

A method for the times: a meditation on virtual ethnography faults and fortitudes.

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Increasingly, identities and relationships are realised and performed in virtualised communities and spaces. To cultural and social interrogators, traditional ethnographic methods represent a contextually rich pathway to mapping intimate and meta-behaviours online. However, conventional techniques must innovate and transform to accommodate a polysemous eco-system and population.

In this paper, I explore key strengths and weaknesses of the ethnographic method when applied to computer-mediated collectives, and highlight specific imperatives that should be considered by researchers. My goal is to offer insights into the deployment of ethnography in diverse digital fora, including how it can be adapted or combined with other techniques to create a hybridised methodology. I support the theory that “new media” is historically relative - and argue that - while unique qualities of contemporary connectors must be practically addressed in research, a macro-epistemological approach is most helpful to contextualise findings to, move scholars toward a best practice for virtual situation.

A method for change

The latter decades of the twentieth century saw the ascendancy of expansive communication technologies that dazzled and commuted individuals, networks and economies with fresh momentum. These technologies have given rise to new sites of convergence, news tools for expression, newly situated socio-cultural tensions, and new vocations to manage the exchanges that occur in these ephemeral territories. Recent statistics from the USC Annenberg School for Communication’s Center for the Digital Future indicate these territories and their residents are growing more numerous. Their 2008 *Digital Future Report* indicates that membership in online communities has grown over 100% in the last three years. In record numbers, individuals are identifying as a ‘member’ of these microverses, visiting them regularly, publishing media-rich content within their ‘walls’, forming heterogeneous, disembodied and physical ties with their inhabitants:

More than half of online community members (54 percent) log into their community at least once a day, and 71 percent of members said their community is very important or extremely important to them. Fifty-six percent of members reported meeting their online counterparts in person... And, a large and growing percentage of members -- now 55 percent -- say they feel as strongly about their online communities as they do about their real-world communities. (2008 *Digital Future Report*, USC Annenberg)

The “messy, chaotic enterprise” (Pahl, 2003) of ethnography seems uniquely suited for research within the virtual collectives of our times: nebulous, shaded and poly-modal. Ethnography’s reflexive DNA allows it to probe the human fibre of cyberspaces. There is ample air traffic control analysis of ‘online community’ – reductive assessment of its movements, distilled into linear metrics such as ‘hits’ or registration numbers. But to understand what and who we are when we connect (and disconnect) online, scholars need to tap the ‘grey areas’ of social motility. Informed observation, participation and interpretation insulate debates around digital existences from banality, rhetoric or uncritical evangelism. As Howard Rheingold, the ‘father’ of virtual community, has argued, it is only through immersion at the community coalface that researchers will advance our understanding of our ‘bloodless’ networked publics (and privates).

What – and where – is ‘online community’?

Technologically-mediated social behaviours raise unique challenges for researchers, beginning with underlying definitions and assumptions (Wang & Gloviczki, 2008). Unpacking challenges in studying the World Bank’s ICT4DEV project, a part-virtualised network of stakeholders around the globe, Casper Bruun Jensen described the project itself as “an ontologically heterogeneous, variable and distributed entity, which does not respect any of the taken-for-granted levels and boundaries in the social science vocabulary. Is it micro or macro? Real or virtual? Material or discursive? Technical or political? We cannot tell.” (Jensen, 2006) Is this entity a community? It possesses members and non-members, literacies, shared purpose, sub-networks and cohesive (whether successful or not) infrastructure. What then might prompt us to classify it otherwise?

The term community, long debated in research, has become a banner term in contemporary cyberspace, adopted by causal agitators as product, panacea and

parlance. Andrew Clark unlocks some complexities of ‘community’ methodologically in his working paper on ‘networks, ties and contacts’:

The idea of community is a confusing concept. It encapsulates issues of identity and belonging, similarity and difference, inclusion and exclusion, place and time, processes such as modernisation, and has been considered both a spatial and social phenomenon. (Clark, 2007)

Bettina Heiss maps a history of the term, and interrogates the sometimes problematic, archaic implications of ‘online community’ as a frame for studying mediated social clustering. (Heiss, 2007)

Overused by an array of competing agendas, the word is bromidic. For many it is divested of any authentic meaning. So neutralised, we return to perhaps the most truthful state of community there is (on or offline): it is what we make it and cannot be arbitrarily imposed by external forces. Rheingold and Benedict Anderson each capture this variability. Rheingold positions community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1993) For Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ of nationalism, meaning is constructed “by its participants, and not necessarily bound by structure of location.” (Anderson, 1991)

Wellman, Boase and Chen (2002) further point out that community is a moving target by nature, in a state of definitional flux long before the arrival of the Internet. For them, contemporary connective technologies are a neutral incubator for existing human forces, rather than a Promethean womb for new social phenomena: “Rather than increasing or destroying community, the Internet can best be seen as integrated into rhythms of daily life, with life online intertwined with offline activities. Slater (2002) accentuates the amorphous distinction between online and offline communities and their inhabitants, arguing it is both arbitrary and reductive. The virtual ethnographer must embrace community as a dynamic conceit, beware artificially demarked ‘community’ zones in modern cyberspace (inhabited by virtual tumbleweed) and instead look toward Rosaldo’s “busy intersections” (Rosaldo, 1989) and their newly constituted digital borderlands.

The indigenous behaviours of online community members are shaped by germinating passions (what members have in common, why they have converged); platform architecture (bulletin board, chat, social network, blog, wiki); community management techniques (guidelines, moderation strategies, status and reward systems); as well as offline social and interpersonal contexts. These can be incidental, serendipitous, or carefully composed. An online fan community will interact in a different way to members of a corporate intranet. (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, Abras, 2003) Conversational flow, modes of expression (textual, symbolic, image-centric, multi-dimensional) and relationship hierarchies are all subject to these factors, which should inform the ethnographic gaze for online community. Additionally, they can be used as orientating pointers for the study. Foot (2006) proposes a pedagogical rendering of ‘web spheres’ as “a unit of analysis, boundable by time and object-orientation, and sensitive to developmental changes, within which social, political and cultural relations can be analyzed in a variety of ways.”(Foot, 2006: 2) Taking Foot’s lead, if we can triangulate between self-managed and architecturally-imposed boundaries, we have likely identified our online community node and can approach it as a ‘unit of analysis’.

Central to ethnographic orientation is the concept of the ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’. Wittel posited that our reconstituted, wired selves demand a reconstituted notion of ‘field’; that the historical definition is too literalised and struggles with adaptation. He suggests we look to network theory for a more relevant, flexible ethnographic discourse within and encircling digital dominions:

Unlike field, a network is an open structure, able to expand almost without limits and highly dynamic. And even more important: A network does not merely consist of a set of nodes, but also of a set of connections between the nodes. As such, networks contain as much movement and flow as they contain residence and localities. (Wittel, 2000, pg 2-3)

Park aligns online ‘travel’ (“to hyperlinks and ethnographic subjects”) with the journey into the ‘field’. (Park, 2004). Clark supports this idea in his advancement of ‘mobile sociologies’, arguing “networks, and their associated communities, no longer revolve around groups in fixed space, but around individuals theoretically set free from contextualising anchor points”. (Clark, 2007). So the researcher follows the fold, not the fences. However, the flexibility afforded the ethnographer to frame their own

‘field’ introduces new complications. By settling on boundaries, however ‘soft’, the researcher risks neutrality and may become complicit in “the construction of spaces and in the spatialisation of difference” (Wittel, 2000, pg 4). The clearest way to ameliorate this is transparency and accounting in praxis and results. If the researcher is probing the realities of a particular online world, their seat at the table in the construction of that community is by extension, *a valid part of that community*. The fact the community permits, forbids, welcomes or alienates a studied presence reveals something important about the way that community functions.

Beddows (2008) rightly asserts that virtual ethnography warps another core methodological concept - the sample. Because “most participants online are self-selecting”, and access to technology is impacted by demographic properties (such as financial status), subjects do not necessarily scale to a representative wider sample offline (Beddows, 2008). This conclusion mirrors a broader critique of ethnography – that while it can deliver nuanced insight; the method struggles in producing generalisable and testable theories (Morrill and Fine, 1997). This critique extends to the virtual world, where a catchment of virtual interactivity is not easily inflated into a sufficiently broad theoretical balloon. There are issues of self-selecting samples. Providing the researcher can gain a sense of who did not take part, the studies can still generate significant results.

Reexamining our assumptions around these core methodological terms can enhance ethnographic practice, augmenting historical applications with reflexive, timely tendrils. Investigative principles and best practice base lines are still present and still matter (their reliability is arguably more important than ever in the ‘liquid’ semioscapes of web 2.0), but they require a highly sensitive, chameleon like skin – mutable as unique scenarios dictate.

The body in transition

In historical ethnographic interrogation, the body is privileged territory; knowledge is status, and is acquired through the ‘doing’. Disembodiment is usually cast as a binary alternative to the physical, naturalised state; the authority of the body implicit in the etymology itself (*disembodied* – the anti-body). Virtuality (and by extension, virtual community), often finds itself marginalised by this material discourse; a greater

intellectual rigor afford bodily literacies, while the immaterial exists as an esoteric negative. Researchers (Crichton and Kinash, 2002; Slater, 2002) have challenged the assertion there is implicit merit in ‘face-to-face’ and that computer-mediated-communication can equal, transcend, and fracture this authority in intriguing ways. Conquergood takes this a step further, charting the rise of a ‘new’ body in participant epistemology and its reclamation as necessarily fluid to achieve multi-pronged research goals:

The communicative praxis of speaking and listening, conversation, demands copresence even as it decenters the categories of knower and the known. Vulnerability and self-disclosure are enabled through conversations. Closure, on the other hand, is constituted by the gaze. The return of the body as a recognized method... shifts the emphasis from space to time, from sight and vision to sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability. (Conquergood, 2003)

This framing recalls Jensen’s “ontologically heterogeneous, variable and distributed entity”: the body as partially existent, the mind [our exchanges, our impressions, our analyses) as a component of the body.

Silences

Ethnography’s ‘offstage’ moments are often its most revealing (Devault, 1990). In face-to-face interview and observation scenarios, researchers identify visual, aural and kinetic cues from their subjects that may signify taboo subjects, or demonstrate an emotional scale useful for behavioural interpretation (what prompts raising the voice; what produces a hush). Explorations of technologically accessed community require the ethnographer to adjust their search for silences; ‘remote’ connectivity with subjects forces a defter unmasking of the unsaid and the unseen, minus physically anchored indices. A delay in a posted response may not indicate discomfort with a question in the same fashion as a verbal pause. A temporary absence from an online community may suggest a consequential change in relationship to the community, or it might merely reflect a technical impediment to connectivity for a period. How then to read the shadows and silences of virtual associations with this partial visibility of subject and context?

The key is to locate silence that *is* visible, albeit it in different ways to the material world. Identify the constituents who are logged on, passively ‘present’ within the

space but non-vocal. They may be publicly visible via a logged on status indicator, signifying their status as ‘lurker’. As Nonnecke and Preece assert in their demographic work on *lurkerdom*, “lurking is not free-riding, but a form of participation that is both acceptable and beneficial to online groups. Public posting is but one way in which an online group can benefit from its members.” (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). They may not be visible publicly, but community administrators may provide intelligence on lurker numbers and contextualising details. Are there multiple private conversations occurring (through chat platforms or private mail facilities) on the periphery of exchanges in public community areas? The ethnographer cannot likely breach the discretion of these social narrows, but awareness of their presence and mapping their relationship to other community nodes can inform a wider understanding of vocal and non-vocal group elements. Observation and engagement over a time will suggest other areas of possible ‘invisibility’.

Ownership

The question of who owns (and who is likely to claim ownership of) virtual assets has confounded stakeholders in online worlds and communities since their inception. With the proliferation of virtual economies and object production within these worlds, the issue is gaining increasing traction - some members of virtual universes are calling for ‘liberation’ of their identities and accumulations from hosting stranglehold (Avatar Libration Front, 2008). But these vigorous debates are generally anchored around a virtual rendering of the material – currency, weapons, land, wardrobe, and toys. Immaterial assets, such as a word or a glance exchanged, are harder to classify, but are equally contestable as social capital with operators and owners.

The ethnographer conducting research in the offline field will encounter obstacles to access (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Brewer, 2001). But ‘ownership’ contention of the research itself is uncommon in these situations. The researcher may need to negotiate rights to ethnographic data as part of their process, and ensure an ethical, inclusive approach to warehousing and dissemination. Such details are generally indentured between researcher and subject. The community is its own gatekeeper, managing access around internal mores and hierarchies. Rarely is a third party, not explicitly included in the research, in a position to lay claim to the

intimacies of community. Offline communities may have external patrols and gatekeepers (both literal and subtextual), but their discreet communions are their own.

On the Internet, communities are more explicitly tethered to complex and sometimes conglomerate commercial interests; service providers and enabling authorities are ‘relationship providers’ (Blakely, 2008), who grant access, moderate content, have various ownership claims to communal content (community members opt in to sweeping licence agreements when they register to join), and can ‘deactivate’ individual identities or the community as a whole, at will. Ethnographers must tune their critical apparatus to detect these ‘invisible’ boundaries and gatekeepers. They need to engage arms length community custodians as part of their consent and access strategy, and should push for absolute clarity around expectations and rights to information shared by all participant parties as part of research. Likewise, the ethnographer owes these custodial entities transparency of intent and visibility on results. The owner of a website which houses an online forum deserves to know and understand the researchers presence within that community. A community manager’s ability to maintain harmony and a safe, comfortable space for their community actors is dependent on this sort of visibility. Community leaders have a duty of care (whether officialised or not), and deference must be awarded to those who create and administer these worlds.

This handshake is important to ensure community members are treated ethically, and for ensuring access is sanctioned and can be sustained. It is also to the ethnographer’s advantage, as these organisations and individuals can help in adding tacit insight or empirical gristle to their work. They can provide anonymised analytics to enrich interpretation; such as frequency of visitations, the number of identities associated to one individual, type and volume of content published within a space, geographic locations of members and type and volume of disciplinary actions (such as banning). This data can mitigate some subjectivity in ethnographic accounting, and spur new interpretations or theories when held in compliment and contrast to performative behaviours in front of the virtual curtain (analytics might reveal a community member is misrepresenting their identity and frequency of visitation – what might this tell us about their negotiation of the power structures and relationship hierarchies within the space?)

Sophisticated commercial incursion into virtuality has also transformed community into commodity and social capital into a 'sticky' asset. This leaves online discourse exposed to market whim and corporate power struggles that can silence debate (Mosco, 2005). A popular social network implodes when the host's venture capital dries up. What happens to its inhabitants, the identities they have created and the media rich 'conversations' they have published? Total erasure is a possibility. A thriving sodality can be disrupted or collapsed by a variety of market driven interventions. A fan community is sued by copyright holders for publishing fan-fiction. The non-commercial site unplugs, unable and unwilling to take on industry lawyers. Add to this the organic ebbs and flows of human relationships and researchers find themselves navigating have a meta-environment in rapid transit. Relationship clusters rise, fall and change hands with unpredictable outcomes. Methodological reflexivity is an important combatant to this ontological handicap. The ethnographer must be at least generally aware of the generalised commercial mediascape they are wading into and explicitly conscious of the fine print attached to any 'walled gardens' with which they seek deeper engagement.

Research that probes macro-community constructs in cyberspace can repurpose the realities of these forces in a meaningful way. Philip Howard makes the case for a revitalised 'network ethnography' to best accommodate the informal and formal organisational clusters forged around new media.

Network ethnography is an amalgam of traditional ethnography and social network analysis. The sample is generated purposefully but informed by network analysis. As a method, it reveals the complex fabric of associations between members with very different roles in very different organizations, while also exposing their deeply shared ideational commonalities. (Howard, 2002 pg 22)

An upshot of this shifting ground is enhanced opportunity to investigate communities in transition; across multiple virtual spaces, through multiple identities associated to single actors, and from online to offline realities. The 'digital' in digital ethnography is but one layer of a holistic contextual circuit.

Insider|outsider

The dilemma of the stranger in a land of familiars is timeless. For ethnographers, it is a badge of honour, a sometimes epistemological fetish, and a scapegoat for less than

robust research. Communities are the home of this tension, their natures defined by demarcations of members and non-members. Insiders possess communal literacies. Outsiders collide with these literacy boundaries and must negotiate entry and acceptance, or exit and excursion. The arriving ethnographer is in many respects the archetypal outsider, a newcomer with an agenda that relies on framing the community as a discrete entity. As Jennifer Ryan highlights her ethnography of social networking spaces:

From the phenomenological point of view, the “truth” of ethnography lies in the interpretation of lived experiences, and is always partial. Such an endeavour is problematized by the author’s own re-interpretation of described experiences, a process that is undoubtedly influenced by the anthropological quest for authoritatively representing the “other.” (Ryan, 2008. pg 34)

This challenge can be exacerbated online, where communities are often fast and furious – galvanized around passions with little patience for the ‘impracticality’ of academia. Game design pioneer Patricia Pizer touches on this sentiment:

What’s not particularly useful are the ethnographies that are so often the product of academic research; imagine Margaret Mead playing a game as a hard-core fangirl, then publishing her “results” as an in-depth study of an MMO. It’s been done. Plenty. A number of academics approach games and cyberspace with either the magic dust of fandom in their searching eyes or the complete blindness of a lack of context for why and how games have evolved the way they have over the years. This research isn’t invalid; it’s merely not as useful as academia would have us believe. Often, the Ivory Tower is presented as the only source of “growing” our knowledge base and improving our games. It seems there must be something useful lying between our deep, dark dungeon of Game Goodness and the sparkling tower of Academic Light. (Pizer, 2008)

A potentially powerful force for future virtual community research will be the ascendancy of ‘native’ ethnographers – indigenous members of digitally located communities empowered to feedback into academic discourse alongside professional academics. In the vein of Rheingold’s participative pedagogy (Rheingold, 2008) this distinction may grow as arbitrary as the online/offline divide.

Organisational creators of a community and the foundational social architecture they establish can inform a study of that group. Here a final reality of contemporary online communities should be acknowledged. The creators, hosts and managers of significant virtual networks and communities frequently belong to the media elite: high-tech brethren of Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2003). “Web 2.0”, for all its approbated populism and democratising rhetoric (O’Reilly, 2005), has been

forged by the same ‘lettered’ cliques Carolyn Martin interrogates in her history of the electric ‘revolution’ and its champions:

Electricians were wont to indulge a powerful impulse to identify aliens and enemies, those suspect in electrical culture and perhaps dangerous to it, in terms of their textual competence. (Martin, 1988)

Venture capitalists, digital entrepreneurs, ‘technorati’, new media moguls – these are the silicon cowboys and girls (Weiners and Hillner, 1998; Pratt, 2000) that create and corral the ‘main street’ of virtual villages. Their decisions, their opinions, their geography (socio and spatial) are a core aspect of online community discourse and will remain so for the foreseeable future. A deeper understanding of these contemporary virtual ‘experts’ will enrich our insights into digital communities, not least around the degrees to which they are authentically self-organising, ‘routing around’ walled gardens and community architecture (and when they are clearly bound by these forces, aware or not).

Anonymity, trust and identity

Anonymity keeps the Internet buzzing. Without freedom to comment immediately and non-identifiably, much web traffic would slow to a crawl. Cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch reminds us: “Even since the days of our founding fathers, there have been people talking about the importance of being anonymous. Revolutionary acts, sometimes, require anonymity.” (Wesch, 2008). Indeed, virtual engagement offers degrees of anonymity for participants’ not often available offline. Methodologically, these degrees are sometimes juxtaposed against the alleged ‘intimacies’ of face-to-face, real world ethnographic voyages, where the researcher will invariably learn the names of their subjects, perhaps explore their homes and join in meals or other key activities. There’s an adoptive sensibility here, wherein the researcher becomes ‘one of the family’ and is naturalised into the communal setting (giving them unique exposure to explicit community literacies). Critics worry that the anonymity of self-virtualisation distances a researcher from their subjects, artificialising interactions and exchanges in an ‘unreal’ environment. Truth is diminished, or unattainable; authentic affinity and discretion infeasible. This is not impossible, but the assertion is far from a truism, and bears little connection to the technological conduit itself. The generalisation ignores the fact that filters to identity can be a boon for the digital

ethnographer; facilitating greater behavioural intimacy than offline observation can achieve. A researcher can conduct candid, real time interviews with constellations of individuals unable to comfortably surface offline due to identification and safety concerns, such as whistle blowers, political dissidents, victims or perpetrators of crime, hackers or pirates. These and other marginalised and vulnerable voices often find a home and an audience online. Such subjects might be located through targeted solicitations in appropriate online networks, determined suitable after research. Correspondence and interaction via electronic platforms can be sufficiently anonymised to create the perception of safe space and insulation from judgment, in turn coaxing close to the chest revelations that enrich research. This confessional effect may be invoked within any vulnerable or closeted communities.

However, this impunity has an underbelly. An apparent lack of consequence (the sensation that boundaries do not exist, rules do not apply and the Internet provides cover from naming and shaming), fuels ‘trolls’, serial pests, ‘sock puppets’ and other virtual players who laterally target virtual communities. These actors engage in strategic disruption and deception, obfuscating and subverting the order of the spaces or environments they assault.

In conversation spaces with limited access and few participants, individuals can allocate their attention and informal social mechanisms can reduce disruptive behavior. In conversational spaces with low entry barriers and hundreds or thousands of participants, governance is more problematic [9]. Such colorful expressions as trolling, flaming, spamming, and flooding have emerged to describe behaviors that benefit some people while disrupting others’ ability to get what they want from a conversational space. (Lampe & Resnick, 2004)

There are pathologies of varying complexities at work. Gaming’, attention seeking and raging against power holders is often part of their modus operandi (Schwartz, 2008). The scale of their actions is vast – from tongue in cheek belligerence to criminal malevolence – and they generate reactive fallout within virtual sites. To a psychology intent on rupturing fixed practice, a researcher may represent an irresistible foil; an obstacle to be conquered, a villain to punish, a toy to swat, a threat to be exorcised. This is largely unavoidable, but a review of the (admittedly limited) literature around these characters, and time spent shadowing their activities across multiple spaces, would be helpful in raising awareness around identifying

commonalities and means of bypass (including the perennial favourite of web-dwellers, don't feed the trolls).

Adapting ethnography to virtual application permits considered probing of communities tethered to digitally-centric enterprise, whether white or black market. Digital entrepreneurs, online gamers, identity thieves, spammers, scammers and serial pests represent groups of individuals difficult, even impossible to access without computer-mediated communication. As with offline groups who have particular sensitivities, these discrete clusters demand obeisance, transparency and a soft methodological touch.

Members of online communities frequently adopt pseudonyms and carefully construct their digital alias to reflect or refract offline qualities and attributes. Material aesthetics and vulnerabilities can be transcended, providing the opportunity for recasting in countless, empowered roles. This splintering and muddying of identity is characterised by Sherry Turkle as a “multiple, distributed system” of self:

The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds, that plays many roles at the same time. (Turkle, 1996)

This ‘gaming’ and improvisation of the ego (a kind of auto-ethnography) is understandably compelling to students of existence in the digital age, but notoriously difficult to diagram. How do you accommodate a single user with multitudinous handles within a fixed community? How do you achieve visibility of associative identities? Do anthropologists need a clinical gaze to fully grasp these ‘distributed systems’? From whom are you obtaining consent?

Expectations are modified along with identity in these spaces, including expectations of trust. People have particular ways of formulating and gauging trust – certain levels of familiarity and disclosure, tangible demonstrations of trustworthiness. These vectors are calibrated online, where misrepresentation of identity and intent is basal, and authentic expressive choices are legion. People may become more guarded and paranoid, wary of virtual scammers and predators (unhelpfully sensationalised by tabloid journalism). Or they may become more open than ever, volunteering information they never would offline. These calibrations of trust and truth telling are

generally unpredictable, and are further complicated by the trackability of online behaviours. Ryan articulates this issue neatly in her work:

In this way, online communication complicates traditionally understood boundaries between the oral and the written, the public and the private... Because most of the information available on the Internet is archived by search engines such as Google, it has become increasingly important to manage one's online reputation. The process of image management entails not only the calculated projection of symbolic markers of identity, but also an imagining of the audiences that may view this display. (Ryan, 2008. pp 118-119)

If the ethnographer chooses to inhabit a virtual community rather than actively construct a research site online, they must recognise the existence of these representational filters and forces, as they negotiate environments with intricate rules and codes of engagement that pre-date their presence.

Recent trends in cyberspace and wireless technologies indicate a push for social portability to avoid the need to constantly import and export one's networks between separate virtual communities that force unique registration and connector building. Decentralised online identification initiatives like Open Id, created by programmer Brad Fitzpatrick, allow for porting a singular virtual representation of self through multiple communities with discrete contextual relationships (personal, professional, educational, passion-based, service orientated). In addition to user convenience (minimizing endless re-registrations with separate communities), the platform is designed as a protectionist measure against the vulnerabilities of those increasingly commercial virtual spaces. Fitzpatrick says Open Id is construed, "not to crumble if one company turns evil or goes out of business" (Fitzpatrick, 2005) These developments are expected to lateralise our online identities and our 'social graph'. Formalised silos (usually commercially bounded) may well flatten and deflate, but rather than create a macro-community, this will likely increase the need for 'self-system' management; as we set desired filters and grafts to keep private distinct from professional, family discrete from friends, and so on. "Users don't always want to auto-sync their social networks. People use different sites in different ways, and a 'friend' on one site has a very different meaning of a 'friend' on another." (Fitzpatrick, 2007) Critics of Open Id use this same point to argue that a one size fits all passport system cannot possibly accommodate the individualised needs and expectations around privacy and purpose of Internet users. The trend toward porous

identity and platforms will raise a new round of important questions and challenges for researchers, and again, reframe our definition of community and shared experience.

Power and politics

As long as online communities are composed of human beings attached to input devices, our analogue hierarchies and hegemonies will manifest in the digital realm (Brabazon, 2001), acting upon these groups as they do our offline selves. Consider Vincent Mosco's point:

The end of history, geography and politics are compelling myths and they are made all the more powerful with the expansion of cyberspace. However, with the spread of anti-globalization movements, and the substantial boost that cyberspace has provided them, even more so with the events of 9/11 and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it appears that time, space and power have returned with a vengeance. (Mosco, 2005)

New communicative platforms invite reruns of timeworn tensions. Though there is often genuine 'newness' in their innovation (and our virginal reactions to that innovation), they are soon repurposed by old warriors discovering a new arsenal. Again, I turn to Marvin for her historiographical take:

Old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances. New media may change the perceived effectiveness of one group's surveillance of another, the permissible familiarity of exchange, the frequency and intensity of contact, and the efficacy of customary tests for truth and deception. Old practices are then painfully revised, and new habits reformed. (Marvin, 1988)

Analogue economic, political and social hegemonies can also regulate online digital residency as a whole. Access *costs* - and we are nowhere near the planet of emancipated power-surfers some silicon priests would have us believe. The virtually situated researcher must learn to re-attune the underlying discourses that parse and border digital territories, as they would identify physical power structures and containers.

Recording the journey

Note taking in classical ethnographic fieldwork would seem a straightforward endeavour; arm oneself with notepad and pen, camera, audio recording device for

interviews, perhaps a video camera if the situation permits. Of course, on a practical level, execution is never that simple – ask a researcher who paused to take notes at an ill-timed moment, or whose voice recorder failed at a critical juncture. But the most basic tools of the trade are clear, and readily obtainable for relatively low cost. Virtual ethnographers can retain this kit, but must be ready to amend it for digital environments.

Software and hardware that permits real-time capture of community moments as they occur is available and offers several advantages to the ethnographer. Applications that can be set up and run on automatic pilot allow hands free immersion for the researcher – they can configure their technology to record proceedings as they wish, then sit back and observe, or participate, without ongoing attention. These solutions can also provide an added dimensionality to virtual ethnography; letting the consumer of the research ‘live’ the community experience through multimedia playback (an extensible immersion not generally possible in classic offline ethnographies). They provide greater agency to tailor the kit to community. For example, a purely textual transcript of user interaction in a highly visual online world such as Second Life, would remove important contextual elements. Enriched video and aural records will more accurately represent the space. Time lapsed screen capture of a bulletin board can demonstrate the organic peaks and troughs of the forum in a visceral way. The Memetic project offers a practical display of these hybridised technology solutions in action, recording interaction within a ‘flexible, hypermedia environment’ for simultaneous and post-analysis. (Buckingham Shum, S., et al, 2006)

Multimedia-rich records can amplify dissemination of research outcomes; piggybacking the broad and narrow cast capability of Internet and wireless infrastructure and services. Researchers can package, distribute and manage their findings and insights over new pathways, reaching new audiences and maximising the impact of their work. Audio and video excerpts can be edited into podcasts, or made available for streaming and download from a researcher’s website, or a popular media portal (such as YouTube). Michael Wesch has gained impressive traction for his work by producing a kind of open access scholarship, where notes and insights unfold in the public realm on his blog and striking multimedia summaries of his digital ethnography projects are deployed collaboratively within the mediums they engage.

(Wesch, 2008). Wesch's heuristics grant his discoveries resonance through and across mainstream media and popular culture strata.

The proliferation of media-sharing tools and services online and the rise of self-publish and print on demand culture have forced down the cost barrier to production and accessibility. Data rich files such as podcasts can be created and distributed globally at low cost and high velocity. The virtual scholar would do well to take advantage of this accelerated dissemination; a means to preserve relevance is especially useful in a field where technological Darwinism invites rapid redundancy of systems and the dynamism of online community makes it difficult to wait out the prolonged churn cycle of traditional journals and academic publishing routes.

Conclusion

Existing and emergent scholarship demonstrates ethnographical approaches are tenable when deployed in digital contexts; indeed, they are organically suited to the hyper-localism of distributed human networks. But unique challenges around privacy, identity, commercialism, trust, ownership and access mean inquirers must conduct a detailed preemptive scan of their 'field' to identify macro-narratives (such as the contested notionality of digital citizenship), pinpoint potentially restrictive parameters and manage associated ethical considerations before outing themselves and their goals to subjects and custodial or transactional stakeholders.

Increasingly, online community research that infiltrates public consciousness (via predominant media channels, pop-sociology texts or the blogosphere) is powered and shaped by commercially orientated forces with a vested interest in the sustainability and malleability of digital hamlets. Industrialism is doubtlessly a relevant voice at this roundtable, but intellectual curiosities must fight for extended airtime in the study of social organisation online to restrain colonising ideologies and preserve pedagogical and public interest. A new era of scholarly collaboration with digital leaders and virtual community members can deliver the passionate, persuasive and reflexive inquiry vital to chart the continental drift of Rheingold's "archipelagos". (Rheingold, 1993)

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