be found. In addition, he will also make a first search of these places, primarily to establish a few contacts with community members, and secondly, to confront the data gathered in pre-documentation with the reality found in the field. In Journalism, on the other hand, rarely does it come to such profound prospecting. Most of the time, when the distances require a few hours' travel, the reporter uses a confirmation call to convince himself that the situation on the ground is the same as he knew. In case of news, it is explainable, because the reporter is pressed by time and does not afford one day just for prospecting. There are exceptions, however, when things can change from day to day, but also in the case of extensive reports. Investigations, special reports and especially television documentaries require such prospecting, not just for the crew team to receive some confirmation of the information they have held before, but also to establish some technical details: which are the most offering places from the visual point of view, where is the best light at a time, what are the conditions for filming or recording the sound in a place or what is the most appropriate time for filming.

### **Integration into the Studied Community**

Field documentation can be done in several ways. In the case of ethnography, the most effective is considered to be the one by which the researcher integrates into the studied community, living with his members for a period of time long enough to be

adopted by them, so that he can assist not only at the daily habits that will become familiar with, but also to those that are periodic or conditioned by certain elements of human life (birth, marriage, death). This method developed by Bronislaw Malinowski is rarely encountered in journalism. In this case, the presence of the reporter is usually announced, and the time spent by him in the community is directly proportional to the length or duration of the report.

However, there are also exceptions: for the eight episodes of the Human Planet documentary series, the BBC team has filmed for three years in 70 locations across the globe. In some of these, journalists spent weeks or even months together with locals (in some places they even came back after a while, in order to capture possible changes) to track, for example, the process of catching an eagle, its taming and training, then the moment when it is ready to hunt for his master; or to capture the whole process of building a house in a tree at 40 feet high by the Korowai tribes living in the jungles in New Guinea.

There are also similar examples in Romania. In November 2013, journalists Elena Stancu and Cosmin Bumbuț left the studio they were living in, in Bucharest, and moved in a camper van, in order to have the mobility and the freedom to spend more time in the communities they were going to document for their journalistic reports. "Life in the car has given us the privilege of working only on the subjects we believe in: because we are not restricted by the pace of a newsroom, we can stay in one place until we finish our documentation", the two journalists introduced themselves on the website that hosts their projects. (<https://teleleu.eu/despre-noi/>).

For the documentary "The Last Kalderash", which approaches the story of Roma workers who are trying to take the craft further but have to go to work or beg in Western European countries, the team spent more than half a year in the village of Corcova, Mehedinți County, while the entire period of documentation and prospecting spread over another year. It was a prerequisite for journalists to be adopted among the

Roma community. Once familiar with journalists and the equipment they use, the Roma have begun to behave naturally around them and to open themselves in front of them. They drank beer from plastic bottles, spoke intimately, ate at the same table, filmed, laughed and cried with them. "The recorder was always on the table, they got used to it there, between rolls in cabbage and a lot of pork." (<https://www.vice.com/ro/article/3dxy8y/filmul-asta-romanesc-iti-arata-viata-trista-a-romilor-care-pleaca-la-munca-in-strainatate>). However, this style of documenting and filming cannot be almost impossible to be applied to all journalistic genres. It can be used for reports that do not depend on their immediate delivery. "We were not going there to do something necessarily, it was not like a movie you're being pushed for. We woke up, took our breakfast, then went to the community to see what Geo would do on the day. Of course, we knew what interviews we needed to do, what we needed to shoot, but we were part of their lives, we were invited to coffee in the morning to the boss' wife, or to have a beer with them and we were even invited to some of their events." (<https://www.vice.com/ro/article/3dxy8y/filmul-asta-romanesc-iti-arata-viata-trista-a-romilor-care-pleaca-la-munca-in-strainatate>)

In journalism, returning to the field is a very rare practice. The above examples are exceptions to what happens in everyday work in this area. Instead, the method is adopted in ethnography, where it can be put into practice both shortly after the first landing, but also after an appreciable amount of time, such as that which separates two generations. In the first case, it is recommended that the returning should be made prior to the publication of the study, because the method may reveal new problems, contradictions or, on the contrary, may clarify certain aspects. Much more common is the second situation, which will focus on studying places and habits previously researched to see the changes they have gone through. The study will now have a comparative character and will review what factors have affected these

transformations. There are researchers who return at regular intervals in the same place, just to follow this evolution more closely.

Speaking about folklore research, Mihai Pop said that this method was "important for establishing the relationship between folkloric tradition and contemporary culture." (Pop, 1998, 114) In journalism there is no specific term for reviewing the land. By joining this issue with the fact that most of the journalistic reports are produced without a field prospecting, it would result that documentation in this field is much more superficial. But we still speak of two different domains, and theory cannot be common to them. Nevertheless, journalists return to the field for follow-ups, but they can also do it, as well as the ethnologist, at regular intervals to observe the evolution of a place or phenomenon. An example is the growing number of journalistic reports that are written each year around the commemoration of the Chernobyl explosion. Beyond the event's remembrance reports, there are journalists who go to the Ukrainian city to note not just what remained after the explosion, but also the way nature is trying to regenerate from year to year, either by lowering the level of radioactivity or by adapting to it.

### **Team Work**

There are cases when several arts (music and dance, music and literature, theater and music etc.) bring their contribution for one artistic act. In ethnography, their study and analysis will be carried out by specialists in those domains and with specific methods. The research campaign in Fundu Moldovei, led by Dimitrie Gusti, is such an example. In this case, there must be a permanent exchange of information and opinion among the group's specialists. "This leads to permanent coordination, to a unit of research, overlaps are avoided, and more importance is being given to certain data found in the interference of the research fields of different specialists." (Pop, 1998, 129)

Teamwork also exists in journalism when doing fieldwork. The difference is that in this profession, the team is not made up of specialists in areas related to the subject,

but from reporters, operators, sound technicians and other technicians. The development of the technique and the reduction of investments in human staff have led to a decrease in the number of employees in the editorial offices, so in most cases the field team has been replaced by a "good at all" man, who can both write and can take pictures or record. This is not the case for televisions, where the team is made up of a reporter and an operator, but here has also gained ground the concept of video reporter, which involves the inclusion of a team's tasks in a single man ready to shoot, ask questions and then write. Regardless of the case, journalists are very rarely accompanied by specialists in all their fieldwork, but they call on them for documentation or consultation before or after the field trip.

Henri H. Stahl emphasizes the efficiency of teamwork, as ethnologists can complement one another: one can ask questions, another one can write the answers, even if hidden, if necessary. "It has happened to me to write very interesting texts from a room with the open window, while on the porch my teammate asked for the information I needed", he explains, recognizing however the character close to the espionage of the work done in this way (Stahl, 1934, 43). But this does not detract from the value of the collected texts, because the specified method does not collect information that could be harmful to the informant. The role of this method is to keep the note of authenticity, given by the natural conditions in which the informant is placed, conditions that will allow him to "naturally think, with his usual syntax, with his vocabulary, with the style figures that are his own." (Stahl, 1934, 43). In a similar manner, journalists use hidden cameras in order to capture dialogues that either would not have existed or would not provide the same information or authenticity under normal television shooting conditions. In this case, the deontology obliges the journalist to let the filming person know that he was caught in this hypostasis. Moreover, it even offers him the opportunity to come up with an official position on what he said during filming.

In field research, direct observation is one of the main methods of collecting information. Even if it does not lead to collecting concrete data, this technique is designed to create a context, to project an overview of the studied society. Whether we are talking about ethnologists or journalists, they will take complex notes to the extent that circumstances permit them to, so that details are not lost by omitting or forgetting them. "The experience of so many years shows that [...] the observation that is not immediately recorded can be considered lost." (Stahl, 1934, 17) The use of means for image or sound recording is also recommended because it allows the creation of an archive that can be used later. Deontology forces the ethnologist to indicate how he could have changed the context or the situation because of his presence and actions. In case of journalism, these mentions are very rare, and they are used particularly on reports written on first person.

It is interesting that the questions about which all journalism theorists say that they are essential at any news (Who? Where? When? How? and Why?) are also reviewed by Marcel Mauss when explaining how to do field observation in ethnography. Thus, he states that, in order to be precise, it must be complete, meaning that it should "include where, why, when, how and for what is done or has been done, and who has done it." (Mauss, 2003, 34). Mauss argues that the observation calls for objectivity: "say everything you know and nothing to remain unknown. Avoid historical or other hypotheses that are unnecessary, often dangerous" (Mauss, 2003, 25). Those are features specific to the journalistic deontology too, but they are respected by today media only to some degree, as media often exploits rumors and unconfirmed assumptions, in the constant rush of followers and audience.

### **Conclusions**

There is a number of common elements in ethnography and journalism documentation, but also differences that can be explained by the different focus of the two specializations, as well as the different working conditions. The most important factor is

the term of rendering the report for publication in the case of the journalist, which generates time limits for the documentation. The same subject can be documented in a single day for a short story by a journalist, or for months on ethnographic research. Of course, the meaning of the finished product will be directly proportional to the time it takes to achieve it.

While news lose their value from day to day, ethnographic research becomes more precious as time passes and the documented rituals disappear or are altered. The ethnologist does not work under the pressure of time, and the temporal proximity does not affect him in any way. There are also differences in the treatment of a theme, because the journalist will always look for the novelty of a situation, while the ethnologist will not make a difference between a common subject and one considered amazing. The complexity of ethnographic research is also given by the fact that there are cases where one act is studied by specialists from all the fields that contribute to its realization, while in journalism the reporter seldom goes on a field accompanied by a specialist, primarily from financial considerations, but also because of time pressures.

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