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Jason Hughes

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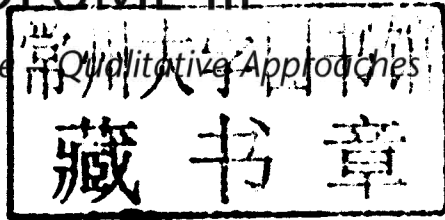
SAGE INTERNET RESEARCH METHODS

VOLUME III

Research Online — Qualitative Approaches

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Volume III: Taking Research Online – Qualitative Approaches

The Virtual Objects of Ethnography

Christine Hine

The Crisis in Ethnography

Ethnography has changed a lot since its origins as the method anthropologists used to develop an understanding of cultures in distant places. It has been taken up within a wide range of substantive fields including urban life, the media, medicine, the classroom, science and technology. Ethnography has been used within sociology and cultural studies, although it retains a special status as the key anthropological approach. In new disciplinary settings, the emphasis on holistic description has given way to more focused and bounded studies of particular topics of interest. Rather than studying whole ways of life, ethnographers in sociology and cultural studies have interested themselves in more limited aspects: people as patients, as students, as television viewers or as professionals. The ethnography of familiar and nearby cultures has also augmented the ethnography of remote and apparently exotic ways of life. These settings have brought their own challenges as ethnographers struggle to suspend what they take for granted about their own cultures, and attempt to negotiate access to settings where they may be dealing with the culturally more powerful (Jackson, 1987). The upshot of these developments has been a wide diversity of approaches to ethnography, although these share a fundamental commitment to developing a deep understanding through participation and observation. Hammersley and Atkinson provide a basic definition, applicable to most studies, of what ethnography is:

> In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (1995: 1)

The practice of ethnography has continually faced challenges concerning objectivity and validity from the harder sciences. A methodology that offers little in the way of prescription to its practitioners and has no formula for judging the accuracy of its results is vulnerable to criticism from methodologies such as surveys, experiments and questionnaires that come equipped with a full armoury of evaluative techniques. In the face of these critiques the popularity of qualitative methodologies, including ethnography, is based on their strong appeal as ways of addressing the richness and complexity of social life. The emphasis on holism in ethnography gives it a persuasive attraction in dealing with complex and multi-faceted concepts like culture, as compared with the more reductive quantitative techniques. Ethnography is appealing for its depth of description and its lack of reliance on *a priori* hypotheses. It offers the promise of getting closer to understanding the ways in which people interpret the world and organize their lives. By contrast, quantitative studies are deemed thin representations of isolated concepts imposed on the study by the researcher.

One response to positivist-based, quantitative critiques of ethnography has centred on claims that ethnography produces an authentic understanding of a culture based on concepts that emerge from the study instead of being imposed *a priori* by the researcher. Cultures are studied in their natural state, rather than as disturbed by survey techniques or experimental scenarios. This argument depends upon a realist ethnography which describes cultures as they really are (it also, of course, depends on accepting realism and objectivity as the aspiration of any methodology). More recently the realist and naturalistic project has come into question from within the qualitative field, as realist notions more generally have been challenged by constructivist approaches to knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1971). The basis for claiming any kind of knowledge as asocial and independent of particular practices of knowing has come under attack, and ethnography has not been exempt. The naturalistic project of documenting a reality external to the researcher has been brought into question. Rather than being the records of objectively observed and pre-existing cultural objects, ethnographies have been reconceived as written and unavoidably constructed accounts of objects created through disciplinary practices and the ethnographer's embodied and reflexive engagement. These developments in epistemology have constituted what Denzin describes as a 'triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis' (1997: 3) for qualitative research, including ethnography. The triple crisis that Denzin describes threatens ethnography on all fronts: its claims to represent culture; its claims to authentic knowledge; and the ability of its

proponents to make principled interventions based on the knowledge they acquire through ethnography. Marcus relates the comprehensive nature of the challenge to ethnography:

> Under the label first of 'postmodernism' and then 'cultural studies', many scholars in the social sciences and humanities subjected themselves to a bracing critical self-examination of their habits of thought and work. This involved reconsiderations of the nature of representation, description, subjectivity, objectivity, even of the notions of 'society' and 'culture' themselves, as well as how scholars materialized objects of study and data about them to constitute the 'real' to which their work had been addressed. (1997: 399)

The 'crisis', rather than suggesting the abandonment of ethnography altogether, can be seen as opening possibilities for creative and strategic applications of the methodology. The 'ethnography of ethnography' (Van Maanen, 1995) occasioned by the new epistemology entails a re-examination of features of the methodology that might have seemed self-evident. The whole methodology is thus opened up for re-examination and refashioning. This provides an opportunity for reshaping and reformulating projects in the light of current concerns. Recognizing that the objects we find and describe are of our own making entails owning up to the responsibility that recognition imposes. It offers up the opportunity of making the kind of research objects we need to enter and transform debates, and opens up the relationships between research subjects, ethnographers and readers to reconfiguration. This chapter takes the ethnographic 'crisis' as an opportunity for making a form of ethnographic enquiry suited to the Internet, involving a different kind of interaction and ethnographic object from those with which ethnography has traditionally been concerned. This approach involves embracing ethnography as a textual practice and as a lived craft, and destabilizes the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a found field site.

The aim of this examination of ethnography is to find a different way of dealing with some problems with an ethnographic approach to the Internet as described in Chapter 2. These problems include the authenticity of mediated interactions as material for an ethnographic understanding and the choice of appropriate sites to study the Internet as both a culture and a cultural object. The problems with an ethnographic approach to the Internet encompass both how it is to be constituted as an ethnographic object and how that object is to be authentically known. Within a naturalistic or realist version of the ethnographic project these issues seem to render the ethnography of the Internet highly problematic. The aim of this chapter is to examine some recent developments in ethnographic thinking that are particularly useful in developing an alternative approach to the study of the Internet. The account will focus on three crucial areas for looking at the Internet ethnographically. These areas are:

- the role of travel and face-to-face interaction in ethnography
- text, technology and reflexivity
- the making of ethnographic objects.

The examination of these areas is used to formulate the principles of a virtual ethnography that draws on current ethnographic thinking and applies it to the mediated and spatially dispersed interactions that the Internet facilitates.

Ethnography and the Face-to-Face

A major issue to be confronted in designing an ethnographic study of the Internet is the appropriate way of interacting with the subjects of the research. Ethnography has traditionally entailed physical travel to a place, which implies that face-to-face interaction is the most appropriate. Before the widespread availability of CMC, mediated forms of communication simply did not seem sufficiently interactive to allow the ethnographer to test ideas through immersion. If mediated interaction is to be incorporated into an ethnographic project, the basis for focusing ethnographic engagement or immersion on face-to-face interaction needs to be considered. The availability of mediated interaction provides the opportunity to question the role of face-to-face interaction in the construction of an ethnography. We can then examine what it is about their reliance on face-to-face interaction that makes ethnographers' accounts of their research convincing, and explore the possibilities for a reconceptualization of ethnographic authenticity that incorporates mediated interaction on its own terms.

The way of considering face-to-face interaction discussed here owes its basis to the 'representational crisis' (Denzin, 1997). The publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) marked a growing recognition that ethnographic writing was not a transparent representation of a culture. The written products of ethnography were narratives or accounts that relied heavily on the experience of particular ethnographers and on the conventions used to make the telling of those accounts authoritative and engaging (Van Maanen, 1988). Ethnography was a 'story-telling institution' (Van Maanen, 1995), and the stories told could be more or less convincing, but were not necessarily to be evaluated on a basis of their truth to a preexisting 'real' culture. Whatever the sincerity with which they were told, ethnographic stories were necessarily selective. Ethnographies were 'textual constructions of reality' (Atkinson, 1990). This perspective provides an opportunity to analyse the importance of face-to-face interaction by looking at the role that is played in accounts by the fact of the ethnographer having been to a field site for a sustained period. The primacy of the face-to-face in ethnography can be understood by reflecting upon the way in which ethnography's production as an authoritative textual account has traditionally relied upon

travel, experience and interaction. This is particularly useful as a way of avoiding making *a priori* judgements of the richness (and ethnographic adequacy) or otherwise of communications media: an assumption that has proved problematic in relation to CMC (Chapter 2).

Travel has played an important part in the construction of an ethnographic authority. The days of reliance on second-hand accounts and the tales of travellers are cast as the 'bad old days', in which the ethnographer was insufficiently embroiled with what was going on to be able to provide an authoritative analysis, and, worse, could be misled by relying on the re-representations of others. Kuper (1983) equates the 'Malinowskian revolution' in ethnography as comprising the uniting of fieldworker and theorist in a single body, such that the one who went, saw and reported was also the one who analysed. The concept of travel still plays an important part in distinguishing ethnography from other analytic approaches. As Van Maanen states:

> Whether or not the field worker ever really does 'get away' in a conceptual sense is becoming increasingly problematic, but physical displacement is a requirement. (1988: 3)

Van Maanen seems here to be casting the problem as ethnographers taking their own analytic frameworks with them, and therefore failing to address the field site they visit on its own terms, as they have claimed. While for him physical travel is not enough to ensure conceptual distance, travel to a field site is a prerequisite for the ethnographic analysis. It is still not clear, however, what it is that makes travel so fundamental. Some clues are provided by analyses of the ways in which ethnographers write about their experience of travelling and arriving. The role played by travel in constructing ethnographic authority is pointed to by Pratt in her analysis of the role of 'arrival stories' in ethnographers' accounts:

> They [arrival stories] play the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork . . . Always they are responsible for setting up the initial positionings of the subjects of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader. (1986: 32)

Travel in this analysis becomes a signifier of the relationship between the writer and readers of the ethnographic text and the subjects of the research. The details that the ethnographer gives of the way they got into the field encourage us as readers to accept the account that follows as authentically grounded in real experience. Along with travel comes the notion of translation (Turner, 1980). It is not sufficient merely to travel, but necessary also to come back, and to bring back an account. That account gains much of its authoritative effect with the contrast that it constructs between author and reader: the ethnographer has been where the reader cannot or did not go.

It is instructive to note that the critique of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1943) was based on another ethnographer having been there too, and having experienced a different cultural reality to the one Mead described (Freeman, 1996). The authority of the critique depends on Freeman's travel. A critic who had not been there might have found Mead's account implausible, but probably could not mount such a detailed and persuasive refutation.

The ethnography of the Internet does not necessarily involve physical travel. Visiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement. As Burnett suggests, 'you travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining' (1996: 68). It is possible for an ethnographer sitting at a desk in an office (their own office, what's more) to explore the social spaces of the Internet. Far from getting the seats of their pants dirty, Internet ethnographers keep their seats firmly on the university's upholstery. The lack of physical travel does not mean, however, that the relationship between ethnographer and readers is collapsed. Baym (1995c) has her own version of an arrival story, as does Correll (1995). Both focus not on the ways in which they physically reached a field site, but on the ways in which they negotiated access, observed interactions and communicated with participants. These descriptions set up a relationship in which the ethnographer has an extensive and sustained experience of the field site that the reader is unlikely to share (besides an analytic distance which mere participants are unable to share). Methodological preambles are far from innocent in the construction of ethnographic authority. The ethnography described in this book is no different. Chapter 4 is there not just to tell you what I did, but to convince you that I did something that authorizes me to speak. Devices such as the technical glossary at the end of this book display the ethnographer's competence with the local language, just as do the glossaries included with ethnographies conducted in distant places and other languages. Whether physical travel is involved or not, the relationship between ethnographer, reader and research subjects is still inscribed in the ethnographic text. The ethnographer is still uniquely placed to give an account of the field site, based on their experience of it and their interaction with it.

The contrast between ethnographer and reader that forms a large part of the authority claim of the ethnographic text depends not just on travel, but also on experience. Again, we have a contrast with the bad old days when ethnographers remained on the verandah (conveniently close to informants but not too close) and failed to engage fully in the field. As Van Maanen says of the genre of realist tales, 'the convention is to allow the field-worker's unexplicated experience in the culture to stand as the basis for textual authority' (1988: 47). In some renditions, this experience of the culture informs the written ethnography by allowing the ethnographer to sense the culture, in ways that extend beyond sight:

> The experience of fieldwork does not produce a mysterious empowerment, but without it, the ethnographer would not encounter the context –

the smells, sounds, sights, emotional tensions, feel – of the culture she will attempt to evoke in a written text. (Wolf, 1992: 128)

From these observations a sense of ethnographic presence begins to emerge in which 'being there' is unique to the ethnographer. The ethnographer who really went there is set up as the one with the authority to interpret, over and above the reader who might wish to interpret, but does not have access to a claim of having been there. Readers are thus always dependent on the second-hand account of the ethnographer. The ethnographic authority is not a transferable one: it resides always and only with the ethnographer who was there. The authority of the ethnographer is also not transferable, within this model, to the subjects of the study whom we might naively assume were also there. The research subject lacks the analytic vision of the ethnographer, and thus cannot coexist in the analytic space of the ethnography. Ethnography acts to construct an analytic space in which only the ethnographer is really there. Ethnographers exist alone in an analytic space which preserves their authority claim. According to Turner, ' "the field" can be conceived of as a space – better an attitude – which far from being neutral or inert, is itself the product of "disciplinary technologies" ' (1989: 13). Attempts may be made to cede this space, as in the exercise in coauthorship described by McBeth (1993), but it is the ethnographer's right to grant or withhold access.

Rosaldo (1989) evokes another sense in which experience is vital to the ethnographer. He describes his inability to comprehend the headhunter's conflation of grief with rage, until he himself suffers intense grief and finds himself angry. This foregrounds the necessity of lived experience and participation for full understanding. The ethnographer is not simply a voyeur or a disengaged observer, but is also to some extent a participant, sharing some of the concerns, emotions and commitments of the research subjects. This extended form of experience depends also on interaction, on a constant questioning of what it is to have an ethnographic understanding of a phenomenon. The authority of interaction, of juxtaposing ethnographic interpretations with those of the native, and opening them up to being altered, is another aspect of the authority that ethnography gains from the face-to-face.

The definition of ethnography as participation given by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 2) highlights the interactive aspect of ethnographic research. The researcher does not just observe at close quarters, but interacts with the researched to ask questions and gain the insights into life that come from doing as well as seeing. As Pratt points out, ethnography distinguishes itself from other kinds of travel, and from the accounts offered by other kinds of travellers:

In almost any ethnography dull-looking figures called 'mere travellers' or 'casual observers' show up from time to time, only to have their superficial perceptions either corrected or corroborated by the serious scientist. (1986: 27)

At least part of this distinction stems from an assumption that ethnography is an active attempt at analysis, involving more than just soaking up the local atmosphere. As Wolf says:

> We do research. It is more than something that simply happens to us as a result of being in an exotic place. (1992: 127)

This interaction also involves the ethnographer in leaving herself open to being taken by surprise by what occurs in the fieldwork setting. By being there, participating and experiencing, the ethnographer opens herself up to learning:

> Fieldwork of the ethnographic kind is authentic to the degree that it approximates the stranger stepping into a culturally alien community to become, for a time and in an unpredictable way, an active part of the face-to-face relationships in that community. (Van Maanen, 1988: 9)

Again we are back to face-to-face interaction as an intrinsic part of ethnography. The importance of the face-to-face in Van Maanen's account is that being physically present forces the ethnographer to be a participant in events and interactions. An ethnographer who managed to be an invisible observer (a cultural lurker?) would leave the setting undisturbed, but would also leave their interpretations of it undisturbed by trial in practice. The suggestion is that the ethnographer, by opening herself up to the unpredictability of the field, allows at least part of the agenda to be set by the setting. This claim to act as a neutral voice for the field has been used to enhance the ethnographer's authority. As Pratt points out, this does create a paradox for the ethnographic account:

> Personal narrative mediates this contradiction between the involvement called for in fieldwork and the self-effacement called for in formal ethnographic description, or at least mitigates some of its anguish, by inserting into the ethnographic text the authority of the personal experience out of which the ethnography is made. It thus recuperates at least a few shreds of what was exorcised in the conversion from the face-to-face field encounter to objectified science. (1986: 33)

Ethnographers in cyberspace can, of course, lurk in a way that face-to-face ethnographers cannot readily achieve. An observer who might be physically visible and marked as different in a face-to-face setting even when silent, can simply merge invisibly with all the other lurkers in an online setting. To do this, however, is to relinquish claims to the kind of ethnographic authority that comes from exposing the emergent analysis to challenge through interaction. Both Baym (1995c) and Correll (1995) make clear that their findings are the result of observation and interaction.

Correll (1995) stresses that besides her online work she also met some of her informants face-to-face, and thus could verify some things that they said online about their offline lives. While this is presented as a way of triangulating findings and adding authenticity to them, it could also be seen as a result of the pursuit of ethnographic holism. In this case, the group did hold periodic meetings, and Correll took advantage of this convention. Many inhabitants of cyberspace, however, have never met face-to-face and have no intention of doing so. To instigate face-to-face meetings in this situation would place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by informants themselves. In a conventional ethnography involving travel, the ethnographer is in a symmetrical position to that of informants. Informants too can look around them, ask questions, and try out their interpretations, although of course they are unlikely to analyse the results in the same way or publish them as a book! The ethnographer simply exploits the role of the stranger, new to the culture, who has deliberately to learn what others take for granted. The symmetry here is that of the ethnographer using the same resources and the same means of communication as available to the subjects of the research. This leaves us with a paradox: while pursuing face-to-face meetings with online informants might be intended to enhance authenticity via triangulation (Silverman, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), it might also threaten the experiential authenticity that comes from aiming to understand the world the way it is for informants. Rather than accepting face-to-face communication as inherently better in ethnography, a more sceptical and symmetrical approach suggests that it should be used with caution, and with a sensitivity to the ways in which informants use it.

The question remains then whether interactions in electronic space should be viewed as authentic, since the ethnographer cannot readily confirm details that informants tell them about their offline selves. Posing the problem in this way, however, assumes a particular idea of what a person is (and what authenticity is). Authenticity, in this formulation, means correspondence between the identity performed in interactions with the ethnographer and that performed elsewhere both online and offline. This presupposes a singular notion of an identity, linked to a similarly singular physical body. As Wynn and Katz (1997) point out, critiques of this singular notion of identity are well established and in no way rely upon the new technologies. The person might be better thought of as a convenient shorthand for a more or less coherent set of identity performances with reference to a singular body and biography. We might usefully turn our attention, rather than seeking correspondence and coherence ourselves, to looking at the ways in which new media might alter the conditions of identity performance (Meyrowitz, 1985). Standards of authenticity should not be seen as absolute, but are situationally negotiated and sustained. Authenticity, then, is another

manifestation of the 'phenomenon always escapes' rule (Silverman, 1993: 201). A search for truly authentic knowledge about people or phenomena is doomed to be ultimately irresolvable. The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that inform-ants judge authenticity. This also entails accepting that 'the informant' is a partial performance rather than a whole identity.

Rather than treating authenticity as a particular problem posed by cyber-space that the ethnographer has to solve before moving on to the analysis, it would be more fruitful to place authenticity in cyberspace as a topic at the heart of the analysis. Assuming *a priori* that authenticity is a problem for inhabitants of cyberspace is the same kind of ethnographic mistake as assuming that the Azande have a problem in dealing with the contradictions inherent in their beliefs about witchcraft. It should be addressed as an issue for the ethnography as and when it arises during interaction. The issues of authenticity and identity are addressed again in Chapter 6 in the light of an ethnographic exploration of an Internet event. Despite this transformation of the authenticity issue from a problem for the ethnographer to a topic for the ethnography, it is fair to say that the ethnography will always have to meet a different standard of authenticity to that prevailing in interactions in the field: the ethnography is ultimately produced and evaluated in an academic setting (Stanley, 1990). What faces the ethnographer is a translation task between the authenticity standards of two different discourses.

Text, Technology and Reflexivity

In the previous section, the Internet was described as a site for interaction, which, although it might not entail face-to-face communication, was still in some sense ethnographically available. This argument is based on the assumption that what goes on within the Internet is social interaction. Another way of looking, however, would see cyberspace as composed of texts, rather than being interactive. There is no definite fixed line between the two concepts. The distinction is useful in so far as it plays out different ideas about what constitutes and characterizes the two phenomena. Interaction tends to be thought of as entailing a copresence of the parties involved, and a rapid exchange of perspectives which leads to a shared achievement of understanding between those involved (although not, of course, a completely transparent understanding). What we call a text could be thought of as a temporally shifted and packaged form of interaction. While spoken interaction is ephemeral (unless transcribed by social scientists) and local, texts are mobile, and so available outside the immediate circumstances in which they are produced. Texts possess the potential for availability outside their site of

production, and hence make possible the separation of production and consumption. Newspapers, television programmes, memoranda, correspondence, audio and video tapes, and compact discs all have a taken-for-granted mobility: they are packaged in a form which means they can be transferred from one person to another. Where clarification is needed, the readers of a text cannot readily ask the authors what they meant. The focus in consuming texts is therefore placed far more on the interpretive work done by readers and less on a shared understanding between authors and readers. We tend (now) not to see texts as transparent carriers of the meanings intended by their authors. It could be said, then, that what we see on the Internet is a collection of texts. Using the Internet then becomes a process of reading and writing texts, and the ethnographer's job is to develop an understanding of the meanings which underlie and are enacted through these textual practices.

There is probably little to be gained from itemizing which aspects of the Internet should be seen as interactive sites or texts. Rather, it is important to keep in mind that they can be both. There is no doubt, however, that some parts seem more interactive than others. IRC, MUDs and newsgroups can seem quite interactive, even approaching the informality of spoken conversation. Although not all contributions are visibly acknowledged, enough receive responses for the impression of an ongoing conversation to develop. The early ethnographers of the Internet have had no problems in rendering these settings as appropriate sites for ethnographic interaction. The WWW, as discussed in Chapter 2, seems to pose more of a challenge to those looking for interactive sites. In contrast to newsgroups, the WWW seems to be a collection of largely static texts (although some of these contain interactive settings or discussion lists). The texts of static web pages might be interlinked, and might change over time, but viewed individually they make available no obvious way in which the ethnographer might interact. The ethnographer could visit other web pages and then develop their own web page as a response, but this hardly meets the standards for knowledge exposed to test through interaction and experience described above. This might seem to mean that the WWW is not available for ethnographic enquiry. The ethnographic approach seems to come to a full stop at the point at which the technology no longer promotes interactions in which the ethnographer can play a part. It is worth looking at the ways in which texts have been used by other ethnographers, in order to find some ways forward.

Traditionally, oral interactions have been foremost for ethnographers, and texts have taken a somewhat secondary role as cultural products, worthy of study only as far as they reveal something about the oral settings in which culture resides. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) interpret this reliance on oral interaction as part of the 'romantic legacy' of ethnography, which tends to treat speech as more authentic than writing. They suggest that texts deserve a more detailed appraisal, and that judgement about the