

The Business of Ethnography: Discovering Perceptions of New Media in Urban Markets

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The Business of Ethnography

Over a half-century ago, an anthropologist conducting an ethnography for a clothing manufacturer observed children and mothers at home and at play. His gaze fixed on overalls, the anthropologist recommended that the manufacturer double-stitch the seams of that garment, previously single stitched, in order that it withstand frequent launderings, and he also suggested the company replace buttons on the straps with metal grippers in order to extend the life of the overalls as the child wearing it grew. This case study appears in a 1961 article titled "Anthropology's Contributions to Marketing" that also lists several other ethnographic encounters with the business of research, from the design of products like chairs and knobs to the development of cosmetics ads that incorporated the culture's symbolic understanding of a woman's eye and mouth.

That article, and the case studies it reviews, suggest that ethnography in market research has been around for quite some time, despite the oft-repeated "discovery" of this so-called "new" and for some, "unorthodox" set of research practices. If the recent spate of popular and trade press articles on the topic is any indication, it is true that ethnography as a research method in contemporary business is becoming more widespread.

Ethnography has its roots in anthropology, the social science discipline which is, literally, the study of humankind. Otherwise known as participant-observation, ethnography means entering subjects' home turf, be it the living room, the bar, the beauty parlor, the supermarket or the streets. As participant observers of people in their own environments, ethnographers observe what people actually do, as well as what they say about it, an approach that allows us to document actual behavior and that also offers insight into meanings people attach to these actions and activities. People are situated and findings are interpreted in terms of the context of people's actual lives - embedded in the family, neighborhood, local subculture and the larger society.

A Case of Ethnography in Business

The State of Broadband Urban Markets is a study of cable programming, telecom, Internet and new media in the New Urban Market. It took shape as we came to see the urban market as crucial to the future of all broadband and media companies. Urban areas, characterized by their youth and multiculturalism, are growing strong. More than one-third (35%; 90+ million) of Americans now reside in the country's urban markets, defined as cities with a population of at least 50,000. The proportion of racial and ethnic "minorities" in urban areas is greater than that for the country as a whole; 41% of people in urban markets are Americans of African, Asian and Latin American ancestry. It is clear that people of color are a dominant force and source of culture in the New Urban Market, though not exclusively so.

We designed a multi-method study, gathering primary survey data on over 2000 urban consumers and on 50 Broadband and Media decision-makers (BMSP(s)), and we also synthesized available secondary data on urban markets. We also engaged in an "ethnography of a city." Our fieldsite in the Metropolitan New York area took us from the urbanized "suburbs" just outside the city, to the neighborhoods of Washington Heights, the Bronx, the Upper West Side, the East Village, Brooklyn and Harlem. Over a four and a half month research period, ethnographer Carla Barrett entered communities, neighborhoods, streets and homes to discover the "New Urban Market," with a particular eye on 14-28 year olds, the future of New Media production as well as consumption.

Amid the complexity of people portrayed in this study, we have discerned some specific patterns.

For example, two major "segments" in the young, urban market are the Aspirers - more likely to be ethnic minorities from lower-income or working-class households, and the Privileged - more likely to be white and from higher income households. Aspirers come to the market and their own futures well-equipped with ambition and pride, strong home and neighborhood ties and knowledge about mainstream as well as their own "cultures of color." The Privileged come to the market and their own futures well-equipped with "social capital" -- the fruits of well-resourced upbringings: quality schools, readily available and accessible tools, opportunity.

For Aspirers, "technology" represents the key to the future, the marker of success and the symbol of belonging to mainstream society. For Aspirers, the "digital divide" is real; to be on AOL is to have arrived, to belong. The Internet comes via AOL that opens up possibilities, opportunities.

On the contrary, some among the Privileged have adopted a "counter-mainstream" self-image. For them, America Online represents the conventional to which they will not conform, at least on a superficial level. For the Privileged, technology is also the key to the future -- futures they are more likely to assume than aspire to.

These bits of ethnographic findings illustrate the kind of insight we have generated, useful knowledge to inform an array of business decisions: branding, marketing, programming, operations, public relations, customer service and product development. By means of ethnography, we have not found impenetrable markets, but sites of tremendous growth and opportunity.

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