Review Paper

ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE CYBERSPACE: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This paper outlines some of the issues involved in conducting ethnographic research in the Internet specifically social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. With the advent of Internet and social media, online environments have emerged where millions of people come together in virtual communities to interact, collaborate, share and consume information. The emergence of these online communities has dramatically changed individual engagement and collaboration patterns. It is no longer sufficient to look at individual or small group activities in the real world as many individuals have browsed, searched, communicated and collaborated within the dynamic online social networks. Extending studies from traditional human relationship in the real world to the virtual world is imperative to better understand human behaviour. Ranging from simple text-based news groups to virtual multi-users environments, the Internet has provided new settings and rich sources of information for conducting ethnography research. However, online ethnography also raises the issues of managing scale, researcher presence and field relations when doing research in the digital world.

Key Terms: Online ethnography, Virtual ethnography, Digital ethnography, Social networks, Social media

1. Introduction

Research is increasingly concerned with how the internet operates within our daily lives especially with the advent of web technologies. Social network sites such as Facebook, blogs and Twitter have provided new platforms for individual to communicate, interact and collaborate. The Internet and emergence of web 2.0 technologies have enabled geographically disperse individuals to come together and in social spaces creating virtual communities. Online ethnography offers possibilities to engage with a global audience of research subjects (Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Koechlin, 2015). People engaged in virtual communications will construct new spaces in such a way that is distinct and separate from the real world (Carter, 2004). Today, human relationships are formed in the virtual world and maintained in similar ways to those in the society and assimilated into everyday life. Questions often arise are how people are living life in online or virtual communities? What relationships are being formed online and how are real life and virtual life interwoven in terms of lived experience? This calls for alternative research approaches to study relationships online.

2. Literature Review

Ethnography is embedded in an anthropological tradition essentially to examine a cultural group or phenomena. It offers a naturalistic interpretation and understanding of human
behavior within cultures and communities by providing "thick descriptions" of intricate social structures, behaviors, symbols and language (Patton, 2002). Thick descriptions offer ethnographers an opportunity to go beyond mere traces of interaction and activity, and gain an in-depth understanding of implicit concepts of motivation, meaning and attitudes that are sometimes different or divergent from explicit behaviors (Geertz, 1998). Ethnographers gather information by observing, talking with people and at the same time scrutinizing relevant archives and artifacts to provide answers to their research questions. This diversity of data collection approaches allowed an ethnographer to triangulate or cross-check the accuracy of the collected data (Gatson, 2013).

Ethnography has also extended beyond anthropology with the emergence of various sub-genres of ethnographic research. Although these sub-genres may differ on specific practices of implementing ethnographic methods, however, most agree that the basic tenets of ethnography remain the recursive and inductive in-depth observation (often through participant's observation) of a culture or a community, and formal or informal open ended interviews designed to understand the perspectives of stakeholders within the community (Hammersley, 2006).

In information studies, ethnography has yet to become a central method but was used in many cases to provide understanding of the relationship between technology and human (Rotman, Preece, He & Druin, 2012). The development of the internet in the last few decades has initiated discussions about sub-genre of ethnography online, digital ethnography or virtual ethnography. This sub-genre of ethnography is based on a reflective position that allows observations of how people construct, reconstruct and make meanings in this case; the Internet and the cyberspace. Online ethnography has been conducted on sites and services such as blogs, chatrooms, forums etc. whereby the researcher could not be physically present (Carter, 2004; Hine, 2000). In a way, the Internet and social media have hampered interaction of researcher and participants. This is because research's participation and being physically present in the 'field' are hallmarks and strengths of ethnographic research (Cowlishaw, 2008). However, this could not be carried out in the case of conducting ethnography in the cyberspace.

Human interactions take place in face-to-face environment as well as in an online environment. Neglecting any one of this environment may not portray an accurate picture of our social and cultural norm. Ignoring the impact of the Internet will also mean the researcher will deprive himself or herself a rich source of information and material for research. Ethnography analyses human practices in the context of culture, and the Internet, and social networking (SN) are part of our modern culture and communication tools. This also calls for rethinking of strategies and ethnographic methods that have the ability to explore the scope of interpersonal interactions in the virtual world while taking into account the lack of face-to-face interaction which is the tradition of interpretivist research (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

Sanday (1979) categorized ethnography into three schools of thoughts namely the holistic, semiotic and behavioural. The holistic school suggests that the ethnographic research should 'go native' and 'live among the subjects' of study in order to empathise while immersing in the social grouping being observed. The ethnographer has to become a blank slate and acts like a sponge, soaking up language and culture of the people in order to fully understand their social and cultural practices.

On the other hand, Geertz (1998) argued that an ethnographer does not need to empathise with the subject. Rather, the ethnographer has to search and analyze symbolic norms such as words, images, institutions and behaviour which form the group culture. Harvey and Myers (1995) argued that 'thick describing' the situation and its context could identify the web of significance which people weave within the cultural context. In other words, they too infer culture can be described and analysed without having to empathise with the people.

From the perspectives of semiotic and behavioural approaches, virtual ethnography seems applicable by interpreting and gaining meanings out of languages, culture and norms, that
ethnographer does not need to empathise with his or her subjects and physically immerse in the settings where human interaction take place.

Klein and Myers (1999) proposed a set of guidelines for the evaluation of interpretative studies that include case studies and ethnographies in information systems (IS). Myers (1999) had highlighted a few of these aspects that are used as guidelines to evaluate ethnographies conducted in the field of IS.

Firstly, the ethnographer must convince the reviewers and readers that his or her findings are new and worth of the research. Secondly, the ethnographic research needs to offer rich insights into the subject matter. Thirdly, a significant amount of material has to be collected because the ethnographer needs to be on the field for a reasonable length of time conducting fieldwork. Fourth, ethnographic studies provide the subject matter set in its social and cultural context and expressed in multiple viewpoints that include dilemmas, frustrations, routines, relationships that are part of everyday life (Grills, 1998). Fifth, sufficient information about the research methodology being presented could help reviewers to evaluate the validity of the findings and to know what the research did and how he did it (Myers, 1999). All these aspects can help researchers and reviewers to evaluate the quality of a virtual ethnographic study.

3. Discussion

The ubiquity and pervasiveness of the Internet, Web 2.0, Web 3.0 and other emerging new technologies posed various challenges to conducting ethnography online. Frameworks developed by anthropology may also be in crisis because the notions of society, the self and traditional culture distinctions are being challenged by the advent of the Internet and usage of social media tools at workplace, public place and home. The traditional ethnography writing is based on extended, empirical fieldwork of ‘being there’, ‘going everywhere’ with the social subject that entails both immersion and intimacy with the subjects to experience and share their social world (Cowlishaw, 2007). Nonetheless, a number of discussions about the appropriateness of virtual ethnography for the study of the Internet and the impact of social network have been presented (e.g. Beaulieu 2004; Beneito-Montagut, 2011, Rotnam et al., 2012, Cordoba-Pachon & Loureiro-Kechlin, 2014).

Some researchers have perceived online environment by nature as hostile, impersonal and shallow and yield little valid data (Carter, 2005). In any ethnography, it is critical to know who the participants are and their locality. In the case of social network, individuals can take on multiple identities and be in anywhere at any time. If the ethnographer is unaware of the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, it could result in only telling part of the story and creating a false impression. The issues of trustworthiness and authenticity of data obtained from online sources are also being questioned if the researcher is not able to participate and observe the subjects in the virtual world settings.

Moreover, Calhoun (1991) argued that the Internet itself has formed a barrier to ethnographic approach since the meaning of community has been illusory enacted on the Internet. Computer-mediated communication using social media tools is actually not rich enough to sustain a meaningful social relationship without taking into account physical interactions between individuals in a community.

Other issues arise for conducting virtual ethnography is that the researcher usually chooses a specific site as if physical boundaries could be applied to the Internet (Schaap, 2002). However, it is important to take note that communication and interactions among individuals never develop in one setting alone. Research that focuses on specific sites such as chat rooms and more recently on specific communities or social networks such as Facebook, Twitter LinkedIn or other blogospheres provides limited understanding of everyday life and the various intersections between different sites and uses (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). Individuals in modern society use myriads of social interaction tools such as emails, web 2.0, Web 3.0 tools and other applications at the same time to interact and communicate. They also juggle across devices such
as mobile phones, tablet computers and across places namely work place, home and public place in the process of interacting with one another.

Many online environments are presented on a matrix-like and global structure that could be hyper-linked to other sites instantaneously. Individual could make friends and be connected by reciprocal comments and through topical discussions in multiple-sites online. As ethnography aims to provide systematic understanding of a culture or phenomenon, it is necessary to observe interactions at various layers and websites. Hence, the size and scope of the online environment make virtual ethnography a complex endeavor.

Therefore, defining the setting in an online ethnography research is a critical issue (Garcia, Standlee & Cui, 2009). Virtual ethnography tries to fit the traditional or ‘real world setting’ onto the Internet and recognise vast differences which exist between ‘virtual setting’ and ‘real world’. Observations and participations in just one layer or website in virtual ethnographic research will provide a fragmented idea of how individual communicate, collaborate and interact on the Internet. Wilson and Peterson (2002) also heightened the high costs of conducting multi-sited virtual ethnography and the uncertainty that comes with moving fields and monitoring changing actors across fieldwork.

Virtual ethnography has inclined to have over representation of textual content over other types of material gathered online (Cowlishaw, 2007). The Internet and web 2.0 technologies provide the researcher with very different sets of data in the form of text, sounds, videos, pictures. Research and theory have to consider multimedia data rather than over-emphasis on textual data (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

High pace of technology changes has also resulted in new online settings, features, and new applications being developed and changing rapidly. For example, Friendster and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) which are very popular not long ago have become obsolete. Interface changes in social network sites also cause a shift in the content and also alter the research context which the ethnographer has no control given some of the social network sites are commercial and proprietary (Rotman et al., 2012).

In order to achieve reflective, critical and precise descriptions of the Internet and social network sites, researcher tends to speed up to follow the ‘fast moving’ objects of analysis and ‘slow down’ to understand them (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). New features and capability of Web 2.0 and other emerging technologies have resulted in research telling us about a specific technology rather than telling us about the meanings of communications and social interactions online.

Ethical dilemmas also arise because participants are distributed geographically which makes it difficult to apply ethical practices. Attitudes differ throughout the world concerning online privacy. It is even more challenging if there is a large number of online users interacting online and anonymity caused by accessibility of the Internet where textual fragments and other digital content can be easily retrieved, modified and forwarded.

Web technologies have grown rapidly with four out five Internet users visiting social network sites and blogs. Across 10 major global economies, these applications have reached over three-quarter of active internet users (Nielson, 2011). Individual time spend online for communication, sharing and soliciting information has increased tremendously. The Internet is liberating and facilitating the generation of a rich field of data suggesting future research directions (Hine 2000; Schaap, 2002; Carter 2005).

The Internet is a cheap-and-easy way to reach the world (Paccagnella, 1997). The very existence of the Internet and its easy accessibility make it a very attractive ‘sites’ to conduct fieldwork. Hakken (1999) argued that virtual ethnographic methods are well suited to study the virtual world. The multiple identities and dynamism of the virtual communities have started to shift the focus away from studying conventional community by researchers.
Hine (2000) opined that virtual ethnographers have the advantage on the fact that they no longer have to struggle to leave or ‘to get away’ and can pursue their fieldwork from their offices. He highlighted fieldwork will be characterized by ‘switching’ roles and lurking around, intermingling fieldwork with multiple layers and social network sites. According to Hine (2008), virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion and necessarily partial, leaving aside these communities in the ethnographic sense.

Virtual ethnography can also move out of ‘visits’ to online sites and into everyday life of the subjects, including leisure and friendship and other dimensions of life because this ‘everyday life’ constitutes the habitus that makes online participation both possible and meaningful (Driscoll and Gregg, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Virtual ethnography has limitations and issues that need to be examined in order to develop this approach for more meaningful research. The new online landscape is also defined by its wide scope, size and constant change (Rotman et al., 2012). Furthermore, the boundary between real and virtual is blurred as people use all types of media available on hand to communicate. Communication systems on the Internet also produce a wide variety of multimedia data other than text. All these require an ethnographic approach which is able to provide tools to capture the complex social interactions online to provide in-depth and rich details for research.

In the meantime, researchers have adopted an expanded ethnography as an appropriate methodology to examine online social interactions (e.g. Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002; Beaulieu, 2004; Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Rotman et al., 2012). The features of expanded ethnography include using quantitative approaches to complement ethnographic studies.

Reference


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