

Article

Message Received: Virtual Ethnography in Online Message Boards

Kevin F. Steinmetz
Doctoral Research Assistant
College of Criminal Justice
Sam Houston State University, USA

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Abstract

As the Internet begins to encapsulate more people within online communities, it is important that the social researcher have well-rounded ethnographic methodologies for observing these phenomena. This article seeks to contribute to methodology by detailing and providing insights into three specific facets of virtual ethnography that need attention: space and time, identity and authenticity, and ethics. Because the Internet is a globalized and instantaneous medium where space and time collapse, identity becomes more playful, and ethics become more tenuous; understanding these aspects is crucial to the study of online social groups. A second focus of this article is to apply these notions to the study of online message boards—a frequently used medium for online communication that is frequently overlooked by methodologists.

Keywords: Internet, ethnography, virtual, identity, space, time, ethics

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Introduction

Virtual ethnography is an expanding methodology in today's increasingly technologically connected society. As more individuals go online to meet their cultural and social needs, the more pressing it is that researchers develop proper methodologies to study online interactions. The Internet provides interfaces for interaction which are substantively different than those available offline. Methodologies must be tempered to cope with and explain phenomenon in this setting—an exercise this piece seeks to perform. Ultimately, the purpose of this essay is twofold. First, issues, problems, and dilemmas which confront researchers engaging in virtual ethnography in general are presented. These conflicts include (1) the reconciliation of space and time in a virtual field site, (2) the negotiation of identity and authenticity in digital interactions, and (3) the management of ethical dilemmas encountered in online field research. The second purpose of this essay is to discuss the reconciliation of these conflicts in virtual ethnography to online message boards specifically. To help facilitate the transition from discussing the general to the specific, examples are provided from research conducted on digital pirates participating in online message boards.

An online message board is a website designed specifically for textual communication. As will be elaborated later in this essay, message boards contain archival and graphically-organized conversations which can be participated in or merely observed. Because of the nature of message boards, the line between ethnography and content analysis/archival research is blurred. The one feature which distinguishes virtual ethnography of online message boards as ethnography is the immediacy, the emotions, and the connection to other users the researcher can feel and experience in the field site—social links often missing in content analysis and archival research. As suggested, virtual ethnography of message boards is only ethnography in this sense if the researcher is engaged in participant observation and can develop and learn from reciprocal social interactions. That said, there is an obvious blurring of boundaries between primary ethnographic experience and secondary content analysis in this situation as the researcher will have exposure to a plethora of social interactions in which they have no stake or participation (called “lurking” which will be discussed later). For researchers seeking concrete boundaries between methodologies, this may be problematic. For those who embrace the complex, the blurring of methodologies may be welcomed.

Before proceeding, the reader should note that this piece approaches virtual ethnography in a manner which simultaneously recognizes the complexity and fluidity of most virtual field sites while also discussing the methodology in a simplistic and even essentialist manner. The reason for this is to try to provide the reader with some concrete approaches to virtual ethnography in online message boards while not falling into methodological nihilism. Having said that, the Internet is an expanding and evolving technological medium and thus creating a “one-size-fits-all” approach to virtual field research is difficult. As such, perhaps it would be best if the reader thought about the points, arguments, and potential solutions suggested here as guidance and training on how to think about approaching virtual ethnography. Here, researcher reflexivity cannot be underestimated (Fay, 2007; Hine, 2005; Jones, 1999).

Virtual communities are not going anywhere in the foreseeable future. As such, the importance of studying these communities cannot be understated. There is a need to study groups of young people rallying behind a political candidate online; to understand how hobbyists interact with each other on the Internet and what it does to their hobby; and to understand how criminals interact within the virtual realm. Without well-developed methodologies for the Internet, the studies of these communities will lack. Researchers must be well versed on issues and possible resolutions to problems of space, time, authenticity, identity, and ethics. A foundation for

understanding online social interactions is detailed here as well as the application for these concepts towards Internet message boards.

The following essay is organized around three central themes which will be discussed in the context of virtual ethnography generally and then message boards specifically. First, issues of space and temporality are described. Second, this essay details problems negotiating identity and authenticity. Third, ethical dilemmas and solutions are provided. After discussing issues within these three themes, some technical suggestions for conducting virtual ethnography in online message boards are provided. Finally, this essay concludes by giving a summary of the issues described. Examples from research involving online pirates using a message board are provided to contextualize the various points throughout.

Issues of Space and Time

Space

In my home there is a poster of a map designed by Randall Monroe of XKCD.com sitting directly above my computer. The map is a representation of various online communities as if they were landmasses—their size being dictated by their estimated population/membership in 2007. Myspace.com is a large landmass surrounded by FaceBook, Friendster, and other social networking sites. Wikipedia.org is a series of islands joined together by lines; a representation of its one-from-many mentality. The myriad of blogging websites are represented by a chain of islands called the “Blogipelago.” Massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) have their own continent. To represent virtual spaces as physical locations may seem absurd. We certainly do not usually conceptualize MySpace as a landmass with mountains and fields. Having said that, this should make us take a step back and ask ourselves how, in fact, do we conceptualize the Internet as space and place?

Defining the Boundaries of the Field Site. While performing an ethnographic study of online pirates, there were times that it was difficult to define the spatial boundaries of the virtual field site. Questions arose like “is it the entire website? Is the focus only on the forums? Does it include the hyperlinks users attach to their posts? How should space be conceptualized while being sensitive to the effects of the offline world?” In other words, one must cope with the notion of space in virtual ethnography. As Jones (1999, p. 18) states, in “cyberspace, is there a ‘there’ there?”

In traditional ethnography, the field researcher selects a physical location and studies the inhabitants of that space. In virtual ethnography, physical location does not dictate the object of study but connectivity or interaction does (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1998; Hine, 2000; Markham, 2005). The Internet is a series of computers connected to each other (to put it simply). The entire phenomenon of the Internet is based on connections. When a group of people are in a chatroom together, they are all joined by signals in what can be called a ‘node’ (Wittel, 2000). A node is a “place” where these connections meet.

We can also use *discourse* as a way to discover ethnographic boundaries (Markham, 2005, p. 801). We can read the text and visual images (signs, symbols, etc.) as cues as to where there are “interactions of interest” (Markham, 2005, p. 801)—examples would include banners indicating a websites affiliation (if it is with the group of interest) or a logo indicating a particular group. This is also true in traditional ethnography though, since the Internet has no real physical location, this method of distinguishing space becomes more important. A notion tied to this is the idea of

perceiving the Internet as a “cyberspace” (Williams, 2007), as a place where the mind rather than the body navigates.

Having discussed the demarcation of the field site via discourse, the reader should be made aware that this form of boundary location may be less necessary in message boards. Since the graphical user interface of the boards provide easy-to-interpret area for discussion which serves to visually guide the user through its “space,” relying on textual communication may be unnecessary. That said, each field site will be unique and the researcher needs to be aware that text can be used to create boundaries.

Even if one manages to detail the boundaries of their virtual ethnographic field site, there is still the problem of the Internet being inherently multi-sited (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004). The Internet is a link-based phenomenon. People post links that will redirect a user to another webpage. This is a way of disseminating Internet culture. To click on the links is to be redirected out of your field site. To not click on the links, however, is to perhaps miss items of cultural relevance which may yield context to the ethnography. Because “linking” is a way of connecting websites together, however, it can be argued that the link (the website that was ‘linked’ to the original page) makes the website a part of the field site, albeit a less relevant part. It can also be argued that to follow every link and make it part of the study is too overwhelming a task for any single researcher. A compromise must be reached by each ethnographer in their field site.

Negotiating Online and Offline Spaces. In the Internet age, physical location begins to matter less in the sense that people can connect to each other from the comfort of home. The user’s location *does* matter, however, because they are not engaging the Internet within a void. They are situated within a physical context that can and will influence their online behavior (Kendall, 1999). When a person is browsing a bulletin board, they are also dealing with their “real” life stresses, relationships, and material reality. To understand an online community in its entirety, a researcher may find it beneficial to study their subject’s offline lives as well as their online. The practice of treating online behavior as springing from the Internet may mask that it is a combination of real life people interacting with other people through a technological medium.

In my own research on digital pirates, the offline world did affect the interactions that took place on the messages board. For example, since the board was international in membership, many of the participants came from a diverse array of countries. The different locations where each person was situated changed what topics they considered to be important and their perspectives on the matter. In one instance, the pirates were discussing the potential banning of Islamic minarets in Switzerland. Users from outside Switzerland mostly decried the efforts to ban the minarets as Islamophobic. Those users living in Switzerland, however, brought a unique lived experience to the discussion and often had a very different outlook—that the minarets were intruding on their cultural spaces and architecture. As such, the immediate location and lived experience of the users affected their online interactions with each other.

While the offline experience of users is important, the focus of the researcher should be directed more towards the online experience and interactions of the population (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Fay, 2007; Wittel, 2000). It would be easier to get mired in the details of each users offline life while losing sight of the focus of much virtual ethnography, which is online social interaction, subculture, and community. As such, offline lives should be considered as contextual for the field site but not of primary interest. Of course, if the study’s research question is specifically concerned with how offline lived experience affects online social life, then the aforementioned argument has to be reconsidered because of its shifted emphasis in the object of study (online community to offline’s effects on Internet interactions).

As we have seen, conceptualizing what makes up “space” in the Internet requires reflexive thinking. The researcher should recognize a location can be created in the ether by connections; both electronic and social. The semiological nature of the Internet also makes it possible to discern space through visual images and text. Conceptualizing space on Internet message boards, practically, is relatively easy for us. One must declare which message board they will be working on and figure out how many forums—if not all of them—will be included. Offline interviews can be used to supplement this online area. Conceptually, we have problems in identifying the spatial aspects: in particular, understanding how the *users* conceptualize it. How cognizant of their conceptualization of the Internet as space are they? What about how they view offline versus online? These are issues that an enterprising researcher should address within their study.

Time

A consideration to give to message boards is their temporality. Message boards are usually archived (Hine, 2000). This means one can access many of the discussions even after they have already occurred. In this sense, “an ethnographer’s engagement can occur after the events with which they engage happened for participants. Ethnographer and participants no longer need to share the same time frame” (Hine, 2000, pp. 22-23). The message board itself becomes an ethnographer’s raw data because the website itself has captured everything already. As such, the field site has greater permanence for the ethnographer and it can even be preserved in various forms (discussed later) which permits the researcher to take very detailed and accurate field notes. While there is a certain convenience to the archival properties of message boards, it can be problematic as well. One issue is that the ethnographer will not experience the threads in the same order and at the same time as any of the other users (Hine, 2000). While the time each post is made is generally marked on the post which allows us to situate the post within a timeline by date, exposure to the posts would still vary from user to user (Hine, 2000). This predicament of experiencing the message board as our informants do may be mitigated by the notion that no users, by this logic, will engage the message board in the same way. As such, differential exposure can be considered as part of the experience.

Another way researchers can reconcile this difficulty in temporality is to understand that each thread will have its own timeline (Hine, 2000). To try to understand the message board as each new post comes up would be difficult if not impossible (Hine, 2000). Rather, it would be easier to focus on each individual thread and treat these discussions as if they were happening in their own place in time, not amidst the potentially hundreds of other discussions happening at the same time (Hine, 2000). Users can participate in a number of discussions at once since responses from other users are kept in an archival format. This means users can be in more than one “location” at any given time.

Issues of Identity and Authenticity

Identity Play and Authenticity

There are issues, however, with the connectivity provided by the Internet. The first is the lack of face-to-face contact available over most Internet mediums (voice/video chat has yet to rise to prominence though it is growing exponentially as we speak). This could potentially allow the informants to adopt a false identity that could fool the ethnographer (Hine, 2000). “In the Internet postmodernity seems to have found its object, in an ‘anything goes’ world where people and machines, truth and fiction, self and other seem to merge in a glorious blurring of boundaries” (Hine, 2000, p. 7). Identity is broken down and is no longer a perceptively fixed phenomenon; it is “intrinsically playful” (Hine, 2000, p. 7; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998).

Identity is flimsy on the Internet because it is easier to play with than in real life. This is because of the effort involved in a consistent performance. Online, you can choose to log off at anytime, limiting the amount of time you have to display an alternative identity. Indeed, it is noted some people explore different identities purposefully (Hine, 2000). That being said, it is also important to note this form of “identity play” (Hine, 2000, p. 119) takes place in all aspects of everyday life and has been around long before the Internet (Markham, 2004; Wynn & Katz, 1997). The Internet merely provides another venue for identity play to occur rather than creating the phenomenon.

On the Internet, identity is generally not an issue, either because it is accepted that to call into question everyone’s identity would be too time consuming—or no one really cares (Hine, 2000). For the ethnographer, however, this is problematic. Identity is something we should remain aware of in a field setting. Hine (2000), however, calls for us not to focus so much on the playful nature of identity on the Internet but, rather, we should focus on how identity is negotiated within this new environment. We do this in virtual ethnography by not studying the people actually sitting behind their computer screens but, instead, by studying (1) their digitally projected identities and (2) how their identities are negotiated and judged as being authentic in and of themselves (Carter, 2005; Hine, 2000). To dwell on the idea that the researcher can never really know who is on the other side of the screen unless they are met in the physical world is to “risk paralysis in the research process” (Markham, 2005, p. 800). This issue changes if the research includes offline face-to-face interviews. The difference between online and offline persona can be more easily identified and reconciled by the ethnographer in this case.

There are reasons to believe that concerns about identity play may be overstated, however. Whitty (2002) performed a study on virtual interactions in online chat rooms. The author found that individuals who spent more time in chat rooms were less likely to tell lies than were those who spent less time. As pointed out, this is “similar to face-to-face relationships where trust develops gradually as people become familiar with one another” (Carter, 2005, p. 152). Just because the virtual world is not the “real world” does not mean social behavior changes entirely between the two. This allows us to consider the idea that, at the very least, seasoned Internet users are less likely (or not very likely at all) to engage in identity play and to be more genuine in presentation.

Establishing Identity

There are substantial differences between “real” space communication and virtual communication. Physical interaction provides other cues for us to gather emotional messages (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Markham, 2004; Sade-Beck, 2004; Wittel, 2000). These include body language, tonality, and rate of speech. However, seeing as how the Internet is predominantly text-based, the question becomes how do we effectively communicate emotion without these indicators? There are some aspects which can be teased out to access subtextual meaning. Lindlof & Shatzer (1998) identify online communication cues as including emoticons (smiley faces), meta-messages (*shakes head* or <shakes head> to indicate disappointment), and acronyms used to communicate emotions or reactions (such as LOL—laughing out loud). Additional cues include the use of italics, capital lettering, bold, typographical errors (intentionally or not), grammatical structure, and line spacing. These are all important to pay attention to. There is a difference in meaning between two statements that are identical except for differences regarding the aforementioned. An example would be:

“I currently do not enjoy the current state of politics.”

“I currently do not *enjoy* the **current** state of politics.”

With the addition of italics and bold, we can be led to unlock a substantively different meaning in the former statement. By italicizing “enjoy” and thus giving it emphasis we may assume there are

alternatives to enjoyment that may not be the opposite, such as various states of grey in between the two. By bolding “current” we are lead to think the user may be indicating he does not enjoy current politics but perhaps he once did. We can draw out more meaning from text if we consider these aspects as well as others.

The Problem of “Lurkers”

While there are a myriad of ways to establish and interpret identity online the notion can be entirely abandoned in this context as well. Because of the potential for anonymity provided by the Internet, people can choose to view an online community completely or almost completely covertly. This is called “lurking.” Lurking is a practice that poses problems for the ethnographer (both methodologically and ethically, though only the former is discussed in this section). Correll (1995) poses the idea that lurkers are only important when they become active members of a community. Lindlof & Shatzer (1998, p. 175) assert the presence of lurkers “raises the issue of social costs of free-ridership, or the extent to which non-involvement riding on the efforts of others detracts from or dissipates the well-being of the community.” They can also be viewed as important only when active community members acknowledge the lurker’s existence (Franco, Piirto, Hu, Lewenstein, Underwood, & Vidal, 1995). Another view is, since lurkers do not project an online persona, they are not meaningful in any way (MacKinnon, 1995).

For message boards, I recommend ethnographers consider that, to quote Hine (2000, p. 25), “in their unobservability, lurkers are rendered as unimportant to the ethnographer as they appear to be to the newsgroup.” The lurkers are only relevant to the extent the community makes them relevant. If a person only reads and never posts then they do not contribute to the community and are, therefore, not a part of the ethnographic focus.

Message Boards and Identity

All of these aforementioned aspects are important for the construction of identity on Internet message boards. There are a few features specific to message boards (and communication formats like them), however. Special attention needs to be paid to the user’s name, avatar, signature, quote, and profile. For example, a user’s login name can tell us a lot. It may indicate a user’s interests (*FishingBobby14*), nationality (*AmericanMerc*), gender (*LazerLady9*), political opinions (*Reaganomics101*), ethnic identity (*WhiteDude86*), profession (*SkinDoc2006*, age (*OldManMcGuffin3*), etc. In addition, a user’s name may have personal significance. Any numbers could indicate birth years, graduation dates, favorite numbers, and so on. They could also indicate personal nicknames.

In addition to user login names, their avatars can tell us a lot. An avatar is an image that is typically placed below or to the left of the user’s name in a discussion thread. It is a visual representation selected to convey something about the user. The image can be of anything within a standardized size—provided it does not violate the message board’s EULA (end-user license agreement) or offend too many people, particularly moderators. Much like user names, images can be indicative of demographic or personal aspects of the individual user. Some message boards allow for quotes, sayings, or descriptors to be added beneath the avatar. These can be titles earned by the user, descriptions of status, etc. Sometimes the user can choose what goes there and sometimes the moderator has to insert it (or chooses to insert it against the user’s will).

Signatures are often one of the best ways to immediately glean something about a user’s identity. These are things users often have a great deal of control over and everyone sees them attached to every post made (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). These can include hyperlinks to the user’s favorite

websites, quotations, opinions, images, and so forth. It is also often one of the larger visible aspects of a user's graphical display—sometimes being larger than the posts.

Finally, each user typically has a “profile” attached to their user account which can usually be accessed by clicking on the user's name next to their posts or through an integrated search function within the message board. Profiles often allow users to specify various demographic variables as well as to provide more detailed descriptions of themselves. The amount of information that can be provided depends on the message board. For fan-made websites, some message boards provide input fields for providing favorite television shows, movies, and other media. Some professional message boards will allow a user to include specifics about their profession. Regardless of what information is endorsed for inclusion by the message board, it hosts a wealth of information for the researcher. The stipulation is that users must (1) actually fill out their profiles and (2) provide honest details. The latter part is not necessary if the ethnographer is only concerned with studying *projected* identities.

In my own research, I have found it beneficial to (1) investigate the profiles of key users on the message board and (2) carefully construct my own user profile. First, user profiles may provide some insight into the offline lives of various users. They sometimes mention personal hobbies, occupation, education, location, and other personal facts. Sometimes, however, they are filled with information that is not relevant to their offline lives but facilitate a particular detached online identity. For example, one user would fill his profile with references to jokes and internet memes (viral and often humorous images, videos, and other content). As stated before, this information is still useful for understanding the user's projected online identity.

Second, the researcher—if acting as a participant observer—should carefully construct both their signature and user profile according to their needs in the field site. For example, when researching online pirates I found it useful to include information about my purposes for being on the message board on my user profile. Any users who became suspicious of my motives in asking so many questions could then click on my user profile and see why I was so inquisitive. One moderator, however, did not take my profile for granted and he tracked my internet protocol (IP) address back to the university where I was conducting research (which, upon determining I was not a law enforcement officer, commenced pranking me for his own amusement).

The researcher must also be careful to omit certain types of information from their profile as well. While researching the pirates, I did not want them to know I was affiliated with a criminal justice program. The connotation could have been that I was working in collusion with law enforcement. As such, I told the users I was a researcher in my profile but I did not tell them my discipline. Each researcher will have to negotiate what to include or exclude within each unique field site.

Ethics and Virtual Ethnography

Arguably the most important shift to consider in virtual ethnography is of ethics. In traditional ethnography, one must strive to protect informants. Above anything else, the researcher must try to prevent their research subjects from experiencing physical (subject getting a real-life beating as a result of the research), psychological (being chastised as a result of the research), or legal harm (facing lawsuits because of the research) (Warwick, 1982). The same applies to virtual ethnography, especially virtual ethnography of a population engaged in illicit activity. The new ethical concerns which have arisen with the Internet discussed here are (1) problems of anonymity and (2) informed consent and age.

Negotiating Internet Anonymity

People (including researchers) are prone to assuming anonymity is secured on the Internet; that no one will be able to reliably trace a person on a message board. This assumption must be resisted by Internet researchers. Hine tells us, “where the technology mediating an interaction was taken for granted, or was familiar to the extent that it became invisible, levels of suspicion and hostility surrounding information use (and the consequent possibility for the construction of an infringement of privacy) were greatly reduced” (Hine & Eve, 1998, p. 239). The technology of the Internet must always be held as suspect of privacy infringement no matter how invisible its workings or members may be to us.

A topic very related to that of privacy and anonymity is lurking. We are not concerned with the lurking of others at this point but, rather, the decision of the ethnographer to lurk. To lurk would run the risk of not participating in the community and losing authority gained through interaction (Hine, 2000). Participation is something that must be experienced to gain complete understanding of a community. On the other hand the ethnographer could lurk. This would sacrifice participatory understanding for observing the group without the potential for their behavior to change while a researcher is present. Here is where informed consent is an issue. The argument could be made that this is the “world wide web” and, then, that there can be limited expectations of privacy. What is important, though, is how the participants feel about their interactions. These interactions are “sufficiently real for participants to feel they have been harmed or their privacy infringed by researchers” (Hine, 2000, p. 23; Clark, 2004; Sveningsson, 2004). On the other hand, to not lurk would be to risk changing the behavior of the participants (Clark, 2004; Sveningsson, 2004). A situated compromise would be to reveal one’s identity as a researcher to the moderators of a bulletin board or the administrator of a website only and receive permission to observe (Sveningsson, 2004).

Much like in real space, ethnographers should assign pseudonyms for participants to protect their identities for two reasons. First, specific usernames can be easily linked back to the singular user (Beaulieu, 2004; Carter, 2005). A Google search of my screen name yielded 62 hits as of February, 2012. This would mean the username would not only be traceable to the one field site, but would yield multiple results beyond the message board. This may be enough that a person could link the username to a person’s real space identity. Another reason to change a person’s username is because to not do so would be to treat the online identity as if it did not matter, but it may to the person who holds that username (Hine, 2000). It is a matter of showing respect to your informants *and* to further protect them.

It is also apparent altering usernames is not enough. Because of the archival nature of the Internet, particularly message boards, it may also be pertinent for the author to omit direct quotations (Hine, 2000). Direct quotations can be traced back to the user with search engines like dejanews.com or Google. In this the ethnographer is faced with a dilemma. On one side, the researcher may gain some sense of authenticity by using direct quotations. The informant runs a risk of having their quote traced back to them, however. On the other side the researcher risks losing some authenticity to preserve the anonymity of the informant. These are decisions that have to be made by each ethnographer in regards to the risk posed to their informants. Using direct quotes, however, has the distinct advantage of allowing the reader to experience, at least a little bit, of the discourse that occurs in the virtual site (Markham, 2005). This is because the quote, “j00 n33d t0 r34d 1|70 7|-1|g5 |V|0r3” can tell us more than the alternative version of “you need to read into things more.” Regardless of this experience afforded the reader, the population under study should be protected to the best of the ethnographer’s ability, even if it means forgoing the use of direct quotations.

Walford (2002) asserts there is little to no need to provide anonymity to research subjects because it does little to protect them. He reasons that if the ethnographer is specific enough, the publication can be traced back to the population no matter how many pseudonyms are used. This train of thought is sound and is something ethnographers may consider. One can see how this argument holds valid with an online setting. For example, in my own ethnography, the pirates operated on a free and open website. If a person wanted to, they could look up “torrenting websites” on a search engine and probably find the particular website under study. The person can do this regardless of my research. The ethical stand point of the ethnographer should be, however, that no matter how easy the population may be to find they should mitigate whatever contribution they may have to the population’s discovery.

To balance the needs of participant protection and research authenticity in my own research of online pirates, I arrived at a situated compromise which involved three steps. First, the name of the message board was changed to prevent tracing. Even though the reader could probably find the website in question through a simple Internet search, changing the name did little to impact the presentation of the results and at least provided some protection. Second, user names were either not given or were altered. Finally, addressing the problem of the use of direct quotations, I subjected every quote I wanted to use in the manuscript to a series of searches through two major search engines—Google and Yahoo! Any quote which did not manifest in a search engine was considered safe to use. Any that were found in the search engine’s results were paraphrased to protect the user’s identity.

Problems of Informed Consent and Age

Two additional issues to be addressed in ethics are the ideas of informed consent and age. “The requirement of consent states that participants in research should have the right to decide whether, for how long and on what conditions they will take part in the study” (Sveningsson, 2004, p. 50). The researcher should seek to disclose his objectives and methods to the population under study (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). This is negotiable, however, if the community proves to be distrusting of outsiders/researchers and would not grant access if they knew all the details. In gaining individual consent of each user in a bulletin board, we can consider their posts to be the same as open public letters/presentations which are not subject to consent (Sveningsson, 2004). Still, sensitivity is required. If the post is obviously something like an emotional confession to the board (seeking help, etc.) then it should be treated with more respect. The writer certainly would expect such.

In terms of children, measures should be taken to protect children in an online setting and they should be excluded from the research without legal approval (Carter, 2005). Verifying age can become difficult and cumbersome in online settings. Because many sites, however, place age limits which require a person to be of at least thirteen, sticking to these sites will help mitigate the problem of age verification (examples of websites like this include MySpace.com, facebook.com, and most Internet message boards). Thirteen, however, is still considered a minor in most countries. A mediated compromise is to treat the users all as being over the age of consent while still taking all of the precautions to protect their identity and if a user should reveal themselves to be beneath the age of consent then the ethnographer should either remove them (as well as possible) from the analysis or take *every* measure to protect their identity. This is, once again, something that will need to be negotiated by each ethnographer in each unique field setting.

Technical Suggestions

The final contribution this piece makes to virtual ethnography is a couple of technical suggestions for gathering and organizing data from message boards. As opposed to offline ethnographic research, the researcher benefits from the archival nature of Internet message boards by having all of the data held in a state of semi-permanence. Many convenient forms of preserving web pages now exists (conversion to .pdf or .xps, saving the webpage, bookmarking, etc.). Any of these will work as long as they preserve the bulk of the webpage. The .xps format is recommended because of the ease of use, low file size, and near-perfect presentation of web pages. Keep in mind, however, this often involves the installation of an .xps viewer. Instructions for creating .xps files from web pages can be easily found through a search engine and will not be included here.

When browsing the message boards, the level of preservation of threads sought by the researcher will vary based on the time the ethnographer has to conduct the research and the level of activity of the participants on the message board. Ideally, every thread the researcher observes and participates in should be preserved. Be sure to include many descriptors in the title of the saved web page; date, title of thread, page number within the thread are all things that could—and probably should—be included. This will allow for easier organizing and reorganizing of data. In addition, preserving the articles ensures that (1) the researcher will have a temporal snapshot of the discussion to allow thorough field notes to be taken over the interactions which took place and (2) gives the researcher something to refer back to if field notes are unclear or the researcher wants to go back into the data to investigate a new insight or idea.

Conclusion

Virtual ethnography is a useful-yet-often-overlooked approach to studying online social interactions. The application of this method to online message boards has received even less attention—a gap which this essay seeks to fill. As identified here, virtual ethnographers face at least three challenges while studying online communities. First, the researcher is confronted with difficulties reconciling space and time in their online field sites. In researching online message boards, the parameters of the field site can be considered constructed by the graphical user interface of the website. For time, the researcher has to negotiate and cope with the archival format of the online message boards—recognizing that they will (1) be able to see all conversations at once and (2) experience the conversations in a different temporal order than their participants.

Second, the researcher has to cope with problems with online identity creation and projection as well as assessing identity for authenticity. Identity play is a concern for the ethnographer, though it may not be as big of a concern as some scholars have made it out to be. In message boards, the researcher experiences unique indicators of identity as expressed through various functions of the graphical user interface of the website as well as the particular textual communication which takes place.

Finally, this piece details some ethical dilemmas confronting the virtual ethnographer in online field settings, particularly on message boards. There are two major dilemmas facing the researcher. First, the researcher has to determine if they are going to adopt the role of “lurker” in the field site. Playing the role of lurker and, therefore, not making the community aware of the researcher’s presence is to not receive informed consent to research. Second, the researcher must be aware that the Internet and the use of screen names do not guarantee anonymity. The researcher should alter user’s screen names in reporting results and should screen any direct

quotations through various search engines to prevent them from being traced back to the message board.

In conclusion, virtual ethnography can be a powerful methodology for understanding online social communities and subcultures. Considering the popularity and expansion of Internet use world-wide, online interactions are becoming more important in everyday life. As such, it is important for researchers to develop methodologies to adequately examine virtual interactions. This essay provides some guidance to understanding virtual ethnography in online message boards, a popular and widespread medium for Internet-based interactions. More development, research, and refinement are necessary in the future as more scholars enmesh themselves into online cultures.

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