



SAGE Research Methods

The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods

Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances

By:Christine Hine

Edited by: Nigel G. Fielding, Raymond M. Lee & Grant Blank

Book Title: The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances"

Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: September 6, 2022

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: 55 City Road

Print ISBN: 9781473918788

Online ISBN: 9781473957992

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473957992.n23>

Print pages: 401-413

© 2017 SAGE Publications Ltd All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances

Christine Hine

Introduction

Widespread popular recognition of the richness and diversity of social interactions enabled by the Internet has gone hand-in-hand with the development of ethnographic methodologies for documenting those interactions and exploring their implications. The established ethnographic tradition of viewing the researcher as an embodied research instrument has been transferred to the social spaces of the Internet. The ethnographic focus on studying social practices, in depth and detail, as they make sense for those involved in them, has enabled ethnographers to find out what people actually do with the Internet in specific circumstances. Ethnography conducted in online settings has been instrumental in demonstrating the complex social nature of Internet-based interactions and enabling us to explore the new cultural formations that emerge online. This chapter first outlines the development of a range of approaches to online ethnography that have emerged as the Internet has evolved and then moves to examine in more detail some of the specific methodological challenges that have been encountered as ethnographic principles are applied within online settings.

Beyond the specific details of how to operate within a given field site, ethnographers also make decisions about the most appropriate way to define their field site. In addition to the development of ethnographic approaches for field sites contained wholly online, a variety of more spatially complex ethnographic field sites have emerged, exploring the complex and contingent connections between online and offline social spaces. These concerns form the focus of the third section of the chapter. The fourth section then considers a further set of key methodological issues focused on the contribution an ethnographer's embodied experiences as they navigate the field makes to the ethnographic project. The final section of the chapter then takes a look forward and considers the challenges on the horizon for ethnographers interested in exploring online spaces as new platforms for online interaction are developed and as the Internet becomes ever-more pervasive.

Online Ethnography and Virtual Ethnography: Evolving Approaches

A diffuse and disciplinarily diverse set of approaches to ethnography in online domains has emerged, using a variety of terms including online ethnography, virtual ethnography, netnography and cyberethnography. Baym's (1995, 2000) account of a newsgroup discussing soap opera viewing led the way in establishing that online contexts could be sites for ethnographic study. Even at this early stage, ethnographers were pointing out that being online would not mean the same thing to everyone. Markham (1998), for example, argued for a reflexive approach to ethnography in online contexts, open to the varying meanings of online activities and the different emotions attendant on inhabiting online space. Similarly, Hine (2000) described a virtual ethnography which took online spaces seriously as a site for interaction but did not assume that there was a singular virtual domain that would necessarily be distinguishable from 'the real'. As the Internet developed, so too did approaches to ethnography in the various online spaces that emerged. Kendall (2002) completed fieldwork focusing on gender in an online forum and Senft (2008) described, through ethnographic observation and participation, the experience of 'camgirls' streaming their lives across the Internet via webcam. Netnography (Kozinets 2010) was developed to enable efficient study of online domains, often deployed in a marketing context for purposes of understanding consumer motivations and behaviours. Anthropologically oriented ethnographic studies of online spaces have included Boellstorff's (2008) study of Second Life, Nardi's (2010) exploration of World of Warcraft and Coleman's (2013) ethnography of a hacker community involving extensive online fieldwork. As the Internet matured, various forms of online ethnography have developed that relate to the underlying principles of the parent methodology, but have adapted to the conditions offered by online interactions and the particular concerns of their parent disciplines.

The nature and role of ethnographic attention to online spaces has developed over time. Robinson and Schulz (2009) identify three different phases of online ethnography: pioneering approaches which saw the Internet as

a new domain for identity formation and stressed the distinctiveness of online social formations; legitimising approaches which stressed the transfer of offline methodological concerns into the online domain and took a more sceptical stance on the distinctiveness of online space; and a more recently emergent set of multi-modal approaches which include consideration of video and audio data alongside textual data, and seek to contextualise online interactions within offline spaces. Robinson and Schulz (2009) stress that approaches to online ethnography have changed as the Internet itself has changed and also as the aspirations of researchers have taken different forms over time. Researchers have different notions of the nature of online space and also diverse disciplinary affiliations, theoretical aspirations and methodological influences. There is no single form of online ethnography, but instead an internally diverse array of approaches oriented to ethnography in and of online space.

Internet studies have been a rich field for methodological development, and this development both within and beyond online ethnography continues as the Internet itself has evolved and in particular with the advent of social media. Giglietto et al. (2012) note that the methodological traditions which dominate in studies of the Internet vary between different online and social media platforms: their review of social media research methods divides the dominant methodologies into ethnographic, statistical and computational, and suggests that although ethnographic approaches led the way in many online fields, in the case of Twitter the computational methods came first and were only subsequently complemented by qualitative approaches. Social media have, indeed, dramatically transformed the landscape for social research in the access they offer to large-scale data on everyday activities, which has in turn fostered computational approaches. As a result, as well as the adaptation of existing methods to the new conditions, self-consciously novel digital methods for social research have emerged (Marres 2012; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013; Rogers 2013; Ruppert et al. 2013). The advent of 'big data' does not, however, mean laying aside small-scale qualitative approaches like ethnography. The 'big data' transformation has fostered computational analysis, but there have also been calls to continue to pay attention to smaller scale, qualitative approaches that can explore how the large-scale patterns come about and investigate what they mean to participants (boyd and Crawford 2012). Mixed method research designs have emerged in Internet studies, allowing for combinations of large-scale and small-scale focus, through which researchers explore both patterns and meanings (Hesse-Biber and Griffin 2013). As I will argue in later sections of this chapter, ethnographic methods that look outwards to the embedding of Internet activities in diverse contexts and also inwards to autoethnographic accounts of how such forms of connection feel, may be very significant in allowing us to grasp the forms of sociality enabled by the Internet and may form a suitable complement, or even counter, to big data approaches.

Ethnography has therefore been significant for some time in interrogating the social conditions of online space, and it continues to be important despite the advent of big data and large-scale computational analysis prompted by social media. Coleman (2010) argues that ethnography of online spaces is particularly significant because these domains have incontrovertibly emerged as central sites of experience in many aspects of everyday life. Ethnography documents the significance of these spaces and, as Coleman (2010) stresses, also acts against a tendency to universalise the digital by highlighting the heterogeneity and specificity of online spaces. As experience of online ethnography has developed, a rich vein of methodological writing has emerged, analysing the methods of participant-observation in online space and exploring the extent to which the issues faced by online ethnographers are distinctive. The question of what, if anything, is different enough about online ethnographic practice to deserve a separate demarcation, whether as online, virtual, cyber- or digital, has preoccupied a number of reviewers, as the next section will detail.

How to do Online Ethnography: Methods and Ethics

There has been a lot said about the specifics of doing ethnography online. It has often been found necessary to specify what online ethnographers should do, to a degree not mirrored in accounts of ethnography conducted in more conventional sites. To some extent, this is a matter of adapting to technical issues, as different online platforms offer distinctive qualities in terms of the forms of self-presentation and interaction open to the ethnographer, and as ethnographers explore the potential offered by archives for moving backwards in time, and adapt to the different forms of data to be collected and analysed. These are practical issues, concerned with the classic ethnographic challenges of getting into the field and deciding what to do once one is there, and it is very helpful for ethnographers to be able to learn from the experience of others in similar fields. Addressing these concerns, a very useful handbook discussing techniques and approaches

employed by ethnographers in virtual worlds now exists (Boellstorff et al. 2012). In practice, however, this handbook and indeed much of the discussion around online ethnography has focused on more fundamental methodological issues, concerning not just how to choose to manifest oneself, what roles to adopt, and how to collect data, but also what the status might be of the ethnographic knowledge generated. As Robinson and Schulz (2009) describe, a need has been felt to legitimise online ethnography as ethnography, and this concern has generated considerable amounts of published reflection.

Steinmetz (2012) identifies questions of identity and authenticity as recurring concerns for online ethnographers. Dilemmas about how authenticity is to be judged in the setting, and whether an online-only notion of authenticity and performed identity suffices or online observations supplemented instead with some triangulation from other sources, have been present since the early days of online ethnography (Paccagnella 1997). Within an online setting, there are questions about the role that the ethnographer should take, and the impact this may have on the knowledge of the setting that they can acquire. Most sociological studies terming themselves ethnographic in online settings do involve some form of participation. Some studies, however, push the concept of ethnography a long way from the tradition of immersive, experiential study. Frederick and Perrone (2014), for example, rely upon ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987) and a form of 'instant ethnography' (Ferrell et al. 2008) in terming their study of online contact advertisements on Craigslist as ethnographic. As Garcia et al. (2009) discuss, merely lurking or collecting data without immersion in the setting poses some problems for ethnographic interpretation, and active participation offers considerable epistemic purchase. Acknowledging the benefits of being actively involved, however, still leaves many issues of the exact nature of participation and the extent to which the ethnographer's role is commensurate with that of participants unresolved. The discussion of the extent to which ethnographers online can be construed as co-present with informants continues (Bengtsson 2014).

Ethical concerns arise repeatedly in reviews of online ethnography: Robinson and Schulz (2009) identify ethical issues such as whether participants can be made aware of the ethnographer's presence in appropriate ways in various online platforms as one of the key concerns of the online ethnographer; Murthy (2008) discusses the troubling tendency for online ethnographies to be conducted covertly; and Garcia et al. (2009) identify dilemmas created by the need to define whether online spaces are public, the decisions to be made on whether, and how, the ethnographer should identify themselves to participants, and the need to protect participants' privacy and autonomy. These reviewers identify ethical issues which are arguably not fundamentally different to those faced by offline ethnographers, who also have to navigate complex notions of public and private and their own variable visibility for participants. The ethical issue arguably arises as a topic for discussion because of a tendency on the part of some online ethnographers to treat online spaces as if the usual ethical rules do not apply, rather than because of some essential difference between online and offline space. In a sense, the marked category of online ethnography creates the need to discuss the ethical problem afresh. Markham (2006) makes a case for a situated approach to online research ethics focused on asking questions of each situation rather than expecting there to be a standard set of approaches that may always be deemed ethical. A useful set of resources based on this situational approach to online research ethics is provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002; Markham and Buchanan 2012).

Latterly there has been discussion of whether new platforms change any of the methodological issues that online ethnographers encounter. Underberg and Zorn (2013) explore the potential offered by new media technologies for more participatory designs, using digital technologies to build cultural representations of and with participants. Gallagher et al. (2013) similarly argue that social media can facilitate collaborative research which actively involves participants in the research process. Baker (2013) demonstrates that social media can be a source of data, a tool for keeping in touch with participants and a form of contextualisation for other kinds of data. In similar vein, Murthy (2013) explores the potential that ethnographies involving social networking sites and smartphones offer for organisational studies. Such developments in participatory technologies have implications for our notion of what the field site is: Postill and Pink (2012) suggest that the shift to Web 2.0 has added new concerns to debates about ethnography online, prompting a shift away from notions of community and network that Postill and Pink (2012) suggest have unhelpfully dominated ethnographic thinking about online activities.

This section has identified some key methodological concerns that online ethnographers face:

- How to judge authenticity and whether to triangulate observations in online space with other forms of observation
- Whether and how actively to participate in the setting
- How to behave ethically and respect participants' privacy and autonomy
- How to respond to developing technologies which do not fit neatly with concepts of online community

Whilst these challenges may recur across many online studies, the answers are very much dependent on the setting and the theoretical interests of the ethnographer concerned. The outcome of much of the ethnographic work focused on the Internet is to argue precisely that we should not be expecting the same methodological strategies to apply regardless of the platform. The issues encountered by ethnographers across listservers, Second Life, WhatsApp and Facebook, for example, will be very different, and yet these ethnographers will also still share dilemmas that are identifiably similar to those that offline ethnographers face. When ethnographers go online, the techniques they use may differ from those that work offline, and novel ethical issues may arise, but there is considerable purchase in reminding ourselves that the ethnographic project and the challenges it faces are, in many ways the same online as offline (Marshall 2010).

Marking out a specific set of issues relating to online ethnography is therefore not always helpful to ethnographers, even though the demarcation of online ethnography does draw attention to potentially useful techniques by signposting a body of methodological literature and conferring a certain legitimacy (Kozinets 2012). The demarcation of online ethnography sometimes indexes a distinctive theoretical aspiration to explore what it is that is characteristic of the emerging digital culture that has become so embedded in contemporary life (Boellstorff 2010; Miller and Horst 2012). For many social scientists, however, this will not be their primary goal, and their theoretical aspirations may well draw them towards a version of ethnography which includes online activities, but does not specifically topicalise the digital as a theoretical concern. In the following section, the emergence of a diverse array of research designs is explored, including, but not confined to online settings. Here the question of how to define a field site becomes particularly prominent.

Defining a Field Site: Blended, Multi-Sited, Networked and Connective Designs

All ethnographers need a working sense of the field site that forms the focus of their study and this can be particularly challenging if a study is conducted partly online and partly offline (Hine 2008; Steinmetz 2012; Tunçalp and Patrick 2014), as now arises in many circumstances. The multiple embedding of the Internet in everyday life problematises the notion of a pre-existing, clearly bounded ethnographic field. Mobile telephony and a mobile Internet, which is multiply embedded and taken-for-granted (Ling 2012), further compound the challenges of demarcating fields. Looking for the 'variously dynamic and changing circumstances' of participants' lives (Gold 1997: 395) becomes an ever-more challenging task. The researcher faces constant dilemmas in deciding which of the possible array of dynamic and changing circumstances to pursue. This recognition of the contingent nature of the field is not a problem confined to online ethnographers because the constructed nature of the field is already an acknowledged issue in anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Amit 1999), if not so closely examined in sociology. However, the increasing social science interest in activities that span dynamic and fragmented mediatised fields leads us into a new consciousness of these issues.

Garcia et al. (2009) state strongly that although few studies of contemporary society can avoid addressing the Internet in some way, there are also few questions that can be answered by exploring online space alone. Hallett and Barber (2014) similarly argue that studying the way of life of many groups of people now has to involve taking seriously the online dimensions of that way of life as well as offline activities. This conflicts somewhat in tone with Boellstorff's (2010) discussion of different notions of the field, which defends online-only fields as a fruitful approach, but they all share a strong assertion that the definition of the field should be appropriate to the research question. Hine (2014) finds the demarcation of a specifically online ethnography no longer helpful in the face of an Internet that is multiply embedded in diverse frames of meaning-making both online and offline. A blended, mobile or networked research design can have a very direct pay-off in terms of the kind of contribution that the author is able to make because they are able to reflect the complexity of lived experience across different spaces rather than confining their aspirations to a description of online space alone. Theoretical interests within substantive fields of sociology, for example in the nature and significance of social movements, or the construction of identity, rarely confine themselves to interest only

in what people do within a specific medium, and hence research designs that span media are required. Policy concerns are also rarely focused solely on activities within the virtual realm, but spill out into an interest in how online activities are experienced and utilised in other domains. Dyke (2013) uses a blended approach, combining ethnography of an online pro-anorexia community and an eating disorder prevention project based in schools and youth centres. The study explores the interaction between the online and offline spaces as young people navigate between them. The policy recommendations made by the researcher as a result of the study highlight the need to understand how online and offline spaces combine in the lives of young people at risk of eating disorders in order to frame successful interventions. Dyke (2013) demonstrates that although it may be challenging for the ethnographer to track issues between online and offline spaces, these very challenges may be theoretically and practically enlightening.

Study of social movements, in particular, appears to benefit from multi-modal and multi-sited designs. Postill and Pink (2012) make a case for the study of social movements in a 'messy' web of interconnections involving social media that acquire distinctive significance in particular places among the groups that use them. Treré (2012) and Farinosi and Treré (2011) similarly make a case for multi-modal study of social movements, which takes social media seriously as a site where events take place, but embeds this social media activity in the real-life contexts that these forms of activism are designed to affect. Beyond the study of social movements, multi-sited or networked ethnographic studies include Farnsworth and Austrin's (2010) study of poker, Burrell's (2009) ethnography of the Internet in Accra, Beneito-Montagut's (2011) study of emotion online, and Orton-Johnson's (2012) multi-sited ethnography of knitting and online spaces. Although netnography is often practiced as an online-only study, Kozinets (2010) identifies the possibility of blending netnography and conventional ethnography. Among studies that do explicitly claim to blend ethnography and netnography are Nichols and Rine (2012) in their study of identity narratives within a de-industrialising community. Hine (2014) argues that the 'e-cubed' Internet (embedded, embodied and everyday) benefits from a connective approach to ethnography. In this connective approach the frames of meaning-making for online activities are acknowledged to be multiple, and the connections which the ethnographer chooses to pursue therefore have to be viewed as strategic choices rather than as dictated by the prior boundaries of the field as an autonomous agent.

Within studies that combine online and offline, a variety of means are available to the ethnographer to define starting points and to decide where to move. Observation may begin online and move offline to conduct interviews which contextualise the online phenomena, as practised by Sade-Beck (2008) in a study of communities focused on bereavement. Blended studies may also start offline, as Miller and Slater (2000) argued. Studies focused on online phenomena may even be conducted from a predominantly offline perspective. Mabweazara (2010) studied journalists' use of information and communication technologies using a conventional ethnographic approach, finding it challenging to grasp this dispersed and fragmented way of working, but valuing the potential that participant observation and in-depth interviews offer to see the uses of ICTs from different positioning, and experiencing it as challenging, but not impossible, to study the embedding of online activities in the offline ethnographically. The choice of research design, including decisions whether to include both offline and online data collection and whether to focus on synchronous or asynchronous communication depend on the aspirations of the researcher and the qualities of the group in focus (Wilkerson et al. 2014).

Field sites including online activities may take a wide variety of forms and the grounds for deciding which form of activities to observe and participate in will differ depending on the goals of the ethnographer. Some of the successful approaches to defining a field site outlined earlier are summarised next, varying according to the nature of the activities concerned or the strategy employed by the ethnographer for moving between them (although different terms are favoured by different authors and there is significant overlap between them):

- Online: the ethnographer studies activities within some online space (or connected set of spaces) on their own terms, without seeking to situate those activities within offline spaces.
- Multi-modal: different communication modes (potentially including face-to-face communication, documents, telephone, social networking sites, other online spaces) are studied because they are used by an identifiable group of people who form the focus of the study.
- Multi-sited: a set of interconnected sites are identified, either in advance of the study or as the study progresses, offering insights into different facets of the experience of interest.

- Blended: a study which combines two (or more) approaches – often online and offline observation – in order to explore a given phenomenon. The actual form of the blending varies, possibly involving a structured comparison between the two approaches, or possibly a more dynamic blending involving the ethnographer moving between sites as in a networked, multi-sited or connective approach.
- Networked: a set of interconnections are followed by the ethnographer by tracing the flow of communication between a group of people or activity of interest. New sites may emerge in a dynamic fashion in the course of the study, rather than being identified in advance.
- Connective: the ethnographer moves between different modes of communication and locations (online or offline) according to a set of theoretically driven interests focusing on the contingent connections that emerge as people appropriate and make sense of online activities offline and vice versa.

As Postill and Pink (2012) argue, in many cases it may be productive to leave open the question of what the connection between social media activities and face-to-face locales might be because the ethnographer focuses on tracing forms of sociality that span online and offline, within a broader interest in finding out about the socio-political reality of forms of activity that involve, but are not confined within, social media and online spaces. In these fragmented mediatised domains of activity, the researcher actively constructs the field. It can be argued that this wide array of possible ways to define the study places an increased responsibility on the ethnographer to be reflexive about the decisions that they take when deciding what will count as the field site.

Autoethnography Online

Reflexivity in relation to the definition of the field site in question is important, but this does not exhaust the importance of reflexivity within ethnographies involving online activities. There is an emergent strand of online ethnography that focuses on the embodied experience of the online researcher as an important source of insight in its own right. These studies build on recent developments in autoethnography as a means to tap into subjectivity and expose hidden structures of feeling not amenable to the more conventional ethnographic accounts which are, to some extent, always limited by what participants can verbalise and recount to the ethnographer (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis 2004; Ellis et al. 2010). Autoethnographers are often full participants in the situations that they recount. Whilst also embedded within academic disciplines, and hence attuned to what may be interesting or topical from various theoretical perspectives, autoethnographies often tread lightly with theoretical content and literature review and concentrate on evocation. Such writing has been accused of self-indulgence, focusing too much on the author's inner world at the expense of a rigorous attention to the perspective of others (Sparkes 2002). It is, however, some form of solution to the challenges posed for ethnography by the complex, fragmented and messy world that arises from the contingent connections between online and offline spaces. Autoethnography focuses the attention on how it feels to navigate such connections.

The term autoethnography is sometimes applied to participants' ongoing attempts to articulate and portray their own situation, rather than to a specific academic ethnographic project. Autoethnography can be used in this sense in relation to online interactions, in that the portrayals that participants post online can be viewed as reflexive texts which articulate their readings of their own culture (Nemeth and Gropper 2008; Jacobs 2010). This usage, however, is currently in the minority, and a narrower sense of autoethnography as a conscious form of methodological approach from someone within the academic community appears to have come to dominate. This form of autoethnography, as applied to online spaces, seems to have potential to make some significant contributions to our ability to work out what online interactions may mean to the people engaged in them.

The online ethnographer is always, in some sense, a participant, in that in order to be present in online spaces the ethnographer has to use the same technologies that participants are using. In order to be an ethnographer of a gaming site, for example, it may be necessary for the ethnographer to become highly skilled at playing the game just in order to stay alive long enough to experience the setting, quite apart from any aspirations to an epistemological purchase offered by the immersive experience. Along the spectrum between participant as observer and observer as participant (Gold 1958), the online ethnographer is always to some extent a participant as observer, in that they use the same medium to communicate as participants use (although they may, of course, also use other modes of communication, and in fact participants too often combine various

modes rather than sticking to just one). Reflecting on the social conditions created by using a particular communication medium can become an important part of the online ethnographer's insights.

Autoethnographic approaches to online ethnography were pioneered by Markham (1998) with a focus on how it felt to navigate online space and communicate in various ways with online others. Markham (1998) used this account to highlight the contingency of the online experience, arguing that she, and those she met online, did not always view computer-mediated communication as a place, but might also experience it as a tool or as a way of being. Other autoethnographic accounts of online experience have followed, fuelled by the increasing acceptance, albeit usually as an alternative or niche approach, of autoethnography as a legitimate methodology. The nuances of online identity practices can effectively be explored through autoethnography: Dumitrica and Gaden (2008) made powerful use of autoethnography to explore the experience of gender in the virtual world *Second Life*; and Gatson (2011), without explicitly naming her project as 'autoethnographic', conducted a study of the online 'selling project' relying on participation in online and offline activities, systematic survey and reflection on the author's own selling practices.

Autoethnographies have also effectively explored pedagogy in online spaces. Lee (2008) writes an account of the experience of teaching an online course. As with much autoethnographic writing, Lee's focus is on evocation rather than precise theoretical contribution as she recounts how the activities of moderating the online course are interwoven with the pressures and sensations of her offline life. The theoretical aspiration remains implicit: Lee writes to show us how the experience feels rather than telling us what we should make of her insights within a conventional sociological framework. Kruse's (2006) autoethnography focuses on the experience of being the online student rather than the tutor, recounting the process of learning to play the mandolin via online tuition and reflecting on the various forms of connection and isolation that he experienced. Henning (2012) explores the experience of a teacher-turned student: having taught online courses she then discusses the insights gained from becoming a student on such a course for the first time. Tschida and Sevier (2013) use an autoethnographic approach to explore the experience of teaching an online course, highlighting the challenges to their pedagogic practices and expectations compared to their experiences of face-to-face teaching.

Autonetnography also exists (Kozinets and Kedzior 2009) and is defined as a form of observation through searching and lurking and making reflective fieldnotes. Wilkinson and Patterson (2014) supplement an initial autonetnographic phase exploring consumer-created 'mash-ups' of the Peppa Pig brand posted to YouTube with online interviews including video elicitation. The term autonetnography, here, denotes an observational phase that focuses on the experience of the researcher as an active agent exploring the territory, and also, as with many studies termed netnographic, indicates a specific focus on consumption activities as exhibited online. Similarly, Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2009) explore celebrity gossip online by positioning themselves to search for it as any Internet user might, although without describing their study as ethnographic or netnographic.

In other cases, the ethnographer's use of their own experience extends beyond a reflection on immersion in the same medium as participants to occupation of a specific role. Baym (1995, 2000) moved from full participant in a soap opera discussion group to ethnographer of the group. Hughey (2008) began as a participant in the forum devoted to African American fraternities and sororities that he later studied, framing his role as that of observant participant and combining an active participant observation that involved starting discussion threads of his own with content analysis and interviews. In fan studies, the researcher is often to some extent an insider in the fan community being studied, and thus it is possibly not surprising that autoethnography of online fan communities should emerge. Monaco (2010) moves around different online manifestations of fandom and sites related to the television programme which is her focus, as well as exploring her changing relations to the text engendered by engagement with these various online sites. Autoethnography offers an opportunity to explore how at least one audience member navigates and finds meanings in diverse manifestations of the fan object both online and offline. These contingent occasions of connection-making can otherwise prove quite methodologically intransigent because an observing ethnographer would find it difficult to follow participants between sites. Parry (2012) includes online sites within an autoethnographic study of football fandom, discussing the online sites as they become part of the flow of experience of being a fan, and reflecting on how this engagement feels and how it impacts on other daily activities. Being an insider to some extent also brings with it some distinctive ethical concerns

relating to the nature of any covert observation that the insider role may bring with it. Paechter (2013) conducted a retrospective insider/outsider ethnography, tackling a group in which she had been a long-term full participant, making the study overt retrospectively and analysing archived posts going back through her time as participant.

The autoethnographic perspective turns the researcher's focus inwards to explore how a particular form of experience feels, but the autoethnographer is also tasked with reflecting on the ways in which a wider world, in the form of social structures and constraints, becomes effectively present for the individual in their everyday experience. Autoethnographers think about themselves as social beings. Through autoethnographies of online experience, we are therefore able to find out how standard infrastructures are made into personal experiences, and how online forms of interaction shape who we can be to one another as social beings. The autoethnographer situates Internet experiences and explores the multiple ways in which they make sense. Because autoethnographers start with the subjective experience, they are able to produce a multi-faceted perspective on the Internet, not limited by a prior understanding of what the field site for understanding a particular phenomenon should be. Autoethnographic approaches, like blended, multi-sited, networked and connective approaches, are able to develop ambitious theoretical aspirations because they follow the trails of phenomena wherever they may lead, and do not confine themselves artificially to a medium-based definition of what 'online' means.

A Way Forward...

It can be said that in contemporary society the Internet is disappearing (Parks 2009) because people do not consciously go online, or even use one medium at a time, but combine media in an ad hoc fashion and practice multi-tasking across devices. Having faced up to the crisis of representation (Denzin 1997), ethnographers appear to be encountering a new crisis of agency: we are confronted by too many choices on how to make field sites and are required to take overt responsibility for the way in which we chose to define the field in any specific set of circumstances. It is no longer easy to fall back on the notion that there is a defined field site which pre-exists the ethnographer's arrival. An ethnographer will forge field sites in line with their aspirations for the study, and sometimes these field sites will be wholly based online, but ethnographers will often find themselves travelling beyond purely online sites and may not adopt any a priori sense of what the boundaries of the field site might be.

Even while the ethnographer becomes conscious of and takes responsibility for agency in defining the field, it is also important to take account of some of the less obvious forms of agency which are exerted by the field itself, leading us in some directions and not others and imperceptibly shaping our studies of the Internet. We need to reflect on the various forms of resistance that the field puts in the way of what we can know. Two key forms of resistance that online domains place in the way of the ethnographer are the increasing commercialisation and proprietary ownership of online space and also the relative invisibility of practices of consumption of online material. Commercialisation renders certain parts of the Internet less accessible to ethnographic study (Kozinets 2010) because proprietary concerns turn it into a series of password-protected closed worlds (Lievrouw 2012) where the ethnographer may need to negotiate informed consent, not just with the authors of online texts but with the commercial organisations whom participants may not even realise claim ownership of their words. Ethnographers cannot assume online that informants have the right to grant access, and proprietary ownership may well place some online spaces off limits for study. Where there are concerns over privacy and proprietary ownership, Internet users are often prompted to seek out more secretive or ephemeral forms of online interaction, and here online ethnographers will be faced by many of the problems that have already always been faced offline, in finding out what participants are up to in their fleeting interactions in private spaces (Gehl 2014). The prospect of a social life openly available for ethnographic study in online space may prove to be only a temporary and quite restricted phenomenon. It is important not to over-generalise from the phenomena that are fortuitously openly available for study now.

Linked to the concern with the retreat into more private, ephemeral forms of online interaction is the broader question of how consumption and interpretation practices are to be built into ethnography. Many people read online content without posting messages themselves, and their activity leaves no visible traces for the online ethnographer to see, but it is potentially highly consequential for their lives. Online ethnography is often predominantly focused on the available data from active contributors, and yet these active contributors

form the tip of an iceberg in terms of understanding the overall online environment as a social phenomenon. To explore the Internet as an embedded social phenomenon, and as a component of contemporary lived existence, we need to acknowledge diverse forms of engagement with online space, including its role in people's calibration of themselves as social beings and their development of reflexive understandings of their place in the world. Not all socially significant Internet use leaves a lasting trace, nor is it immediately visible to the gaze of online methods. Blended and multi-sited designs and autoethnographies of consumption are a useful contribution to the effort of understanding the embedding of the Internet in everyday life, but there is still considerable work to be done in excavating the repercussions of the invisible nature of the consumption of online content, which so often stymies ethnographic effort focused on what is visible online. Anthropological approaches to ethnography have proved particularly fruitful in exploring these wider dimensions of digitally suffused culture (Horst and Miller 2013).

Online-only ethnography is relatively cheap, and often minimally disruptive to the lifestyle of the ethnographer compared to other ethnographic approaches. Online-only ethnography does have a significant contribution to make, particularly in working out the dynamics of interpersonal relations and exploring contemporary practices of meaning-making and identity formation. Online spaces have provided unprecedented access for ethnographers to experience and explore everyday life in depth and detail, and this should have a significant contribution to make to social science. However, when we study an online space as social scientists it is important to make the broader theoretical aspiration clear, and thus to demarcate the study as 'virtual' or as 'netnography' may sometimes be unhelpful. Whether we study online-only field sites or conduct blended studies that move around differently mediated forms of space, these studies should be contributing to the development of social science, and to use the epithet 'virtual' or to mark our studies netnographies is potentially an unhelpful act of distancing from the broader theoretical territory. In order to cement policy-relevant or theoretically ambitious disciplinary contributions, more complex, more challenging studies that span the online/offline border and deal with less visible aspects of the Internet as a social phenomenon also need to be carried out. It is important not to give the impression that online-only studies are enough. In the heavily politicised and cost-conscious domain of research funding, it is important to point out that the cheapest study is not necessarily the best, and that qualitative research in complex online/offline fields will not be quick, easy or cheap, but offers possibly one of the best ways to capture and interrogate these emergent forms of sociality that defy generalisation.

References

- Altheide, D. L. (1987) 'Reflections: ethnographic content analysis', *Qualitative Sociology*, 10(1): 65–77.
- Amit, V. (ed.) (1999) *Constructing the Field*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, S. (2013) 'Conceptualising the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: as tool, as data and as context', *Ethnography and Education*, 8(2): 131–45.
- Baym, N. (1995) 'The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication'. In S. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 138–63.
- Baym, N. K. (2000) *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Beer, D. and R. Penfold-Mounce (2009) 'Celebrity gossip and the new melodramatic imagination', *Sociological Research Online*, 14. Available at <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/14/2/2.html> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Beneito-Montagut, R. (2011) 'Ethnography goes online: towards a user-centred methodology to research interpersonal communication on the Internet', *Qualitative Research*, 11(6): 716–35.
- Bengtsson, S. (2014) 'Faraway, so close! Proximity and distance in ethnography online', *Media, Culture and Society*, 11(6): 862–77.
- Boellstorff, T. (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life: an Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Boellstorff, T. (2010) 'A typology of ethnographic scales for virtual worlds'. In W. S. Bainbridge (ed.), *Online Worlds: Convergence of the Real and the Virtual*. London: Springer, pp. 123–33.
- Boellstorff, T., B. Nardi, C. Pearce and T. L. Taylor (2012) *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- boyd, D. and K. Crawford (2012) 'Critical questions for big data: provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon', *Information, Communication and Society*, 15(5): 662–79.

- Burrell, J. (2009) 'The field site as a network: a strategy for locating ethnographic research', *Field Methods*, 21(2): 181–99.
- Coleman, E. G. (2010) 'Ethnographic approaches to digital media', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39(1): 487–505.
- Coleman, E. G. (2013) *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997) *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dumitrica, D. and G. Gaden (2008) 'Knee-high boots and six-pack abs: autoethnographic reflections on gender and technology in Second Life', *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1. Available at <http://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/323> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Dyke, S. (2013) 'Utilising a blended ethnographic approach to explore the online and offline lives of pro-ana community members', *Ethnography and Education*, 8(2): 146–61.
- Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira.
- Ellis, C., T. E. Adams and A. P. Bochner (2010) 'Autoethnography: an overview', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12. Available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Ess, C. and AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2002) *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee*. Available at <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Farinosi, M. and E. Treré (2011) 'Inside the "People of the Wheelbarrows": participation between online and offline dimension in the post-quake social movement', *Journal of Community Informatics*, 6. Available at <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/viewArticle/761> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Farnsworth, J. and T. Austrin (2010) 'The ethnography of new media worlds? Following the case of global poker', *New Media and Society*, 12(7): 1120–36.
- Ferrell, J., K. Hayward and J. Young (2008) *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Frederick, B. J. and D. Perrone (2014) "'Party N Play" on the Internet: subcultural formation, Craigslist, and escaping from stigma', *Deviant Behavior*, 35(11): 859–84.
- Gallagher, K., A. Wessels and B. Y. Ntelioglou (2013) 'Becoming a networked public: digital ethnography, youth and global research collectives', *Ethnography and Education*, 8(2): 177–93.
- Garcia, A. C., A. I. Standlee, J. Bechhoff and Y. Cui (2009) 'Ethnographic approaches to the Internet and computer-mediated communication', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(1): 52–84.
- Gatson, S. N. (2011) 'Self-naming practices on the Internet: identity, authenticity, and community', *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, 11(3): 224–35.
- Gehl, R. W. (2014) 'Power/freedom on the dark web: a digital ethnography of the Dark Web Social Network'. *New Media and Society*.
- Giglietto, F., L. Rossi and D. Bennato (2012) 'The open laboratory: limits and possibilities of using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as a research data source', *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 30(3–4): 145–59.
- Gold, R. L. (1958) 'Roles in sociological field observations', *Social Forces*, 36(3): 217–23.
- Gold, R. L. (1997) 'The ethnographic method in sociology', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(4): 388–402.
- Gupta, A. and J. Ferguson (1997) *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hallett, R. E. and K. Barber (2014) 'Ethnographic research in a cyber era', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 43(3): 306–30.
- Henning, T. B. (2012) 'Writing professor as adult learner: an autoethnography of online professional development', *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 16(2): 9–26.
- Hesse-Biber, S. and A. J. Griffin (2013) 'Internet-mediated technologies and mixed methods research: problems and prospects', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 7(1): 43–61.
- Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hine, C. (2008) 'How can qualitative Internet researchers define the boundaries of their projects?'. In A. N. Markham and N. Baym (eds.), *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 1–20.
- Hine, C. (2014) *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. Oxford: Berg.
- Horst, H. A. and D. Miller (2013) *Digital Anthropology*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hughey, M. W. (2008) 'Virtual (br)others and (re)sisters: authentic black fraternity and sorority identity on the

- Internet', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37(5): 528–60.
- Jacobs, K. (2010) 'Lizzy Kinsey and the Adult Friendfinders: an ethnographic study of Internet sex and pornographic self-display in Hong Kong', *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 12(6): 691–703.
- Kendall, L. (2002) *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010) *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2012) 'Marketing netnography: prom/ot(ulgat)ing a new research method', *Methodological Innovations Online*, 7(1): 37–45.
- Kozinets, R. V. and R. Kedzior (2009) 'I, Avatar: auto-netnographic research in virtual worlds'. In N. T. Wood and M. R. Solomon (eds.), *Virtual Social Identity and Consumer Behavior*. New York, NY: ME Sharpe, pp. 3–19.
- Kruse, N. B. (2013) 'Locating "The Road to Lisdoonvarna" via autoethnography: Pathways, barriers and detours in self-directed online music learning', *Journal of Music, Technology & Education*, 5(3): 293–308.
- Lee, K. V. (2008) 'A neophyte about online teaching: almost done', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(7): 1180–86.
- Lievrouw, L. A. (2012) 'The next decade in Internet time: ways ahead for new media studies', *Information, Communication and Society*, 15(5): 616–38.
- Ling, R. (2012) *Taken for Grantedness: The Embedding of Mobile Communication into Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mabweazara, H. M. (2010) 'Researching the use of new technologies (ICTs) in Zimbabwean newsrooms: an ethnographic approach', *Qualitative Research*, 10(6): 659–77.
- Markham, A. N. (1998) *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual space*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Markham, A. N. (2006) 'Ethic as method, method as ethic: a case for reflexivity in qualitative ICT research', *Journal of Information Ethics*, 15(2): 37–54.
- Markham, A. N. and E. Buchanan (2012) *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Committee (Version 2.0)*. Association of Internet Researchers. Available at <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Marres, N. (2012) 'The redistribution of methods: on intervention in digital social research, broadly conceived', *Sociological Review*, 60: 139–65.
- Marshall, J. (2010) 'Ambiguity, oscillation and disorder: online ethnography and the making of culture', *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2. Available at <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/mcs/article/view/1598/1859> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Miller, D. and H. A. Horst (2012) 'The digital and the human: a prospectus for digital anthropology'. In H. A. Horst and D. Miller (eds.), *Digital Anthropology*. London: Berg, pp. 3–38.
- Miller, D. and D. Slater (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.
- Monaco, J. (2010) 'Memory work, autoethnography and the construction of a fan-ethnography', *Participations*, 7. Available at <http://www.participations.org/Volume%207/Issue%201/monaco.htm> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Murthy, D. (2008) 'Digital ethnography: an examination of the use of new technologies for social research', *Sociology*, 42(5): 837–55.
- Murthy, D. (2013) 'Ethnographic Research 2.0: the potentialities of emergent digital technologies for qualitative organizational research', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 2(1): 23–36.
- Nardi, B. A. (2010) *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Nemeth, D. J. and R. C. Gropper (2008) 'A cyber-ethnographic foray into GRandT Internet photo blogs', *Romani Studies*, 18(1): 39–70.
- Nichols, L. T. and J. Rine (2012) 'Collective identity narratives: historical and emergent stories of selfhood in a deindustrializing community', *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 39: 121–49.
- Orton-Johnson, K. (2012) 'Knit, purl and upload: new technologies, digital mediations and the experience of leisure', *Leisure Studies*, 33(3): 305–21.
- Orton-Johnson, K. and N. Prior (eds.) (2013) *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paccagnella, L. (1997) 'Getting the seats of your pants dirty: strategies for ethnographic research on virtual communities', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 3(1). Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00065.x/abstract> (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Paechter, C. (2013) 'Researching sensitive issues online: implications of a hybrid insider/outsider position in a retrospective ethnographic study', *Qualitative Research*, 13(1): 71–86.

- Parks, M. (2009) 'What will we study when the Internet disappears?', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(3): 724–9.
- Parry, K. D. (2012) 'Game of two passions: a football fan's autoethnography', *Qualitative Research Journal*, 12(2): 238–50.
- Postill, J. and S. Pink (2012) 'Social media ethnography: the digital researcher in a messy web', *Media International Australia*, 145: 123–34.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (ed.) (1997) *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. Oxford, Berg.
- Robinson, L. and J. Schulz (2009) 'New avenues for sociological inquiry: evolving forms of ethnographic practice', *Sociology*, 43(4): 685–98.
- Rogers, R. (2013) *Digital Methods*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ruppert, E., J. Law and M. Savage (2013) 'Reassembling social science methods: the challenge of digital devices', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 30(4): 22–46.
- Sade-Beck, L. (2008) 'Internet ethnography: online and offline', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(2): 45–51.
- Senft, T. M. (2008) *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2002) 'Autoethnography: self-indulgence or something more?'. In A. P. Bochner and C. Ellis (eds.), *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, pp. 209–32.
- Steinmetz, K. F. (2012) 'Message received: virtual ethnography in online message boards', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(1): 26–39.
- Treré, E. (2012) 'Social movements as information ecologies: exploring the coevolution of multiple Internet technologies for activism', *International Journal of Communication*, 6: 19.
- Tschida, C. M. and B. R. Sevier (2013) 'Teaching social studies online: an exemplar for examining the broader implications of online methods courses in teacher education', *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 9. Available at http://jolt.merlot.org/vol9no4/tschida_1213.pdf (accessed 23 July 2016).
- Tunçalp, D. and Patrick L. Lê (2014) '(Re)locating boundaries: a systematic review of online ethnography', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 3(1): 59–79.
- Underberg, N. and E. Zorn (2013) *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Wilkerson, J. M., A. Iantaffi, J. A. Grey, W. O. Bockting and B. R. S. Rosser (2014) 'Recommendations for Internet-based qualitative health research with hard-to-reach populations', *Qualitative Health Research*, 24(4): 561–74.
- Wilkinson, C. and A. Patterson (2014) 'Peppa Piggy in the middle of marketers and mashup makers'. In S. Brown and S. Ponsonby-McCabe (eds.), *Brand Mascots: And Other Marketing Animals*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 123–40.
- <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473957992.n23>