Studying a Television Audience in Malaysia: A Practice of Audience Ethnography in Kampung Papitusalem, Sabak Bernam, Selangor

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the ethnographic nature of audience studies and the practices of audience ethnography in Kampung Papitusalem, Sabak Bernam. Although ethnography has been adopted in the studies of media reception worldwide, it is not a popular methodological tradition among the media and communication researchers in Malaysia. However, considering the multicultural nature of the Malaysian population and media, audience ethnography should be considered as one of the practical methodologies in media and communication research in the country. Based on the empirical ethnographic research involving a group of Malay-Javanese women in Kampung Papitusalem, Sabak Bernam, this article presents the methodological issues of an ethnographic approach in studying Malaysian television audiences. The practice of audience ethnography in the kampung indicates that the methodology would likely be applicable in media audience research in rural Malaysia by considering practical data collection techniques including partial immersion of fieldwork, conversational interviews, and selected participant observation.

Keywords: Audience ethnography, qualitative research, identity, television, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this article is to discuss the methodological issues in conducting audience ethnography and shed light on understanding this research approach using an empirical example from an ethnographic fieldwork in Kampung Papitusalem, district of Sabak Bernam, Selangor, Malaysia. The growing popularity of audience ethnography
captivates global anthropologists to shift their research interest from traditional culture to popular culture — which has become the key subjects in media research — and move the study locus from the North Atlantic heartland to the global South (Petersen, 2003). At the same time, ethnographic approach to audience research has come to existence among the researchers in the field of media and cultural studies since the 1980s (Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004; Hermes, 2010). The tradition of the anthropology-inspired methodological approach which started in Europe and North America is popular among media anthropologists and reception researchers in non-Western countries. For example, they adopt this approach to study television consumption and identity politics (Abu-Lughod, 1995; Mankekar, 1999; Scrase, 2002; Shetty, 2008), media and nation building (Postill, 2008; Bloodhein & Liebes, 2009), and soap opera reception and modernity (Thompson, 2000; La Pastina, 2004; Idah, 2006; Machado-Borges, 2007; Syed, 2011). Yet, audience ethnography has not been developed as a popular intellectual tradition in Malaysia because most of the local researchers focus on quantitative-based phenomenological research topics (for example Wang, 2004; Firdaus, 2006; Abdul Wahab, Wang, & Baharuddin, 2013).

Very few audience ethnographies have been conducted in Malaysia. However, there are some ethnographic studies of Malaysian media audiences that can be considered as significant contributions to the current literature. For example, Syed’s (2011) exploration of Malay women watching imported television serials gives a plausible explanation about the audience interpretive engagement of transnational modernity in Malaysia. Similar to Syed (2011) who studies the Malay audience in rural and urban settings, Thompson (2000) captures communal television viewing between kampung Sungai Siput and Kuala Lumpur. While both Syed (2011) and Thompson (2000) focus on television audiences in Malaysian Peninsula, John Postill (2008) searches for the audience interpretation of collective identities in East Malaysia. Investigating the negotiation of ethnic and national identities among the Ibanese, Postill (2008) discovers that media, especially television, plays primary roles in modernising them through “cultural standardisation under conditions of rapid economic growth” (p. 5).

As Malaysian television audiences become more fragmented, casual and at some point intuitive, audience ethnography should be seen as an optional methodology. Radway (1988) argues that researchers should seek to explore “the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it” (p. 369). Therefore, an ethnographic approach to audience research should be considered as one of the alternative ways to study multicultural audiences especially in Malaysia. At the same time, the resistance to conduct audience ethnography is perhaps caused by some methodological issues. The present article addresses some issues pertaining to the ethnographic approach.
to studying television audiences and contributes to the understanding of audience ethnography.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that requires a researcher to spend a period of time with the community under study, observing and recording their lives in natural settings (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007; Gobo, 2008; Fetterman, 2010). This methodological mechanism has long been adopted in the study of media audiences. According to Moore (1996), audience ethnography refers to a methodological practice for “investigating the social world of actual audiences, using qualitative techniques—most notably the extended period of participant observation ‘in the field’ and the unstructured conversational interview with informants” (p. 3). The main objective of audience ethnography is to understand the media consumption “from the virtual standpoint of actual audiences” (Ang, 2005, p. 156). In addition, it serves as an instrumental purpose for understanding “the media practices, and meanings people attach to media, and as a way to document everyday media practices in detail” (Peralta, Helle, & Johnson, 2012, p. 12).

The anthropological based approach emerged in the early 1980s within the British Cultural Studies (BCS) community (Hermes, 2010). It started with Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” thesis (1980) which significantly inspired a number of other researchers in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham and the rest of the world. Some of the notable pioneers in television audience ethnographies include Dorothy Hobson’s study of British Soap Opera (1982), Ien Ang’s Dutch Dallas study (1985), David Morley’s Family Television (1986), Charlotte Brunsdon’s study of woman television audience (1986), and Ann Gray’s study of feminine Video Cassette Recorder (1987). However, these studies explore the audience’s decoding of certain television programmes simply through qualitative interviews and textual analysis. The lack of time that media researchers spend in the field is an issue for some anthropologists (Spitulnik, 1993; Gray, 2003; Seiter, 2004). Spitulnik (1993) notes that critics raise the important points missing in ethnography of media audience such as detailed participant observation and actual immersion in audience’s life.

Despite these critiques, media audience researchers continue to use the term ethnography to label their study even though the procedures do not necessarily meet the nature of traditional ethnography. For example, Mario Gillespie’s study of British Punjabi youth’s television culture (1995) and Chris Barker’s exploration of soap talks among the British Asian girls (1997) combine participant observation with qualitative surveys and focus group discussion respectively. However, the ethnography of media audience has been expanded to the study of online culture and communities, such as “CMC (Computer-
Mediated Communication) ethnography” or “virtual ethnography” (Lindlof & Shatz, 1998; Hine, 2000), “netnography” (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Becham, 2005) and “network ethnography” (Howard, 2002). These new forms of ethnography allow media researchers to conduct observation of textual discourse that arise from virtual communities’ activities, in non-territorial field site.

In point of fact, there are some excellent contemporary media research studies that are conducted in accordance with the proper practices of ethnography. For example, Vicki Mayer’s two-year fieldwork in San Antonio (2003) explores the Mexican American’s reception of telenovela through interviews and participant observation that includes field notes and television co-watching. Similarly, Thaíse Machado-Borges (2007) adds complementary methods such as structured conversation and essays along with the other primary approach to understand Brazilian youth’s telenovelas consumption. Another telenovela study that can be considered as proper ethnography is La Pastina’s study of audiences in rural Brazil (2004). Through a year-long study in the field, Antonio C. La Pastina (2004) carries out triangulation of in-depth interviews, surveys, focus group discussion, archival readings and participant observation to explore rural Brazilians’ engagement in popular telenovelas. Notwithstanding the disciplines, some anthropologists such as Abu-Lughod (1997), Manketak (1999), and Shetty (2008) apply ethnographic approaches in their television audience research and shed light upon understanding of television audiences and politics of identity.

Essentially, audience ethnography is the salient trend in the second and third generation of media reception research, underlying the studies of the relationships between media, culture and communities (Alasnutari, 1999). While the earlier generation embraces the critical inquiries of identity politics, the contextual use of media and the role of media in everyday life; the latter suggests to “bring the media back to media studies”, by which both content and audience interpretation are critically analysed (Alasnutari, 1999, p.7). In the beginning, ethnography offers an instrumental mechanism which enables media researchers to “overcome the artificiality of mass communication research based on naturally occurring data” (Ruddock, 2001, p. 128).

The importance of ethnography as a methodology in media and cultural researches lies in its core principle that acknowledges audiences as active consumers of media texts. David Morley (1992) argues that media audience research needs to be diverted from the “pessimistic mass society thesis” to shifting between “optimistic” and “pessimistic” paradigms. Furthermore, Morley (1992) suggests that communication researchers should consider “the dimensions of power and influence through which the powerful (leader and communicators) were connected to the powerless (ordinary people, audiences)” (pp. 50-51). In this way, both content of messages that have effects on