Online Ethnographies

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Internet research

"Applying the insights, methods, and perspectives of ethnography to this class of issues is a terrifying and delightful challenge for what some would call the information age." *Susan Leigh Star, 1999*

"The philosophies and criteria of different researchers need to be different, improved, and ever-changing. Build your own vessel. Stage your own show. Evaluate your own evaluation." *Robert V. Kozinets, 2010*

Stand-alone literature review (Okoli & Schabram, 2010)

Many different versions of online ethnography have recently been suggested. To clarify the nature of these approaches, a literature review with several phases was conducted[1]:

1. As a starting point we chose Robert Kozinets' (2010) Netnography. Employing backward search, more references were found .

2. A keyword search in the (main) electronic databases: Science Direct, EbscoHost, Inderscience, ACM Digital Library, and Springer Link

3. Further searches with Google Scholar

4. Search words: netnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography, ethnography of Internet, cyberethnography, webnography and digital ethnography. These keywords had to occur in the title, as keywords, and/or in the abstract section

5. 14 approaches were identified as applications of the ethnographic method deployed in various disciplines

[1]Isomäki, H. & Silvennoinen, J. 2013.

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Results

On a general level it can be said that the approaches share the six strengths of good quality Internet research (Baym, 2006, p. 82):

1) grounded in theory and data,

2) demonstrate rigor in data collection and analysis,

3) use multiple data collection strategies,

4) take participants' perspectives into account,

5) demonstrate awareness of and self-reflexivity regarding the research process, and

6) consider interconnections between the Internet and the situated life world

However, regarding the change process from traditional to online ethnography, especially in terms of 1) ICT as a field, 2) researcher's immersion in a field site, 3) learning and using the local vernacular, and 4) detailing of elements in fieldwork (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; 2005; Kozinets, 2010), we became interested in the approaches' relation to ICT, reflected also in research object and researcher position.

Online ethnography approaches 1/2

Approach	Main authors	Relation to ICT	Research Object	Researcher Position	Research Procedures
Traditional Ethnography	For instance, Geertz, 1973	F2F, offline	Cultures and communities	Participant - observer	Combining different methods
Netnography	Kozinets, 2010	Online & offline	Online (offline) cultures and communities	"Apparent" participant-observer	Phased method through 6 steps
Connective Ethnography	Dirksen, Huizing & Smit, 2010	Online embedded to offline and vice versa	Social dynamics in local physical context with online context	Online & offline participant observation; long term	Traditional methods blended with online research
Connective Ethnography	Fields & Kafai, 2008, 2009; Hine, 2007	Moves between online & offline	Virtual communities, support groups, e-science	Active, towards holistic under-standing; long term	Multiple sources of data through connection of different spaces
Mediated Ethnography	Beaulieu & Estalella, 2009; Beaulieu, 2004	Online & offline through technologies	Internet, traces of links, hits and hyperlinks	Participant-observer	Contiguity and traceability
Digital Ethnography	Wesch, 2009	Online	Vlogs	Long term active participation, "friending"	Creation of videos, discussions, interviews
Digital Ethnography	Murthy, 2008	Added to offline research	Digital Video, Social networking websites, Blogs	Covert participant-observer	Question-naires & email interviews

Online ethnography approaches 2/2

Approach	Main authors	Relation to ICT	Research Object	Researcher Position	Research Procedures
Digital Ethnography	Masten & Plowman, 2003	Online & offline	Mobile communities connected to sites	Lurker; swift analyser of multiple digital data	Many digital techniques; participant observation by participants
Cyberethno-graphy	Rybas & Gajjala, 2007	Online & offline worlds	Social network environments & virtual communities	Long term involved participant-observer	Epistemology of doing, observing the physical environment
Cyber-Ethnography	Ward, 1999	Online &offline as hybrid space	Online interactions for instance in chat-rooms	Participant observer	Reflexivity, semi-structured interviews
Webno-graphy	Puri, 2007	Online (offline)	Blogs, chatrooms, discussion boards	Lurker, "a part of furniture"	Digital collection of text-based consumer data
Virtual Ethnography	Hine, 2000	Online & offline	The shaping of virtual communities	Emerging participant-observer	Field connections, intermittent engagement
Network Ethnography	Howard, 2002	Online	Network field sites	Active or passive participant - observer	Social Network Analysis
Multi-sited Ethnography	Wittel, 2000; Green, 1999	F2F, traditional & virtual ethnography combined	"Real people" & virtual space	Participant-observer Online & Offline	Multiple objects and fields of study

Conclusion

ICT as a field

❑ ICT as a field defines the boundaries of online ethnographic studies:

1. the relationship between a community of users and ICT network (online/offline activities and their comparisons),

2. the relationship between a community of users and single ICT application (how the application shapes/enables/restricts interactions/culture formation within the specific environments) or

3. By recognising the possibilities for various mediated practices offered by ICT applications and network functionalities that users take into use (how people come to grips with technologies; "doing design ethnography"; technology development)

❑ Boundaries of research need to be constructed by ethnographers in doing ethnography: need to follow the social dynamics and users' way to use applications in the context of research (theory/practice; cf. Hine, 2008)

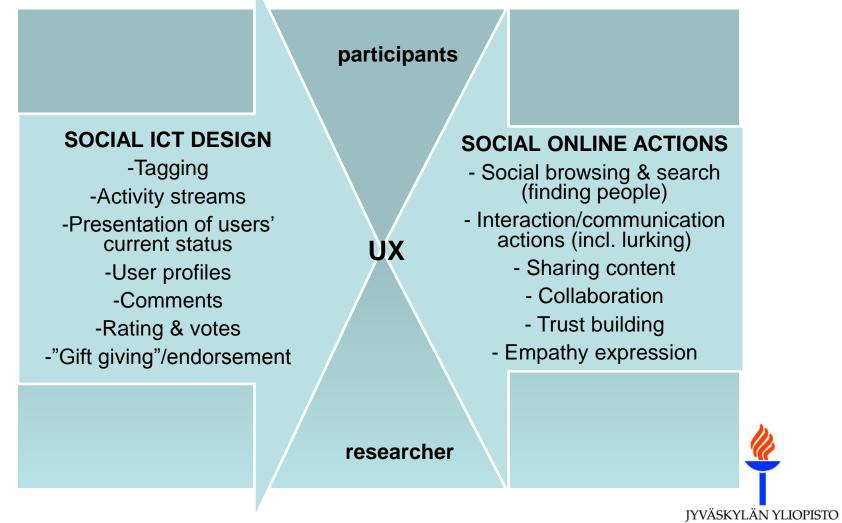JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
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Conclusion

Online immersion

❑ Different technologies shape the nature of online communities/interactions various ways

❑ Holistic view of online life worlds can be gained only if understood how participants utilise/interpret all features of the online environment ('interpretative flexibility' of ICT applications (Pinch & Bijker, 1987))

❑ Ethnographers need to reflect on the technological environments' qualities which enable, restrict or shape participants' and their own engagement to the community or interactions (part of learning the local vernacular)

❑ Important to understand what is the social design of the ICT application and what is participants' interpretation and local use of the design (part of detailing the elements in fieldwork)

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Online researcher position and immersion to the field: subjective/intersubjective User Experience (UX)

How to understand technology-mediated lifeworlds online?

participants

SOCIAL ICT DESIGN

-Tagging

-Activity streams

-Presentation of users' current status

-User profiles

-Comments

-Rating & votes

-"Gift giving"/endorsement

UX

SOCIAL ONLINE ACTIONS

- Social browsing & search (finding people)

- Interaction/communication actions (incl. lurking)

- Sharing content

- Collaboration

- Trust building

- Empathy expression

researcher

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Thank you!

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