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## Institutional ethnography for communication and media research

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to illustrate how an existing sociological methodology “institutional ethnography” (IE), coined by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, can inform qualitative research projects in communication and media studies. In introducing IE to our field, I hope to equip communication and media studies researchers with a qualitative methodology that opens up opportunity to map the undergirding ruling relations and institutionalized processes that shape the many aspects of human and mediated communication. Upon explaining IE’s methodological anchoring in feminist ontology and epistemology, I detail several methods for data gathering (participant observation, interviewing, textual analysis) and put forward suggestions to analyze IE data. I then offer potential avenues for IE in communication and media scholarship across the journal’s three perspectives – communication and culture, communication as a social force, and communication and new media – and close by discussing some of IE’s methodological opportunities and limitations for our discipline’s diverse research agenda.

### KEYWORDS

Institutional ethnography;  
qualitative methodology;  
qualitative methods

When choosing a qualitative method for media and communication research, scholars have options – ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and others, with many submethods and nuances within and among them. Our existing repertoire of methodologies and data-gathering techniques casts a wide net over the many aspects of human and mediated communication; yet, methodological inventions and interventions are needed to drive research forward.

Particularly in the critical/cultural paradigm of communication and media scholarship, researchers often rely on ethnographic methodologies with data-gathering techniques such as (participant) observation, field notes, and narrative interviewing. Ethnographies, then, enable researchers to understand the rituals, practices, languages, or behaviors of a “culture-sharing group” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 90). In connecting ethnography’s analytic scope to communication patterns, communication and media studies share a long

history of employing the methodology, with inquiries focusing on visual communication in movies (Chalfen, 1975) over Westernizing consumer cultures (James, 1995) to Latina identities in transnational television (Mayer, 2003) and global Bollywood audiences (Rao, 2007).

A common drawback of ethnographies is that the rich explication of a culture-sharing group's patterns does not leave much room to provide an exhaustive rendering of how institutional structures ground such patterns. A traditional, "realist" ethnography, for instance, would pay only marginal attention to the ruling relations that dictate how people become situated in their culture-sharing group. A "critical" or even "feminist" ethnography would pay attention to ideological structures and include a social change objective, but would not necessarily render an explication of a culture-sharing group's network of social relations.

In this review, I seek to introduce an existing ethnographic methodology with its roots in Canadian sociology to the field of communication and media studies – institutional ethnography (IE). IE was developed by feminist scholar Dorothy E. Smith in the 1970s as a methodology that sought to explicate the many institutionalized ruling relations that organize and coordinate the processes, interactions, and rituals of the members of a culture-sharing group at a particular study site. While IE has enjoyed long-standing rapport in many academic disciplines, such as sociology, education, geography, and occupational health, I argue that IE has much to offer to communication and media studies. A few studies in other disciplines, such as nursing, have already incorporated questions of media – for instance, Urban's (2018) IE on news coverage of nurses in Canada – though a formal introduction of IE to communication and media studies has yet to be made.

I begin this review by charting IE's methodological anchoring in feminist interventions. I then provide a selection of data-gathering techniques possible in IE research that find frequent application in ethnographies of communication and media studies, including participant observation, interviewing, and textual analysis. Upon reviewing several potential processes of data analysis, I offer prospective avenues for IE's application to communication and media studies. I organize the recommendations into three areas by drawing on the three analytical perspectives *The Communication Review* denotes: "communication and culture," "communication as a social force," and "communication and new media." Thus, in this essay, I hope to equip communication and media researchers with an alternative qualitative methodology; one that is committed to centering participants' experiences by unveiling the institutionalized processes that undergird the many aspects of human and mediated communication.

## Institutional ethnography: A methodological intervention

IE originally emerged out of the central endeavor to account for the standpoints and experiences of women in scientific research. In her earliest essay on IE, Smith (1974) critiques the androcentrism of the scientific methods of the 1960s and 1970s. In pointing to the analytical ramifications of this marginalization, she succinctly articulates:

Sociology ... its methods, conceptual schemes and theories – has been based on and built up within, the male social universe. ... It has taken for granted ... the fundamental social and political structures under which these become relevant and are ordered. (p. 8)

In the development of IE, Smith (1974) advocates to embed research participants' experiences in their ideological and social structures. She argues that our social realities become organized through governing (or ruling) relations and institutions, thus dictating how meaning is forged and directly mediating our ability to understand ourselves and our experiences. In turn, such grounding then allows researchers to better grasp the ways in which power works to mediate participants' social relations and their social networks.

On an axiological level, Smith (1974) expresses the central concern that sociological research often produces ethnographies *about* people, rather than *for* people. While this critique certainly includes Smith's initial worry about the representation of women in scientific research, IE has since developed into a broader understanding of standpoint as a practice – in the sense that IE seeks to privilege the experiences of research participants to paint a more reflexive account about how these experiences relate to larger ideological processes and systemic power structures. Marjorie DeVault (1999) explains that IE reverses the process of looking, by looking inward from the margins “toward centers of power and administration – searching to explicate the contingencies of ruling that shape local contexts” (p. 48).

Smith's (1987) IE – as a methodology<sup>1</sup> – establishes theoretical value via the researcher's observations of real-life experiences and interactions while encouraging the exploration of new standpoints rather working from established ways of knowing. In many ways, Smith's (1974) original essay was ahead of its time as it points to a series of methodological interventions later made by feminist scholars (see also Fricker, 2007; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Stacey, 1988). For IE, important reconsiderations include positivist epistemologies and ontologies about credibility, objectivity, and researcher-participant relationships.

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<sup>1</sup>I employ Sandra Harding's (1987) differentiation between methodology and method. Methodology is “a theory and analysis of how research should proceed” (p. 2) and methods are the “techniques for data gathering” (p. 2). The two operate in tandem, as one's methodological orientation fundamentally affects the method(s) one chooses to use.

As explained by Campbell and Gregor (2002), inductive research processes, such as those of IE, need not share the assumption that “new findings must be built up from and refer back to ideas already established in the literature” (p. 17). This inductive approach serves so that theoretical models can better account for the material reality of study participants and study site. Enabled by IE methodology, researchers then operate from the participant’s experience toward theory – for Smith (2005), the experience becomes “authoritative” (p. 139). Teghtsoonian (2016) succinctly renders that IE is “not intended to elicit information *about* the research participant ... rather, research participants are understood to be *knowledgeable informants* from whom institutional ethnographers can learn” (p. 334).

The central difference between a “classic” ethnography and Smith’s contribution is that IEs seek to go beyond explicating the enactment of culture in a group. Building on structuralist methodology, which recognizes that social phenomena must be embedded into their cultural and systemic context, Smith’s (1987) IE points to the ruling social apparatus that grounds “institutional processes, which together organize, coordinate, regulate, guide, and control contemporary societies” (p. 152). Hence, Smith (1987) advocates that researchers pay attention to the ways in which multiple axes of power critically work to create, sustain, and mediate people’s social relations. Using the IE framework, the researcher is able to understand how phenomena and activities “are organized and how they are articulated to the social relations of the larger social and economic process” (p. 152). G. Smith, Mykhalovskiy, and Weatherbee (2006) explain that IEs are not constrained by what the researcher observed in the field, but rather “seek to reveal the extended bureaucratic, professional, legislative, and economic, as well as other social relations involved in the production of local events and activities” (p. 172).

As a research methodology, IE has gained traction in a variety of humanistic and social science subfields. Drawing heavily on her own experience as a woman in academia, Smith’s original IE situates the woman’s place in the hierarchy of education (Smith, 1974, p. 7). Over the past thirty years, institutional ethnographies have been applied to shed light on people’s experiences with HIV/AIDS health hazards (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2011), have studied the interactions of gay men with drag queens (Berkowitz, Belgrave, & Halberstein, 2007), and have explained how institutional policies impact people’s decisions to seek out postsecondary education (Restoule et al., 2013). Rather than focusing on a brick-and-mortar institution, IEs allow researchers to focus on the institutionalized processes that organize social experience for certain people at certain times and in certain settings. As these diverse sets of studies illustrate, the IE methodology readily applies to a variety of human experiences and study sites, including those of interest to communication and media scholars.

## The methods of institutional ethnography

Smith (2006) explains that the process of IE “begins by locating a standpoint in an institutional order that provides the guiding perspective from which that order will be explored” (p. 32). Building on this initial standpoint, the researcher continues to study “how those actualities were embedded in social relations, both those of ruling and those of the economy” (p. 31). To select an appropriate method of data gathering for IEs, it is important to know that Smith understands ruling relations as embedded in their institutionalized forms. Devault (1999) provides the example that “the family household as private ... connects to multiple institutions outside ... paid work, education, health care, leisure activity” (p. 49). Physical institutions that organize social activities can include governments, schools, or the media; cultural institutions are more in line with guiding power structures such as hegemonic ideologies and cultural conventions, including communication (see also Smith, 1974, p. 7).

In Smith’s (1987) early monograph, she notes that IEs typically unfold during prolonged interactions and primarily use informal interviews as the method for data gathering (p. 73). In more current applications, institutional ethnographies incorporate a commitment to a range of data collection techniques to gain a “360-view” of a particular phenomenon or experience (Taber, 2010). According to Smith et al. (2006), institutional ethnographers employ various methods, including – but not limited to – in-depth interviews, archival research, and textual analysis (p. 172). To employ an embodied “Verstehen” of the social relations and provide a thick description of the participant’s experience, Taber (2010) recommends utilizing multiple data-gathering techniques in IE (p. 10). While the data-collection recommendations heavily depend on the research goal and context of a project, there is particular value in participant observations, in-depth semistructured interviews, and textual analysis for qualitative communication and media research.

With the institutional ethnographic goal of mapping social relations in mind, participant observations can already help scholars focus on the various ruling relations that affect the observed interactions and experiences. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2010), participant observations are opportunities to “experience events in their native cultural settings” (p. 155). Scholars then produce field notes of their observations, which become “concerned with describing and interpreting the symbolic qualities of communication as social action” (p. 155). Diamond (2006) explains the merits of participant observation in IE: “Because they have the potential to refine our appreciations of ... stories, authors, bodies, place, time, motion, how ruling relations work, and particular ways for seeing the social organization in the local” (p. 58). For communication scholarship, participant observations

become an important tool in capturing day-to-day occurrences as they provide insights into dynamics that organize people's lives. Next to participant observation, in-depth interviewing is one of the most frequently employed methods in institutional ethnographic research.

Interviewing is a classic technique in ethnographic research as it allows participants to speak from their own perspective about things that matter to them. Smith explains this process in a 1999 personal interview, where she reflects on the methods of IE: "You sometimes don't know what you're after until you hear people telling you things" (Devault & McCoy, 2006, p. 24). In preparation for an IE, scholars often craft a semistructured interview guide. Rather than constraining conversations to a strict protocol, guides are designed to focus conversations – next to questions about a particular event or experience, interview guides allow for elaboration prompts (asking to expand on a statement), example prompts, restatement prompts (paraphrasing a statement), or logic prompts (reflecting on one's own argument) (Schaffer, 2015, p. 187).

In keeping with the goal of IE, an interview guide allows the cognitive meandering that often provides the most valuable insights into the social dynamics and relations that shape a particular experience. For communication research projects, interviews allow some of the richest insights into social experiences, which can become of value in media studies and human communication projects about a variety of topic areas. Again, the central difference to a traditional ethnography with interviews as a method is that IE researchers pay attention to the institutional(ized) processes that shape a participant's experience with the phenomenon in question. In addition to observation and interviewing, textual analysis serves as an important tool in IE.

Texts manifest the official social rules that maintain a person's social status within the larger cultural context. Together with oral testimony and observation, written texts provide evidence of organizational structures, roles, rules, and expectations that situate experience. This is applicable to a wide variety of research contexts, questions, and goals. Turner (2006) asserts "text-based social relations and texts as essential coordinators of institutions [since] texts produce ... and organize people's activities" (p. 139). In arguing for the importance of textual analysis in IE of organizations, Eastwood (2006) notes that "attending meetings does not necessarily give a sense of how ... an organization works" (p. 18). She critically points to analyzing organizational documents as they provide valuable additional information about internal and external communications and supplement oral testimonies.

### **Data analysis in institutional ethnographies: Finding the social relations**

One of the major differentiations between a conventional ethnography and Smith's IE unfolds during data analysis. By describing events and systems

that “define a particular group,” traditional ethnographies aim to let readers “vicariously experience various social realities” (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007, p. 24). IEs, on the other hand, focus on unveiling the sets of social relations that create a person’s or group’s particular social position. According to Rankin (2017), IE analyses begin with locating the research problematic – this can be to recover knowledge, to situate experiences, or to explain actions by a culture-sharing group. Devault and McCoy (2006) explain that IE can serve to illustrate various aspects:

Some use their data to map out complex institutional chains of action; others describe the mechanics of text-based forms of knowledge, elaborate the conceptual schemata of ruling discourses, or explicate how people’s lived experience takes shape within institutional relations. (p. 39)

Institutional processes become vehicles that uphold ruling relations, so IE researchers often not only ask “why,” but also “how.”

Upon data collection, institutional ethnographers try to create an accurate representation of “how people’s activities are reflexively/recursively knitted together into particular forms of social organization” (G. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172). Often, IE researchers employ what is called “mapping” to make sense of their data. In an interview, Smith explains the metaphor as it relates to IE:

Being in the malls in Toronto and you can find a map that says, “You are here.” And it is that kind of finger pointing off the text, into the world in which you stand, looking at the map or reading it. (Carroll, 2010, p. 27)

Using the mapping metaphor, researchers can work from the social reality of a participant or group in a particular setting toward the institutionalized processes that situate, structure, organize, or rule. Turner (2006) visualizes her analysis in diagrams that highlight various stages of the process in question, with textual explanations of how her study participants become embedded in the process (p. 146).

Drawing on Smith (1987), DeVault (1999) explains mapping as a process to “connect empirical observations” (p. 51). Various observations or individual interviews remain separate until the researcher begins to sort them into meaning units, themes, or categories. By grouping similar data points, the researcher can begin to look underneath, to find out what the groupings symbolize, what social positions/realities/networks/relations they represent. By doing this uncovering, the researcher can use IE to produce a “map” of what a particular social reality is like in a particular social setting at a particular point in time. There is a point to be made about IE’s vagueness in terms of data analysis. In her various accounts of the methodology, Smith herself stays away from laying out specific procedures. This goes back to Smith’s original intervention – IE is not rooted in rules, scripts, or models, as

that would fundamentally go against the ontological and epistemological anchoring of the methodology itself.

A conventional ethnography on television viewing by stay-at-home fathers, for instance, could yield insights into genre selection and viewing times. An IE, however, would prompt researchers to uncover institutionalized factors that influence media choices and viewing habits such as child-care availability or the price of network subscriptions. Particular attention is paid to how experiences and social realities become organized around power structures – Tummons (2017) calls this finding the connections between the local and the “translocal” (p. 147). For Devault and McCoy (2006), data analysis of IE means to parse together – inductively – how data reveal both the creation and maintenance of institutionalized processes and how these affect a person’s or group’s experience in a particular setting. This style of data analysis makes IE a method of thick description (Denzin, 1978).

Some institutional ethnographers utilize qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, MAXQDA, or Dedoose; others reject a social science coding approach as this would clash with the inductive principles of IE (see also Devault & McCoy, 2006, p. 38). The benefit of using software is that it allows for centralized record keeping (text, audiovisual material, pictures, social media data, etc.) and for iterative organizing and coding of data. IE researchers commit to extensive fieldwork and data analysis procedures to get inside the research problematic and reflect the organization of ruling relations outward.

At its core, IE relates to the diverse processes of human and mediated communication at multiple levels. Communication and media studies scholars should know of the opportunities the methodology delivers. To show IE as a valuable qualitative research methodology in our discipline, I offer a series of research suggestions that hope to illustrate IE’s potential to the research in communication and media studies.

### **Institutional ethnography: A place in communication scholarship**

*The Communication Review* denotes a heuristic division of the field of communication and media studies into three overarching analytical perspectives, which include “communication and culture,” “communication as a social force,” and “communication and new media.” Across these areas, IE can be a useful research methodology, offering insights into how communication is organized culturally or how media function ideologically. Below, I illustrate the types of questions that IE permits scholars to ask and what research projects stand to gain from adopting an IE focus.

The “communication and culture” strand concerns itself with the production of meaning, the interpretation of media texts, and the analysis of culture. IE’s anchoring in feminist epistemology makes it an ideal methodology for

critical/cultural communication research – communication and culture scholarship values individual experiences, often focusing on social change. Ruling relations, as Smith (1974) calls institutionalized power structures, become evident in both culture and communication. Rooted in the critical-interpretive paradigm of communication research, communication and culture scholarship often commits to deconstruct power relations, uncover marginalization, or point to opportunities for equality and social well-being. IE shares this commitment. Within this area of communication and media research, the main units of analysis within the IE methodology – social experience, social relations and relationships, social context and networks – are commonly represented research questions and goals in the subfield.

The “communication as a social force” perspective focuses on the transformation and development of communication and media with particular attention to political economy, technological change, and institutional dynamics. From a media studies standpoint, IE can supplement existing methods in a variety of concentrations, including political economy, international communication, or global media industries. Here, IE could enrich projects that address political-economic dimensions of media industries such as the systemic structures of media ownership, information flows, or industry globalization. These projects often rely on statistical data of media ownership, distribution, and consumption, yet rarely address how individuals or culture-sharing groups relate to these processes. Furthermore, these projects rarely focus on how media organizations become embedded in their particular network of social relations, thereby omitting valuable insights on stakeholders and institutionalized processes that affect the macro (e.g., economies), meso (e.g., organization), and micro (e.g., audience) level. Further, global media projects that examine the political and legal frameworks of media systems – such as media regulation, media policy, or media licensing – would benefit from IE as the method would allow scholars to map out how these processes coordinate and manage the experiences of media consumers. For example, in my IE of a media nongovernmental organization, I render the organization’s network of social relations with other media stakeholders and interpret the team members’ personal identifications with the goals of the organization (Sorce, 2019). This serves to assess how the organization – and its members – become situated in the larger political economy of media.

The “communication and new media” cluster studies how digital convergence presents in media texts, audiences, and industries. The very production of media text in the digital age has invited a horizontal blurring of traditional labor divisions in the communications sector, allowing media users to produce media texts using online platforms and applications. A way that IE can contribute to this line of inquiry is to invite research projects that take a deeper look at online communities’ communication practices, focusing on the ruling relations that enable or forestall participation in the digital

realm. Digital convergence also mediates how quickly and how permanently audiences constitute themselves and how actively they engage with media messages. While audience studies have a long-standing commitment to ethnographic methodology (consider Ien Ang, David Morley, or Janice Radway), the findings have largely centered on the how audiences respond to (messages in) mediated texts. IE would allow researchers to pay particular attention to undergirding factors that affect consumption patterns such as work schedules, allowances for leisure goods, or mobile data plans.

Of course, these three perspectives are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they share many intersections. These perspectives are also not exhaustive and neither can they represent the myriad of specializations in communication and media studies scholarship. These three larger areas merely serve as an initial framework to showcase IE's potential as a methodology for our field. As this brief review illustrates, there are many access points for IE in communication and media research, perhaps most succinctly rendered through the methodology's focus to unveil institutionalized processes, of which there are many to be found communication and media alike.

### **Limitations and opportunities**

In keeping with its interpretive tradition, qualitative research offers avenues for methodological development and intervention while opening possibilities for theoretical and analytical expansion. Different methodologies serve different research goals and no one methodology can facilitate all research questions – the same goes for IE. IE is not equipped to analyze large sample size datasets, and neither would IE be a fitting method for deductive research designs that define themes or categories from established theories or literatures. As other qualitative methods that immerse the researcher thoroughly, IE shares limitations with other ethnographic methodologies. In particular, it can become difficult for researchers, who are passionate about the social phenomenon under study, to pull back from the participant into the participant-observer role. With IE, the research goals often involve questions of marginalization and suppression. The political dimensions of studying difficult social phenomena or working with disenfranchised communities can let IE become personal to the researcher, which is not a limitation, but rather necessitates disclosure in the analysis and findings.

IE is also not a new methodology by any means, but one that can critically inform research in communication and media studies, and has been lacking the attention it deserves. There is hardly any situation in which people are not subjected to at least a degree of institutionalized process or larger hegemonic structure. However, if the research goal does not include a critical snapshot of how the phenomenon becomes organized around such processes, then IE would not provide the ideal methodology for study.

The research avenues presented in this article focus on studies that would engage questions of ruling relations and institutional influence on people's social realities and networks.

As the provided research examples in communication and culture, communication as a social force, and communication and new media illustrate, there is a strong case for the application of Smith's IE to communication and media studies scholarship. Building on the theoretical opportunities IEs deliver, Smith's methodology can grant scholars better access to studying the facets that influence people's social position and social relations in communication and media contexts. IE can help to bring out the critical nuance in ethnographic scholarship that concerns undergirding ruling relations. It can provide a useful analytical lens to examine social phenomena of human and mediated communication and encourage scholars to write *for* research participants rather than *about* them.

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