

Chapter 25

Online Ethnographic Methods: Towards a Qualitative Understanding of Virtual Community Practices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the use of online ethnographical methods as a potent way to reach qualitative understanding of virtual communities. The term online ethnography envelopes document collection, online observation and online interviews. The chapter will explain the steps of conducting online ethnography – from defining setting and spelling out your research perspective, to collecting online data, analyzing gathered data, feeding back insights to the studied community and presenting results with ethical awareness. In this process the chapter will compare online ethnography to traditional ethnography and provide illustrative empirical examples and experiences from three recent online ethnographical studies on social information and media sharing (Skågeby, 2007, 2008, 2009a). While multimedial forms of data and data collection are becoming more common (i.e. video and sound recordings), the focus of the chapter lies mainly with text-based data. The chapter concludes by discussing methodological benefits and drawbacks of an online ethnographical process.

INTRODUCTION

User engagement and communication sharing are two very central activities of virtual communities. In themselves, these activities also lay the ground for online methods as practical means of data-collection. The enduring qualities of some conversations and the technological means to

record other, more transient, conversations make it possible to collect social data from virtual communities. Indeed, the growing body of research in the field of Internet studies provides support to the viability of online methods to examine virtual community practices, behaviours and sentiments (Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Hine, 2005; Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002; Maczewski, et al., 2004). Not only does this development give an improved scholarly foundation for researchers to “honour the field in

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which the participants are working – the online environment” (Crichton & Kinash, 2003), but also that “turning to the Internet for data collection [...] prompts one to think outside of the traditional box and leads to creative methods and measurements” (Skitka & Sargis, 2006, p. 543).

Online Ethnography as a Method to Understand User Engagement and Communication Sharing

Online ethnography is a qualitative approach to data collection in virtual communities. As such, its aim is usually to look beyond amounts and distributions and to try to unearth the deeper reasons for behaviours or sentiments (i.e. “why?”). In the attempt to find answers to the question “why?” online ethnography must acknowledge that usage is often situated in specific communities and with specific communication technologies. As Jones (2005) puts it: “Internet studies can [...] describe and intervene in the life and values of the people who use the internet, and these can be best understood, no matter our temporal distance, through close observation and analysis of specific people and technologies, in specific places and times”.

In many ways, online ethnography is not very different from traditional ethnography (Hine, 2000; Jakobsson, 2006). In fact, online ethnography has been described as “[traditional] ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” (Guimarães, 2003; Kozinets, 2002). Thus, to understand online ethnography, this chapter argues that it is important to understand the “costs and benefits” of traditional ethnography. A very short, but concise, explanation of ethnography would articulate it as a description of individuals, groups or cultures in their own environment over a (long) period of time. As such, ethnography is not explicitly wed to a specific set of methods, but commonly the utilized methods are qualitative in nature (e.g. observations and unstructured interviews). This chapter will discuss how document collection, direct observations and participation as

well as mediated interviews with key informants can help researchers to shape a valid description of a studied virtual community.

THE ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHICAL PROCEDURE

The online ethnographical procedure consists of a number of different steps, namely cultural entrance (or *entrée*), collection and analysis of data while also making sure that trustworthy interpretations are made, conducting ethically sound research and making sure that members of the studied milieu can provide feedback to the research(er). This chapter will describe these steps, but use a slightly different, and elaborated taxonomy, i.e. defining setting and research perspective; making an entrance; qualitative online data collection; analysis; and presentation of results. Additionally, the author will also consider the omnipresent ethical dilemmas that colour online ethnographical research.

Defining Setting and Research Perspective

This chapter will assume that an important research question has already been defined and that online ethnography has been identified as a workable method for addressing this particular question. It may be that online ethnography is judged to be the only available method for this specific question. In some cases it might even be seen as counterproductive to include other (offline) data collection methods – particularly when researching the specifics of mediated social interaction (Markham, 2004b). Still, it is important to understand that online ethnography is one method part of a larger repertoire of viable qualitative methods. This means that even though a study is aimed towards a virtual community, online and offline methods can sometimes be used in conjunction when researching certain practices or other social phenomena (Garcia, et

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