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► Chapter 8

New Fieldsites, New Methods: New Ethnographic Opportunities

Laura Robinson and Jeremy Schulz

Introduction

As the rapid rate of the adoption and normative use of information technologies accelerates, sociologists must expand the sociological imagination to explore a host of questions related to mediated communication. From Twitter to YouTube, the media convergence anticipated at the close of the millennium is coming into being. Blogs, vlogs, Web browsing, e-mail, and old time television, radio, and phone are all increasingly accessible via digital technologies. Furthermore, not only can we consume these digital media, but we can now produce them easily and quickly. Yet, sociological methods have not kept pace with the profound changes in communication ensuing from the Information Revolution. Although the quotidian use of new media continues to grow by leaps and bounds, there is little consensus on how we can best collect and analyze new media data.

This chapter begins to address these issues by examining how ethnographic methods have been adapted to explore new media and digital communication. We find that three central tensions have shaped the adoption of ethnographic methods in new media environments since the advent of cyberethnography in the mid 1990s. The three tensions that we identify and discuss are the character of mediated interaction (e-mail, IM, blogging, texting, etc.) as a social process, text as interaction, and the relationship between the observer and the observed. Our analysis draws upon both the current work in the field and foundational works that established cyberethnography as a legitimate methodological undertaking. Each section presents a history of salient texts detailing methodological growth and innovation. We bring these texts together to close each section with an eye to methodological and ethical implications under the heading “Stories from the Field.” This section provides analysis of challenges in methodological adaptation and related ethical concerns that will be of increasing importance vis-à-vis user-driven content.

We close our chapter with a review of how the strengths of traditional ethnography are especially suited to examine future waves of digital phenomena. In evaluating the commonalities between traditional and mediated ethnographic practice, we argue that although new twists in the evolution of the Internet may require ethnographers to continually adapt their methodological tool kits, they will not reduce the salience of the method.

In reviewing different tensions in the evolution of cyberethnographic methods, we find that the seeming newness of much of the cyberethnographic endeavor is a reworking, rather than a replacing, of traditional ethnographic methods. Finally, just as cyberethnographers argued a decade ago that the novelty of the Web will likely fade as information technology increasingly becomes just another taken-for-granted part of everyday life (Webb, 1999), we argue that once cyberethnography has been incorporated into the corpus of sociological methods, its legitimacy will be beyond question.

Mediated Interaction as a Social Process

As we will explore in this section, since its inception, cyberethnography has largely valorized the constructionist aspects of social interaction. Cyberethnographers train their lenses on microsocial interaction and smaller-scale interactional patterns. Often, these micro-interactional patterns may be conceptualized along Goffmanian lines (Cavanagh, 1999; Robinson, 2007). More specifically, Goffman (1959) conceptualized the social world in terms of theatrical performance or “dramaturgy.” Goffman’s extended metaphor of dramaturgy describes the social world as a theater in which social actors play different roles for different performances. From a Goffmanian point of view, all of our actions and interactions are performances through which we enact different roles or personae for different audiences and different contexts. Like Goffman, cyberethnographers have been quick to focus on the *dramaturgical*, *ritualistic*, and *ludic* aspects of the interactions taking place in online environments. Also like Goffman, cyberethnographers have concerned themselves with the kinds of interpersonal “engagements” and “encounters” that make up the micro-interactional order (Goffman, 1959; Turner, 2002).

However, each wave of cyberethnographic invention and practice has approached the intersection between interaction and identity from a different angle. The research efforts of the first cyberethnographers were animated by a transformative vision of what Miller and Slater call online “sociality” (Miller & Slater, 2000, pp. 72–74). The first generation of cyberethnographers took advantage of rich new fieldsites offered by Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and other text-based sites and virtual worlds that encouraged mediated sociality via role or identity play. Celebrating the transformational potential of these cybervenues, these “pioneering” cyberethnographers touted the potential that virtual environments offered for the emergence of a new kind of self-identity and personhood qualitatively different from that which flourished in off-line social environments (Robinson and Schulz, 2009, 1). In these new spaces of interaction, identity was framed solely as a matter of “projection” (Baym, 1998; Reid, 1999; Zhao, 2005) because the old identity categories tied to the body no longer held sway. As Correll explained, people who are engaged in online chat exercise a degree of control over their “fronts and idealizations” that they would find impossible to replicate in off-line contexts (Correll, 1995, p. 287).

In the early utopian views of the liberating promise of the Internet, a number of these pioneering cyberethnographers drew attention to the anonymity and “pseudoanonymity” (Donath, 1999, p. 53) of online environments as the foundations for their claims of a new kind of social process of identity formation. For them, the state of near-total anonymity on MUDs and chatboards meant that participants could create and sustain whatever self-presentations their online interlocutors would accept as genuine within the confines of

that particular online interactional space. One of Turkle's informants (1995) describes, "I'm not one thing, I'm many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world" (185). In their view, such a situation necessarily gave rise to identity play and kinds of experimentation that would be simply unfeasible in off-line environments (Donath, 1999). Thus, they argued that MUD environments lead to uncommon states of "disinhibition" among users who feel free to adopt any persona they wish without risk to their off-line reputations or identities (Reid, 1999, p. 113).

This preoccupation with the transformative effects of anonymity led many pioneering cyberethnographers to proclaim the virtual realm a *sui generis* social arena operating in accordance with its own rules and logic (Boellstorff, 2008; Kendall, 2002). They envisioned the cyberrealm as a medium for interaction that posed fundamentally different dramaturgical and identity construction possibilities than the off-line realm, where individuals are physically co-present (Zhao, 2005). Pioneering cyberethnographers mirrored the users they studied in that they were invested in the discontinuity between the social life they observed in online environments and the social life they witnessed in off-line environments. Turkle, Stone, Rheingold, and others focused on the "intentional identities" and identity signaling games that enabled MUDers and other denizens of online environments to flout the normal rules of microsocial interaction tied to physical co-presence. For example, in "furry" MUDs, participants could adopt animal surrogates and frolic with other animals to indulge their animal appetites (Robinson, 2007). Their accounts of virtual interaction highlighted the liberating potential of the medium, as an environment where individuals' conduct and identities were no longer tethered to their physical bodies (Rheingold, 1993; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995).

It was not by chance that pioneering cyberethnographers paid inordinate amounts of attention to the online activities of gamers, MUDers, and other individuals who capitalized on the anonymity of their online worlds. The college students and young adults who populate Sherry Turkle's groundbreaking 1995 book *Life on the Screen* spent up to 80 eighty hours a week living what amounted to alternative lives as MUDers and gamers. Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electric Frontier*, foregrounded users' quests to be "somebody else" or even "several people at the same time" (1993, p. 151). In her work, Allucqu re Rosanne Stone focused on the ease with which MUD users cultivated fictitious characters that bore little resemblance to their off-line selves, but which were all the same entirely real to both their creators and their audiences. Recounting the tale of Sanford Lewin, a middle-aged male New York psychotherapist who impersonated a disabled woman and deceived countless others in the process, Stone concluded that the advent of the virtual persona signals a fundamental shift in our notion of personhood. From now on, she declared, "it's personas all the way down" (Stone, 1995, p. 81).

However, by the late 1990s, the tide began turning when ethnographers sought to "legitimize" (Robinson and Schulz, 2009) cyberethnography as an extension of off-line traditional ethnographic practice. These legitimizing cyberethnographers made note of the complex interplay and interpenetration between online and off-line identity and sociality among participants in online environments (Kendall, 2002, pp. 44–45; Markham, 1998, pp. 87, 162–163). Increasingly, these cyberethnographers argued that many people who go online do so in order to provide themselves with "another context" in which to interact with others, not to create alternative or substitute lives for themselves. Unlike pioneering ethnographers, legitimizing cyberethnographers such as Kendall and Markham

did not presume that every person who went online did so in order to concoct a new self-identity or self-presentation. While acknowledging the medium's potential as a facilitator of identity masquerade, legitimizing cyberethnographers underscored the variability in the extent to which online lives and off-line lives blur together. Increasingly, arguments for master identities housing both online and off-line representations displaced transformationist emphasis on identity play and deception (Wertheim, 1999). Today, the emergence of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook confirms how individuals blur their online and off-line lives.

However, to accomplish their goal, these cyberethnographers sought to validate virtual ethnography by taking issue with the idea that a deep involvement in online worlds necessarily transforms the participants' sense of self and weakens the hold of social identity categories related to embodied characteristics like ethnicity, gender, and age. Not all individuals' off-line self-identities are tightly coupled with the intentional "representations" that they fashion for their forays into the online world (Kendall, 2002, pp. 222–223). These scholars also parted company with pioneering cyberethnographers inasmuch as they granted the possibility that online relationships and identities could cross over into the off-line world or vice versa. In sum, these legitimizing cyberethnographers took up an "integrationist" rather than a "segmentalist" (Nippert-Eng, 1996) perspective on these two domains of interaction, seeing them as essentially coterminous and continuous realms of social interaction and identity performance (Markham, 1998, p. 197). This shift in the field reflected a larger transformation in the overall population of Internet users in the United States. Increasingly as Internet use became more normative in American society, scholars shared a vision of a master self encompassing both online and off-line identities as the normative assumption for studies of the Internet (Robinson, 2007).

Stories From the Field: Methodological and Ethical Implications of Mediated Interaction

Cyberethnographers have conducted participant observation in a wide range of fieldsites including but not limited to economic venues, digital support groups, and political communities. Across these different kinds of fieldsites, the move toward the conceptualization of online identities as synonymous with off-line identities has important implications regarding how cyberethnographers treat online identities. Regardless of the kind of fieldsite they enter, cyberethnographers take care to recognize how members of a fieldsite perceive the linkage between their online and off-line identities. At the same time, cyberethnographers must strategically make their own off-line identities as researchers transparent in their online presentation of self.

Regarding members' identities, cyberethnographers must ask themselves how respondents frame the relationship between their online and off-line identities. It is impossible to fully understand the social processes at play in a particular community without ascertaining this fundamental distinction. For example, in her own work, Robinson has found that respondents conceptualized cyberidentities as part of their master identity frames. In Robinson's work (2005; 2008) on 9/11 digital discourse fora in Brazil, France, and the United States, community members often referred to their online identities to underscore their authority to speak to a range of issues. Whether in reference to ideological

debates, discussion of discriminatory reprisals, or debates over authority to speak for national collectives, forum participants made explicit reference to their own off-line identities to bolster their authority when speaking in online venues. At the same time, forum members also made reference to other participants' presentation of their off-line identities as a means to criticize those who did not share their views. For example, in posts about firsthand knowledge of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, those community members claiming physical proximity to New York or Washington told personal stories in which they described their experiences as eyes on the ground. To do so, they bolstered online authority via reference to off-line status, their places of residences or employment, titles at work that could be checked by other participants, and other identifiers that bolstered their right to claim such knowledge.

These identity claims were critical to the factionalized debates central to the forum communities. Therefore, understanding this identity work was critical to unlocking the frictions within communities' group dynamics. For example, on the Brazilian and French fora, expatriate Brazilians and French living in the United States referenced their personal experience on 9/11 and their expatriate status. Doing this double identity work allowed them to reference their lives in their countries of origin in order to maintain their own status as Brazilian or French nationals, while also claiming to speak for the American collectivity. By contrast, their critics attempted to drive them out of the online communities by using their off-line expatriate status as a tool to critique them as "outsiders" who, having "turned their backs" on their countries of origin, no longer had any "right" to speak for their respective national collectivities.

Given the centrality of certain off-line identity claims, the shift toward an integrationist view of online and off-line identities also gives rise to new ethical concerns of how cyberethnographers should respect privacy in cyberspace. In sum, if our identities in cyberspace are extensions of our off-line identities, they must be afforded the same ethical consideration as they would be given in the off-line world. In addition to using pseudonyms to protect members' identities or user handles just as one would with off-line identities or real names, cyberethnographers must also consider how to best present their off-line identities as researchers in online environments.

While similar to off-line fieldsites, in cyberspace there is another ethical twist to announcing a researcher's presence. When traditional ethnographers venture into off-line fieldsites, they listen to what people are saying and engage their informants in conversational exchanges. In observing how their informants are relating to each other, they are often physically co-present and observable to all interactants. In the case of online fieldwork, there is the issue of what it means to be a pure observer or a participant observer in an environment that is neither public nor fully private. This issue has a bearing on the controversies over the advisability of "lurking" (Miller & Slater, 2000; Bell, 2001) in online environments in order to collect data. Unlike the situation faced by off-line ethnographers, who are often embedded in interactional spaces that are either public or private, the cyberethnographer faces difficulties in making this determination in cyberspace.

This has clear ethical implications for cyberethnographic practice; the cyberethnographer who chooses to "lurk" and witness the online proceedings without drawing the notice of the respondents is assuming that the fieldsite is essentially a public space (Soukup, 2000). However, simply because a site is not password protected does not mean that participants in the site consider it a "public space." Just as locals at a park or coffee shop who have staked out their "turf" in the off-line world, online community members may

not necessarily consider their site a public space open to anyone who wishes to enter, whether or not there are any rules in place to stop individuals from loitering or lurking.

The ethical dilemma in cyberspace is that the researcher may lurk without being seen in ways that are impossible in the off-line world. For this reason, the cyberethnographer who eschews lurking may do so because she feels that such unobtrusive observation is inappropriate in an environment where some participants might assume that they are taking part in private interactions. When in doubt, many cyberethnographers recommend dialogue with participants regarding the private versus public character of the fieldsite.

This being said, cyberethnographers must also remember their “invisibility” to others. While in the off-line world the ethnographer’s physical presence may signal to others that they may be observed, this is not the case in cyberspace. As this indicates, cyberethnographers who engage in unobtrusive observation may not intentionally do so. On the Internet, although cyberethnographers may announce their status and intentions, participants may not receive their messages if they are not present when they are posted. Whether posted as a textual post or blog entry, cyberethnographers’ announcements of arrival may not be read after they have been posted. This risk is heightened when cyberethnographers observe real-time interaction on a text-driven site where past messages are not accessible once they have been superseded by a new generation of messages.

This introduces an ethical tension that is not necessarily present in the off-line world. On the one hand, cyberethnographers who wish to announce their presence must do so continuously to ensure that users are aware of their presence. On the other hand, they must do so with caution to avoid disrupting naturally flowing interactions or becoming an irritant to members of an online community. In the off-line world, it would be unnatural for the ethnographer to continually disrupt ongoing interactions in the physical world by holding up a sign saying, “The ethnographer is present.” Online, the cyberethnographer cannot be expected to continually post: “Remember everyone, you are under ethnographic observation.” In reviewing these and related concerns, the Association of Internet Researchers uses the language, “guidelines not recipes,” to indicate that all such ethical decisions are necessarily context dependent (Ess et al., 2002).

One solution is to embed a link to one’s professional homepage into one’s signature on posts or communications. By linking to a Web page detailing the researchers’ activities and status as an ethnographer through a signature link, cyberethnographers may maintain their ethical commitments to announcing their presence as researchers while doing so in a manner that seems natural rather than obtrusive. In his work on open source in Brazil, Takhteyev (2009) went one step further. As part of his observation of the Lua community, he started a related open source project, with a Web site (now at <http://spu.tnik.org/>) that he inserted into his participation in the project and for his normal “professional” mail. This strategy validated his role of researcher in two ways. First, it provided a transparent account of his engagement in the field that was visible to all community members. Second, this strategy ensured that he would be viewed as a full-fledged member of the community by virtue of his skills.

In like manner, it can also be helpful to use one’s professional e-mail address in personal communications as yet another implicit signal of one’s professional identity as a researcher. Robinson’s work (2006a) on the eBay Black Friday walkout offers an example of why these subtle reminders may be important to preserving the researcher’s credibility. While observing the eBay community’s walkout in response to new administrative policies, Robinson had asked several community members if they would like to answer

questions about the community protest. Unbeknownst to her, her invitation was reposted by community members on other community chat rooms and forwarded to other community members by e-mail. In one instance, the researcher's academic affiliation was not included and she was contacted immediately by an eBay member who suspected Robinson of being an informant working for eBay! Fortunately, a quick e-mail from her university account with links to appropriate Web pages validated Robinson's identity as a researcher and allowed her to garner valuable data from a respondent confident of Robinson's true identity.

Text as Interaction

The discussion thus far has primarily dealt with how social processes occur in cyberspace through the medium of text, indicating the centrality of text-based interactions to much of cyberethnographic inquiry. This leads us to the second central tension in the shaping of cyberethnographic methods: the idea of text as interaction. The MUDs, bulletin boards, and other online fieldsites that have traditionally been subject to the gaze of early cyberethnographers were, of necessity, entirely built around text-based platforms designed to process only text-based inputs and outputs. Thus, to the present, most cyberethnographies have examined online interactions occurring exclusively in the form of written communications, whether linguistic or paralinguistic, and excluded the possibility of spontaneous nonlinguistic communication characteristic of face-to-face interaction (Turner, 2002). To make these mediated social processes meaningful, cyberethnographers have argued that it is possible to regard these written communications as closer to live interaction than recorded interaction, in Steve Jones' terms more "practice" than "product" (Jones 1999, p. 15). Recent studies have enlisted increasingly sophisticated analytical techniques to analyze a variety of text-based interactions. Sociological studies of email interactions (Menchik and Tian, 2008) and blogging (Tian and Menchik, 2009) have drawn on the work of sociolinguists such as Bakhtin and semioticians such as Peirce in order to shed light on the dynamics of identity work in online environments.

Since the advent of the field of ethnography, qualitative researchers have long debated whether the object of analysis is live interaction or merely the traces of interaction. The off-line ethnographer analyzes social interaction and talk as one coherent "flow" of social interaction unfolding in the phenomenological present. Much of this interaction consists of talk, but this talk itself constitutes an ongoing flow of action in which the observer can immerse herself. Thus, many ethnographers are taught to pay careful attention to the talk that forms an integral part of the ongoing social interaction in most societies and cultures (Agar 1980, pp. 105–108). It is only when the ethnographer records speech that concerns social interactions temporally or physically far removed from the here and now that she treats this talk as "second-order" account-giving rather than an aspect of the ongoing interaction. Thus, traditionally for ethnographers, the here and now is the experiential locus for the object of observation and the act of observation as well.

Given these understandings, cyberethnography's critics have argued that computer-mediated communications resemble documents and other memorializations of completed interactions that have already slipped into the past. Because of the asynchronous character

of Internet-mediated communication, when the cyberethnographer analyzes the transcripts of archived chat or MUD interaction, he or she is doing archival research similar to the research undertaken by an historian. For an ethnographic purist, then, the cyberethnographer who studies archived chat is necessarily studying what the off-line ethnographers Pollner and Emerson have labeled “dead sociality” (Pollner and Emerson 1983, p. 251).

In response, cyberethnographers have contested this definition of interaction by arguing that these communications can be experienced not as memorializations of some originary act, but as live ongoing interactions. They believe that with text- or image-mediated interaction, the observer is witnessing something akin to the living sociality of ongoing off-line interaction. In taking this stance, cyberethnographers have advocated approaching computer-mediated communication as a double-sided object. It is in recognition of this double-sided character of online interaction that Hine conceptualizes the object of cyberethnographic observation as a couplet comprised of a cultural performance and the “artefact” corresponding to this performance (Hine 2000, p. 39). From this angle of vision, text takes on a dual existence housing both the past and present in one.

One way of understanding this is to imagine how individuals interpret past text in the present. For example, when individuals visit the online auction house eBay and read a member’s profile, they witness text representing past interactions that this member has had with other members. This textual commentary turns the past into the present when the individual reads it as the necessary preliminary step in deciding whether or not to bid on an item. In this sense, text is not a dead archive of the past, but in a dramatic fashion, all past text becomes the basis for the present act or interaction with the site. In parallel manner, when an individual visits the online video site YouTube, the videos on display are the result of other users’ choices, comments, and ratings. In all such cases, the present cyber-reality may be interpreted as a continual accumulation of all past input by members or participants. This might be likened to the way traditional ethnographers use textual evidence from off-line fieldsites such as information on bulletin boards, advertisements, handouts, manuals, or other print information they encounter in their off-line fieldsites.

In addition, legitimizing ethnographers have made other arguments for the use of text as data. From their angle of vision in off-line participant observation, the ethnographer witnesses a host of cues via what Goffman termed “face engagement,” in which individuals produce a rich array of verbal and bodily cues signaling meanings, intentions, and social identities (Goffman, 1959). Cyberethnographers drew upon a Goffmanian framework to argue that participant observation of face engagement and shared social practices could occur via text (Robinson, 2007). To make this case, cyberethnographers referenced the Chicago School as setting an important precedent for using text written by members to understand their own meanings without the intervening lens of the researcher. Significantly, this approach allows the cyberethnographer to record and analyze the interactions of third parties interacting with each other in pure form. In this sense, cyberethnographic text is both the data and medium through which participant observation is conducted (Cavanagh, 1999), a process that has fascinating implications for the research process. Off-line, ethnographers must perform all interpretive tasks themselves by transcribing all of their observations into text in the form of fieldnotes. Online, informants translate their own experiences into textual form by creating their own textual translations of the off-line range of interactive cuing mechanisms. Given this contrast, cyberethnographers may tout one of the virtues of

cyberethnography as its ability to produce one fewer lens of distortion because the text is the interaction that is recorded verbatim as data (Hine, 2000).

Stories From the Field: Methodological and Ethical Implications of Text as Interaction

The use of text also introduces new methodological implications regarding the collection and use of text as data. In Robinson's work on both 9/11 (2008) and eBay France and eBay USA (2006b), she recorded her data by archiving entire Web pages to capture all ongoing interactions as experienced by participants. While data analysis programs can be helpful, they should be used in tandem rather than in lieu of archiving. Archiving entire Web pages offers several advantages. First, when reviewing data at a later date, the cyberethnographer may wish to revisit conversations or comments as they occurred in cyberspace. Archiving ongoing Web pages allows cyberethnographers to preserve data in the format in which respondents experience it and to make each subsequent exploration of the data a fresh view of the original interactions. Second, this technique allows cyberethnographers to accurately trace the threads of interaction over minutes, hours, and days. Comments or posts that may not seem significant at first view may acquire salience in light of continued conversation or repetition. By archiving Web pages of chat or continuous interaction, cyberethnographers may keep an accurate ongoing record of all exchanges between community members and preserve the integrity of larger community dialogues and debates.

The archiving of such data brings us to ethical concerns of how cyberethnographers should protect anonymity of respondents when publishing or sharing their findings. When recording textual data that is posted under user names, clearly it is necessary to change user names to protect anonymity just as with data in the off-line world. However, as search engine technologies become more advanced, there is an increased risk that researchers' replication of data can inadvertently reveal off-line identities.

Today, there are new twists engendered by the rapid growth of social networking sites that rely on the convergence of media consumption and production known as Web 2.0 or user-generated Web site content. While this may potentially occur with data from any non-password protected site, this is especially problematic when studying sites such as MySpace that explicitly reveal individuals' real names and off-line identities. Reproducing textual data from a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook can allow anyone with enough Internet savvy to track down respondents' real identities. For example, if an individual's MySpace account allows "public" access, a simple online search may allow anyone to pull up that person's profile. By typing in a single quotation from someone's MySpace page using quotation marks, it is theoretically possible for anyone to pull up those profiles and see photos and other identifying information.

To test this ethical concern, we replicated some quotes taken from studies of MySpace to see if we could find out respondents' identities. We used a simple Google search in which we typed in an exact phrase from someone's MySpace page that a researcher had quoted. We were able to find the exact user profile of the person quoted by using a phrase as simple as "Are we still gonna go play Frisbee?" Although the article's author had given this individual a pseudonym, this provided approximately two minutes of anonymity. A Google search based on "Are we still gonna go play Frisbee?" revealed two

possible MySpace profiles in which this quotation was used. One of them was a perfect match to the other identifying information provided in the author's description of the respondent. As this indicates, quotes that may seem innocuous are often unique enough to reveal personal identities.

While quotes about playing Frisbee may not pose extraordinary potential ethical conflicts, it is easy to imagine how data revealing information about sensitive populations could pose an enormous risk for those under study. To push this concern further, we visited a non-password protected pro-anorexia online community. We again selected a quote that had no personal identifying information that may be paraphrased as, "How can I be alive with such a big belly?" Taking this quote out of context, we again ran a simple Google search putting the text in quotation marks. Not only were we given an exact match to the girl, but also her picture. If we found these individuals so easily, so can almost anyone else with an Internet connection. Please note that given our success in finding these individuals' personal information, we are not replicating the exact quotation in either of the examples given.

With employers and educational institutions increasingly "looking up" applicants' social networking site profiles, the ethical implications for researchers to protect anonymity is increasingly important. Cyberethnographers must face a unique set of ethical challenges. On one hand, we want to preserve the integrity of our informants' words. On the other hand, the ethical risks to do so may be too great. Should a cyberethnographer be studying a sensitive population, she must take precautions to project anonymity. These may include, but are not limited to, running searches on quotations to make sure that they do not reveal their authors' real identities. While simply correcting spelling errors is one option to thwart search engines, cyberethnographers may have to consider the necessity of altering the text through the use of ellipses or even paraphrasing some parts of respondents' words while preserving the meaning. While there is little discussion regarding what cyberethnographers can do, increased dialogue on this issue is both timely and needed.

Observer and Observed

Just as cyberethnographers have come to recognize that the object of their analysis can be constituted in a variety of different ways, they have also recognized the complex relationship between the observer and the observed that is, in many ways, unique to cyberethnography. More specifically, cyberethnographers have come to acknowledge that, whenever they undertake cyberethnographic research, they are coming face-to-face with interactional environments that pose special challenges for those seeking an in-depth understanding grounded in direct observation. When off-line ethnographers carry out conventional participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973), they can perform acts of straightforward firsthand observation and, at the same time, put themselves in the shoes of the participant in order to convey what it feels like to be a participant in the world under observation. This approach privileges what the anthropologist calls "direct observation" (Agar, 1980, p. 127).

However, the cyberethnographer must make a choice whether or not to privilege online data or use a combined approach to online and off-line data gathering. Since its inception, many of cyberethnography's practitioners have been divided between those who advocate studying online phenomenon uniquely in virtual venues and those who argue for a blending of online and off-line fieldwork. In this dilemma, we come full circle

to our original discussion of mediated social processes in relation to the social construction of identity begun in the first part of this chapter. As we discussed, one of the central tensions between pioneering and legitimizing cyberethnographers was the negotiation of online and off-line identity projects. These opposing stances also play out in terms of methodological choices. Some choose to conduct all fieldwork virtually, while other researchers choose to conduct both on- and offline fieldwork; this latter approach allows the researcher to compare on- and offline identity performances. While both approaches rely on ethnographic methods of participant observation and ethnographic interviews, each of these approaches provides a different fit between research questions and data.

Regarding the former, cyberethnographies relying uniquely on online fieldwork analyze members' contributions to chat rooms, bulletin boards, and MUDs (Markham, 1998; Ward, 1999). This type of ethnography is uniquely marked by participant observation online and relates members' experiences as encompassed by the virtual medium. Markham gives a self-reflexive account of her participant observation in a MUD that illuminates members' accounts of "ways of being." Ward conducted her participant observation in two virtual communities, The Cybergrl Web Station and Women Halting Online Abuse. This approach accepts presentation of the virtual self; the orienting goal is to understand members' actions and perceptions of a particular virtual community.

A number of arguments have been used to validate the use of data collected in purely online fieldsites. From a theoretical standpoint, Goffmanian analysis of public and private life may be used to illuminate the nature of online and off-line selves and interaction (Cavanagh, 1999). Goffman's work (1959) provides numerous, pre-Internet examples of the multiplicity of identity performance in which the identity performances that individuals produce vary substantially in the context of their reception and the character of their intended audiences. Cyberethnographers, following Symbolic Interactionist approaches, have argued that the online self, as constituted by its identity performances, is continuous with the off-line self, even though it enacts itself in a disembodied environment (Robinson, 2007). Taking such a Symbolic Interactionist approach privileges members' understandings of their online and off-line identities.

In addition, from a methodological standpoint, in determining whether online fieldwork alone is sufficient, it is crucial for the cyberethnographer to understand how members understand the relationship between their online and off-line selves. One question of central importance to cyberethnographers is whether or not members of virtual communities also interact in the off-line world. If there are no connections between online and off-line interactions on the part of members, it has been argued that validating online participation observation with off-line verification can create a bias:

The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity . . . we cannot assume a priori that authenticity is as problematic for online members as it is for the cyberethnographer. (Hine, 2000, p. 49)

For this reason, those espousing this stance believe that it is not necessary to initiate face-to-face interaction in the off-line world because of the potential to distort participant observation by placing "the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by informants themselves" (Hine, 2000, p. 48). Walstrom (2004) argued that this epistemic

positioning gives the cyberethnographer an advantage over the off-line ethnographer. For, while the purely off-line ethnographer cannot know what it is like, from a subjective standpoint, for participants to interact in online environments, the online ethnographer can easily put herself in the participants' virtual shoes. From this perspective, the cyberethnographer must consider whether or not online members perceive the virtual-physical distinction as critical to their experience in a particular virtual fieldsite. Such knowledge can only be determined by extended participant observation online. According to Hine (2000), "The decision to privilege certain modes of interaction is a situated one. If the aim is to study online settings as contexts in their own right, the question of off-line identities need not arise" (22). From this perspective, it is valid to conduct all participant observation and ethnographic interviewing via mediated interaction.

On the other hand, sometimes cyberethnographers need to conduct observation and ethnographic interviewing across both online and off-line realms. This is true when members of a community or fieldsite extend their online relationships into off-line spaces (Baym, 2000). If members of an online community also meet in the off-line world, conducting ethnography in both online and off-line settings may be necessary. Humphreys (2007), for example, examines a series of interactions some of which take place on the virtual site Dodgeball and some of which take place in off-line venues where people meet up in bodily co-presence. Miller and Slater combine online data gathering and analysis with an off-line house-to-house survey in their study of the online Trinidad community to see the impact of the Internet on households in the region. A two-pronged data-gathering strategy was the choice of researchers like Turkle (1995), Kendall (2002), and Correll (1995) who sought to combine online and off-line ethnographic observation and interviewing. Turkle met many of her respondents face-to-face, while Kendall and Carter attended off-line "meets" where community participants would get together in the flesh.

Kendall's research (2002) on BlueSky presents an excellent example of when online and off-line ethnographic methods are ideal complements to best study how participants interact both online and off-line. In Kendall's case, gaining a complete and nuanced understanding of BlueSky participants' identities and relationships necessitated leaving the online world because many of the ties between the participants had an off-line dimension, as well as an online dimension. Kendall's foray into the off-line world demonstrates the necessity of ethnographic sensitivity to respondents' experiential horizons. Because her respondents also interacted with each other in the off-line world, Kendall was following in their footsteps when she initiated off-line contact with them. Because she used the same means of communication as the participants and had access to the same amount and quality of information as they did, her observations conveyed what Hine calls "experiential authenticity" (Hine, 2000, pp. 48–49). For her, there was no conflict between using as many data-gathering channels as possible and staying faithful to the subjective experiences of her own respondents.

Stories From the Field: Methodological and Ethical Implications for the Observer Observed

This discussion brings us to our final section on the ethical implications of conducting fieldwork using new digital technologies. Earlier text-based cyberethnographers

conducted much of their fieldwork via a computer screen first with dial-up modems and then with high-speed connections. By and large, their data collection neither captured the subject's image nor rendered the ethnographer into an observable object herself. Today, however, Web 2.0 is based on highly interactive visual content. Cyberethnographers and their respondents can use highly mobile handheld devices to record multimedia and create their own digital representations both cheaply and easily.

Lange's work on YouTube offers insight into some the ethical implications of Web 2.0 cyberethnographic fieldwork. Lange complemented her online fieldwork with off-line participation in YouTube meet ups in the off-line world. She filmed these events and then posted her ethnographic video-based data on YouTube and her own Web site comprised of video blogs or "vlogs." Lange obtained informed consent before recording participants' images and voices for her video-based and interview data collection. However, in certain instances such as reproducing screen shots of YouTube participants' online videos, Lange (2007a) might choose to "fuzz out" certain identifying information such as faces or logos if she had any concerns about reproducing the unredacted images. As Lange's work (2007b) indicates, cyberethnographers may need to add multimedia skills to their methodological toolkits to engage in multimedia fieldsites (See Figure 8.1).

Further, while most scholarly publications still rely on text-based evidence published in paper journals, Web-based publications that can easily hyperlink to images, music, and video are increasingly common. As we saw earlier, just as the publication of text from Web sites may allow us to find the "real" identity of respondents with an online search, the release of visual ethnographic evidence may also put informants at risk in ways that would have been unimaginable before Web 2.0. As media convergence continues, cyberethnographers must carefully think through how to protect anonymity while preserving the authenticity of visual data (See Figure 8.2).

Finally, Lange's work illustrates how user-generated Web 2.0 media can radically change the relationship between the observer and the observed. Should the cyberethnographer venture into the off-line world, she must consider how she will become the object of scrutiny by those under observation. The cyberethnographer must face new concerns about how her identity may become part of a feedback loop with those she is studying. Lange's work (2007c) indicates how multi-modal Web 2.0 produces fieldwork in which the researcher may become the object of study herself. Indeed, respondents may choose

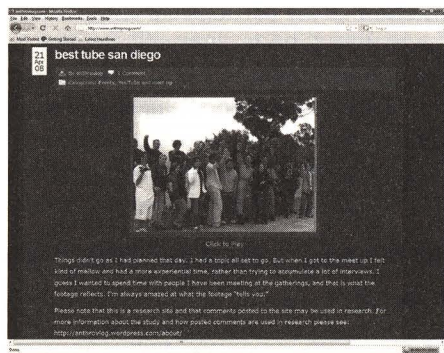


Figure 8.1 Anthrolog (<http://www.anthrolog.com/>).



Figure 8.2 YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/AnthroVlog>). Screen shot taken by Patricia G. Lange on October 8, 2007.

to publicize the fieldworker's personal identity. Lange describes her research with video bloggers from a "media-savvy group." She explains that, in the course of her fieldwork, her picture was taken without her knowledge and posted to Flickr, an online photo site, without her consent:

... they have the power to capture events I attend and put the images on the Internet. They can identify me, disclose personal information, and manipulate my image without my even knowing it... "data" was collected on me, as my interactions were documented in photographs (and possibly also video) and distributed globally... (2007c, p. 4).

Lange (2007c) was put in a position of comparative powerlessness in that respondents were able to record and reproduce her image and identity at will because of new media technologies. Lange cautions that some researchers and institutional sponsors are ill equipped to meet these challenges: "Although many human subjects protocols are set up with the assumption that the researcher alone records and analyzes materials, in fact in the video blogging community the power of recording and distribution may exceed that of any individual researcher" (p. 5). As she explains, "Ironically, the more I sought to control my image, the less control I actually had" (p. 4). As this indicates, ethical concerns must be reexamined in light of new technologies for both subjects and researchers alike.

Discussion: Where Are We Now?

As today's digital fieldsites are born, change, and die in an instant, cyberethnographers must continue to be flexible. Many of the challenges of data collection and analysis have no clear models or methodological exemplars from which to draw explicit guidance. Rather, ethnographers must plunge into a host of textual, pictorial, and aural data that may be here this morning, changed this afternoon, and gone tomorrow. While daunting, we believe that ethnography's traditional strengths are ideally suited to studying the elastic and ever-changing nature of mediated communication. More specifically, according to

The National Science Foundation's report, qualitative methods are especially appropriate for examining "naturally occurring processes" and "phenomena of social life," as well as "cultural practices" and "manifestations of globalization at the micro level" (Lamont and White, 2008, p. 17). In contrast to ethnography, much social science inquiry uses quantitative methods following what has been termed the logico-deductive or positivist model (Emerson, 2001). While valuable in its own right, this paradigm orients itself toward very different goals than ethnography. Unlike ethnography's emphasis on engagement with respondents, the logico-deductive mode of research often valorizes a distanced posture toward the objects of study (Burawoy, 1998). Rather, the researcher uses strategies related to the linkage between data and theory that aim to verify or disconfirm theoretical propositions framed in advance of empirical research. Analysts adopting this approach maintain distance from respondents to avoid introducing any bias into the research process; subjects are often decontextualized from natural settings in order to control for the effects of context (Burawoy, 1998). Finally, in achieving these ends, the formalized language of science is privileged over the language of everyday life used by those under study such that accounts of the social world rely on "experience-distant" terms (Emerson 2001, p. 35). From the ethnographic perspective, this process creates what may be termed a nonnaturalist social ontology because empirical engagement plays but an ancillary role in the research process (Emerson, 2001). We believe that these orientations are not ideal for examining naturally occurring processes on the Internet in order to reveal cyber cultural practices.

By contrast, online and off-line, ethnographic methods conceptualize engagement with subjects via fieldwork and participant observation as central to the research process to shed light on emergent social phenomena. Off-line and online, the ethnographer relies on contact and communication with "members," or those under study, and seeks to communicate with them about their understandings of the social world (Burawoy, 1998). For many ethnographers, a full description and analysis of social processes is not possible when employing the logico-deductive emphasis on detachment and the nonnaturalist social ontology. Rather, for ethnographers, uncovering members' meanings is crucial to the methodology's goal of understanding social processes and interactions from the point of view of those under study (Emerson & Pollner, 1988). Given the rapidly changing nature of mediated communication, which is but one part of the Information Revolution, we advocate the flexibility and innovative potential of cyberethnography to examine our society in flux.

Future Directions

Whether taking notes on a Blackberry in Brasília, typing them into a laptop computer in Ulan Bator, or jotting them down with a pen and paper in Silicon Valley, ethnographers conduct extended fieldwork to gather data through the observation of naturally occurring settings and interactions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989). For ethnographers and cyberethnographers alike, naturalistic forms of evidence include categories and orientations originating in common sense or folk idioms that capture the reality of "everyday life" rather than the formalized idiom of social science. Rather than offering objectified descriptions of the social fields in which social actors operate, the ethnographer relies on the categories cognitively accessible to social actors and concentrates on reporting members' emic

categories by using members' own terms and words as windows into their social worlds (Emerson, 2001). Many ethnographers aspire to capture the "subject-centered" dimension of social reality by entering subjects' ongoing life worlds through participant observation. Ethnographers conduct ongoing fieldwork to appreciate the interactions and practices as they are seen through the eyes of the actors engaged in producing them (Emerson, 2001). For all of these reasons, we believe that traditional ethnography's orientations are an ideal fit with the rapidly changing nature of mediated communication as the field of Internet studies continues to be built.

However, to do so, we must continually adapt off-line ethnographic practice to the constraints and possibilities afforded by digital fieldsites. As increasing generations of individuals in developed nations grow up "wired," we believe that the novelty of cyberethnography will likely fade as information technologies become just another accepted part of everyday life. Simultaneously, once cyberethnography has been incorporated into the field of sociology, its legitimacy will be beyond question (Webb, 1999). As we have seen in this chapter, in the middle of the 1990s, ethnographers introduced the idea of the virtual world as a nonphysical space of flows that centered on connection, not location. Today, as the depth and complexity of interactive venues deepens, social phenomena originating in the online world are increasingly spilling over into the off-line world.

As these arguments indicate, physical face-to-face interactions and virtual interactions are increasingly but two possibilities among other forms of mediated communication including, but not limited to, the cell phone, iPod, and video conferencing. In sum, the dynamics of mediated interaction must be recognized as having the same level of complexity as face-to-face interaction. For this reason, we close this chapter by urging cyberethnographers to increasingly conceptualise mediated environments and interaction in terms of a range of possibilities. Already, the online auction house eBay provides a wealth of examples of how mediated and face-to-face forms of interaction coexist. The exchange of goods in the off-line world based on actions and interactions on the eBay site forms one point of online and off-line crossover for which members regularly engage in varied forms of mediated communication including phone and snail mail. Creating even greater possibilities of online and off-line interactions, eBay also holds events in the off-line world that promote the virtual site through face-to-face encounters.

Taking this further, the prevalence of cell phones and other handheld communication devices will make it necessary for cyberethnographers to consider an even greater range of communication possibilities. With media convergence, cell phones and other handheld devices are offering a new array of communication possibilities, thereby multiplying the potential platforms for digital communication. For this reason, we believe that cyberethnographers will increasingly extend their fieldsites beyond the computer to a sophisticated array of personal communication devices. This is already happening as the Internet becomes increasingly available via cell phones. At the same time, a new host of Web sites offer an increased range of communication media reliant on media convergence. Likening itself to the iPod, Dimdim claims to be the world's easiest Web conference Web site because it allows users to simultaneously give live video Web presentations using whiteboards, Web pages, and shared voice. Lifestrea.ms is yet another kind of convergence site that aggregates individuals' communications from Twitter, Facebook, MySpace Photos, etc. into a bundled communication package.

As these possibilities indicate, conceptualizing the fieldsite as accessible via a cell phone or Blackberry will prompt new challenges and questions about how to study interactions

in real time versus asynchronous communication, how to analyze digital images, and how to best study other new forms of multimedia interaction. Even as we develop new research strategies suited to studying text-based mediated interaction, video-based and audio-based interaction is mushrooming on various digital media. Traditional methodological tools and constraints do not suffice when it comes to collecting data composed of a communicative mélange of images, sound, and text, which is increasingly the norm given media convergence. Today's webcams allow visual computer-mediated communication (CMC) to jump from text to image in what will perhaps soon be called its "primitive" form. Video clips and sound tracks are embedded in Web sites and linked to posts. Not only are the media mixed, but they no longer form or follow linear structures. Virtual ethnographies of video- and audio-based interaction will have to be even more attentive to issues of embedding and context. To be sure, written and spoken language will always be central to examining interaction, but cyberethnographers will also need to consider varied multimedia forms of communication.

Of further importance, both scholars and students must tackle these issues together. We must consider how future technologies may change the very way ethnography is taught and how the craft is disseminated. It is likely that in years to come we will collectively redefine normative classroom environments. Increasingly, the training of ethnographic methods will take place in wired settings. Simultaneously, training will increasingly incorporate technological tools. Now we might imagine the use of texting for jotting. However, the future promises even more dramatic shifts. These shifts will be equally salient in terms of publishing work in digital venues and sharing work through constantly evolving personal electronic devices. We can only begin to imagine the scope of the evolving ethical challenges that we must face together.

In closing, examining ethnographic practice in light of digital technologies, this article sheds light not only on issues connected to methodology but invites larger questions that will grow ever more pressing as the Information Revolution continues to unfold. We believe that increasingly cyberethnographers will creatively avail themselves of their sociological imagination in order to unearth the forms of social life that will exist and multiply in this new virtual world. Given the increasing salience and centrality of virtual environments to everyday experience, it has become imperative to conduct rigorous ethnographic research on the new forms of social life emerging in this domain. Such research requires a solid foundation. The fast pace of change, however, demands constant methodological innovation. We must consider cyberethnography as an ever-evolving form of research with wider implications for both sociology and the field of new media studies.

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