

Museum ethnographies of communication:

The media-audience-discourse nexus

Chaim Noy

This paper brings together research sensitivities and sensibilities from the fields of media ethnography and ethnography of communication (à la Gumperz & Hymes, 1964, and its newer iterations and reverberations. See ; Katriel, 2015; Noy, 2017), as these are pursued in the context of museal communication and mediation environments. The paper moves back and forth between addressing the communicative affordances of museum media, through which discourse is generated and circulated onsite (and increasingly online as well), and the analysis of that (user-generated) discourse.

At the background of this paper is a shift that museums have been undergoing during the past two decades, as they have been transitioning from modern, collection-based institutions, to post-modern audience-centered institutions. The current phase is evinced in a turn towards *participation* (the ‘participatory turn’ that media scholars have been studying intently(Carpentier, Schrøder, & Hallett, 2013; Hutchby, 2014; Thornborrow, 2015)). Museums pursue the participatory turn through presenting various interactive media to their audiences, which encourage the production of discourse that is, then, publicly displayed in situ. This turn to participation stresses interaction (it embodies a shift in museum’s locus of authenticity, which used to rest in the artifacts and objects, and now rests in interactions), where the “museum’s newly perceived function [is that] of giving voice to the individual fate and transforming bystanders and later generations into ‘secondary witnesses’” (Andermann & Arnold-de Simine, 2012, p. 7). This stress on interaction, and on the liberal-economic ideologies of ‘giving voice’, creates rich and fertile scenes for ethnographers of media and communication. In the museums I have studied, interactive media devices, that range from the more traditional and analogue visitor/comment books, to newer touchpads, digital keyboards, and hybrid (digital-cum-analogue) participatory interfaces.

In the paper, I report on and discuss two lengthy ethnographic studies, which I did in two Jewish history and heritage museums in the United States. These ethnographies focus on the onsite institutional interaction between audiences and museums, as these are materialized through different media platforms (which possess different communicative affordances). The issues I confront are describing and conceptualizing the communicative scenes that these museums make available, their underlying media ideologies (and to some degree also language ideologies), the roles they ascribe to their visitors, and if and how the latter take on themselves these roles. Additionally, as museumgoers produce and curate texts onsite, my ethnographic studies also look at what kind of genres different affordances – and consequently museumgoers’ interactional practice – enable.

- Andermann, J., & Arnold-de Simine, S. (2012). Introduction: memory, community and the new museum. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(1), 3-13.
- Carpentier, N., Schröder, K., & Hallett, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Audience Transformations: Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity*. New York: Routledge.
- Gumperz, J. J., & Hymes, D. H. (1964). *The Ethnography of Communication*. Washington: American Anthropological Association.
- Hutchby, I. (2014). Communicative affordances and participation frameworks in mediated interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 72, 86-89.
- Katriel, T. (2015). Expanding ethnography of communication research: Towards ethnographies of encoding. *Communication Theory*, 25(3), 454-459.
- Noy, C. (2017). Ethnography of communication. In J. Matthes (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell
- Thornborrow, J. (2015). *The discourse of public participation media: from talk show to twitter*. London: Routledge.