Chapter 7
Online Ethnographies

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ABSTRACT

Various new approaches of ethnographic research have been developed for inquiries in online settings. However, it is not clear whether these approaches are similar, different from each other, and if they can be used to study the same phenomena. In this chapter, the authors compare different suggested methodological approaches for conducting ethnographic research in online environments. Based on a literature review, 16 approaches, such as netnography, webnography, network ethnography, cyber-ethnography, and digital ethnography, are analysed and compared to each other. The analysis of the online ethnography proposals is conducted through a case comparison method by a data-driven framework. The framework provides structures for the analysis in terms of relations between Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), research object, researcher position, and research procedures. The results suggest that these approaches disclose fundamental differences in relation to each other and in relation to the basic idea of traditional ethnography. Finally, the authors discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the analysed approaches.

INTRODUCTION

A pertinent recent change in various daily activities in workplaces, homes, and schools concerns networked social practices, such as the snowballing use of social media. While new information technologies are increasingly used as promoters of various types of social practices, the study of online communities has become of particular interest. The key idea is to share information and create knowledge together with other users, in line with the view of knowledge sharing as a

socially constructed and mediated phenomenon (Vygotsky, 1978). A contemporary shift in the practice of online communities is the transformation of users' roles from mere consumers to producers of information: many applications enable content sharing by offering environments that allow the integration of pictures, audio and videos, with written expressions (Iivari, Isomäki, & Pekkola, 2010).

Essential in this shift is that the users generate contents by which interactive relations between users in online communities function, forming unique online cultures or communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). Online communities are characterized by feelings of belonging, empathy and support (Rheingold, 1993), and a particular purpose and policies for community life (Preece, Abras, & Maloney-Krichmar, 2004). Online communities' designated cultures include social rules, norms and joint understandings, which are developed and learned as becoming and being a member of a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These practices are the key to online communities' meaning and functions, for example, social rules enact special types of communication (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

Online communities and cultures interact in online environments, nowadays often referred to as social media, which refers to Web-based applications that are constructed on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0 that allows the creation and changing of user-generated contents (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The inquiry regarding the use of such applications has been increasing during the past decades, and is currently intensively studied in numerous contexts, such as knowledge sharing and diffusion across gaming spaces (Fields & Kafai, 2008, 2009), information sharing with listserv application (Pomson, 2008), participation in a community of learning in a workplace (e.g., Stacey, Smith, & Barty, 2004), viability and veracity of online learning (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004), online communities as part of blended learning (e.g., Garrison &

Kanuka, 2004), informal learning in an online community of practice (Gray, 2004), and social technologies in higher education (Hemmi, Bayne, & Landt, 2009), to name a few. It is worth noticing that methodological approaches in these studies represent variations of how traditional research methods have been applied to online settings.

To study these specific online communities forming a unique online culture a suitable research method is needed. In particular, to understand online communities, a suitable research method should offer conceptual means to shed light to the specific social and cultural nature of those communities and facilitate the bridging of relevant concepts and researchers' 'raw' experiences in a way that fulfils the demands of valid inquiry (cf. Weick, 1996).

In the current situation, it is difficult to select an appropriate research method to study online communities: research literature includes several approaches that aim to apply traditional ethnography to the study of online communities, to their social and cultural dynamics while creating and sharing knowledge. However, it is not clear whether these approaches are similar to or different from each other, or whether they share the same idea of the research object. It is especially unclear how these approaches facilitate online communities' research in terms of knowledge sharing, and how can they be employed within novel Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)?

In this chapter, we present a review of research methods that are presented suitable for conducting research in online communities seen as socio-cultural phenomena. Based on a literature review, we analysed various new approaches found in the current research literature. The different approaches to online ethnography are compared by an explanatory framework depicting the essential factors that illustrate the features of the methods. The results suggest that the online ethnography approaches differ from each other, and thus, may be deployed in a different manner. The variation in the current online ethnographic methods is also

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