

Virtual Ethnography Revisited

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In this presentation I will outline the main components of the approach that I call virtual ethnography, talk about some ways in which this approach can be used as a component in a broad range of social research projects and describe some practical steps that researchers can take for effective research engagement.

The idea of virtual ethnography was to find a way of taking seriously, as a sociological phenomenon, the kinds of things people did on the Internet. At the same time, the challenge was not to assume that simply by looking at what happened online we could get the full picture of why it might be socially significant or meaningful. The principles that evolved from my initial virtual ethnography of a media event were:

1. We can use ethnography to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful.
2. Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact.
3. The ethnography of mediated interaction often asks researchers to be mobile both virtually and physically.
4. Instead of going to particular field sites, virtual ethnography follows field connections.
5. Boundaries, especially between the “virtual” and the “real”, are not to be taken-for-granted.
6. Virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion.
7. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. Our accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities.
8. Intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography.

9. This is ethnography *of, in and through* the virtual – we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings.

10. Virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.

The broader context of these principles is an interest in ethnography as a way of understanding social life as lived and experienced. In ethnography, we can use our sensitivity about how amenable settings are to particular research approaches as a way of learning about those settings. Making a choice about appropriate communication media is a way of exploring the varying textures of social life as enacted through different media. This means that I do not think of virtual ethnography as confined to projects that want to understand the use of the Internet as their primary goal. As the Internet becomes more and more embedded into everyday life, social research will have to come to terms with it in order to achieve its goals of effectively researching and portraying everyday life. If the people you study move some aspects of their life onto the Internet, then so must you.

In recent research I have been exploring uses of information and communications technologies in contemporary scientific research, in particular the discipline of biological taxonomy or systematics. Some particular thoughts that arise from this research are:

The importance of developing appropriate researcher presence. In a context where the people you are researching have their own web sites, you need one too. It is becoming routine for potential interviewees contacted by email to check out researchers – if you do not offer a link to your home page, then they may well use Google to look for you. Not having online presence can create suspicion, and also mean that you miss out on a chance to deepen discussion of your research.

The limitations of covert ethnography – negotiating consent is about more than just ethical duty. It is easy to do covert research in many kinds of Internet setting. Particularly prominent are mailing lists and newsgroups, where researchers can collect data without telling anyone what they are doing. The ethics of this practice are hotly debated. I have found that contacting people to ask for permission to quote their words is much more than simply a chore undertaken to satisfy ethical demands. It can be a very valuable route to an enhanced research experience. Making the kind of direct contact that asking permission requires means that you learn more about the contexts in which the words we see online are produced and consumed.

The importance of participating in and understanding a communication ecology. It is a mistake to think that particular technologies or communications media necessarily map on to socially meaningful research questions. Instead of setting out to research a particular medium it is often helpful to learn something about the various choices of medium available to the people who are at the heart of the research project, and aim to participate in appropriate ways within that existing ecology.

Links to resources

Association of Internet Researchers – <http://www.aoir.org> – includes link to the Association's ethical guidelines, giving questions that researchers should address before designing research using data collected via the Internet

Virtual Methods – <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/virtualmethods/vmesrc.htm> - site based on ESRC seminar series, containing archive of presentations with thematic index, list of useful resources, and advice on good practice in virtual methods.