

Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series

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E-Seminar 50

Energy and Digital Living

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“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture;” that quote has been attributed to many but owned by no one. Fitting, because it is a dilemma we all deal with in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The written text is often inadequate to convey the depth and meaning of musical, visual, and kinesthetic communication.

Perhaps nothing has demonstrated that conundrum better than the so-called “affective turn” (a curve that we, as anthropologists took a long time ago). Writing and academic language struggle to convey embodied, emotional, and aesthetic truths that other forms of communication express quite well. Or, perhaps more accurately, text must combine with other forms of expression to achieve the author’s/composer’s/scholar’s goals. *Energy and Digital Living* is an excellent case in point, a multi-modal model worth exploring and emulating. It is my pleasure to provide a few cursory comments on this incredible effort.

As is always the case with the MedianAnthro e-seminars, I will assume that everyone has “read” the site. Of course, one does not simply “read” sound, visual media, relationships, bodies, and emotions, but that is the point. The textual fetish of post-structuralism often reduced the world(s) to textual semiotics, but that has been a fairly limited way to understand media forms that are, quite simply, more than the sum of their words.

“Dancing about architecture” is, therefore, more than a absurd metaphor meant to shock us out of textualizing everything, it is an indication that there are, in fact, other ways of being and communicating while still holding true to the core goal of scholarship: explanation (whether analytical or synthetic). Quite literally, dance is a fairly good way to communicate about (and literally “around”) architecture, for example. That is why ritual has been such an important focus of ethnographic research.

To bring it back to the matter at hand, this multi-modal website is a great solution to the problem of ethnographic explication. In *Energy and Digital Living* we gain not only a window into the subject

of mediated, digital practices in and around the home, but also a deep intersubjective involvement via images, colors, and sounds that involve us more deeply in a highly collaborative ethnographic experience. That experience did not end out there in “the field” but is rather being inter-subjectively developed and enhanced with each visit to the site. The site is the field, as are the informants’ homes, as is the server, as are the academic departments where the researchers reside, as are the granting institutions that funded it with specific goals and parameters in place, and so on. The website does not occlude that wider network of meaning in the way that the traditional ethnographic narrative sometimes can, as if the journal of the lone explorer in a foreign land. There is little segregation of field and research, medium and messages in Energy and Digital Living. We are more fully in on the project, able to interpret a wider range of visual and aural stimuli than the traditional monograph typically allows. I am not falling for the acritical “image is truth” ideology here, just saying that we have a lot more to work with in this project and are able to bring more to it ourselves as visitors. Speaking of sound, that might be one of the sites and project’s few weaknesses. As is often the case, sound is somewhat secondary in the website’s rendering of these home worlds. We can see what takes place and “hear” it in the verbal interpretations from residents, but it seemed to me that sound was gathered from the camera’s mics rather than using something like a Zoom recorder. Sonic definition is lost and there appears to have been less of an attempt to represent soundscapes than visual information.

However, even a large team can’t cover everything, and the weakest possible criticism of any work is to harp on what it does not do. Energy and Digital Living does a lot, and does it very well. The beautiful design of the site and nicely rendered, appropriately simple videos really work. To see a busier and less effective website, I would direct you to ecosong.org, a musical project I have been involved with for a few years and am currently redesigning. You will see that my very crude, amateur webwork does an injustice to the incredibly rich musical offerings contributors have provided in Energy and Digital Living. However, the site I designed is pretty crappy, an archive of my collaborators’ (mostly) professional work as opposed to a well thought-out and user-friendly experience that works with and enhances the content in Energy and Digital Living. In other words, I know from experience how difficult it is to produce a website like Energy and Digital Living and absolutely love the look and design of this site. I will be stealing various elements (with credit, of course) as I redesign [ecosong](http://ecosong.org). Per the best interactive installations at a museum, it is clear how to explore a desired pathway and content in Energy and Digital Living.

Gamification has become popular in many worlds, and there is an element of that here as the visitor is allowed to navigate at will and then rewarded with discovery. It is not the sort of discovery that surreptitiously disciplines the visitor, however, but rather one that reflexively names the game regarding what the game developers, or rather ethnographers, intended through their authorship. There is no “good dog, have a digital bone” ruse here. It is clear that this is critical research and not a piece of persuasive communication masquerading as some sort of objective lens. We are learning what the ethnographic collaborative learned as we explore:

Rather than simply interviewing participants, the use of video in these methods allowed us to investigate the unspoken, habitual elements of daily practices that participants may not have known (or been able to) mention.

It takes some reading to figure out that the “us” in the above statement is “them” (ethnographers) and not “us” as in an inclusive reference to the viewers/listeners/readers. I greatly appreciated not being overly interpellated, to be able read the ethnographer’s honest reflections, goals, and discoveries without the assumption that those perspectives and the actual content were one-in-the-same, or that our/my interpretations and experience thereof would somehow simply map onto that. In other words, the invitation to intersubjective meaning-making is there in explicit form. Meanwhile, our access to the informant’s world and words is so deep in this medium that we cannot help but draw our own individual interpretations that are informed by the “authors,” the informants, the medium (is the message), and our own experiences. By design, the project and site inspire the viewer/listener/reader (I will start saying “visitor”) to draw intertextual (sic) and comparative connections between our own energized home lives and Alison’s, Alan’s, Scott’s and Roxana’s, to name a few. Perhaps it would be nice to have seen and heard more from the researchers as well, rather than have them represented in mostly textual form. However, most of us would be reticent to come out from behind our text to be exposed on video in that manner unless taking part in auto-ethnographic research. Nevertheless, such turn-about might only be fair and, more importantly, productive.

As for how a visitor might use this site, or interpret it, that probably depends on the visitor. In a weird way, I started to find these pieces providing a stock of “possible selves,” to borrow a term from Psychology (by way of anthropological ethnographer JoEllen Fisherkeller, 1997). Which of these people’s home life is most like mine? Do we use more or less energy and experience more or less electronic media than a specific informant and his or her family? A disgusting sense of smug (see South Park’s “Smug Alert!” episode) came into play in reference to some of the more potentially wasteful and, when it comes to digital media, Alone Together (2012) examples, but then I found myself realizing that I could not remember the last time I dried clothing without electronic assistance, whereas that seems to be the norm for many of these families in the UK. That led to consideration of national energy use norms and practices. I found myself understanding these lifeways better, rather than getting defensive or, worse, judging. That appears to be a goal of this project, a more interactive and networked cultural experience wherein one can reflect, compare, draw out ideas, rethink, create, and understand. In other words, Energy and Digital Living is good ethnography. It is an applied project with theoretically rich analysis and implications.

I am going to stop there rather than over-determining, or more likely, boring y’all with my own interpretations of this rich site and project. I mainly wanted to note that this is a very good model for doing multimodal, multimedia, and interactive ethnography. Such work has been talked and written about a great deal, but rarely accomplished to this degree. (However, if I have simply missed other examples out there, please do share; I might not be the only one who is unaware of other such experiments).

Energy and Digital Living so nicely invites us all to become experts on home energy cultures. Yet, there is a clear sense of expertise and value-added by the researchers as well, especially in terms of their ethnographic expertise. My own knowledge on the subject of domestic energy is severely limited, other than the fact that I am a fellow traveler in the world of alternative ethnographic

expression. Per my opening quip, “writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” I have increasingly resorted to supra-textual means to communicate my ethnographic research, in collaboration with musicians, environmental activists, and to a lesser extent, scientists. For me, Energy and Digital Living has been an invaluable learning experience and resource in that regard, one that I will be sharing with my research collaborators, students and colleagues in media ethnography, music, communication studies, and environmental studies. Energy and Digital Living presents an exciting way forward in terms of ethnographic research and representation, one that others can point to and say, “that sort of thing.” I am particularly thinking of grads, for example, trying to legitimate webnography in the eyes of a committee.

I do have one question based on my exploration, although it will not serve to prime the seminar well. Fortunately, priming is probably unnecessary, because this rich site will lead to myriad thoughts and questions regarding epistemology, methodology, theory, and representation. Meanwhile, I have a much more pedestrian query, but one that might relate to the problem of fostering the spread and development of visual, aural, kinesthetic, and performative communication in the academy:

Q: Were there any tensions between the time and effort this project has taken and how colleagues in your department or elsewhere interpreted it in terms of “metrics” vis-a-vis traditional written publications? In my experience, those who only publish written work have absolutely no idea how much time it takes to mount a collaborative media production (in fact, that very phrase is somewhat redundant; all good media productions are highly collaborative). There is a sort of “that’s nice” view of media work, but often films, websites, musical scores, and so on are not taken as seriously as good old fashioned journal articles, impact factors, and books, even though they can often take twice as long to produce. It is clear to me that Energy and Digital Living took a ton of work, is theoretically rich, and will have as great or greater impact than any book. So, to bring it into mundane terms: do your colleagues and administration get that? Please tell me that they do! Provide us with hope that the academy will catch-up with the possibilities for such work to advance the goals of scholarship. Or, depress us if the reverse is true. Either way, I look forward to hearing about your experience in regard to explaining and rationalizing this wonderful project with colleagues who have never done anything like it.

No matter what your experience in that regard, I am sure that the production of this project, done so very well, will widen the space for future scholars to explore this and other formats for their ethnographic work. Thanks for producing this site and conducting the extensive fieldwork in all 20 homes, and thanks in advance for stimulating what I am sure will be a fascinating seminar.

References

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