'ETHNOGRAPHY AS NEGOTIATED LIVED EXPERIENCE': RESEARCHING THE FLUID AND MULTI-SITED USES OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN JOURNALISM PRACTICE

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The permeation of digital technologies into social practices, including journalism has posed significant challenges to our understanding of what really counts as 'ethnographic'. However, there is consensus among researchers that ethnography inscribes a particular relationship between the *researcher*, the *researched*, and the *context* of research. Specifically, it brings a variety of techniques of inquiry into play, attempting always to observe things that happen, to listen to what people say and to question people in the setting under investigation. Drawing on my ethnographic exploration of how Zimbabwean print journalists use the internet (and its associated digital technologies) in newsmaking, this study suggests the continued relevance of traditional ethnographic methods (observation; informal conversations and in-depth interviews) in studying internet-based phenomena in the context of journalism practice. While advancing the argument that ethnography is a negotiated self-reflexive 'lived experience', I also emphasize the importance of sustained *intuitive* and *creative* inclinations throughout the research process.

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While initial anxieties about just how far 'tried and tested ethnographic methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions' (Hine, 2005a: 1) are slowly fizzling away as researchers experiment and innovate with new opportunities offered by digital technologies, the emerging corpus of ethnographic solutions continues to be tinged with concerns. In the context of Journalism Studies, a field whose disciplinary roots are closely connected to newsroom ethnographies (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1991), the permeation of digital technologies into the profession has posed serious challenges to researchers. There is lack of consensus over the extent to which founding newsroom ethnographies apply to the new media environment – in particular, the fluid and multifaceted nature of contemporary news production.

Against this backdrop, the present study revisits ethnography in the context of journalism practice and offers a confidence boost to researchers seeking to deploy the approach to understand journalism practice in the digital era. Specifically, the study draws on my ethnographic study how Zimbabwean[1] print journalists deploy and appropriate the internet and its associated digital technologies (social media and email) in their day-to-day newsmaking practices. The study focused on two dailies (*The Herald* and the *Chronicle*) and four weeklies (the *Sunday Mail*; the *Sunday News*; the *Zimbabwe Independent* and *The Standard*) and was conducted between June and December 2008. The nature of the study required a methodological approach that would enable me to capture the multifaceted aspects of journalists' uses of new digital technologies, including the contexts of appropriation. Consequently, I adopted a multiple case-study ethnographic approach that employed a combination of observation (offline and online) and in-depth interviews to study practices in the six newsrooms.

The methodological approach I selected found root in the collective strengths of two broad theoretical concerns: the *sociology of journalism* (Fishman, 1980); and *social constructivist* approaches to technology (Bijker, 1995). Although these theoretical bodies were conceptualized before the 'new media age' (in the 1970s and 1980s), together they provide a basis for conceptualizing the interplay between journalists, their immediate context of practice and the wider social factors that coalesce to structure and constrain the deployment of new technologies (Mabweazara, 2010a). They collectively remind us that all action, as indeed new media appropriation, takes place in an embedded social context and, in order to understand the appropriations, we need to understand that broader context (Orgad, 2005).

Although the study discusses the opportunities (and challenges) involved in the ethnographic choices I made, particularly shifting between observing journalists online and offline as well interviewing them in situ and outside the newsrooms, I also

advance the idea that ethnography is an adaptive self-reflexive 'lived experience' negotiated between the researcher (who constitutes the primary research instrument) and the context of research. Thus, although arguments abound on the extent to which conventional ethnography ignores certain aspects of cultural practices mediated by digital technologies (Hine, 2000), I submit that ethnographers may benefit from the important but often unacknowledged pragmatic elements of qualitative research – *intuition* and *creativity* (Janesick, 2001). The unpredictability and 'transient' nature of digital platforms, combined with the recurrently multi-sited nature of journalism practice require adaptive lenses such that the researcher is persistently alert to *intuitive* moments that call for *creativity* in unpredictable situations.

Janesick defines *intuition* as the immediate apprehension or cognition of critical issues that speak to one's research in the research field, it is 'a way of knowing about the world through insight and exercising one's imagination' (2001: 539). *Creativity*, on the other hand, refers to 'having the sense or quality of being created rather than imitated' (2001: 532). For Janesick, the two are closely connected – intuition constitutes the seed for creative acts in the research field. Conceptually, these interrelated terms point to the researcher's cognition of methodological challenges and being able to ingeniously mediate them without watering down the rigorousness and validity of the research process. As Hine (2005a: 2) rightly observes, 'when we set out to research social interactions we cannot specify in advance just what form those interactions will take, nor how we will be able to participate in or observe them'; this calls for a sustained intuitive and creative vigilance that has an enduring alertness to the 'nebulous settings' (Rutter and Smith, 2005) in which journalists practice.

In demonstrating the continued relevance of traditional ethnographic approaches, I attempt to reflect on and describe the *intuitive* and *creative* moments that characterized my ethnographic study of the appropriations of digital technologies in Zimbabwean newsrooms. In doing so, I hope to initiate a conversation that may help illuminate how we view the role of the 'ethnographer' (including the challenges they face) in contemporary journalism research, all of which render sharing solutions and experiences invaluable.

Ethnography: An Enduring Research Tradition in a Changing News Production Context

Despite the definitional inconsistencies surrounding the term 'ethnography' there seems to be consensus among researchers that its epistemological concerns are rooted in the epistemic position of the researcher that finds explanation in its roots: '*ethno* (people) and *graphy* (describing)' (Lindlof, 1995: 20). Thus, ethnography involves a holistic description of cultural membership. Although it is often described

as a method, it actually encompasses a range of approaches, all of which inscribe a particular relationship between the researcher and the researched. It therefore brings a variety of techniques of inquiry into play: attempting to observe things that happen, to listen to what people say and question people in the setting under investigation (Walsh, 1998). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 1) succinctly conceive of ethnography as:

> a particular method or set of methods which in its most characteristic form … involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – *in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research.* (emphasis added)

The *raison d'etre* of ethnography's epistemology is thus the connection between the researcher and the researched. It seeks to 'investigate in particular the perspectives of participants, the nature and forms of their knowledge, their interactions, practices and discourses' (Luders, 2004: 225) aiming to draw connections between practices, experiences and the context (within which both the participants and the researcher find themselves). This entails the immersion of the researcher in the field of study – observing what happens; listening to what is said; asking questions in order to gain in-depth understanding of the cultural issues at stake (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

News production research partly has its roots in the long tradition of ethnographic research. The early studies of news production constituting a body of work referred to as the *sociology of journalism* based their research on extensive and intensive periods of newsroom observations and interviews (see Cottle, 2007; Fishman, 1980; Hansen et al., 1998; Tuchman, 1991). These studies represent a substantive literature, rich in empirical detail and the theorization of the mechanics and cultures of news production. Although today the field of news production and journalistic practice has changed immensely from the early days, ethnographies of news production retain their relevance: they continue to provide useful insights into approaches for attending to 'the normally invisible workings of news media' (Cottle, 2007: 1).

The approaches invite a deeper and possibly more humanistic understanding of newsmaking cultures, practices and performances of media producers and how these give expression to the complexities and contingencies involved in news production (Cottle, 2003). In keeping with the broader qualitative research tradition, ethnographic methods are naturally fluid and based on ontological and

epistemological assumptions that favour a relatively open and unstructured research strategy.

This flexible approach allows researchers to consider unforeseen issues that emerge as important and worth pursuing during the course of conducting research (Bryman, 1988). The flexibility allows the researcher to make sense of and construct meanings out of the ongoing 'dialogue' between journalists, their immediate spaces of practice and the wider context. Indeed, the very process of the social production of news demonstrates the profession's deep embeddedness in 'constructivism' (Tuchman, 1991), which renders relevant a qualitative methodological approach. This flexibility and sensitivity to cultural contexts is tied to ethnography's 'trademark': the need to remain loyal to the phenomena under study. This nonetheless does not mean 'that ethnographers just wander around aimlessly or that simply being in a situation they will soak up data. Ethnography might be adaptive, but it is still purposive' (Hine, 2009: 6).

Traditional newsroom ethnographies derived from sociological traditions have, however, come under criticism for their failure to provide 'much-needed insight into the changes the Internet has … wrought on the work and practice of journalism' (Paul, 2008: ix). While the methodologies 'come close to providing an adequate description of the culture and practice of media production, and the mindset of the media producers' (Paterson, 2008: 2), including the defining epistemological foundation of Journalism Studies as a discipline, the permeation of new digital technologies into news production practices calls for the need to update the traditions. As Cottle (2000: 21) argues: 'these "new(s) times" demand a "second wave" of ethnographic studies that deliberately set out to theoretically map and empirically explore the rapidly changing field of news production and today's differentiated ecology of news provision'. Much has changed, both theoretically and empirically, since early newsroom studies were carried out and 'the time is long overdue for similarly intensive and in-depth researches' (2000: 34). Similarly, Paterson (2008: 2) contends that 'the relevance of these earlier works of news sociology is becoming marginal, for modern newsrooms – even the few still producing exclusively for "old media" channels – bear an ever decreasing resemblance to newsrooms of the late 1960s and early 1970s'.

New technologies therefore pose new challenges for newsroom ethnographers. They have not only redefined journalists' day-to-day routines but also how ethnographers capture the routines. In particular, technical aspects are not easily amenable to observation nor are they open to close scrutiny if one follows traditional ethnographic modes of observation. One of the main sources of anxiety for contemporary newsroom ethnographers is the question of 'where to begin and end an ethnography, and where to go in between' (Hine, 2009: 6).

In response to these developments, a number of scholars have sought to devise approaches that enable a close scrutiny of journalism practice with the high ethnographic standard of first-hand experience. To this end, innovative newsroom studies predominantly constituting a reworking of traditional ethnography have emerged over the past few years. These developments have taken place in tandem with methodological innovations in other fields by ethnographers who have equally struggled to come to terms with the unsettling impact of digital technologies (see Hine, 2005a, 2005b). The emerging methodological innovations, nevertheless, still 'benefit from the key attribute of ethnographic work – direct and profound contact with the news workers and, in most instances, their working environment and culture' (Paterson, 2008: 9). Paterson (2008: 5) further contends that: 'despite change in media technologies, proven methodologies remain relevant, as do central questions about their application'.

However, emerging ethnographic innovations vary considerably 'sometimes with little in common apart from a shared claim to the term "ethnography"' (2008: 4). They 'range in approach from in-depth interviews to fairly unstructured but long-term observation to a highly systematic exercise in data gathering and analysis' (2008: 9). Among the innovative researchers, some have tried to develop a kind of 'multimedia cyber-anthropology' (Paccagnella, 1997) in which they recommend the use of digital practices such as email communication or participation in chatrooms to conduct forms of participant content analyses that are sometimes labelled: 'digital ethnography' (Murthy, 2008), 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) or 'network ethnography' (Howard, 2002). Murthy (2008: 837) argues for a balanced combination of 'physical' and 'digital ethnography'. In his view, this approach 'not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents' (2008: 837).

As I have argued elsewhere (Mabweazara, 2010b), conducting social research using digital technologies themselves, as some of the foregoing scholars propose, raises its own challenges. In particular, 'the inability to make independent observations leaves researchers confined to analysing content availed to them by their research subjects, thus making it difficult for them to make independent analytic deductions as the research process unfolds' (2010b: 662). As Howard (2002: 555) puts it: 'Researchers can easily reinterpret or misinterpret these messages if they lack deep knowledge of the individuals and relationships involved. Moreover, it is difficult to reach this depth of knowledge with computer-mediated communication between the qualitative researcher and subjects.' Additionally, researchers cannot draw on contextual social factors to examine the issues at stake. Rather, they are reduced to covert participant observers shaping the 'digital field site' in unfamiliar ways (Murthy, 2008: 849).

In light of these weaknesses, I am ambivalent towards social research that uses digital technologies as the sole data-gathering instruments as most proponents of digital or virtual ethnography suggest. In keeping with Howard (2002), I argue that ethnographic approaches that are set solely in virtual space have the potential to obscure independent observations in the physical spaces of the research (such as the newsroom). They leave the researcher's purview limited only to the analysis of content made available by the research subjects in the digital spaces. I therefore propose a compromise that combines online or digital ethnography with traditional physical ethnography – shifting between offline and online ethnography – with data derived from one approach informing the next and vice versa in a single study.

As I attempt to demonstrate, the use of multiple approaches within a single study illuminates or nullifies some extraneous influences as data relating to the same phenomenon are not only compared but also derived from a diversity of techniques. Mixing methods offers enormous potential in exploring the multiple dimensions of journalists' appropriations of new technologies in their daily practices. An ethnography of journalists' appropriation of digital technologies should then be seen as being 'about mobility between contexts of production and use, and between online and offline, […] *creatively* deploy[ing] forms of engagement to look at how these sites are socially constructed and at the same time are social conduits' (Hine, 2009: 11).

The remainder of the article draws on my study of Zimbabwean journalists' appropriation of digital technologies (internet, social media and email) to demonstrate the continued relevance of traditional ethnographic approaches. The first part briefly discusses how I established my role as an observer in keeping with established ethnography; the second and third sections respectively discuss my use of offline and online observations to capture the fluid and diffuse uses of the internet by journalists; the fourth part discusses my use of in-depth interviews to complement and corroborate data gathered through other means. The article concludes by giving a reflective overview of the complexities and possibilities of using traditional ethnography to study new media practices.

Establishing My Role as an Observer: Invoking the Traditions of Ethnography

Although my conditions of access in the newsrooms studied were generally relaxed because of my prior connections with the newsrooms and most journalists,[2] this did not preclude establishing useful working relations in order to secure an intimate vantage point on news production practices in the newsrooms. As Hine reminds us: '[e]stablishing one's presence as a bona fide researcher and trustworthy recipient of confidences is not automatic, [it] varies depending on the cultural context under

investigation' (2005b: 20). Thus, the identity I assumed defined the course of my ethnographic immersion and my navigation of 'the field' in its various dimensions – online and offline. I sought to establish what Walsh (1998: 226) describes as 'a large degree of ordinary sociability and normal social intercourse' that 'demystified' my lengthy presence in the newsrooms.[3] In this regard, at the start of my observations I introduced myself to all interested parties and reassured them about my intentions. I also familiarized myself with the basic organization of the newsrooms, that is, who sits where, and their respective responsibilities.

In the early stages of the research, I deliberately assumed the role of a stranger who watches and asks questions in order to make sense of different scenarios and activities within the newsrooms. I gradually established myself as a 'naïve participant' retaining, as Walsh (1998: 226) advises, a 'self-conscious position in which "incompetence" [was] progressively substituted by an awareness of what has been learnt, how it has been learned and the social transactions that inform[ed] the production of knowledge'.

I also developed a 'contextual sensitivity' that enabled me to fit within varied and complex news production processes by nurturing ongoing contextual relations. This entailed remaining 'relatively open to *in situ* developments and impromptu lines of inquiry' (Hansen et al., 1998: 37, emphasis original) with a sustained intuitive and creative vigilance that was enduringly alert to the nebulous nature of the context in which journalists practice as well as deploy new technologies.

Following Walsh (1998) and Hansen et al.'s (1998) advice that changes in observer role over the course of fieldwork may be vital in producing new information and creating new lines of inquiry that extend the scope of one's ethnography, I continuously reflected on and adapted my role to ensure a sustained acceptance in the field. I also negotiated and renegotiated an acceptable 'front' that encouraged the willingness of journalists to 'volunteer' information on their day-to-day deployment and appropriation of digital technologies. As an observer, I had to open myself up in ways that I do not in ordinary life (Goffman, 1989).

To avoid the pitfalls of 'going native' in my ethnographic immersion, that is, abandoning the position of analyst for identification with the journalists, leading to restrictions on the character of the data collected (Walsh, 1998), I adopted a degree of 'marginality' in the research situation, avoiding too much rapport and yet maintaining a familiarity that grasped the perspectives of the journalists. For instance, each time I discerned a sense of 'over-rapport', especially with the journalists I knew from my past connections (as explained above), I took a step back to re-establish the critical distance I needed to ensure a perceptive understanding of the issues under study. This also entailed a consistent intuitive sensitivity and alertness in navigating moments that threatened my understanding of issues.

Establishing useful working relations with the journalists in the selected newsrooms helped to set the appropriate backdrop for my ethnography, in particular the subsequent deployment of a combination of observation (online and offline), as well as in-depth interviews (in situ and outside the newsrooms) in the six newsrooms as discussed in the following sections.

'Offline Observations': Capturing the Fluid and Multi-sited Uses of the Internet

Attempts to capture the fluid and multi-sited processes of internet use in the convoluted routines of journalism practice with the high ethnographic standard of first-hand experience, without doubt, present a challenge.[4] Unlike other qualitative research methods, which typically involve the deployment of a research instrument such as an interview schedule, the observer 'becomes his or her own research instrument' (Hansen et al., 1998: 36). Accordingly, in my study the issue of deciding on the relevant categories for observing journalists' appropriations of new media depended on my persistent alertness to the research's objectives, which limited my attention to relevant 'analytical categories in the field' (Jensen, 1982, 242). This approach finds root in the flexibility of ethnography, which, as noted earlier, enables the researcher to persistently exercise discretion, deciding always what is interesting, and worth documenting in the field notes. It is this flexibility and alertness to contexts where my ethnographic immersion would yield 'thick descriptions' that assisted me to overcome the practical obstacles of using a qualitative approach to study the use of digital technologies in journalism practice.

Thus, to capture the complex imbrications of the technologies, journalists and the context of practice, I purposively identified loose categories that focused my attention to different aspects of news production and journalistic routines and attempted to 'shut off' categories that competed for my attention. To achieve this, I deployed a loosely categorized checklist, which I constantly referred to ensure coverage of all key issues in my observations. As Peshkin (2001: 240) notes, 'the selection of a category … focuses the researcher's attention, interest, time, and energy in a particular way'. To this end, since the core of newsgathering processes occurs mainly at the level of reporters (Fishman, 1980), I decided to observe the daily activities of reporters, focusing my attention on different news desks or beats for a time. I also regularly decided between staying in the newsroom all day and going out on newsgathering assignments.

This process entailed attending early morning editorial conferences as well as following individual reporters on assignments but also leaving space for the contingent and unexpected. The early morning conferences were particularly important as they provided 'insightful professional exchanges, revealing journalistic

values and judgments in action' (Hansen et al., 1998: 56). They provided a rich source of 'dense journalistic comment' and verbalized decision-making (Cottle, 2007: 6). In addition, given that news is primarily a product of transactions between journalists and their sources (Tuchman, 1991), attention was also given to the interactions between reporters and their sources, taking a closer look at how the interactions were mediated by digital media. Thus, although ethnography is generally flexible, being systematic and orderly is not antithetical to its epistemological goals (Hine, 2009). Peshkin (2001: 241) similarly argues that: '[t] here may well be times when what we want to learn is best learned by rigorously structured perceptual means; in this way, we obtain frequencies to undergird our speculations and interpretations'.

In many ways, however, these strategies were hinged on my intuitive tendency to make 'numerous sampling decisions about what to include and what to place at the centre and periphery' (2001: 250), in keeping with my research goals. The extract below, from one of my newsroom observations at *The Herald*, shows how a conscious decision to stay in the newsroom and focus attention on senior journalists' new media activities proved useful. In particular, it shows how my intuitive predisposition enabled me to simultaneously observe and directly witness the fluid processes characteristic of everyday interactions and routines in the newsroom. Thus, although, I could not set down the finer details of the specific new media uses and activities, at least at the surface (without capturing nuance), I could observe the trends in their use in the newsroom setting:

> The Assistant News Editor walks in for his late shift at about 10:00 am and from a distance, I notice that the first thing he does upon logging onto his computer is to browse through his *email*, it is also within close range enough for me to discern that he immediately responds to a selection of emails.
>
> As he does so, he shifts to a social networking site, *Facebook*, and spends a couple of minutes on the site before returning to his mailbox once again, but only for a few minutes. He then shifts his attention to online newspapers and, in particular, spends quite a while on *Newzimbabwe*, a news website that mostly focuses on Zimbabwean issues. Eventually he stands up and takes a stroll around the newsroom, chatting with colleagues and clearly catching up on 'news'. (Field notes, *The Herald* newsroom, 14 July 2008)

Thus, while it is not always easy to set down everything that one witnesses,

especially technical actions on platforms such as social media (Paterson, 2008), intuitive alertness and creativity in the research context render the application of proven traditional ethnographic methodologies relevant (Mabweazara, 2010b). My sustained alertness to critical moments enabled me to explore and 'excavate' fluid and diffuse activities, often obscured from view, but which required my active involvement in order to discern them (Schatzberg, 2008). My immersion in the newsrooms and sustained alertness to selected journalistic activities – in particular, those that spoke to my research goals – unlocked the possibilities to discover and explore more.

Following Goffman's (1989: 125) advice, I also listened to what the journalists spoke about and picked up 'on their minor grunts and groans as they respond[ed] to their situation'. In the same manner, unstructured *informal conversations* generated important data that constituted a key element of data triangulation. I intuitively responded to opportune moments which presented themselves for informal conversations in the field. These conversations took place in various contexts: in the newsrooms; on newsgathering assignments; in staff canteens; at the press clubs; in pubs, and in editorial reference libraries. On many occasions, the informal conversations went on for hours and often proved valuable for deepening insights on issues elusive to observation or as 'follow-ups' to issues glossed over in formal interviews after an interviewee's discomfort over a particular line of questioning. To capture insights from these unstructured moments, I kept a small pocket notebook in which I discreetly wrote notes immediately after the conversations. However, given that 'one can never record everything' as social scenes are inexhaustible (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), I had to make numerous sampling decisions, choosing only to record particular observations because they 'stood out' in relation to my research goals.

There has been considerable scholarly interest on what conventions to follow when recording and writing ethnographic data (Tjora, 2006). Mason (2006) argues that the researcher needs to pay attention to how they wish to handle the distinction between *literal*, *interpretive* and *reflexive* 'readings' of their field notes. Thus, in writing my field accounts of new media uses by the journalists, I took the *interpretive* approach by 'constructing' my accounts rather than the 'accounts simply mirroring reality' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 239). In expanding on my notes, I used various figures of speech to narrate 'recognisable and plausible reconstructions' (1995: 245) of journalists' new media practices and actions in particular settings. In doing so, I followed Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995: 246) advice that 'the graphic use of metaphorical descriptions must always be part of the ethnographer's repertoire'.

Although my participant observations were conducted within specific time frames in each newsroom, as shown earlier, when data began to replicate itself

by duplicating what I had already got, I took the decision to stop taking notes and move on to the next newsroom. Thus, the data collection process gathered momentum with the shift from one newsroom to another. This constituted an ongoing process of reflection that allowed the comparison of data and experiences from one newsroom with data and experiences from another. This approach also enabled me to organize time strategically by following up and zeroing in on aspects not fully documented in previous observations, thus concretizing them as well as providing more data for triangulation.

Further to this, because the internet did not allow for a full range of 'human expression' that I wanted to experience, it became even more important for me to see my observations as an alternative source of data for enhancing triangulation against information gathered through other means, in particular, online ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews as discussed below. One of the 'major strengths of observation is that it is not really a single method, but can embrace different ways of gathering data and styles of observation' (Bryman, 1988: 48). The flexibility of the method allows for the incorporation of other methods, such as unstructured interviews and informal talk which provide a solid basis on which evidence and findings can be triangulated by allowing inferences drawn from one data source to be contrasted, corroborated or followed up by another.

Online Observations: Examining the Use of the Internet 'from the Inside'

To make sense of journalists' appropriation of the internet, social media in particular, it was necessary to immerse myself in the context and spaces in which they actually used the technology. Given the 'general tendency for people to disclose more about themselves online' (Hine, 2005b: 18), this approach was clearly enlightening as it made visible some features of journalists' use of Facebook which were not readily observable through other means.

I initiated my observation by regularly checking web browsers on reporters' desktops in the newsrooms.[5] This broadly indicated that entertainment reporters invested more time on social networking sites than their colleagues on other beats and thus helped to focus my attention on appropriate forms of social media engagement. This subsequently led to a sustained period of online investigation – lurking over entertainment reporters' Facebook profiles, observing and identifying relevant activities connected to newsmaking. These observations established that Facebook was a valuable platform connecting reporters with sources (potential and existing) scattered across the globe.

Figure 1 highlights how my online observation of reporters on Facebook gave insight into its centrality as journalistic tool.[6] The observation revealed how the social setting enabled journalists to interact with friends and potential sources, in the process paving way for tips and story ideas. As the screen shot illustrates, the journalist playfully cajoles his friends about stories coming up on the entertainment pages of the next edition of the *Chronicle* and in response one of his friend's hints that he has a more scandalous story.

The social networking platform clearly connects the reporter to society and fosters trust and norms of reciprocity that constitute key antecedents to effective entertainment reporting. The short messages left by friends on the reporter's 'wall'[7] call attention to what is happening on the social scene, hence offering a conduit for maintaining relationships and engaging with readers. Thus, the experiential aspects afforded by my online observation revealed the sociological relevance of Facebook as a bounded digital field-site that deserves our attention as much as any other territorially based field with 'sociologically relevant things happening there' (Hine, 2009: 9). Indeed, without access to direct observation of journalists' activities on Facebook, my data could easily have been reduced merely to what journalists say they use the platform for, as well as what little I could glean from my 'non-interactive' newsroom observations discussed above.

While this form of online observation gave a rich source of information, it was obviously insufficient on its own. It did not provide scope for the formation of intimate relationships and the expression of emotion traditionally ascribed to ethnography. In addition, the observation did not allow for an immediate connection between contextual social factors and journalists' use of Facebook. To use Orgad's words: '[t]here remained a need to obtain users' constructions of their experience of Internet use' (2005: 54). Acknowledging the challenges associated with online observation, Hine observes that online research encounters 'can … be unrewarding, stilted, terse and unenlightening (just as offline encounters can be)' (2005b: 17). It therefore became necessary for me to see online observation as one of a set of ethnographic approaches for extending my reflections. In particular, the ephemeral and fleeting nature of online practices necessitated a multiple-method ethnographic approach that contextualized and interpreted information gathered online against *offline observations*, *informal conversations* and *in-depth interviews*.
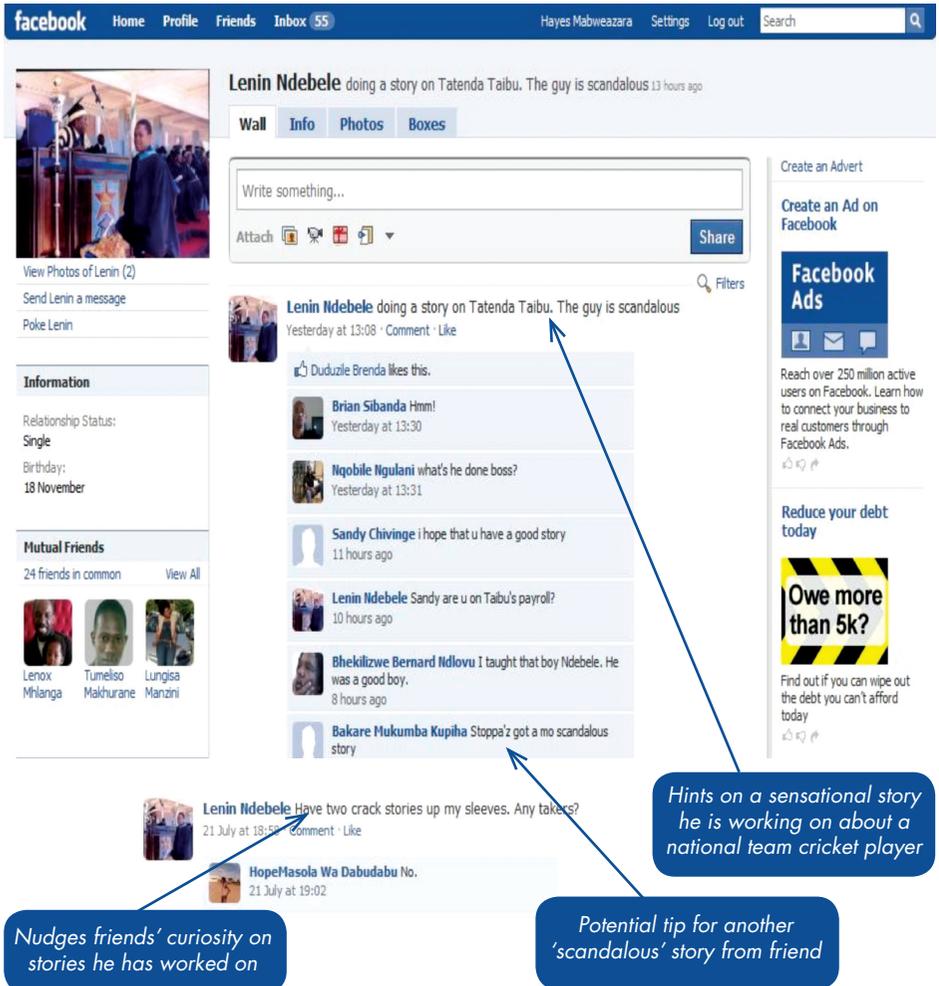
Figure 1. Online observation of a *Chronicle* entertainment reporter's Facebook activities

As Hine further advises: 'While it might be appealing simply to lurk and observe ongoing activities in a virtual field site, there are some interesting opportunities to be exploited by a move into more active engagement' (2005b: 11). Similarly, Orgad

(2005: 52) submits that '[e]xtending researcher–informant relationships … into an offline context could be seen as a way of contextualizing and adding authenticity to the findings obtained online'. Thus, by not relying solely on knowledge accrued through online observation, I avoided the risk of overlooking important practices outside the purview of the fragmented and fleeting practices on Facebook.

In-depth Interviews: Shifting Locations to Capture the Complexities of New Media Use

To corroborate my offline as well as online observations, I employed in-depth face-to-face interviews with selected[8] journalists to access thick descriptions and insider perspectives of practices and cultures of new technology use in news production. The aim was to capture the multifaceted nature of internet use and account for the kind of work that journalists do 'behind the screen' (Orgad, 2005: 58) – far from the purview of offline or online observation. Thus, shifting to direct in-depth interviews enabled me to fill in the gaps in my research by directly seeking to understand journalists' experiences of new media use in their journalistic routines. Of particular significance in using the interviews in my ethnography was the decision to flit between in situ (newsroom-based) interviews and interviews scheduled outside the newsroom in order to capture and fully explore journalists' 'insider' information about their appropriation of new media.

The decision to interview journalists in situ, at their desks in the newsrooms facilitated direct access to their uses of the internet and its associated digital technologies (in particular, social media and email). The setting facilitated an interactive engagement between the journalists, the researcher and the technologies under examination. Equally, journalists illustrated their responses to particular questions by making reference to specific websites, their practices regarding social media, as well as emails received from newsroom branches, readers and other news sources. Journalists also illustrated the connections between everyday uses of the technologies and specific aspects of news production, including linking the technologies to the generation of specific stories, as well as abuses of the internet in the newsrooms.

The location of the interviews also made it possible for me to make reference to specific web activities as cues for helping journalists remember websites I had observed them browsing at a distance (see field notes from my newsroom observation at *The Herald*, discussed earlier). In the interviews I also often used data gathered from observations as probes – 'instructive way[s] of stimulating the interviewees' memory and encouraging [them] to elaborate' (Orgad, 2005: 61). The extract below from a newsroom interview with an entertainment reporter at the *Chronicle* is illustrative of how in situ interviews enabled me to directly witness as well as probe how journalists make use of social media in their newsmaking practices:

Reporter: I do some of my stories on Facebook. As you know artists and entertainers are scattered across the globe. So I have a 'network' of artists on my friends' list and when I do stories I arrange and interview them through Facebook […] its easy that way.

Interviewer: Any examples of stories you have done through Facebook?

Reporter: Yes, I have just done one with Arthur Mafokate, a South African musician.

Interviewer: Have you ever met him in person?

Reporter: No, but the good thing is I have pictures on my profile, so he has an idea of how I look like. [*Digresses as he directs me to his computer monitor*] Look, this is the story I'm talking about …

Interviewer: So all these direct quotes in this story were solicited through Facebook?

Reporter: Yes, they are from my chat with Arthur on Facebook word-for-word. He actually sent me pictures of his child through the same platform [*turns to his mail box to show me the pictures*]. What made it easy for me to link up with him is that I am a friend to some of his friends on Facebook and I have interviewed some of them for stories …

I have also done a story with Makhosi, the Zimbabwean nurse who starred in *Big Brother* in the UK through Facebook, and now she regularly sends me story ideas. As we speak I am expecting something about Kevin Ncube.[9] She gets information in the UK about many Zimbabwean celebrities and socialites and lets me know through Facebook. … Look [*digresses as he directs me to some of his Facebook conversations with Makhosi*]

Sometimes you can actually pick stories from Facebook … like if you get an artist writing: 'I had a boring show', on his or her profile like this [*directs me to Facebook profile*], that is a scoop on its own! You quickly initiate communication with them and ask how big the show was and what went wrong and so on. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, a South African musician was publicly 'dumped' by his girlfriend on Facebook and the *Sowetan* tabloid newspaper picked it up and made a big story out of it …

This extract shows how in situ in-depth interviews equipped me with an understanding of journalists' inner perspectives and descriptions of new media experiences that were not amenable to observation. They complemented and helped me to make sense of offline and online observations that were occasionally non-participatory. Often, the interviews were interrupted by some activity on the digital platforms. For example, a journalist posting a comment on his/her profile; responding to a friend's post on his/her wall or a chat request prompt. Each time this happened, I shrewdly 'dragged' the moment into the discussions, attempting always to find out whether they were work-related or not. In some instances, the erratic posts became opportune examples illustrating what we were talking about at the time. By the same token, I referred to issues that remained unclear, contradictory or that were completely omitted during informal interactions in order, 'to stimulate the interview to explore them' (Orgad, 2005: 61).

While in situ interviews enabled me to mine more realistic and less superficial data that yielded thicker descriptions and provided an opportunity to identify contradictions or misconceptions emanating from distanced observations, the free movement in the newsrooms created a constant disturbance. Indeed, there were moments when journalists appeared to censor themselves because they did not want colleagues to get wind of what they were saying. These circumstances necessitated shifting my interviews to more convenient settings that helped me to illuminate sensitive issues, especially those generally deemed to be beyond the discursive range of acceptable practices in the newsrooms. For instance, issues that touched on ethics and stringent in-house policies (deemed too sensitive to talk about in the newsroom) were explored at length in spaces where reporters felt more secure.

From my previous interactions with most journalists in the newsrooms studied I knew that their leisure activities were important, particularly, the time they spent at press clubs and in pubs. Consequently, these spaces became secure extensions for unrestrained interactions with journalists. The extract below from an interview with a news reporter at *The Herald* illustrates how I benefited from shifting the location of my in-depth interviews, especially when discussing sensitive issues relating to newsroom policies that impact on the uses of the internet.

> Interviewer: Are there any restrictions on how you should use the internet and related technologies in the newsroom?
>
> Tanaka: Not overtly, but you just have to be extra careful about a number of things ... in particular about which computer to use; which websites you browse and what sort of email account you use when in the newsroom. This includes checking who is around you when surfing the web ...

Interviewer: Are you saying that you are monitored on your activities on the web within the newsroom?

Tanaka: Yes, you see, at the moment there are a lot of suspicions on company email. People suspect that if you use the company email the IT department can intercept and read your private mails, but if you have a web-based email, the belief is that it's more secure. For that reason, I have a company email and a personal web-based email. I prefer to use the web-based … I don't really feel comfortable with the company email.

I'm sure you have heard of colleagues who have been suspended and subsequently dismissed on allegations of 'moonlighting' for other organizations after their emails were intercepted and used as evidence against them in disciplinary hearings. So, you can't but help being cautious in your use of the web within the newsrooms.

This extract demonstrates the level of journalists' articulacy on sensitive issues in interviews located outside the newsrooms. The interview setting helped to uncover much more about the journalists' everyday contexts of practice than newsroom-based interviews or observations. The interviews were 'often surprising in their richness and … high level of expression' (Orgad, 2005: 59).

Individual in-depth interviews were also useful for another reason. They enabled me to probe chief editors and Information Technology (IT) managers whose work routines were not open to observation and yet provided insights into corporate and editorial lines of command that structure or constrain journalists' appropriation of new technologies. Given that, in individual interviews, 'people do not always say what they think, or mean what they say' (Jensen, 1982: 240), it was essential that interviews were combined with other data-gathering techniques discussed above.

Concluding Reflections
While the unsettling impact of new digital technologies in various social and cultural practices has led to the emergence of innovative ethnographies that 'push against methodological boundaries' (Hine, 2009: 18), this study demonstrates that traditional ethnographic approaches are still very much relevant to the new media scenario. However, this is not to shy away from the challenges that new digital technologies pose for any attempt to carve out a firm definition of ethnography, including the very notion of 'the field' and the practicalities associated with doing *ethnography*. However, there is broad consensus among methodologists that it encompasses a range of approaches, all of which inscribe a particular relationship between the researcher

and the researched, aiming always at making connections between practices, experiences and the context (within which both the participants and the researcher find themselves) (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Walsh, 1998).

As a methodological stance, ethnography is naturally flexible and based on ontological and epistemological assumptions that favour a relatively open and unstructured research strategy adapted to 'the circumstances in which ethnographers find themselves' (Hine, 2009: 6). It is this flexibility that renders the approach relevant and applicable to investigating contemporary developments in journalism. It allows the researcher to make sense of as well as construct meanings out of the ongoing 'dialogue' between journalists, their immediate spaces of practice and the wider context, thus enabling the researcher to capture the fleeting and distributed appropriations of digital technologies.

This flexibility, however, does not imply that the epistemological goals of ethnography are antithetical to being systematic and orderly (Hine, 2009: 6). As Peshkin puts it: 'There may well be times when what we want to learn is best learned by rigorously structured perceptual means' (2001: 241). In addition, the flexibility of ethnography demands an understanding that its research design is an ongoing concern in the field and what counts as data has to be constantly re-evaluated. In this sense, ethnography should be seen as an iterative inductive practice that is continually negotiated in the research context.

The reflexive account of my fieldwork in Zimbabwe attempts, therefore, to show that ethnography is a 'negotiated lived experience' rooted in the quest to understand practices 'from the inside' while also viewing them distantly in order to keep a grip on the analytic concepts that undergird and inform the depth of knowledge that ethnography strives for. While demonstrating ways of navigating the challenges of deploying ethnography to study new media phenomena in journalism practice, the study also shows that the researcher has to be persistently 'self-reflexive' and alert to the *intuitive* and *creative* inclinations ever present in research contexts in order to capture practices from different angles and positions.

Although the strategies and approaches foregrounded in this study are discussed in relation to my personal experience in Zimbabwe, they are not isolated from related studies. In this sense, they provide some useful hints for ethnographers who may seek to examine new media phenomena in journalism or media practice, more broadly. However, a different empirical design, involving different kinds of online interactions (of a participatory nature), including closely examining the implications of shifting between offline and online research settings, could help to provide further insights into the evolving nature of ethnography.

1.

A note of clarification is in order: my interest in this study is to use my experience in Zimbabwe to discuss and make general observations about the practicalities of deploying ethnographic methods in the new media era, rather than emphasize the implications of Zimbabwe's socio-political context on using ethnography. The study therefore applies beyond Zimbabwe.

2.

My research benefited from my prior connections with the research context. Not only was I conducting the research in my 'native' country, but I was also researching among a social group I was intimately attached to through my professional life as a journalism educator in Zimbabwe. More significantly, my activities in social organizations such as the Bulawayo Press Club (where I was on the executive committee for some time) ensured regular contact with journalists. This 'insider status' not only helped me to gain some rapport with the journalists but to also avoid mistakes in the highly polarized and sensitive political context of my research.

3.

Although the technique of participant observation is flexible and not strictly linear in its execution (Hansen et al., 1998), it still depends upon sequenced research stages, each constituting an indispensable part of the ethnographic process. Thus, for the present study, I spent a total of seven months in the field between June and December 2008, and my newsroom observations were structured and organized within this time frame. Given that four of the newsrooms studied (The Herald, Sunday Mail, Zimbabwe Independent and The Standard) are located in Harare (the capital city), I decided to spend four months in Harare between June and September and two months in Bulawayo (the second largest city), where the Chronicle and the Sunday News are located, between October and early December.

4.

For example, observing journalists browsing various web-pages on the internet, updating their social media profiles, or chatting on Yahoo! Messenger without being deemed too intrusive,

and relating the discrete digital practices to the object of one's study.

5.

While the idea of observing journalists' web browsers on their desktops legitimately invokes ethical questions around the invasion of their privacy, in this particular instance I carefully negotiated 'access' and ensured informed consent from all the reporters whose browsers I observed. In addition, the 'contextual sensitivity' and ongoing contextual relations that I nurtured and cultivated in the newsrooms also facilitated an easy and transparent access to a number of complex contexts, including the journalists' web browsers.

6.

The journalist concerned allowed me to observe his activities on Facebook, eventually leading me to log onto my Facebook account to conduct forms of 'participant content observation' of his activities on Facebook. This approach was in keeping with ethnography's goal to bring a variety of techniques of inquiry into play: to observe things that happen, listen to what people say and question people in the setting under investigation in order to gain in-depth understanding of the cultural issues at stake (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

7.

The space on each user's profile page (also referred to as a Timeline) that allows friends to post messages for the user and is visible to anyone among the user's network of friends on the site.

8.

Although guidelines for sampling within ethnographic research tend to be flexible and situational, my respondents were purposively selected from observations (both offline and online). I gave particular attention to journalists whose daily routines and practices spoke directly to the study's objectives.

9.

Kevin Ncube is a Zimbabwean radio and television personality who fled the country for the United Kingdom in fear of 'homophobic' attacks after his sexuality was exposed by the media.

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