

Virtual Ethnography

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Introduction

The Internet holds an ambivalent position in academic research. On the one hand, it is seen as a tool to collect data and get access to realms that seem to be out of reach for the scientists. As a “virtual laboratory”, social scientists are enabled to collect data time- and space-independent, across national boundaries without high costs (Joinson, 2005, 21). Thinking of websites as a form of textual documents, the Internet is an endless archive of research material that is universally accessible. But also other methods, qualitative as well as quantitative, are commonly transferred into the Online field: Online surveys, Web-based questionnaires, E-Mail interviews, Online focus groups are a few to mention (Flick, 2009, 264ff).

On the other hand, the Internet is an object of research in itself. Being part of the everyday life of people, questions of Internet use, identity construction, social interaction in the Web are important research fields in various academic disciplines and contexts. The gathering of empirical data is thus warmly welcomed and over the last decades, research on Internet has been conducted using all kind of methodology. Referring to Marotzki (2003), Flick (2009, 264f) mentions three basic research focuses in Internet research: “offline: we study (interviews, for example) how users deal with the Internet in their life world; online-offline: we analyze how the Internet has changed societal, institutional or private areas of living (also by using interviews); online: we study communication in the Net in virtual communities by using interaction analysis” (ibid.).

Even though all conventional research methods have been applied to Internet research at one point, it might not feel obvious at first sight to use ethnography in order to study Internet use. “The image of the ethnographer is that of someone who visits places or locations such as communities and organizations” (Bryman, 2004, 471) not to sit in front of a computer screen. Conventional notions of ethnography might include the use of several methods of data collection, a delimitable field, long-time orientation, participation in the lives of the subjects and the establishment of relationships (e.g. Bryman, 2004, 471). How does the Internet as research object justify an ethnographic approach usually concerned with places and cultures?

In fact, the connection is not that hard to draw. If we think of the Internet as a technology, the term ‘Cyberspace’ already implies a spatial dimension. Ever since in academic discussion, the Internet has been seen as a multidimensional space, a virtual

reality that users do not consume, but that they can explore. This is partly due to inherent characteristics of the technology: hypertextuality vs. linearity; network organisation vs. hierarchical organisation; interaction vs. consumption. Manuel Castells (1996, 376ff) even refers in his concept of 'the space of flows' to the 'electronic home' – a re-location in the process of de-location.

Additionally to the perception of the Internet as place, the Internet can be seen as a culture. According to Rheingold (1993), Karen O'Reilly (2009, 215) highlights that Online groups can take the form of a virtual community and that meaningful relationships exist in the Internet. "True sociality" of the Web has according to Christine Hine (2004, 7f) been proven over time "thanks to the compelling descriptions of sustained online interaction and the formation of social structures". Ethnography is thus a way to study the lived experience, interaction and interpretation of the technology observing and interacting with the subjects in a particular virtual field.

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on this methodology focusing on problems and questions that arise when applying ethnographic approaches to Internet studies. Furthermore, one particular interest is, how virtual ethnography can be used to study political participation and deliberation through Online communities. Here, I want to reflect on a small study I conducted using this methodology.

Method

Ethnography is a methodology that has its roots in social and cultural anthropology as well as sociology (O'Reilly, 2005, 3). Fetterman (1998, 1) describes ethnography as "the art and science of describing a group or culture". Central in ethnographic research is that the data is collected within the particular group or culture. Ethnographers literally go into the field of study and use a range of methods (not only participant observation) in order to draw a holistic picture of the group – from an insider's perspective. The aim is to get a complete picture of the particular culture, the daily routines, values and practices rather than finding out about irregularities and abnormalities.

'The field' is an important concept in ethnographic research. Once figured out the research problem, the ethnographer has to define the field, get access to it, recruit participants, establish relationships to the group and take on an insider's role (O'Reilly, 2005, 3; Fetterman, 1998, 35). However, the 'field' or the 'setting', as Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) call it, is rarely the object of study, but "a named context in which

phenomena occur that might be studied from any number of angles” (ibid.). A field is nothing natural, but culturally shaped and defined and the researcher has to be aware of that. Once defined and accessed a field, most important during the process of fieldwork is the balance between the emic insider’s perspective and the etic researcher’s objectivity. While living with the ‘Natives’, the researcher may not make the mistake to ‘go native’.

Referring to Hammersley & Atkinson (1995), Flick (2009, 233) locates ethnography in a tradition of qualitative methodology mentioning the main features of ethnography to be: exploration rather than testing hypotheses, working with unstructured data, studying only a small number of cases or only one case in depth, analysing the data while interpreting meanings and functions of human actions. Critical exploration is the main concept of the fieldwork and ethnography contains thus the typical features of qualitative research. For the practice, Fetterman (2009, 20ff) adds further principles of ethnographic research: nonjudgemental orientation, acknowledging diversity within a culture and between cultures, contextualisation of conclusions and the need to operationalise whenever possible.

Milestones in Virtual Ethnography

As argued before, social interaction in the Internet implies an enhancement of the field concept to virtual fields and during the 90s, various authors discussed the Internet theoretically from an anthropological perspective (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Markham, 1998). As a consequence, only little later, authors began to collect data in the Internet using ethnographic studies. Most notable are the works of Daniel Miller & Don Slater (2000) and Christine Hine (2000).

Miller & Slater followed a method that was rather close to conventional ethnography. In their study, they were concerned with Internet use in Trinidad and just as in conventional ethnography they applied a wide range of methods starting from observing people in Internet cafés to interviewing actors in the local Internet environment. As a conclusion, the authors state that there is no way to generally distinguish between “real”

and “virtual” world. The virtual world is embedded in a material world and in society as a whole¹ (Miller & Slater, 2000, 8).

Hine (2000) examined a popular trial and its representation and construction in the Internet. She analysed Websites, interviewed Webmasters, investigated newsgroup and took part in discussions there. Her publication with the title “Virtual Ethnography” is – besides the actual discussion of how this case was dealt with in the Internet – an exploration of ethnographic Online research, its strengths and weaknesses. Thoroughly investigating the literature and elaborating on the transfer of ethnography to the virtual realms, she established 10 principles of virtual ethnography that critically discuss main problems and the estrangement of ethnography, when applied to the Internet: the lack of face-to-face communication, spatial and temporal dislocation, the understanding of technology as both culture and cultural artefact and thus the ethnography itself as virtually constructed (Hine, 2000, 63ff).

Having always been an adaptive methodology, ethnography, she argues, can be used to study the Internet, when applied anew in every single case: “An adaptive approach to ethnography will allow it to thrive in the conditions which developments in mediated communication offer” (2000, 154). With this contextualisation and structuring of the methodology, her contribution to ethnographic Internet research is remarkable and five years later, she published as the editor a compendium on Virtual Methods dealing with progresses and developments in Online methodology.

Together with Hine, virtual ethnography was increasingly used in research on Online communities and virtual reality (e.g. Sundén, 2002; Kanayama, 2003). Whereas these early text-based communities² could be rather easily accessed, since several years, private or semi-public Online communities play an increasingly important role in the study of the Internet. While the first wave of Online communities grouped around topics or activities³, more recent social networks bear an egocentric notion of community

¹ Here, they argue against Castells and his distinction between ‘the Net’ and ‘the Self’ pointing out that the Internet can by far not be seen as a monolithic and reified structure, but as a mirror of society in all its diversity.

² Sundén refers to them as MOO’s – MUD Object Oriented.

³ Delanty (2003, 171) applies this concept of virtual communities to political participation: “The Internet brings together strangers in a sociality often based on anonymity and where a ‘new intimacy’ is found in which politics and subjectivity are intertwined” (ibid.).

(Boyd, 2009, 27). "Rather than relying on interests or structure-based boundaries, current social groups are defined through relationships" (ibid.).

According to the "ARD/ZDF Onlinestudie 2009", 27% of all Internet users up from 14 years in Germany are active in Online communities at least once a week, in the age range of 14 and 29 years it is 62% (female) and 67% (male) (Eimeren & Frees, 2009, 340). Interestingly, in average, users of online communities are registered in two online communities. The connecting according to social rather than cultural proximity (cf. Boyd, 2009, 28) challenges Online researchers anew and requires an ethnography that is focused on networks rather than continuous cultural environments.

Challenges in Virtual Ethnography

Hine's (2000) ten principles of virtual ethnography were in fact a discussion of the main challenges that ethnography has to face when transferred to the Internet and also other authors point to problems that come up when designing an ethnographic study of the Internet (e.g. Flick, 2009; Markham & Baym, 2009; O'Reilly, 2009) and I want to discuss three of them in this paper.

The Field

The dislocation of 'the virtual' jeopardises the field concept. "How can one engage with Internet use in the field, as it occurs, when there is no single place to be?" formulates O'Reilly (2009, 216) the main challenge for Online ethnographers. According to Hine (2000) and Markham (1998), this problem has to be faced with an innovative and adaptive understanding of ethnography in itself. "The object of ethnographic enquiry can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle" (Hine, 2000, 64). However, we have to keep in mind that the ethnographer creates the space him/herself through interaction with the objects. This puts thus also the role of the ethnographer into question.

Having no spatial boundaries, another problem that emerges with the virtual field is the question where to stop the investigation. What should be taking into account and which sites/profiles/links should be neglected? Both Markham (1998, 81) as well as Hine (2009, 2) have a very pragmatic answer: The investigation should be stopped, when enough data is collected. "Deciding where to start and when to stop can be an intrinsic part of the ethnographer's attempts to ensure that his or her research questions are both coherently addressed and adapted to the cultural landscape that emerges" (ibid). In that regard, virtual ethnography is not much different from conventional ethnography

that is also generally open-ended. According to Hine (2009, 17), the boundless Internet might even help to understand cultural complexity in a better way.

Role of the Ethnographer

Hine (2000, 54) highlights the ethnographer's understanding of the Internet as reflexive. Taking part in the interaction, the researcher shares the same experiences as the participants. This makes the ethnographer to an informant him/herself even more than this would be the case with a rather observational method in a 'real' field. "Ethnographers are adapting participant observation for use in virtual settings by ensuring they meet certain criteria (...) and even being socialised into the culture" (O'Reilly, 2009, 217). However, the ethnographer has even the opportunity to investigate websites as a 'lurker', someone who reads only, or to collect data with special software filming or recording interaction (Flick, 2009, 275). This raises ethical questions.

Ethics

The ethical questions raised in virtual ethnography are similar to those in conventional ethnography: How does the ethnographer present him/herself? Should ethnography be overt? How is the privacy of the participants secured? However, in virtual ethnography, it might be easier to neglect questions of scientific ethics due to the open access to private information and the 'unreal' and sometimes even playful character of Internet communication. Referring to Hine, O'Reilly (2009, 218) warns: "if we believe a virtual community is real enough to research, then they are real enough for us to harm or infringe their privacy". Researchers may not take advantage of "self-disclosure" that Joinson (2005, 23) sees as the "most widely recognised prosocial behaviour on the Internet".

What is real?

As already discussed by Miller & Slater in 2000, the Internet can barely be considered as existing without material contexts. This is increasingly important as the Internet has become more and more a part of the everyday live rather than a virtual place, where people go to. The connection to the real life of the participants has to be taken into account in order to investigate virtual behaviour comprehensively. Through virtual ethnography, the researcher gains only one part of the interaction or – as Flick (2009, 275) blames Hine – it might sometimes rather be an analysis of Web content than interactions on the Web.

Speaking of reality as authenticity, a whole range of questions comes up: Are the participants 'real'? Do the participants reveal their 'true' identity? What conclusions can be drawn from the virtual behaviour to the real world? The relevance of these questions depends on the research question. "The search for authenticity should be put aside unless or until it reveals itself as a problem for the inhabitants of a cyberspace" (O'Reilly, 2009, 217). If the research question demands the exploration of the real world, virtual ethnography can be combined with conventional ethnographic methods and authors suggest to generally break the distinction between the two realms. "There is no reason to feel you need to select either/or virtual or 'real' ethnography" (O'Reilly, 2009, 219). As Miller & Slater (2000) show in their study, virtual ethnography does not exclude face-to-face interaction with participants.

Applied Virtual Ethnography

In addition to the problems of virtual ethnography that are addressed in the literature, I want to discuss problems that came up in a small study that I conducted using principles of virtual ethnography in order to get access to a community. Being interested in political deliberation and participation in the Web, the study aim was to prove whether users of the two social networking platforms Facebook and Twitter express themselves politically and how. Referring to the concept of the digital public sphere, the research question was: Do Internet users demonstrate citizenship in Twitter and Facebook and if so, how?

The main challenge concerning the methodology was to get access to existing networks in order to investigate an existing environment. Since Facebook is a rather private network, access is only to achieve through an existing node in a network. As the study objects, I thus chose my personal, existing network environments, the participants were my friends on Facebook or follower on Twitter. In order to identify political notions, I examined the Facebook posts/Twitter tweets on one day using an operationalisation of political notions that was theoretically deduced from the concepts of citizenship and public opinion.

Sampling

Flick (2009, 275) points out that in virtual ethnography "sampling is purposive and analysis of collected material is, like other forms of ethnography, rather flexible". However, it proved to be problematic to use my personal network environment due to

several reasons: Firstly, it was barely possible to generalise any of the results and even not distinguishable how much of the data describes Online behaviour as such and how much describes me and my particular environment as an outcome of personal background and interest. Even though Hine highlights that the ethnographer is – while interacting in the field – an informant him/herself, it was hard to be objective in that regard. Secondly, since I investigated my personal daily life, I lacked distance to the participants and the social environment. Referring to Hammersley & Atkinson (1995), Hine (2000, 14) speaks in this context of “acceptable incompetence”. The researcher should come as a stranger to the technology in order to notice all the small details, otherwise there is the risk to take for granted the irregularities (e.g. habits of certain Facebook friends) that unfold in front of the eyes of the researcher.

In the paper, I suggested a two-step way of sampling in order to avoid this problem. In a first step, the Online environments of people should be picked and defined as research fields. This goes along with methods of field access in conventional ethnography: “An introduction by a member is the ethnographer’s best ticket into the community” (Fetterman, 2009, 36). The actual ethnography then takes place in the social networks of these participants. This means that there are several layers of participation. Firstly, the people whose networks are examined and secondly all the friends, who are in these networks.

Combination of methods

It was striking in the study that virtual ethnography is a methodology and not a method in itself meaning that it is rather an attitude towards the study object than a way to collect data. Having once accessed the field, several methods can be applied to approach the research question: Hine (2000) uses discourse analysis a lot, Boyd (2007) & Sundén (2003) use Online interviews. In my small study, I used content analysis that I even evaluated quantitatively. While using the general ethnographic principles and values, the researcher can be highly creative in the application and triangulation of methods. This is a very convenient way of doing research, however, it bears risks concerning the quality of the data.

Quality criteria

As I already indicated, the reliability of the study is called into question. Investigating the personal network environment jeopardises notions of objectivity. However, this is a general concern towards ethnography and Flick (2009, 236) points out that data

collection methods are treated as secondary in ethnographic studies. “This approach may be interpreted (in a positive way) as showing flexibility towards the subject under study, but it also holds the danger of methodological arbitrariness” (ibid.). It is thus even more important to be systematic and thorough, when using methods such as observation, interviewing or content analysis. However, the Internet might offer even better opportunities to record and archive the collected data. In my small study, I took a screenshot of every political notion expressed via Facebook and Twitter. This would not be possible in face-to-face communication.

Conclusion

This paper elaborates on problems and challenges that occur when transferring ethnography to the Internet. Even though some ethnographic principles have to be revised and adapted, a whole range of Internet research shows that ethnography is today a methodology that is embraced by researchers and that actually works. “Studies like these are clearly inviting us to consider the nature of the Internet as a domain for investigation, but they also invite us to consider the nature and adaptiveness of our research methods” (Bryman, 2004, 473). Virtual ethnography challenges conventional ethnography, but this should be regarded as a chance to rethink common principles such as the role of the ethnographer, holism or notions of the field.

Ethnography has always been a methodology in transition. Being originally concerned with remote cultures, it has been used later on to study subcultures, organisations or institutions. Mobile and multi-sited ethnography or postmodern strategies such as auto-ethnography added another layer of abstraction to the methodology (Flick, 2009, 234; O’Reilly, 2009, 168ff). To apply ethnography to the realms of the Internet seems to be a logical consequence and proves the innovative and adaptive character of the methodology.

In my study, I was faced with rather practical problems: sampling, operationalisation, objectivity. Since ethnography is regarded as highly flexible, it requests a high amount of experience, independence and professionalism from the researcher, which I personally considered to be the main challenge in my study.

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