



Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital technologies has the potential to open new directions in ethnography. Despite the ubiquity of these technologies, their infiltration into popular sociological research methods is still limited compared to the insatiable uptake of online scholarly research portals. This article argues that social researchers cannot afford to continue this trend. Building upon pioneering work in 'digital ethnography', I critically examine the possibilities and problems of four new technologies – online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs – and their potential impacts on the research relationship. The article concludes that a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents. However, access to these technologies remains stratified by class, race, and gender of both researchers and respondents.

KEY WORDS

blogs / digital ethnography / digital video / online questionnaires / online research methods / social networking / web 2.0

An ethnography cannot give us a glimpse of reality that resides beyond the story told within the ethnography; the story is all.

(Thomas Kent 1993: 67)

As ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories. When an ethnographer comes back from 'the field', they, like Walter Benjamin's (1969: 84) 'storyteller', have 'something to tell about'. Whyte's (1993[1943]) seminal work in *Street Corner Society*, among other examples, demonstrates how good ethnography effectively communicates a social story, drawing the audience into the daily lives of the respondents. With the introduction of new technologies, the stories have remained vivid, but the ways they were told have changed. The hand-drawn figures of Whyte's Cornerville were replaced by crisp machine-assisted line drawings. Similarly, the stenographically documented interviews of the 1920s and 1930s Chicago School sociologists began to give way to magnetic wire recording in the 1950s (Lee, 2004).¹ The advent of new digital technologies follows in these footsteps. Consumer-grade digital cameras provide ultra sharp images and video of ethnographic sites, enabling not only the recording of interviews and research sites, but also the possibility of webcams and videoconferencing. Web questionnaires have enabled large-scale multi-site international surveys that would have exhausted the whole departmental budget in the days of postal research. Email interviews have gathered rich bilateral streams of data from otherwise inaccessible respondents. Despite the ubiquity of these technologies, their infiltration into popular sociological research methods is still limited compared to the insatiable uptake of online scholarly research portals (most notably Google's Books and Scholar databases).² This lack is echoed in textbook methods literature. Paul ten Have's introductory qualitative research text dedicates a mere two and a half pages to the internet (ten Have, 2004: 101–3) and W. Lawrence Neuman's textbook (now in its sixth edition) spends the bulk of its four pages of coverage warning social scientists away from internet methods (Neuman, 2006: 126–9). O'Reilly's (2005) *Ethnographic Methods* does slightly better with a chapter on visual data which makes a passing reference to the use of video diaries, but otherwise sticks to a fairly traditional discussion of analogue photography. Even Alaszewski's more specialized text *Using Diaries for Social Research* dedicates a mere six lines to blogs as forms of research diaries (2006: 12). As these remain popular pedagogical texts, their omission of digital ethnographic methods should cause some alarm. Uwe Flick's (2006) textbook on qualitative research is a very noteworthy exception as he includes a solid chapter on online research methods and a chapter on video. Crang and Cook (2007) have a lively discussion of 'filmic' methods (pp. 104–28) in their methods book, but skirt internet research, save a passing paragraph on email interviews (p. 66). Silverman's (2005) primer *Doing Qualitative Research* does not include any reference to internet methods (save for a one-page description of a student's internet ethnography) and is relatively downbeat on the inclusion of video (p. 60). However, his edited collection, *Qualitative Research* (2006) makes great strides in digital ethnography and features a strong chapter on the internet and social research (pp. 95–124).

This article argues that social researchers cannot afford to continue this overall trend of sidestepping digital methods in the future. Building upon pioneering work in 'digital ethnography' (Coover, 2004; Couldry and McCarthy, 2004;

Dicks et al., 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Jones, 1999; Pink, 2007), I critically examine the possibilities and problems of four new technologies – online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs – and their potential impacts on the research relationship. As a substantial proportion of digital ethnography seems to be covert, this trend and the associated ethical issues are examined. The respondent-led aspects of video and blogs are considered as possible inversions of traditional researcher/subject roles and the latter is discussed as a potential public sphere. The article concludes that a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods to tell social stories, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents in these accounts. However, access to these technologies remains stratified by class, race, and gender of both researchers and respondents.

Before proceeding, I do understand that technological progress has sometimes resulted in laudatory, rather than critical treatments of digital media (Dyson, 1997; Gates, 1996; Gore, 1994; Negroponte, 1995). Invocations of ‘digital ethnography’, ‘hypermedia’, ‘virtual ethnography’, and ‘new media’ can, of course, similarly appear as more style than substance, leading some of us to question their real rigour. In the 1950s, as Eliot Freidson noted, the use of a tape recorder in research settings was mocked (Lee, 2004: 877). In the 1970s, photography came under similar scrutiny. Howard Becker (1974: 12), for example, argued that ‘the pictures anthropologists take in the field are really vacation pictures, no different from the ones they take on any other vacation or that non-anthropologist vacationers take’. Ironically, Becker was one of the first sociologists to use tape recording technology in the early 1950s.³ Similarly, some sociologists who embraced photography decades ago are today sceptics of webcam video streams or research ‘blogs’.

Digital Ethnography: A Covert Affair?

My survey of digital ethnographic work reveals a disproportionate number of covert versus overt projects. Much of this frontier-breaking work has been especially interested in sex and deviance. A similar pattern holds true with their ‘analogue’ antecedents.⁴ Pioneering physical ethnography, especially projects sponsored by the early Chicago School, supports this conclusion. For example, Paul Cressey’s (1932) seminal study of the Chicago ‘taxi-dance halls’ uses a team of covert ‘observers’ to research these venues, where young women were hired out (like taxis) at ‘a dime a dance’ (1932: xi). Laud Humphreys’ (1970) work on ‘tearooms’ extends this covert legacy of sex⁵ research into casual gay encounters in the public toilets of a Midwestern American city. As ethnography goes online, it is clear that this sociological fascination continues. For example, Sharp and Earle (2003) covertly study paid-for-sex on the internet by looking at over 5000 ‘reviews’ by male clients of sex workers on a ‘punters’ website. They carefully map this network, examining the cognitive and spatial dissonance and consonance between reviewers. Another case is Magnet’s (2007) study of the website

suicidegirls.com, a commercial site featuring nude photographs of 'heavily tattooed, punk women'. Magner's work is done wholly online. The bulk of her digital ethnographic data comes from the site's well-trafficked forums, with the rest from e-mail interviews. Slater's (1999) work on Internet Relay Chat (IRC)⁶ studies the exchange of 'sexpics', digitally encoded 'sexually explicit material',⁷ amongst a number of users over the course of a year. The digital sex image serves as a barter currency (e.g. to be exchanged for similar or other types of pornographic computer files) between users in this community. Slater's study is based on covert participation in 'sexpic' chat groups.

The presence of ethnographers in a virtual field site is often physically 'invisible' – what Ebo (1998: 3) terms 'cyberstealth' – as they 'read' web blogs, or covert as they take on anonymous web 'avatars' in chat rooms or forums. The psyche, both of 'researcher' and 'researched', is expressed but not always grasped by the other. Though the internet projects an air of neutrality, it is a space of power relations. These are manifested, albeit sometimes in unique virtual incarnations such as racist or homophobic chat room moderators or blog owners.⁸ For the ethnographer, Dicks et al. (2005: 128) caution that the internet should never be read as a 'neutral' observation space as it always remains a fieldwork setting and, as such, a researcher's data selection and analyses are always biased by agendas, personal histories, and social norms. That being said, the role of observer can still sometimes be considered 'passive' in the eyes of bloggers and chat room users if the researcher is not overtly interacting with them. As is the case offline, there are significant ethical considerations behind covert electronic research. Denzin (1999: 123), for example, admits he was 'a passive, lurking observer' and never asked for permission to quote postings.⁹ Denzin's situation is hardly unique, with Schaap (2002) 'lurking' for over two years in an online role-playing-game (RPG) community. Indeed, as Kozinets (2002: 65) observes, digital ethnography's 'uniquely unobtrusive nature [...] is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness'. The only baseline which researchers seem to concur on is that 'we must consider the act of lurking and its implications' on those being investigated (Richman, 2007: 183).

It is clear that the ethics behind new media-driven research cannot be overstressed, but professional scholarly organizations and methods literature alike are ambiguous on the subject.¹⁰ Noteworthy exceptions are Bruckman's (2002: 221–30) thoughts on 'Human Subjects Research on the Internet', Sharf's (1999) 'Ethics of Doing Naturalistic Discourse Research on the Internet', and Schrum's (1995) 'guidelines for ethical electronic research', which cover issues of privacy, informed consent, online pseudonyms, and documentation, amongst other things. Schrum's (1995: 323–4) concise set of ethical research guidelines urges researchers to be overt rather than 'lurk', treat e-mail correspondence as private unless otherwise agreed, and view themselves as having an 'obligation' to the electronic communities they are researching. Though use of (or engagement with) her guidelines should be encouraged, they do not discuss the possibility of 'ethical' covert research and the 'obligations' this may entail. (This is understandable given that Schrum's work is over a decade old and better suited to listserv¹¹ than Facebook,

blogs, and wikis.¹²) Bruckman, who worked closely with the Association of Internet Researchers, deals with ‘disguising’ oneself on the internet. However, her work also does not cover social networking sites or wikis. Sharf, who did work on a listserv called Breast Cancer List, is particularly interested in the ethics of ‘harvesting’, skimming data from online lists, newsgroups, chatrooms, etc. without express consent. Though legal in many jurisdictions, not all researchers are convinced that bloggers, chatters, and newsgroup users are comfortable being covertly observed or covered.¹³ Despite their divergences, the three do agree that online research ethics are particularly important with vulnerable or marginalized groups. Whether one’s project is covert or not, Sharf’s (1999: 253) suggestion that we should question both the potential harms (e.g. conflicts with the online group) and the benefits (e.g. legitimization of the group) is one digital ethnographers would be wise to heed.

Ethics aside, covert work marks a dramatic shift from Whyte’s physical ethnography of the Italian slums of Boston. There, his ethnicity and gender gave him access to data that would have been inaccessible to ethnic minorities and women. Contra early utopian ‘cyber-guru’ academics such as Esther Dyson, cybercultures do not represent an empowerment which brings ‘power to the powerless’ (Dyson, 1997: 8). Despite ‘disguising’, or perhaps in spite of it, ‘race’, gender, sexuality, and disability do not disappear in cyberspace. Rather, as Harp and Tremayne (2006: 249) argue, ‘[r]einforcement of traditional constructions of gender and racial power relations ... illustrates the conflicting potential and reality of the Internet’. Digital ethnographers retain their socio-cultural gazes, albeit in digital forms. For example, the video ethnographer, selecting what to point the camera at, or the chat room ‘lurker’, selecting what to copy and paste, sometimes ‘records’ exotica or marginalizes ethnic others. The videos or textual excerpts are uploaded to a research blog and the colonial gaze continues online. Of course, video or textual discrimination is in many ways no different from conventional observer selectivity. However, the potential for exponentially increased dissemination (e.g. research blogs are publicly accessible and indexed in search engines such as Google) amplifies the impact of, for example, racialized, sexist, and homophobic researcher selectivity.

Web 1.0 – Online Questionnaires and Email Interviews

The first digital research method I examine is online questionnaires. In the 1990s, social researchers who wanted to implement online questionnaires had to design and program them from scratch. Today, a rash of inexpensive online questionnaire hosting services such as SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang¹⁴ now exist and do not require any substantive technical expertise. Similarly, primers (e.g. Thomas, 2004), which discuss the design, deployment, and analysis of web-based questionnaires, are readily available. Advantages of online questionnaires include their ease of storage, retrieval, and qualitative analysis. They can also be relatively easily programmed to seamlessly export data to SPSS or

another quantitative analysis package. Qualitative responses can be kept as Microsoft Word or generic text documents, providing ready access without the need for transcription. Furthermore, these interviews are ready to be coded into qualitative data analysis packages such as NVivo and ATLAS.ti – again, without the need for transcription. The scale of these ‘productivity advantages’ is perhaps most dramatic in quantitative applications. Not only can large data sets ($n = 20,000+$) be generated at a modest expense online as compared to traditional survey research methods (Brewer and Hunter, 2006: 96), but precious research money and time is also saved as these data do not have to be manually entered.¹⁵ Another advantage of online questionnaires is the ease of implementing structured responses, adaptive questions, and point-and-click responses (Van Selm and Jankowski, 2006: 444). For example, one of my online questionnaires (which gathered data informing an article on transnational ethnic identities, Murthy, 2007a) investigated ethnic identity formation and employed Likert-type numerical scale cultural identity and Worchel self-identity questions as well as several open-ended questions.

In previous research, I typically found that similar questionnaires offline were an extremely costly and labour-intensive affair. Though online questionnaires can have lower rates of completion than their paper counterparts (Leece et al., 2004), their reach is potentially global and, as Gunter et al. (2002: 233) observe, they are generally returned more quickly and have ‘richer’ responses to open-ended questions. It is very easy to send respondents a reminder e-mail asking them to complete the questionnaire, an action which Moss and Hendry (2002: 586) argue increases response rates, as I also found in my research. Furthermore, the benefit of e-questionnaires is that respondents frequently e-mail friends, co-workers, and relatives asking them to also participate in the research (a process which can be filtered if undesired).¹⁶

The use of this web-based research has been useful to me in gathering some unique qualitative data as respondents generally provided different, sometimes more personal, responses through the internet, compared with face-to-face interviewing and standardized questionnaires, confirming Miller and Slater’s (2000: 183) conclusion of the sometimes greater ‘intimacy’ of data collected online. I found that responses to my online questionnaires and e-mail interviews also provided unique data that I would not have obtained in traditional face-to-face interviewing. Depending on the type of data and questions, the converse, of course, can also be true. I found that the two methods in tandem provided a more powerful approach. Furthermore, as Schaefer and Dillman (1998: 380–1) observe in their study of qualitative e-mail methods, the combination of traditional qualitative research methods with internet-based interviews, actually increases response rates.

I also found that online questionnaires and e-mail interviews can significantly broaden a cohort of respondents. In my research on music and ethnic identity (Murthy, 2007b), pilot physical ethnographic work indicated extremely low response rates amongst women. E-mail interviews and an online questionnaire allowed me to gain access to female (and some male) respondents who, in

a nightclub setting, had declined to participate in my research. However, they were comfortable exchanging e-mail addresses. These individuals participated initially in the online research, but usually agreed to be interviewed face-to-face subsequently. In this way, my use of online methods actually helped the success of my physical ethnography.

Digital Video

Digital video is not that new. However, the more recent developments of hard drive and flash memory recording enable the easy embedding of videos into research blogs and forums. Three possible exploitations of digital video are of particular note: (1) The respondent as video (auto)biographer; (2) Video vox populi; and (3) Webcams. This section briefly explores 'video diaries' and also discusses the possibility of respondents uploading these to the researcher.

Representation is always a critical aspect of ethnography – differentiating strong and weak research. The possibility of gathering video self-representations of research subjects, 'video diaries', has had some strong early success. The 'Live Sociology' project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), has explored some applications of this technology. One particular project discussed at Live Sociology 2007, the Video Intervention/Prevention Assessment (VIA) video diary project developed by Chalfen and Rich (2004), gave hand-held video cameras to asthmatic patients at the Children's Hospital Boston in order 'to teach your clinician about your illness'. Two aspects of the project are exceptionally illuminating – the raw desire of respondents wanting to 'communicate' and the learning feedback loop in which the video 'self-examination' by patients revealed a 'cognitive dissonance between what they observed themselves to be doing and what they knew they should be doing' (Chalfen and Rich, 2004: 23). In regards to the former, respondents chose to record themselves during episodes of great discomfort, a fairly clear indicator of their desire to communicate the life contexts of their illnesses. What struck me was not just the respondents' deeply felt desire to communicate, but also their eagerness to communicate even intimate details. Of course, researcher-led ethnographic interviews can dig up vivid life stories. However, an interview during a bloody coughing episode underscores the raw corporeality and pathos of the data being gathered. The research participants may 'play up' to the camera, but these video diaries ultimately reflect how the participants want to be viewed or represented.

The proliferation of webcams in households with computers presents a unique opportunity for the use of video research diaries such as these, as respondents can easily create videos and upload them directly to the researcher or to a research vlog (video log). Additionally, as the catapulting of YouTube to the fifth most popular web site (Waldfoegel, 2007: 6) indicates, users are increasingly comfortable with the medium of video online. Another possible advantage of using webcams is that these videos can be less 'staged' as respondents forget that minuscule cameras are recording them. Video diarists often move about their

domestic spaces, drifting in and out of the frame. Their desk, front room, bedroom, etc., can become a ‘reality TV’ studio space. Andrejevic (2004: 193) uses the phrase ‘public privacy’ to describe this effortless/imperceptible mobility of webcasters between their comfortable private domestic space and a public space. Although the quality of these recordings is usually less than that of handheld video cameras,¹⁷ the data collected in this liminal space of ‘public privacy’ can sometimes be quite groundbreaking, as Teresa Senft’s (Forthcoming) in-depth ethnographic study of ‘camgirls’ (female webcasters) illustrates.

Web 2.0 – Social Networking

When a computer network connects people or organizations, it is a social network. (Garton et al., 1999: 75)

Social networking websites have become a key aspect of Web 2.0 (the internet’s so-called interactive phase). The sites have a simple mission – network through existing and compound relations (i.e. ‘friends of friends’). The growth of the most popular sites, MySpace and Facebook, demonstrates web users’ urge not only to map out their social networks meticulously, but also to converse publicly with these ‘friends’ about the intricacies of their respective daily lives. The candour of the sites is partially due to their initial popularity amongst undergraduate university students. Facebook, for example, began its life as a social networking site which was exclusive to Harvard and then American university students in general. The limited membership of the site cultivated a fairly open ‘collegial’ space. In its early days, Facebook pages tracked everything from dull campus happenings to infamously licentious fraternities and sororities. Facebook spread to universities outside the US and in September 2006 opened its virtual doors to anyone. It now has over 7.5 million members and is rated the top website for young people aged 18–24 (Barsky and Purdon, 2006).

MySpace, which was acquired by Rupert Murdoch’s News International in 2005, is the other dominant player in the social networking world. Unlike Facebook, it was never restricted to university students. According to Barsky and Purdon (2006: 66), it is the fourth most popular English-language website. The enormity of MySpace is reflected by the sheer volume of member pages. For example, it is fairly difficult to find an Anglo-American musician without a presence on MySpace. One of the innovations of MySpace was its very early integration of video and audio. Musicians, for example, could put up tracks (or samples of them), videos, and a slideshow of images. Their ‘friends’ (predominantly fans) would contribute daily postings to these pages and eagerly await new audiovisual material. The ability of these posters to embed images and web links within these postings not only aided their popularity but also made for a fascinating *mélange* of discursive methods.

Specifically, social networking sites can be useful to ethnographers in the following ways:

- (1) they are virtual 'gatekeepers' with chains of 'friends' who are potential research respondents;
- (2) they contain vast stores of multimedia material regarding even the most marginal social movements or groups;
- (3) ethnographers can 'invisibly' observe the social interactions of page members, gleaned a previously unavailable type of ethnographic data;
- (4) pages can be created by social researchers with the explicit purpose of conducting research online (e.g. focus groups watch an embedded video and comment on it);
- (5) the structure of relationships on the sites is a useful research method itself with, as Garton et al. (1999: 78) argue, the content, direction, and strength of the relationship 'strands' a fruitful approach;
- (6) pages can be created by social researchers to disseminate useful information to the public, an approach taken by the creators of the 'Cure Diabetes' MySpace page (Barsky and Purdon, 2006).¹⁸

Though very alluring, the drawback of these research options is that membership of these communities is inherently restricted to the digital 'haves' (or at least those with digital social capital) rather than the 'have nots', and ethnic/gender digital divides strongly persist, an issue I discuss later. While allowing for these gaps or omissions, research done through social networking sites is suited to projects whose respondents are either familiar with or can be trained on the requisite technologies. That being said, the use of social networking sites for focus groups, for example, can result in increased inclusion for those with disabilities (mobility and otherwise) as well as groups that are vulnerable or otherwise difficult to access.

My research on a transnational 'South Asian' music scene (Murthy, 2008) has used these sites extensively in the first three ways mentioned above. I 'met' many individuals on the sites and eventually conducted face-to-face interviews with over a dozen of them. I analysed discussion threads, audio tracks, images, and quite a few videos on the pages of 'friends' listed on the main MySpace and Facebook pages of musicians and bands. The repository of images was particularly interesting. Seeing the ways in which participants of this music scene represented their lives both inside and outside dancehalls was invaluable to my research. Though I had ethnographically immersed myself in the home, work, and leisure lives of my respondents, I was able to burrow further into their lives through their MySpace and Facebook pages. I was even invited by a handful of respondents to become their 'friends' online.

The use of these sites in social research as discussed above is promising, but awareness of their potentialities is lagging far behind. This may be due to questions of privacy and ethics. In the context of journalism, Fletcher (2007: 41–2) asks: 'is it safe to lift stuff off the web in this manner? Is it ethical to do so? Many who put stuff up in the first place say it isn't.' Newspapers have argued that material from social networking sites is in the public domain. However, seeking

permission may sometimes be the recommended path for social researchers. Regardless, material from social networking sites must be contextualized properly. Fletcher (2007: 43–4) gives the example of the reporting of the death of Gavin Britton, a first-year undergraduate student at the University of Exeter. The *Basingstoke Gazette* newspaper went to his MySpace page, which had pictures of him extolling drinking, and ran their story with the headline: ‘Gavin boasted of his drinking on the Net – and died on a party night’ (Fletcher, 2007: 44). Put in context, Gavin’s page is quite the norm amongst young undergraduate students. Like any other data source, social networking web sites should be treated in a nuanced or layered fashion. When considered alongside other data (e.g. interviewing), the sites can provide unique in-depth autobiographical accounts of scenes and respondents.

Blogs

Mitchell Duneier’s (1999) *Sidewalk* broke with traditional ethnographic research methods by inviting the research ‘subject’ to become the research critic. Duneier not only asked Hakim Hasan, one of the sidewalk vendors he had observed, to read his written accounts of New York ‘sidewalk life’, but also invited Hakim to write an Afterword to his book and teach a course with him in California (Hasan in Duneier, 1999: 319–30). This critical ethnographic style is regularly used by feminist ethnographers, as seen, for example, in the edited volume *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon, 1995). This is not to say that the unequal power relationship between the researcher and researched is attenuated. Rather, these methods allow respondents to exercise some of their ownership of their emotional and discursive share in the research project. As blog readership continues to increase year on year,¹⁹ this medium could exponentially increase this consultation in the case of some respondents. However, social researchers do not seem to be utilizing blogs.

Jill Walker (2006), who adopted blogging early on (since 2000) and is a tenured academic in Norway, argues that the problem may be that blogging and academia are not straightforward companions. From her perspective, the public nature of the blog shapes the ways in which academics engage with the ‘blogosphere’. Walker (2006: 130–1) observes that academic ‘research blogs’ can generally be divided into three categories: ‘Public intellectuals’, ‘Research blogs’, and ‘Pseudonymous blogs’. The first is self-explanatory. Many of these blogs have also given voice to traditionally underrepresented disciplines, perspectives, and actors.²⁰ Research blogs are used to collaboratively share research data and results and Pseudonymous blogs do what their name suggests. This last category was made most known by bloggers who have criticized the ivory tower from within. Though these groupings are useful, they are perhaps today more limiting than empowering. What is missing from Walker’s sometimes forced framework is the rich interactive potential of blogs and research. For example, Pseudonymous blogs could be reclaimed by

covert researchers and used as a method for them to probe dialogues they may not be able to do in person. Research blogs need not be confined to the posting of data, but rather could be used by respondents to engage in what Lassiter (2005) calls 'collaborative ethnography', where the community meaningfully becomes invested in the researcher's work through consultation and critique. In this way, blogs can be seen as potentially democratizing forces in the ethnographic process.

Blogs can also be a great force in accountability. A good example was the case of the *New York Times* journalist Jayson Blair who was revealed as a plagiarist on various blogs.²¹ Blair resigned the next day. Of course, this is an extreme example. In the context of research blogs, I am thinking more of the accountability Duneier's subjects required. In this way, his work had the interactivity of a blog. For example, as Hasan observes (in Duneier, 1999: 327), Duneier brought each of his respondents to a hotel room and read chapters of his book and showed them photographs, soliciting their opinions before making 'his own judgments'. Blogs provide the potential to make social researchers more accountable. To some extent, they can be conceptualized as a Habermasian 'public sphere' in which communication has the potential to become more egalitarian and foster a system of checks and balances. As Bohman (2004: 136) argues, the internet, as public sphere, can create a 'space of mutual accountability' which blurs the roles of 'speaker' and 'hearer' (or even makes them reciprocal), a process which 'means that one must be responsive to others'. He argues that this transformation has the effect that 'one is now accountable to their objections' (Bohman, 2004: 136). Of course, the blog as a public sphere still runs into some of the same pitfalls of offline public spheres as often a 'patriarchal hegemony persists' (Harp and Tremayne, 2006: 259). Though a valid critique, the healthy dialogical exchange that blogs can potentially foster between respondents and researchers is absent all too often from scholarly ethnographic work.

Some regularly updated research blogs have been deployed to chart either an ethnography real time (inviting comments) or to discuss digital ethnographic methods. Many of them tend to be maintained by commercial practitioners. For example, Mark Dawson, a commercial anthropological ethnographer, runs a blog on ethnographic methods and Grant McCracken, another commercial ethnographer, blogs extensively about ethnographic work in progress (right now, it is in Mexico).²² Dina Mehta's attractive blog, 'Conversations with an ethnographer in India',²³ discusses, amongst other things, her work on mobile phone usage in rural India. On the academic side, Sunil Garg, a postgraduate student, blogs about his ethnographic methods assignments, inviting comments from viewers.²⁴ Kansas State University's 'Digital Ethnography' blog,²⁵ mediated by Michael Wesch, examines the pedagogical uses of blogs in ethnographical methods. The extensive site also chronicles the group's 'You Tube ethnographic project', which collaboratively explores the phenomenal growth of the video website by uploading researchers' videos to YouTube itself.

Digital Stratification

The potentialities of new and ever more embedded technologies are immense. But the digital divide persists. It should come as no surprise that internet access in the UK is 'markedly lower than the national average' amongst socially disadvantaged groups (Coleman and Normann, 2000: 3). Because of this, most research data obtained from online respondents in Britain would be skewed towards more socially advantaged groups. Though funding for government programmes to extend internet access to these populations in the UK has become significant, reducing the debate to this, as Anderson and Tracey (2002: 146) argue, 'overlooks the importance of social and cultural capital ... in decisions about ICT acquisition'. Secondly, non-economic factors such as disabilities and speaking languages other than English also figure in new media technology usage (Coleman and Normann, 2000: 3). Perhaps the most prominent of these is age. Those over the age of 55 in the UK show a low rate of usage (Anderson and Tracey, 2002: 145).²⁶ Researchers should be mindful of the nuances of this divide and its social implications when representing both the remit of their work and the scope of their results.

Interestingly, the divide also exists amongst the sociological community itself. For example, wealthy 'Old Universities' can afford the facilities for training and supporting digital ethnographic work. Smaller institutions and 'New Universities', reliant on smaller student, rather than research-led, funding are too many times excluded from this emergent medium. Noteworthy exceptions do exist,²⁷ but the norm is that broadcast quality digital video cameras, computers with high-end video editing software, SLR digital cameras, and the relevant budgets to train faculty continue to demarcate institutions and even individual departments.

Dissemination is also significantly shaped by the divide. New media technologies can exponentially extend the reach of social research. For example, Maag (2006: 10) cites the example of an investigator at the University of Chicago who disseminates her breast cancer research by podcast technology, where files can be downloaded to portable audio players such as iPods. However, projects such as these would almost always be dependent on large-scale grants, a process generally skewed against smaller institutions and 'New Universities' whose faculty have demanding teaching loads.

Conclusion

The high level of invisibility of digital ethnography in sociological methods handbooks is tellingly reflected in Carol A. Bailey's recently published definition of 'field research':

Field research is the systematic study, primarily through long-term, face-to-face interactions and observations, of everyday life. (Bailey, 2007: 2, original emphasis)

This article has sought to raise an alarm when the sociological 'field' continues to be delimited to traditional physical configurations. What Bailey's definition wholly misses is that 'everyday life' for much of the world is becoming increasingly technologically mediated. I have argued that, as social interactions increasingly move online, it is imperative that we respond critically, whilst not succumbing to the idea in which the technologically mediated form is held as superior – a pitfall of the dot-com 'cyber-evangelists'. Rather, I have argued that new media and digital forms of 'old media' are additional, valuable methods in a sociologist's toolkit. I have outlined the potentialities, limitations, and ethical considerations of four new technologies – online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites, and blogs – and argued that research done exclusively online can be highly fruitful. Besides the data collected, blogs and other online forums can keep researchers more accountable as respondents have the opportunity to engage publicly with the research process and its outputs. However, for the novice and expert alike, the combination of participant observation with digital research methods into a 'multimodal ethnography' (Dicks et al., 2006) may provide a fuller, more comprehensive account. This is especially true with the inclusion of conflictual or ambiguous data from social networking sites, anonymous chat rooms, and blogs.

Conducting social research using new media technologies raises its own challenges. As researchers become covert participant-observers, they shape the digital field site in sometimes unfamiliar ways. Another difference, as Toulouse (1998: 6) argues, is that the state of flux in which web sites, blogs, forums, and social networking sites operate 'defies conventional research methodologies'. The challenge for us is not only to adapt to new research methods, but also, as Saskia Sassen (2002: 365) stresses, to 'develop analytic categories that allow us to capture the complex imbrications of technology and society'. Doing these in tandem, with an eye to ethics and the digital divide, will be the benchmarks by which sociology's engagement with new media technologies will be judged.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an ESRC grant. Thanks to Les Back, Sujata Moorti, John B. Thompson, and my students at Brunel University for their useful insights. For his comments on an earlier version of this paper, I am grateful to David Lehmann. Thanks also to the anonymous referees for their constructive suggestions and to Teresa Senft for sharing her forthcoming work.

Notes

- 1 As Lee (2004: 877) observes, the first mention of tape recorders in sociological literature is around 1951; phonographic recording had a very limited following amongst ethnographers.
- 2 See <http://books.google.com> and <http://scholar.google.com>

- 3 In 1951, Becker recorded interviews with 'Janet Clark' in his research on drug addiction (Lee, 2004: 877–8).
- 4 A similar genealogy is found in 'race'/racism research such as Nigel Fielding's (1981) covert study of the racist British National Front. Today, organized race hate groups, including the National Front documented by Fielding, have formidable online presences, a trend documented by Gabriel (1998) a decade ago and by Blee (2002) in her work on women involved with organized electronic race hate. Silver (2000: 137) also draws attention to far-right skinhead and white power newsgroups.
- 5 Though the taxi-dance halls were not brothels, the 'hiring' of taxi-dancers was, to some extent, based on a sexualized aesthetic. Additionally, as Cressey (1932: 46–53) notes, sexual stalking was part of the 'game' for many patrons.
- 6 IRC is a network of chat rooms in which users, through a browser or specialized software client, log in. Users are able to privately message or transfer files to each other.
- 7 These are usually image files or videos. Also, as Slater (1999: 99) observes, the material tends to conform to off-line mainstream (heterosexual) pornography.
- 8 Chat room moderators have the power to ban users from the 'rooms' they manage and blog moderators can delete posts they deem undesirable. As is the case off-line, heteronormativity can be a factor in these decisions.
- 9 However, as Viégas' (2005) interviews with bloggers indicate, there is an understanding amongst some that blog posts are part of the public domain and can be quoted as such.
- 10 The exception, in terms of professional organizations, is the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) 'Ethical-decision-making and Internet research' guidelines (Ess, 2002). However, the membership of social scientists within the AoIR is minimal.
- 11 E-mail-based distribution lists.
- 12 'Wikis' are user-editable pages which any visitor can amend. The most well-known example of a collection of wiki pages is Wikipedia, <http://www.wikipedia.org>, a user-editable online encyclopedia.
- 13 One argument made is that bloggers, posters, and other web users consent to public display, but not to citation or reproduction in qualitatively different environments (e.g. journals, books, and newspapers).
- 14 See <http://www.surveymonkey.com> and <http://www.zoomerang.com>
- 15 This observation, however, should not be equated with an argument that internet-based survey research is a superior research method. Rather, I would agree with Brewer and Hunter (2006: 96) that a 'multimethod strategy' combining internet-derived data sets with more 'controlled statistically representative random samples' is generally, though by no means universally, a more suitable and rigorous investigative method.
- 16 The most prominent downside of 'uninvited respondents' is the increased risk of fraudulent or deceptive responses. However, simple measures such as requiring to enter a validation code at the end of an e-questionnaire can eliminate attacks by malicious 'robots' (who enter random data into questionnaires).
- 17 The video quality of consumer-grade webcams is acceptable. Higher resolution web video, as Simpson (2006: 45) discusses, requires hardware-based encoding, a process which is usually neither cheap nor straightforward.
- 18 <http://groups.myspace.com/cureDiABETES>

- 19 For example, in the US, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported a 58 per cent increase in blog readership in 2004 (cited in Harp and Tremayne, 2006: 247).
- 20 For example, Jill Dolan, Chair of Drama at University of Texas at Austin, writes on gender and sexuality in the arts through her blog, 'The Feminist Spectator' (Dolan, 2006). Ananda Mitra (2004) discusses the use of the internet amongst marginalized women in South Asia.
- 21 See Hewitt (2005: 17–27) for a more in-depth, albeit very partisan, discussion of the Jayson Blair scandal.
- 22 See <http://www.ethnography.com> and <http://www.cultureby.com/trilogy/ethnography/> respectively.
- 23 <http://radio.weblogs.com/021664/categories/ethnography>
- 24 <http://sunilgarg.com>
- 25 <http://mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg/>
- 26 Wagner et al. (2002) report similar findings for those in Germany over the age of 60. They note that the exception is for individuals with high levels of education.
- 27 The institution at which I previously taught is one example as it has high-quality video cameras for loan, video editing suites, ample computing, and some technical training. However, this is an unusual case as it was formerly a technical college and retains a focus on computing and engineering.

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