

**EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Seminar Series**

<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>

**E-Seminar on Elisenda Ardèvol's working paper
"Dream gallery: online dating as a commodity"**

(28 June – 5 July 2005)

John Postill (University of Bremen)

jpostill@usa.net

Dear network members

**** New rule: maximum of 3 postings each participant per seminar ****

The 6th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar opens now. The seminar will run until Tuesday 5 July 2005 at 4 pm Central European Time. We shall be using this mailing list to discuss a working paper by Elisenda Ardèvol entitled 'Dream gallery: Online dating as a commodity' which is available both in English and Spanish at <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>

Elisenda teaches at the Universitat Oberta of Catalonia (UOC). She has a PhD in anthropology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and has done fieldwork among the Gypsies/Roma in Granada and Barcelona (Spain) and on Afro-American evangelical cults in Los Angeles, California (USA). Having taught online since 1998 she has become very interested in cyberculture, virtual ethnography and media anthropology (see <http://www.easaonline.org/networkbiosaf.htm#EA>).

The discussant will be Kyra Landzelius of Gothenburg University (Sweden) who is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Science, Technology and Society in Graz (Austria). Kyra has worked on Internet usage among Native Americans and on virtual communities for parents of preterm babies (her bio is at <http://easaonline.org/networkbiosg-1.htm#KL>).

To participate all you need to do is email your comments or questions directly to medianthro@abyznet.net (i.e. not to me) after the author has responded to the discussant who will be emailing her comments later today.

Please note that we have introduced the following new seminar rule (no. 9): 'Participants are allowed to contribute a maximum of 3 postings per seminar (this restriction does not apply to the author or to the chair)'. This is to allow for a broad range of views and comments on a given paper. **The rules of the e-seminar now stand as follows:**

- 1. The discussion starts when the discussant emails his or her comments on the working paper to the list.**
- 2. The author(s) then replies to those comments.**
- 3. The rest of list members can then add their comments, questions to the author, points of information, etc. These will be addressed by the author(s) at their own convenience throughout the week.**
- 4. Full bibliographic references are not required, but they are always welcome.**
- 5. All contributions should be emailed directly to the list (medianthro@abyznet.net) not to the seminar chair.**
- 6. Contributions should have a clear, concise subject, e.g. 'Research methods'. Please avoid uninformative (e.g. 'Your comments') and empty subject lines (NB abyznet rejects empty subject fields).**
- 7. Contributions should be kept as brief and focussed as possible.**

- 8. Contributions should be sent in the body of the email, not in an attachment.**
9. Participants are allowed to contribute a maximum of 3 postings per seminar (this restriction does not apply to the author or to the chair).
10. The usual offline seminar norms of courtesy and constructive criticism apply.

Once the seminar is over, we will be saving it and uploading it onto the website in PDF format, as we think these discussions can be a useful resource for future research and teaching.

Finally, I wish to thank both Elisenda and Kyra for their time and effort and invite Kyra to send us her comments.

Best wishes

John

P.S. New list subscribers who are still unsure about how the e-seminar works can download transcripts from previous e-seminars from

<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>.

** New rule: maximum of 3 postings each participant per seminar **

**Discussant's Comment on Ardèvol's working paper
 "Dream gallery: Online dating as a commodity"**

by Kyra Landzelius

Dear All,

Before I present my comments on the interesting paper by Elisenda Ardèvol, perhaps a few words of self-introduction are in order. I must confess to being a Network newcomer, or more like a once-and-future member – having enthusiastically joined this group back in autumn (2004) only to find myself wrapped in other quests (mainly my bread-and-butter job as a medical anthropologist and finishing a collection on health activism – which does have a share of media anthro hidden in it). Having discovered the ‘file folders’ function for yahoo mail at about the same time did not help matters any, as best-laid-plans to automatically organize inbox inflow resulted in entire streams and themes of neat incoming stuff seamlessly lodging itself into folders that became simply another icon, which I never even thought to glance at – I being a prime example of the dangers of technological ‘options,’ not to mention the dangers inherent in the idea of ‘organizing’ one’s desk-top!). I have also been a nomad from home (as a visiting scholar in Graz)—although this is an exile I gladly welcome, given the splendors of southern Austrian landscapes! Thus, I want to say at the outset that I appreciate that John Postill, our seminar chair, invited me to be a discussant in the e-seminar series despite my virtual absence. By way of preparation, I spent a long morning glancing over the oeuvre that constitutes past e-seminars (feeling somewhat like an interloper), and so here also extend my gratitude to all the contributors

for the interesting discussions and topics circulating therein, some of which have undoubtedly found their way into my musings here. I write here largely stream-of-consciousness (and then have gone back to impose some semblance of order through paragraph headings assigned after-the-fact).

Overview

Ardèvol's paper is entitled 'Dream Gallery: Online Dating as Commodity' (hereafter abbreviated 'Dream Gallery'). In the author's own words it presents a 'recent study focusing on how Internet users introduce themselves publicly in cyberspace through personal web pages, personal diaries and web sites where they can search for relationships, love, or friendship.' (p.1). And yet, 'Dream Gallery' at once reaches for much more in its purview; although in certain key respects, from my reading, it accomplishes much less than its stated intention. Perhaps its ambitious reaching is responsible for a provocative, if somewhat teasingly unfinished, final paper that touches on many interesting themes, without tying them together or seeking closure. The theories of Giddens, Baudrillard, Turkle, Gergen, Turner and Beck surface, without much elaboration in relation to the data, nor without a dialogue developing between these theories. The rather broad yet vague sweep of 'Dream Gallery's analyses—resulting in a 'suspended' paper—leaves the reader wanting more—which I hasten to add, is the mark of a successful scholarly overture, after all.

Situating The Study

Most of the text is devoted to a detailed presentation of the commercial dating-service search engine, Match.com.es, and of personal web pages posted therein—'user profiles' (textual and images/photos)—although it is unclear as to how many web pages this discussion is based upon (and this is a critique of the paper's presentation of methodology, which I will take up below), or indeed whether the author is picking and choosing certain common characteristics and compiling a kind of 'generic' web page for analytical purposes. One of the paper's strongest contributions is the overview it gives of these paid subscriber match-making sites. There is a rich trove of material for theorization in these sites themselves: the logic driving them, the producers designing them, their implicit 'model' of the 'average' consumer, their rationalizing of selves/relationships into 'compartment' profiles, their reflection and response to social anomie, to over-worked lives with little time to simply socialize, to 'risk mentalities' in the era of AIDS, etc. And what about their role as 'big brother' gatekeepers policing and even censoring (and moreover paid to police and censor!, and I would add, manipulate) intimate representations of selves and potentially intimate (future) relationships? The author does not take the route of analyzing this search engine/home site, per se; and yet, her descriptive overview is peppered with analytical commentaries that proffer intriguing insights. I would have liked to have heard more from her analytical perspective on these sites. The analyses she does provide get rather hidden in-between descriptions. Moreover I sense an unresolved tension in her own reading of these sites as signifying domains (mass cultural 'productions') based largely on their empirical design, and her reading of users' relationships to these sites, their constructions of identity vis-à-vis these sites, and how these shape relationship-quests in an internet age (the latter more adequately depicting her objective, as stated below).

Elisenda's goal is to: 'analyze the extent to which personal relationships are considered from a marketing standpoint, and in what sense we can talk about how personal relationships are "consumed" over the Internet' (p.1). I found this to be a very fascinating proposition, immediately leading me to a range of questions: just who considers these relationships from a marketing standpoint—the website producers? the users? general social theorists? the

anthropologist/interpreter?? And just what is meant by a ‘marketing standpoint’: 1) relationships modelled after marketing processes (that is, commodified—and if so, deliberately or unconsciously or both)? or, 2) relationships that are structured and/or experienced according the logic of market processes (that is, in some way rationalized, budgeted, exchangeable, to be ‘tried-on for size’ or coming with a ‘shelf life’)? and/or 3) relationships simply wrapped in a discourse of market lingo (that is, rhetorically reflecting/reproducing market idioms without necessarily enacting or embodying them)? Or 4) are they ‘marketed’ ‘only’ because Match.com participants are paying for an online dating (or pre-dating) service and thereby ‘manufacturing’ relationships? In any event, this purchasing likely introduces new algorithms (expectations, values, freedoms, anxieties...) into relationships (or is this just my jaded perspective?). Likewise, one could raise similar questions with regard to the subjectivity of the persons who are acting here: how are these being framed by and framing the proposed ‘consuming’ of relationships over the Internet? However, as I eagerly read on I did not find these questions answered, or even addressed; and I apologize for perhaps being thick-headed, but it never became clear to me just exactly who the author considered to be doing the ‘considering’ here. I would really love to know just what questions are motivating the author’s research along these lines.

One question Elisenda does pose is ‘how are new relationship spaces organised on the Internet?’ This is a brilliant question; and the author’s descriptions of the Match.com service and its architecture go far towards portraying this interactive space as a meaning-making endeavor that embeds ‘packaged’ notions of self that users not only adapt themselves to, but it seems gain ‘security’ and reassurance by having these profile arenas (‘my basics,’ ‘about my date,’ ‘appearances’) mapped-out for them in advance. Elisenda’s attention to the prominent role these webpages accord to the body (or at least, to graphics of the body) is a welcome contribution to the tendencies of cyber-theorists to simply assume the body disappears or loses importance in cyberspace, when in fact the opposite may be true: ‘the body’ (as icon, performance, fantasy, even posture) may well gain in magnitude (at least my own research supports that). Elisenda pays attention to bodies, but alas, not to gender, which is given virtually no mention in the discussion, even that pertaining to body graphics.

As noted, the author is interested in understanding how new relationship spaces are organised on the Internet. However, these ‘spaces’ remain sadly untethered. For example, they are not compared to other online spaces/experiences: eg, how might these for-profit ‘getting acquainted’ sites be similar to or differ from, say, online communications regarding hobbies or shared health problems, or even shopping on e-Bay? Or, to give another example, they are not compared to other offline for-profit dating services: eg, in what ways, if any, does Match.com differ from commercial match-making services that have been in operation for decades now (in other words, in what ways does Internet matter here)? To give yet another example, they might have been compared to other (non-Spanish) Match-com generated spaces, thus giving us a comparative glance at cultural differences and similarities in these sites, their ‘users’, etc. (Elisenda herself makes a case for such cross-cultural comparison on p.5). My point here is not to compile a wish-list of all the interesting ideas that emerge for analysis from her text, nor to imply that Elisenda should (or even could, in a single paper) engage with all of these angles in her project; yet I believe that the research she is reporting on here is really calling out to be illuminated with respect to some context and a critical angle derived thereof. Those proposed above are given by way of illustration, yet of course, many other angles could be conceived and one could think of multiple tetherings that would enrich this study by contextualizing it, and enrich its value for

contributing to our larger knowledge quests (about online practices, or about Spanish culture, or about post/modern subjectivity, etc., etc.).

Questions of Locality

Following from this issue of space, and what I see as its absence as an analytical lens in this paper, we might turn to the question of ‘what happens to place (space/time) online.’ This is a hot topic of debate, especially among the more ethnographically-oriented cyberspace researchers. The debate has largely clustered theorists on one or the other side of an unproductive divide: those advocating the more-or-less virtual evaporation, transcendence or annihilation of place; versus those arguing for the reproduction, transformation or adaptation of place (albeit one usually conceived as re-worked in particular ways). Unfortunately, the author is silent on this debate, and it is unclear whether this is an unintentional or strategic decision; however it does have the dual effect of making her study float without anchorage to an empirical context, and without bridging to a corpus of critical writings and thinkings on just this question. I would argue that online research requires attending to just this issue, irrespective of which strand of debate a researcher aligns with. That is, if advocating that locality becomes redundant, then it behooves a fieldworker to demonstrate in just what ways this happens, how it is experienced by the various actors involved, how it shapes subjectivities, relationships, etc. Likewise, if the researcher is an advocate for the continuing relevance of locality, then again, how it persists, transforms, adapts, etc. needs to be spelled out. I myself am strongly in favour of a reading that argues for the continued importance of locality; and would moreover assert that anthropology is particularly well disposed to address just these issues of situating the offline online, and vice versa.

In similar fashion, reading the text, I found myself wondering what has happened to ‘culture’? In writing this it is not my intention to fetishize the concept or the word (indeed I am very much in sympathy with the ‘death of culture’ and ‘writing against culture’ trends in reflexive anthropology). My criticism here applies rather to the relative thinness of discussion about contexts, language or idioms, collective significations, social forms, etc. which could frame and help us to productively interpret and situate this website. It is as if these sites—and the empirical data and their analyses(?)—would be virtually the same if the author would have chosen for study any one of the 56 other languages in which the site is made available by its commercial designers. (My personal favorite here would be to see a study of the Esperanto version—who are its users, their ideologies, locations, etc.). However, to return to ‘Dream Gallery’ the reader is left querying: ‘in what ways, if any, is this site different from say, its counterpart in North America, in Finland, in Australia, in Hungary...’ Perhaps the answer is that it differs very little, but if so, then this would itself be a fascinating finding that requires interpretation following comparative data collection (in an aside, I might note here that my own findings in studying homepages on the part of parents of preterm babies in 9 languages (with the help of native speakers assuredly) is that there is surprisingly little formative or narrative differences between say, those posted in Turkish, in Italian, in Swedish or in English—but I have, as yet(?), been unable to attribute this—is this the ‘global middle class’ phenomenon that some theorize, is it mimicry, diffusion, convergence, a technologically-driven genre, or?). I would be very interested in learning if Elisenda (or others of you doing virtual fieldwork of a comparative nature) are encountering similar or different issues and can speak on them.

Questions of Subjectivity

Picking up on the author's concern to examine user's self-representation in relation to the theories of risk society (Beck), the 'saturated self' (Gergen), 'pure relationship' (Giddens), and 'simulacra' (Baudrillard), I will thus say a word or two about the issue of reflexivity. First, I highly applaud Elisenda's initiative here. We sorely need more ethnographically-informed, field-data rich, thick descriptions of the kinds of subjectivity being sweepingly theorized by such theorists. This is precisely the contribution that anthropology is best poised to make, especially in relating these theorizations to technologies (especially media) that explicitly or implicitly are implicated in hypothetical transformations of the (post or hyper) modern self. I assume I am preaching to the choir here, so I will climb down from my anthropology soapbox.

The author has chosen some fabulous quotes to highlight her analyses of subjectivity. One (presumed) informant in particular is worth mentioning—one identified as Morfeo, whose quotes are phenomenally rich in reflexivity, socio-historical insights and opinions, a tinge of self-irony and what struck me as a 'nostalgia for the present' (I think this was Appadurai's phrase). The words of this person seemed to hold an entire worldview that resonated with the author's thesis about reflexive selves and 'consumed' relationships. Yet, short of simply citing Morfeo at length, it is surprising how little analysis is given to his (her?) words. Perhaps the author here is letting Morfeo speak for himself, and I can appreciate a flight from over-interpretation (which alas I would have to plead guilty to), and yet we are also given no auxiliary or contextual information about this informant; nor for that matter, how these quotes were even collected.

I fear I have gone on much too long already (I noticed most discussants kept their comments short, and I have already violated that), so I will abruptly wrap this up with just a few words about format.

Style

The original text is in Spanish, but I have been working with, and am here responding to, the English translation. I regret that my linguistic handicap bars me from the nuanced benefits of the original text; moreover I am inclined to believe that some of my criticisms of style almost certainly relate to the effects of meanings 'lost in translation.' However, I hope they will have relevance to any future re-working of this paper in English. There are a number of expository statements where it is unclear as to the 'agency' driving them: For example, on page 2: '[The Internet] is a system where our dreams can become true at a low price and at low personal risks; a systems that responds to the current needs of our hectic daily lives and the compartmentalization of our social interaction.' It was unclear to me whether this was the author's opinion, a paraphrase or summary from the literature, a hypothesis guiding research or conversely a finding from the research at hand, etc.? Similarly, on page 7 'Our selves are subject to a plurality of social contexts and to multiple unique opportunities to relate to others, which means we are not able to define a stable identity of ourselves, and our bonds to others are more elusive and ephemeral as are our passions and deep feelings.' We can all recognize in this echoes of contemporary theorists of the decentered, postmodern subject—but I am uncertain as to whether Elisenda is 'simply' agreeing and taking these theories as fact, or intends to apply her data in order to support and/or debunk these theories. My preference is for the latter to be the case, but if so it would be important to present the data that gives us insight into these theorizings about the subject. With regard to the question of style, though, such general-type statements (and there are a few scattered through the text) may carry different connotations in Spanish, but the English versions would benefit greatly from a grounding in a specific voice.

Format

I would prefer a more structured format to the paper: with a more outlined introduction, empirical materials presented up-front, methods addressed, interpretations covered thematically by paragraphs, and a concluding section. This sounds awfully dry, I know, but I do think that a more explicit argument needs to emerge for the paper as a whole, and the argument that is there at times got buried in descriptive passages, or was rushed at the end. By and large, in working towards its analysis ‘Dream Gallery’ tries to go into too many directions at once, in terms of the theories and topics introduced, some of which almost pop out of no where (the theme of reality and representation at the paper’s end; the topics of marital stability and teenagers mid stream). More structure would likely identify those themes/topics that the author wishes to focus on and those that necessarily must be reserved for another paper.

Methods

Feeling a bit like a schoolmarm, I would encourage Elisenda to be much more explicit about her methodology. This could be achieved in a long footnote even, but it should be put up-front in the text, and not come as an aftermath. I found myself looking ahead to get more information about where the quotes came from, for example, and even in the methods section, we are left guessing about the numbers of webpages read, the length of time spent, whether she interviewed people or simply quoted their pages, etc. Solid field methods is (or should be) one of anthropology’s strong points, and one which might well distinguish the contributions we can make to cyber-research. I might also mention here the question of fieldwork ethics. There has been quite a bit of (unresolved) scholarly writings about the ethics of doing research, the ethnographer’s exposure, of representation, of whether or not things online are in the public domain or conversely, whether we, as researchers, need to protect the confidentiality and identity of online informants (whether or not they know themselves to be informants). There are no easy or blanket solutions to the special ethical issues raised by online fieldwork; however, I do believe that it behooves researchers/writers to explain their respective approach vis-à-vis the research subject for any given research exercise, and to justify their choice of ethical paths, especially perhaps if identifying photographs or the like are being made available as data.

Concluding Remarks

In closing I sincerely wish to thank Elisenda for this thought-provoking paper, and John for bestowing on me the honor of discussing it. It makes a most welcome contribution to the literature on personal narratives online or virtual autobiographies, and moreover parlays these into considerations of relationship-building. It further ambitiously strives to relate these ‘poetics of the self’ to theories about the subject as being re-configured in contemporary times, and about relationships as being newly challenged through new technologies of representation. I fear that I have weighed in heavily, but (I hope constructively) in my critique of this work; if so, please accept it in the spirit that feedback is a gift—it is presented in that spirit, and I most certainly have had far too little feedback in the course of my career, so in that spirit to I invite other discussants to join in, and critique and correct my comments here.

I very much look forward to reading the larger work that ‘Dream Gallery’ is launching!

Sincerely,
Kyra Landzelius

Kyra Landzelius, Ph.D.
Visiting Scholar
Inter-University Research Centre for Technology, Work and Culture
Institute for Advanced Studies on Science, Technology and Society
Kopernikusgasse 9
8010 Graz Austria
phone: + 43 (0)316 813909-62
mobile: +46 705 752306
email: landzelius@sts.tugraz.at

Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)

eardevol@uoc.edu

Dear all,

First of all, thanks to Kyra for her valuable comments that demonstrate a really accurate reading and that give very suggesting and provocative ideas for improving my paper and for continuing my current research. In my first reactions, will try to clarify some questions posited by Kyra, following her expository order.

Overview

In fact, this paper is the first result of a prospective fieldwork about self representation and body image in the Internet. It was during fieldwork on that subject that I was attracted to Match.com and became more and more interested in online personal relationship. The web site design and the self presentations and photographs attached led me to de idea of a model of personal relationship related to consume, that give path to the understanding of online dating as a commodity; my work hypothesis.

I am very happy if the paper leaves the reader wanting more - it was my purpose!! I just have tried to make an ethnographic description and then, let the reader theorize about the data I present. That's why I do not theorize until the very end, and in such way that I let the way open to other interpretations. I have tried to use the method of exploration going from data to possible theories that suit them. In that sense, is an open paper, because my intention is to go further, opening a new fieldwork phase with these coordinates in mind, if they support the test of the present debate!

Situating the study

As I said in the last methodological notes, it is not a 'regular' fieldwork but a 'prospective' one. That means that it has followed a non systematic data collecting, but a learning process of the ethnographer, getting to know this (for her) new virtual environment, and letting her act as a 'newbie' in that world. But of course, I visited different web sites devoted to dating-service before I chose Match.com (9 to be exact) and, once in Match.com.es, I select a set of data based on genre and age diversification (about 30 profiles). My idea in that paper was to offer an

overview (to my self included) about the possibilities of that kind of ethnographic work can bring, as Kyra points out.

I tried to adopt the perspective of a user that gets enrolled in that interplay, and what he or she can find during the process. As Kyra shows, it was, in a certain way, a double or triple task: one of describing the site and its mechanisms, one of describing the profiles typology, and one narrating the process of the user that gets involved in such relationships, from the beginning, until the face to face encounter.

Kyra raises a lot of suggesting questions about relationship- quests in an internet age; I hope we will come back to them during the debate. Only one comment about who considers these relationships from a marketing stand-point: obviously, for the web site producers, it's a commercial enterprise. But, some users see their participation as kind of shopping and consuming activity or in terms of economy and management. These folk ideas cohere with theories of Cambell, Beck and Giddens, that offer a boarder interpretation of the patterns observed. So the link between big theory and data is done by the ethnographer. The same with the folk ideas I found about self presentation.

Questions of locality

My interest in location is present all over the description; despite may be you cannot found it explicitly. For contextualizing my data, I had to look to other web sites, not only in Spanish, but also in English (American, United Kingdom and Indian sites), and I have detected interesting adaptations and different ways of self presentation, but it was not the purpose of that article to go depth into a comparative analysis. I have mentioned, here and there, the necessity of a further comparative cross-cultural research on that topic.

I eluded to talk about culture because it was difficult to make cultural boundaries in this Spanish language website. In fact, I reduced the search to Spanish country, but also in Spain, there are people all over the world that speak Spanish, but that they are not 'culturally' Spaniards, so I preferred to speak about 'Spanish language context'. No doubt that Internet raises questions about locality, culture and language that have to be explored.

Questions of Subjectivity

I am really and gratefully surprised about Kyra comments here!!! Morfeo was my key informant, and he helped me to put some 'order' in this paper. I asked him to sign the article with me, but he would like to keep himself anonymous and insisted to not appear as a co-author. I respected his decision and I did not mention him. So, it is not strange that his voice resonates with mine. I express my gratitude to him now, and I am also very glad that Kyra has detected our complicity!!!

Style

Thanks! I take note!

Format

Thanks! I take note!

Methods

Yes, I know, I know. I must have had to be more systematic, but it was a prospective exercise for a long term study, and it's very difficult doing virtual ethnography to count the days and hours you spend doing online fieldwork. In fact, it takes nine months of compulsive fieldwork, that is, I do not spend every day online, nor was 'living' in the Internet for x period, so.. I thought that 6 month will reflect approximately the time spent. I also said that I have not conducted formal interviews. I have chosen to be as sincere as I can explaining my methodology; despite I know that may be some one will consider it's not a 'serious' ethnography; and despite some ethical problems could appear, but all the information is available online at the pages I quoted, except some quotations of the conversations with my informants, as Morfeo. But in those cases, they are aware of the study, and they gave privately their consent and have a draft copy.

Concluding remarks

Thanks again to Kyra for her insights and relevant comments; they will help me to follow the research with more enthusiasm. I have not answer all her questions, but I am sure that other discussants may follow the open lines to continue the discussion and pursue further some of the issues she raises. I hope not too many people are gone for the summer yet!!!!

Elisenda

Elisenda Ardevol
Professora
Estudis d'Humanitats i Filologia
Av. Tibidabo, 39
08035 Barcelona
UOC

John Postill (University of Bremen)

jpostill@usa.net

Many thanks for those thoughts, Elisenda.

The discussion is now open to all of us on the list. Please email your comments or questions directly to medianthro@abynznet.net with a subject line that sums up your point. Also, please bear in mind that the limit is 3 contributions per head for the entire seminar.

John

Erkan Saka (Rice University)

erkan@rice.edu

I agree with Kyra on the virtues of Elisenda's article. I mean it! Instead of repeating them, I will just focus on two points:

Throughout the last year, sometimes for the sake of an adventurous moment, I have looked at similar sites in English and in Turkish. I did not really participate, in a way, I could not overcome my 'real' self to initiate some relations... So when I saw Elisenda's article, I was curious to see what happens. Here comes my first and main critique: Based on a 6-month online fieldwork, Elisenda would have more to say what actually happened between her and members of the site. In addition to reference to interviews (in fact, these are mostly limited to Morfeo), Elisenda's own interactions would be more illuminating. A story of her own involvement as a 'looking' person would convey a deeper contribution to theoretization. As an informed observer, our author is doing a very good descriptive work but as an ethnographer something seems to be missing. MAYBE this is all my fault, I missed some points in the article, so I am sorry if this is the case. Otherwise, let me highlight that participant part of participant observation has to be added.....

Secondly, I find this and similar statements unproductive: 'The guidelines of the program design in building these profiles are very strict, leaving little room to improvisation' (page 5). I feel the author traps herself by (implicitly/unintentionally?) taking a negative and limiting view of commercial organizations. As she herself says there are surprisingly detailed profiles. Thus even the possible number of combinations of the fixed categories add up to a huge number and possible profiles. Besides, open ended 'brief description' type of sections provide even more combinations. Plus, pictures as she demonstrates (I loved that section, i never thought about it before) are another category for improvisations. In the end, I believe, the variation of people a user can meet is no less than the 'real life' opportunities...

--

Erkan Saka
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Anthropology
Rice University
Houston, TX

Field diary:
<http://frazer.rice.edu/~erkan/blog/>

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)

ph.budka@philbu.net

Dear List,

Knowing that Elisenda's study is in its initial phase and the frame of the ethnography isn't yet clearly cut, there are some issues I would like to raise which were partially mentioned by Kyra in her comment. I will start at the end of the paper:

Concerning methodology, I would like to know what kind of (textual) analyses are (going to be) used to investigate personal relationships on the Internet: content analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, etc.? With Kyra, I am wondering what role the crucial aspect of ethics plays in this project (see e.g. Mann & Steward 2000 with a full chapter on the ethical framework of an online study)?

In the section 'making the dream come true', Elisenda nicely demonstrates with the process of 'online flirtation' to offline encounters, that the 'virtual' and the 'real' world are not clear cut dimensions (p. 12-14). On the contrary, human relationships on the Internet imply always both aspects.

Additionally, the analysis pays attention to the visual character of the World Wide Web and the consequential importance of the human body, here in visual form. Unfortunately, I am missing some references on the statement that 'the Internet offers the possibility of a "pure relationship"' (p.8).

In her introducing description of the web site, Elisenda points out searching criteria she calls 'gender' (heterosexual, homosexual), which at least from my point of view are nothing else than sexual orientations (p.5). Maybe this is only one of those translation problems, Kyra mentions in her comment.

With Kyra I am curious to find out more about the dream gallery, maybe in a cross-cultural comparative context.

Best,

Philipp

References:

Mann, Chris and Fiona Steward (2000): Internet Communication and Qualitative Research. A Handbook for Researching Online. London: Sage.

Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)

mcoman53@yahoo.com

Dear All

I read with a lot interest both Elisenda paper and Kyra's comments - which were so rich so I can't separate now Elisenda work from Kyra contribution.

My first thought was to go and see the Match site. On a second thought I asked myself if I had/have any chance to check an ethnographic account on kula, plotlach or even foreign correspondents work. So here is an advantage and a risk - the field is there, fixed and accessible to all "readers"; obviously my journey in the site and my lecture of the side will not follow Elisenda's path, but still, the problem remains: how much ethnography, in the more or

less classical sense of the concept, is involved in a description of a site? The ethnography of Internet sites looks (for me) more like an hermeneutical exercise to read a TEXT. One have to deal with narratives, descriptions and pictures. They are "reffering" to some behaviors, but the researcher do not deal with the real, concrete, observable, behavior; he/she works with a textualisation of probale/possible/or fictional behaviors. And it seems obvios to me that we can not apply the techniques of reading social actions in order to read a text (which speaks about "virtual" actions and hypothetical roles). And that this type of analysis should be rooted more in litterary tradition and techniques of "suspicion" in order to avoid the traps of the textual construction.

Now about the theoretical frame - some models are suggested and I would like to pick up only one – the liminality paradigm (p. 11). I'm a little bit afraid by the generalisation of liminality in recent media studies - it looks like everything is or could be liminal in media field. It is possible that the site offers alternatives to real life situations (alternatives which can be, however, transformed in real experiences); but it looks more like a vicarial experience. And if all these people want to be perceived as "different", if they construct identities which can promote them on the top as more attractive, more unique, more etc (which is the reason of the marketization of these identities) we definitively do not deal with a communitas. The site is not for me a liminal structure - but Elisenda has a point here. The site looks like a masquerade - and functions similar to a masquerade. It allows people to have access to different other people and different experiences (maybe unaccessible in real life, under the real social status) through a "mask", an ideal and conjectural identity. Which is a culturally constructed one and hides sexual "a propos"; which protects and guarantees more freedom of self expression. To anticipate a possible question: it is not a carnival because it do not instore an world up-side-down...

In this context, it is not the aspect of commodity and marketing that fascinate me in this site and in further analyses of it, but the ritualization of communication, the creation of communicative "protocoles" (in a pure goffmanian sense) that allows people to create identities acceptable inside a certain symbolic frame (what Elisenda suggests at pag. 2)

And a small detail - it seems to me that in the typology of personal representation (p. 9) point C and point D are about the same structure: body in a context

Best
Mihai

John Postill (University of Bremen)
jpostill@usa.net

Well, many thanks to Erkan, Philipp and Mihai for that first round of comments. Perhaps Elisenda would like to address them in her next email?

Meanwhile feel free to keep sending in your comments and queries, but please remember to include a subject line that sums up your point (this makes it easier to keep track of the discussion).

John

Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)

eardevol@uoc.edu

Bufff!! Thanks a lot for this first round, I hope I can survive!! I know that we all are working hard at the end of the semester or have gone to the beach yet! So I really appreciate your constructive thoughts!

Thanks, Erkan for your sharp comments!!! Mmmmm, you want to know more about my experience in this site? I can give you my profile!! ;-) It's true that I have indented to do an ethnographic description without taking the 'I' position in narration, nor making an explicit point about reflexivity. But I think that my blood was in the description despite using an impersonal subject. My be your experience differs of mine, I will be glad to hear more about that...

I agree that capital is productive, not restrictive :-)) I only want to introduce a reflection about the importance of the 'guidelines' directing the profiles, to show the sociotechnical imbrications of software programs, the same will apply for non-profit web sites. There is a social policy in that site and a conception about self and what defines our identity, this was my argument.

Philipp (thanks) also makes a point about analysis method that I do not know how to solve at the moment. I think that I used 'content analysis' of textual and visual data, but I am not sure that this will work for the 'big' research. Any ideas will be welcome! About ethical concerns, I have read the book you mention and also the recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers (<http://aoir.org>). I have the informed consent of the people that I quote directly private conversations, but you are right that the research must include another more explicit means and my idea now is, at least, to get in contact with the rest of people that are behind the profiles I quoted, although I only used public information.

About gender, yes! This is a 'miss-in-translation' what I try to say is that 'gender' is not an explicit item in that web site, that they elude the question by only refer to sexual orientations, and not all.

The point of 'real' and 'virtual' world links with the comment of Mihai about liminality and my abuse of that concept, but I felt that it suits well with the experience of living an online affair, where your social-physical dimension is occulted. So, it's a kind of play, I kind of daydreaming. Virtual space acts, in that case, like a 'limbo' world, different of other means of dating, as contact pages in the newspapers. The experience of 'going real' is a shock. You are face to face with "that" person and you realize that you are not the 'you' and he is not the 'he' that you were used to. So, real and virtual world are not clear cut dimensions, but there is a before and after in the fact of meeting that person physically. So, virtual relationships (in the way I have explained) share some qualities of dream experience and of play, carnival, or ritual. And, what's more important, this is a collective experience and gives the participants a sense of 'communitas', explained so well by Turner.

Mihai (danke) also touches another important point related to ethnography, that is how to do ethnography in virtual spaces and how to relate the observations you make there with the off-line behavior. Christine Hine in *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) speaks about authenticity. The problem, she says, is not how authentic or sincere people are in computer mediated interaction, but a research problem itself. The association of Internet with identity play is not without its critics. I agree with her that internet users do not always deliberately construct new identities, and also new identities are not coming from a social vacuum. (This reminds me the polemic about camera over action, that Alessandro Duranti solves just saying that also over action is a social action!)

But what I have experienced is that the identities that I have constructed and maintained in my online relations (flirting relations through Mtach.com, to be exact) although I do not lie about my age, profession and hobbies, I experienced a deeply contrast with my sense of self when the physical encounter occurs. That does not solve the problem of 'physical' behavior in front of 'textual' behaviour, but I think both are or can be as real or as fictional, because 'textual' and 'physical' behaviour are 'real' behaviours at all. There is a question of performativity of the textual social interaction that is different, I believe, from the kind of interaction that a book or a poem can offer with the reader. Elisabeth Reid had told about that in her explorations in a MUD. There is a problem that also has been theorized as textual-orality. Is for that reason that I have introduced the idea of simulacra instead or against representation. The idea is that images and texts of the profiles and the interaction conducted by email with and between these profiles are a social interaction simulation. It means that images do not represent me, they act for me! It means that textual behavior do not refer to 'real' behaviors, it acts as a simulation of physical behavior with real consequences.

...waiting for the "second round"

Elisenda

references:

Hine, Christine, (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage Publication

Reid, E. (1994) *Cultural Formations in Text-Based Virtual Realities*. M. A. Thesis, University of Melbourne. <http://www.ludd.luth.se/mud/aber/articles/cult-form.thesis.html>

Duranti, A. (2001) *Linguistics Anthropology*, Blackwell

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)

danieltaghioff@yahoo.com

Elisandra's contribution is very stimulating and provocative, and it shows that ethnography need not be a chore, a matter of counting pots, but also rather a lot of fun to do...

The discussion so far has also been very rich and varied. I'd like to dip into various bits and make some interventions which will hopefully amount to a coherent commentary of some sort...

>I just have tried to make an ethnographic description and then, let the reader theorize about the data I present. That's why I do not theorize until the very end, and in such way that I let the way open to other interpretations.<

I am not sure that you can 'just describe' something. Elisandra is clearly being very selective in what she describes. She is not producing an exact copy of the Match.com site. She is producing a description mediated by her specific relation to the site. What is more it is mediated by her hopes and aims in terms of her research also, and thus by both her situated standpoint as a researcher, and her purposes in representing to an academic audience.

Perhaps Elisandra leaves the way open to other interpretations, but it is not entirely clear how, and whose interpretations this might be, to reiterate Kyla's excellent points on this. She leaves the way open to commentary from us as academic commentators, which is fine, but does not give us enough to go on in terms of interpreting her relation to the site, at least initially. She says she has a key informant, but does not really give us enough of their background, in order to help us to form commentary on her key informant's relation to the site. There is also not much clarity as to the differences between the key informant's and her own standpoint(s) on the site, and no other real sustained commentary from other sources, by which other perspectives might be brought into our academic commentary on the site. It would seem that the open-ness of the piece thus has a danger of resolving into a rather over-textualised singularity of interpretation of the practices in question, perhaps related to the authors rather limited 'participation' in the practices of the site (her own it seems, or did she sit-in in some way with the key informant, or with other informants?)

>But what I have experienced is that the identities that I have constructed and maintained in my online relations (flirting relations through Match.com, to be exact) although I do not lie about my age, profession and hobbies, I experienced a deeply contrast with my sense of self when the physical encounter occurs. That does not solve the problem of "physical" behaviour in front of "textual" behaviour... but I think both are or can be as real or as fictional, because "textual" and "physical" behaviour are "real" behaviours at all. There is a question of performativity of the textual social interaction that is different, I believe, from the kind of interaction that a book or a poem can offer with the reader.<

OK it seems she participated in meeting someone physically that she had approached via an online relation. I think this deserves more thick description, and more comparison with the experiences of others, and even other's commentary on her own experiences. Kyla seems to be bang on in stressing how Elisandra contextualises, or not, her work, and so opens or closes her text to critical consideration. Again since her own standpoint is not made clear, neither is the closure around her standpoint rendered as open to question or comparison.

However to defend Elisandra somewhat,

>Secondly, I find this and similar statements unproductive: 'The guidelines of the program design in building these profiles are very strict, leaving little room to improvisation' (page 5). I feel the author traps herself by (implicitly/unintentionally?) taking a negative and limiting view of commercial organizations. As she herself says there are surprisingly detailed profiles. Thus even the possible number of combinations of the fixed categories add up to a huge number and possible profiles. Besides, open ended 'brief description' type of sections provide even more

combinations. Plus, pictures as she demonstrates (I loved that section, I never thought about it before) are another category for improvisations. In the end, I believe, the variation of people a user can meet is no less than the 'real life' opportunities...<

I vey much liked Elisandra's seemingly Baudrillard inspired point that the online relations are built up not despite the tenuousness of the profiles in terms of some reference to reality, but rather because of it.

The critique here seems to miss that point entirely, sailing off into the waters of information theory and generative grammar, defending the idea of the near infinite generativity of fixed combinations, without stopping to question the 'productivity' assumption, that those fixed options to be combined, must necessarily correspond, in some more or less mechanical fashion, to some underlying correspondance between sign and signified.

It is precisely here that Elisandra's [up to now somewhat under-developed] thick descriptions and multiple commentaries might be able to score some heavy theroetical hits, especially around the transition from 'virtual' to 'real' (or are they now 'hyper-real') relations. I am really curious to see where she takes this aspect.

Regards

Daniel

PS the stuff on standpoint is based on Goodman's Languages of Art and Hobart's readings of it. The commentary stuff is classic Hobart fare, see for instance "Loose Cannons" or "Just Talk."

.....
 Daniel Taghioff
 Media Program
 School of Oriental And African Studies

Homepage: <http://www.geocities.com/danieltaghioff/>
 Phone: 020 8374 7112
 Mobile: 07981 944 237

.....

Jens Kjaerulff (Aarhus University)
 etnojens@abyznet.net

Thank you for the paper Elisenda. you are working on a topical area ('net dating') which I believe has very interesting potentials, and deserves serious attention.

In an entirely genuine and well intended sense, I think a great merit of your paper is the ways it raises so many more questions than it solves, as especially your discussant, Kyra Landzelius, so cogently and eloquently labors. I don't recall when I last experienced that I so relished a

discussant's comments over the exposition to which the former were intended only as 'comments'. (Thank you very much Kyra, don't apologize for doing a thorough job, I think we are all well served that you took the time and cared to make the effort.) For my part, I think this is particularly so since the questions you leave in the air so to speak, are left un- or inadequately digested at a much wider canvass in studies bent on analyzing 'cyber-flickers', although they may be better concealed than they are in the draft you have treated us to. Your paper, complimented by Kyra's comments, brings a whole array of issues on the table that deserve much more sustained reflection by us all.

Let me suggest just two (related) issues that may serve to focus further discussion:

1) In her comments, Kyra solicits keener attention to contextual or 'cultural' dimensions, noting at the same time however:

> that there is surprisingly little formative or narrative differences between say, [homepages on the part of parents of preterm babies] posted in Turkish, in Italian, in Swedish or in English _but I have, as yet(?), been unable to attribute this is this the 'global middle class' phenomenon that some theorize, is it mimicry, diffusion, convergence, a technologically-driven genre, or?). I would be very interested in learning if Elisenda (or others ... are encountering similar or different issues and can speak on them.>

'Even' among the inhabitants of the couple of Danish-country side villages where I studied practices of 'telework' as an entry to focus on 'change' in contexts of internet usage, there was a striking diversity in outlooks, not on pre-term babies in this case, but on issues of 'work', and how these tied in with other concerns, notably in terms of 'family'. Issues of 'work' and 'family' are very often grossly generalized by analysts, both in terms of description and analysis, and whether in terms of nationalities, 'classes', technological determinism, diffusion (Cf. the quote above), and what have you. I believe this is more an artifact of our assumptions and methodological shortcomings (e.g. sticking with homepages in our research?), than a reflection of empirical states of affairs. How, then, do we go about 'contextualization' in a way that allows us to exceed such shortcomings, encompass empirically prevailing diversity, and discover new and startling connections?

2) The answer I propose should surely be old hat: - assume that culture unfolds empirically as situated, ongoing process among particular individuals; follow PEOPLE, rather than settling for armchair 'cyber-ethnography' and intellectual fashion. Let me try to make the former concrete: during my fieldwork, I inadvertently came to follow a 'case of online-dating' very closely. Two of my key teleworking informants underwent divorce in the course of my fieldwork, and one of them pursued 'netdating' very keenly in the aftermath of this agonizing experience. Echoing Elisenda's 'marketing' vocabulary, this fellow was initially bent of 'checking his value on the market' as he had it. He consoled his emotional turmoil basking in the high number of 'hits' he scored (replies to his advertisement on a netdating site - allegedly more than 60 women eagerly replied to his very first posting!). Having composed himself somewhat after this evident on-line success, and contrary to his initial stated intent, he then gradually proceeded to meet some of the seemingly most promising candidates in person (several of whom I also met in his home), and only consulted the online forum on an occasional basis when a 'candidate had failed', as it were. To make a long story all too short, this proceeded for more than a year in no uniform fashion, and he eventually found a woman through this web-site to whom he got married and had two

children, upon which he basically forgot about 'online-dating' forever after. What is the lesson we can learn?

I propose, that 'cyber-ethnography' will simply not suffice, if we are to do any justice to the empirical phenomena behind the flicker on the screen that we seek to understand. Moreover, we should abandon conceiving of our object (and so effectively cast our analyses) in terms of the static idioms and templates that the history of our discipline is so full of, but which nonetheless still widely prevail in new guises, and which the 'textual' nature of media such as webpages so readily invite for. 'Online dating', I suggest, should not be an anthropological object in it's own right, but a route towards approaching complexities of humans trying to cope and make sense of complex living on a much wider scale -i.e., towards probing the processes through which the empirically unfolding culture-in-the-making we can observe, is indeed ongoingly produced. In the course of living a life, computer-'media' is just one 'means' among so many, and often a quite ephemeral and insignificant one at that.

My appology for reiterating old hat from previous seminars, but Elisenda's paper in conjunction with Kyra's comments so eminently invited for it, no less given the conrete context of 'online-dating'. Many thanks to you both, and with hopes of a many more exciting contributions.

Cheers // Jens

John Postill (University of Bremen)

jpostill@usa.net

I am intrigued by the comparative possibilities that this paper opens up, as Kyra and others have pointed out. In particular, I'm interested in how the 'catalogue sociality' of Match.com might compare and contrast with other forms of internet-mediated dating, flirting, etc, and sociality more widely.

I'm thinking, for instance, of Friendster and similar firms which use a very different approach to that of Match.com, namely by providing a snowball approach whereby people can introduce their friends and acquaintances to other friends and acquaintances who will hopefully do likewise, and so on. So rather than providing customers with a bounded catalogue policed by the firm, they provide them with a self-policing unbounded network. In this environment of 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001), the fostering and management of trust is far more devolved than within Match.com: it's passed on to customers. Then there are so-called online communities like USJ.com.my, the main meeting point of residents of Subang Jaya, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur where I've recently done fieldwork. Through its thriving forum, USJ.com.my has fostered what we might call 'community sociality', a form of sociality that stresses togetherness, solidarity, boundaries, etc. Finding a partner in such a social setting is again a different matter altogether.

Perhaps, then, we cannot speak of a predominant market-based 'social model' of courtship replacing in modern societies earlier kinship-based models (p. 14) but rather of an expanding range of competing models, including kinship- and/or friendship-based, amidst a proliferation of social technologies?

John

Reference

Wittel, A. (2001) Toward a network sociality, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 6, 51-76.

Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)

kyra_landzelius@yahoo.com

Elisenda's paper has demonstrably been 'good to think' as attested to by the flow of this seminar. I also appreciate the dialogue around my comments, both by way of some reassurance that my overly-long commentary was not completely over-the-end, and also for prompting me to think anew about my own work.

So many interesting issues have been raised, yet I reassure you I shall resist the temptation to address them all!

A few though prompt my reflections: namely here about contextualizations.

In the context of the question of contextualization, Jens writes: "I propose, that 'cyber-ethnography' will simply not suffice, if we are to do any justice to the empirical phenomena behind the flicker on the screen that we seek to understand."

To me, the operative word in this sentence is IF. Myself being most intrigued by the offline/online dialectic, I am a keen ally of Jens' passionate plea for the 'old'; nonetheless, I fully support stand-alone cyber-ethnographies (studies of MUDS, MOOS, chat rooms, and so on) as valuable initiatives in our quest for greater insights into human meaning-making activities. So, I question whether we always need the IF, whilst agreeing that the most rewarding challenge is to do justice to the phenomenon behind the flicker, as Jens eloquently puts it. I might take detour here to qualify what Daniel read as my 'banging on about contextualization' as not necessarily intending that context need be a geophysical/cultural/linguistic loci - I was thinking more along the lines of 'the production of locality,' (Appadurai's term) which I would expand to include theories as contexts. I suppose I was most asking Elisenda for a 'worlding of cyberspace' in the manner that Fischer advocates, and of whatever kind she choose.

But to return to this issue of what's behind the flicker: Jens found great diversity in a circumscribed area with regard to concepts of work and family - this is an intriguing but not surprising finding, from my perspective, and I would completely concur with his insight that such concepts are largely glossed by theorists, even anthropologists. Yet, if the object of study shifts, so does the field, and I'm thinking here of my findings of convergence in presentations of the preterm baby across numerous language groups - this would hardly lead me to conclude that the 'preemie' is conceptually the same in these linguistic groups (although I may hypothesize that the preterm baby is more likely than the non-preemie to be conceptually streamlined, given that the preemie is a unique, recent techno-historically invented category-of-person) but I do find that

Representations of the preemie show a striking convergence in the genre of homepages (hyperlinked via webrings) - which is an animated context where many cyber-active parents of preemies are investing energies in 'coming to terms' with the existential odyssey of having a frail, cyborg, uncertain newborn/new kin. Whether this is 'simple' mimicry (parents read others homepages and then copy the basic formula in their own self-poetics), or whether this convergence represents a collective exercise or tacit experiment with dialogic/graphic 'bridge-building' as a path towards 'coping', cognizing, mutual self-help, and/or collectively authoring the preemie into existence, or something else again - It is the very fact of these linguistically wide-spread converging expressive vehicles that I find especially challenging to interpretation. So, sometimes we can expand the 'field' in following our object(s) of analysis, but in other cases the field delimits and raises new questions, in this case away from polysemy (diversity) and towards the question of meta-constructs, in contra-distinction to most anthropological paths.

Perhaps this is another example of what John aptly identifies as the 'expanding range of competing models'- for sociality, relationship-building (as he gives the neat example from his work in Malaysia) or what-have-you - that are being introduced by things cyber. It definitely seems that any grand theorizing is to be tempered: Baudrillardian market-reflecting simulacra or any other may serve us best as 'local' interpretations, fantastically capturing Match-com, for example, but thin for trying to come to terms with other forums of flirting, searching online.

This leads me to enthusiastically echo a semiotic perspective, as raised by Daniel (although I wasn't at all certain what was meant by an underlying correspondence between sign and signified, and wouldn't agree that there need be, but was unclear what Daniel was saying). But I do appreciate that the semiotic perspective was raised, and advocate privileging 'significations' as opposed to communications, in our studies of computer-mediated communications, communicative acts, etc.

Cheers to all,
Kyra

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
danieltaghioff@yahoo.com

To Kyla's last response:

> I might take detour here to qualify what Daniel read as my 'banging on about contextualization' as not necessarily intending that context need be a geophysical/cultural/linguistic loci - I was thinking more along the lines of 'the production of locality,' (Appadurai's term) which I would expand to include theories as contexts.<

I didn't think you were 'banging on' i.e. boring us with too much text, but that you were 'bang on' which is a sloppy use, by me, of colloquial English on what is clearly an international list (apologies.) It means 'right on target.'

I agree with your open interpretation of contextulisation: The problem, as I see it, is that analysis tends to be fruitful in terms of how one relates objects, texts or contexts, rather than through considering them in isolation.

>This leads me to enthusiastically echo a semiotic perspective, as raised by Daniel (although I wasn't at all certain what was meant by an underlying correspondence between sign and signified, and wouldn't agree that there need be, but was unclear what Daniel was saying).<

The warm glow of agreement tinged with the uncomfortable edginess of misunderstanding.

Again I apologise for unweildy use of terminology.

What I mean is that the relations in question (in Elisadra's paper) did not proceed from some firm foundation of the fixed categories involved providing some reliable reference to the agent that one would be interacting with.

Rather the categories, and the relations, actually take on their aspect of enabling something that would not otherwise be possible, due to open-ness of those references, due to the ambiguities involved and the freedoms that brings.

The assumption of 'productivity' tends to imagine things only being enabled through more fixed references, through truth bearing relations to underlying realities. As far as I understand it, Baudrillard saw the ways in which we understand signs, and the references made with them, in relation to various modes of production. He was criticising productivism in terms of it assuming a mechanical production process for signs, where underlying realities 'produce' signs via direct and mechanical relations.

This ignores how ambiguous references, political persuasion, and many other forms of reference that are not at all straightforward, can be enabling of social practices.

The whole sign and signified thing is drawn from de Saussure, and is not very helpful, I agree.

Regards

Daniel

Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)
 eardevol@uoc.edu

‘The last fashion in New York in human relationships: people manage their emotional, sexual and friendship necessities as a financial portfolio of actives. Every one has a contacts portfolio for dating with the ideal match depending on the moment and necessity: Much more than flirting!’ (by Nomi Prims)

(La Vanguardia, 19/06/2005)

I take John_s idea of an expanding range of competing models and the proliferation of social technologies. Match.com is only one of them. How people are using, interacting, and give sense to what they do with and through this sociotechnological is fascinating!

I will think about your interesting interventions during this weekend in the Pyrenees mountains, far away from any computer machine!

Elisenda

John Postill (University of Bremen)

jpostill@usa.net

Thank you, Elisenda, enjoy the mountains and we look forward to your return to the list on Monday!

As usual the lines are open over the weekend for a further round of comments and queries. I'd like to remind you that the seminar closes on Tuesday at 4 pm CET.

John

Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)

kyra_landzelius@yahoo.com

Hi People,

Back to Daniel on the question of signs- thanks for the clarification. I fully agree then that sign and signified need not have a fixed relationship, I thought you were implying the opposite (our mis-communicate further underscoring the ambiguity of online 'communications!'). Given just such ambiguities, I was applauding your thinking along the lines of sign and signified as VERY helpful in our enterprise to interpret virtual exchanges (contra then your closing apology - though to the (alas limited) extent that I am a learned semiotician, I am more Peircean than Saussurian inclined). I will reiterate my concurrence: presupposing 'communication' is presumptuous at best, and moreover raises a host of questions about the sign-signifier-signified process - questions multiplied and magnified in the realm of the virtual. A focus on signification is to me a fruitful methodology, not only to caution us against iffy projections that 'communication' is taking place, but also to encourage us to decouple and identify signs and signifieds and search the various paths and relations between them. And I hope I am 'bang' on target here! By the by, (and to further underscore the importance of a 'significations' approach) I interpreted 'bang on' to mean 'to continue to beat, like a drum' (with no offense taken on my part whatsoever) and it was fine with me to be 'accused' of that in the context of thinking context :)

A follow-up on the above - I found Daniel's reading of Elisenda's text brilliant and a real contribution, re: how the tenuousness of profiles actually facilitates the ways relationships are

built up - loose semiotic chain proving very fruitful precisely because of 'floating' signifiers (after all, if we follow Lacan and others, all relationships exist as fantasies, possible phantasies)

All this signifying stuff is admittedly tricky: when/where/how/why do individual signifieds ('interpretations') become collective communications? Here I recall Mihai's excellent, in my opinion, pivoting of 'communitas' to emphasize the ritualization aspect of some online communication 'protocols'. Bringing in Goffman on 'symbolic frames' could also prove a fertile approach for those of us trying to get our minds around these phenomena. Mihai's fascination with ritualized forms resonates with my own; and I also appreciated his parsing of carnival and masquerade and believe he introduced some provocative analytical tools for a reading of (Match-com type) arenas of self-presentation/parading. Reading Elisenda, I was secretly pleased to see her introduce Turner's concepts, and indeed must confess that I turned to 'communitas' back in a 1999 article discussing and trying to capture online dynamics - even going so far as to speculate about 'cyber-itas' (as I believe I called it - rather laughable in retrospect, which is probably why I dropped the term, but some of the online worlds I am analyzing smack of a lot of 'ritual process', my old anthro first-love, and that is what I too was trying to capture).

Hope you all are enjoying, or soon to be enjoying, your summer rituals!

Kyra

Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)
S.Pink@lboro.ac.uk

Dear Elisenda and All

First many thanks to Elisenda for a great paper, and for sharing the early days of her fieldwork with us.

I just want to make a quite specific comment on one area that Elisenda's paper made me think about. In 1995 I taught a module on sexuality and the body and my final lecture was about the body and cyberspace (as it was often called then). I'm afraid I am away from the office doing fieldwork at the moment so cannot supply any detailed references, but just some thoughts that might be useful. The early and mid 1990s seemed to be a time when there was an explosion of literature across the social sciences and humanities about both the body and the internet and inevitably all sorts of notions of cyber bodies dislocated and interpellated identities. Much of this work seems to me to have exaggerated, or over anticipated the 'impact' of the internet on the how mind-body relationship is experienced and to have constructed an undue distinction between the sorts of social relationships one might have on-line and those one might have off line. However this literature could be useful for Elisenda to look at since various contributors to the debates did make efforts to theorise the (dis)embodied nature of on-line relationships, cybersex, and more.

There was also some interesting work on on-line identity (identity more broadly is my other point below). I'm thinking partly of Mark Poster's work but also other contributors (I will supply refs later if Elisenda likes). An interesting case study that was discussed at the time focused (and this

description is vague as clearly my memory isn't very good after 10 years, but I will look up the reference for this too) on a person who had invented an on-line identity that did not correspond with her/his off line persona – (i.e. a different sex, age etc) – and formed a series of intimate on-line relationships using this 'false' identity. In the end she/he was tracked down by people with whom she/he had developed intimate relationships on-line, which led to an interesting discussion of the results of this. That case study might link in nicely with the questions of inventing oneself/identity online that Elisenda raises.

Finally just a note on personhood/ the self. I felt p7 begged a more detailed discussion of the self/personhood. This might look at how we might theorise how the on-line dating self is constituted, for example, through practice, but also it raises the question of to what extent we might see the self as something more 'essential' (see Nigel Rapport's writing on 'The transcendent individual'). This leads to the subsequent question of how right cultural/social theorists have been to argue that the self is destabilised in 'cyberspace'.

Look forward to the rest of the discussion!

Sarah

John Postill (University of Bremen)

jpostill@usa.net

Dear seminar participants

As you will have noticed, we've had a quiet weekend. For those of you not yet on holiday, there's still time to post comments on Elisenda's paper till Tuesday 4 pm CET.

Best wishes

John

Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)

eardevol@uoc.edu

Back to work!!!

Firs of all, thanks to all contributions, I think that they are very valuable to my work and to the general discussion about online sociality and boarder interpersonal relationships in our late capitalism societies.

Body, identity and cyberspace

I agree with Sarah about the body and cyberspace theorization in the early and mid 1990s. Thanks to remember its implication in the current debate!! Some years ago, I have done a study about online identities. There, I intended to show that interviewed users do not necessarily experiment a dislocate identity going online, but that the experience of a distributed and ubiquitous identity has more to do with previous reflexive practices about self than an effect of internet relationships.

What I saw in match.com.es profiles seems not a destabilization of self identity, but a certain hesitation in being able to define oneself, a recognition of others role in personal traits definition, and a clear maintenance of the narratives related to mind-body duality, specially in the case of how people explain online friendship.

So, while it seems that we can live in a "saturated self", folk theories seem still linked to an "essential" self and to mind-body duality. Even though people studied suscribe the "disembodied" nature of online relationships, they "live" the experience as a "true" and sensorial experience. Even more, the body matters and it is present and used in internet through image and text. The conclusion is that online relations are a very "embodied" relations.

Catalogue sociality

As Jens pointed out, for many match.com users, online dating is only one way among others to find singles. As a lot of users narratives say, once the user accomplishes his or her objective, usually stop searching for more_ but I cannot derive from this behavior that computer _media is only just one means more, among others, ephemeral or insignificant, because it is not only an individual, private and punctual question, but a common practice among millions around the world, an organized social network, and an standardized economic activity. So, going back to John, it has to do with an increasing use of social technologies that we have to study in its social signification and cultural dimension.

Context and ethnography

I now realize the "big" significance of contextualization problem. It's not only a problem of transcultural comparison, but also a question of comparing different models of sociability presents in internet and a question of tracing the limits of our object of study. So, it has to do with sociality and mate patterns in our wider societies, but also how social technologies are performing them. How these online/offline patterns relates each other is one of the problems left unsolved, but John commentaries about competing sociality models I think will help to resituate.

Kyra observations about _the production of locality_ open a new perspective on what is the program and the people doing in match.com and also traces new limits on the contextualization of the description. Linking with Daniel observation of my naive presuppositions about theory and narration style, of course I had an interpretative framework, product of my relations with the site and with my theoretical background and experience! But, as Jens says, I wanted to raise questions more than try to solve them, just pointing to explanation theories at the end. Generalizations are dangerous, as we have seen, and, as Kyra says grand theorizing needs to be tempered!

Maybe there seems to be a 'des-compensation' between the fieldwork length and the presented results, as Erkan demands. Maybe it is necessary to clarify this 'decollage' or 'gap'. But it was difficult to explain in a non-methodological paper and in a few words the kind of fieldwork it means to get involved in such relationship and the special 'tempo' it takes. I take note to explain it better and in more detail in further essays, but by no way I think it is necessary to narrate my experience in an autobiographical style. Just saying that the "preliminary study" took more time than I supposed!

I appreciate Kyra and Daniel's debate about signification, especially that of 'floating signifiers'. My idea here was to contrast representational and symbolic theories with simulation ones in order to understand the relationship that users engage with their image online production and exchanging.

Virtual and ritual

Mark Poster's case makes reference to the nature of online relationship and confirms the authenticity problem, in the sense that what we have to do is to look how people tackle with that issue of trust, authenticity and falsehood in online relations, so, it also means how we deal with that questions in offline world. As have been said during the debate, the question is not easy to solve, because people do experience virtual relations as 'real' as physical relations, but also make a distinction between virtual and physical encounters. So, I found convenient to characterize these kind of online relationships from a ritual perspective (which is not new), that allows to account for the paradoxes I met among users (included mine) explanations of their online meetings. Thanks also Kyra for her idea of 'cyber-itas', I wonder if I can have the complete reference of her work in order to quote it!

Finally, I agree with Jens that 'online dating is a route towards approaching complexities of humans trying to cope and make sense of complex living on a much wider scale', but, I do not find that it is in conflict with Kyra's defense of stand-alone cyber-ethnographies. I have tried to demonstrate that online relationships have wider implications, not only related to social reproduction, but also related with self identity, knowledge and experience.

Elisenda

Pille Runnel (Estonian National Museum)

piller@jrnl.ut.ee

Dear Elisenda and the list,

While entering the debate at the very end of the seminar, after being offline for the last days, and reading Elisenda's conclusion-like letter, I'd prefer not to rise any new topics. But as the issue of social technologies is one (though somewhat marginal) part of my own ICT research, I still drop a few lines, not too much connected to the previous discussion.

One of my online field sites has been a slightly similar environment www.rate.ee. I have been following it as a part of a wider research on Estonian youth media and ICT cultures. The environment is unique in the sense that almost half of the Internet users in Estonia own an

account there (as it is a free service) and it has been celebrating a continuous attention by the media. At Rate.ee, users practices vary from online dating to forming the networks between real-life classmates or families not to forget the simple 'presence' open to all kinds of scenarios. The central option, offered by the service provider, is rating everybody else's photos.

My research, still in the stage of the fieldwork, has taught me that also another framework might be relevant for approaching these kinds of relationship-building online environments: besides the connections of technology/technological structures and sociality, the connections of media and sociality might be significant. Online-socializing is linked to the issues of individual's media presence, including the questions, of how one's private life becomes in a way a resource for the person, or a way of accumulating capital, but also the very means through which one can test his/her communicative competences. Besides consumers of the profiles/relationships we might also think about them in terms of audiences (which itself consists of various roles, both active and passive).

Thinking about these kinds of environments also as media (events), has become even more topical after the introduction of various services based on recommender systems (either on content-based suggestions or collaborative filtering) – these are more familiar from online-shopping like Amazon.com, and largely forthcoming in future e-governance systems probably. They have been recently even more clearly present in the form of various initiatives like audioscrobbler or, particularly good example, Last.fm, which are at the same time a kind of social technology and the media. Users are the broadcasters and audiences, relying on their own musical tastes, preferences and choices, but at the same time they depend on and learn from the other users, whose tastes and preferences, ie profiles (can we also say, online identities?) influence them.

Due to the late hours' I'll not develop my mostly empirical examples-centered remarks any more. But I hope that this issue will come up also in our future discussions. I'd like to thank both Elisenda for the rich paper and following comments and rest of the seminar participants, whose comments have been certainly helpful for me as well,

Pille

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)
ph.budka@philbu.net

Dear List,

Even though Elisenda has already posted a concluding note, which nicely summarises the seminar so far, I would like to go back to the basic aspect of online fieldwork or ethnography. This kind of inquiry seems to become more and more popular among anthropologists (three out of six working papers in this series are using online research).

Being quite at the beginning of my PhD project, which has an online and offline phase of data gathering, I am wondering how more experienced online fieldworkers deal with the limits of this

kind of investigation (or are there no limits?). How and when to switch from on- to offline interaction? How to keep on- and offline research meaningfully connected?, etc.

Maybe we can discuss this topic beyond the e-seminar, only if this is of interest of course.

Cheers,

Philipp

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
danieltaghioff@yahoo.com

My third and final contribution is to add to Phillip's question, which I second as being interesting:

>Being quite at the beginning of my PhD project, which has an online and offline phase of data gathering, I am wondering how more experienced online fieldworkers deal with the limits of this kind of investigation (or are there no limits?). How and when to switch from on- to offline interaction? How to keep on- and offline research meaningfully connected?, etc. Maybe we can discuss this topic beyond the e-seminar, only if this is of interest of course.<

Also grappling with Methodology I have a similar question:

If participant observation is about having something to compare, contrast, or triangulate people's own textualisation of their lives with (in order to make it different from say, interviews or questionnaires; one might also ask if this is an adequate conception of ethnography;) how does this relate to online ethnography?

Is online a purely textual world, or are we engaging in interactive practices that reveal more than perhaps an interview might? Is there something in the ways in which people respond to one another online that provides some basis for critical consideration of how they textualise their own and other's lives?

Daniel

Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)
kyra_landzelius@yahoo.com

Dear Group,

I'll also keep points brief, although I'm afraid they are not in the wrap-up style of Pille and Elisenda, but more along the lines of the open-ended and highly significant queries that Philipp poses - food for thought indeed for future seminars!

Clearly the issue of qualitative versus quantitative differences (to umbrella it in simplistic terms) arises with respect to online/offline forms of life and equally to our interpretive attempts to apprehend them. What can we transfer over from previous methods/theories, what can we re-work and re-use, what needs to be radically re-thought or discarded, what new tools and theorizations should we be experimenting with...? All of these questions have a familiar ring to anyone who has been even occasionally dipping (as myself) into the 'cyber' literature... And yet we have far more questions than answers -which is what makes this arena so much fun!

One of the more 'serious' arenas for a fieldworker, in my opinion, is that of ethics, however. I found it rather curious that not much discussion ensued on this question, leading me to wonder if most all readers found the matter resolved in the case of what I'll call 'public access' data?

Philipp was the clear exception to the silence on this point ; and he cogently reminded us that discourse analysis, content analysis, visual analysis, etc. all command their own ethical conundrums and responses (and thanks for the Mann and Stewart reference). Elisenda (noting that Match-com sites are in the public domain) doesn't seem overly-concerned with ethical equations, and I want to emphasize that I do understand reasoning along these lines - after all, anyone (theoretically) can go online and access them. Yet it leaves me wondering about so many issues with regard to researcher-informant relations - is there such a relationship? if so, what are it's parameters? how does it differ? what are our obligations to 'informants' (confidentiality, privacy, etc.) in an era of such exposures? Pille gives us the example of the Estonian site where - if I understand you correctly(?) - participants vote on pictures of each other?? This is a stark example of the incredibly exposed and exposing trends in mediated socialities and self-performances. The sheer volume, the unbounded distribution, the immeasurable 'self-life' of these images attest to very different stylizations of subjectivity. What do such forms mean then, or command, in relation to 'conventional' fieldwork ethics? Or are we simply talking about 2 disparate universes?

Prior to reading/participating in this seminar over the past week, I was of the firm belief that it is vital that online researchers be explicit in describing the ethics underlying their particular research design and methodologies, if for no other reason than to assure readers that we have thought-through ethical issues. This was the point that I had hoped to make to Elisenda - that even in the case of 'public access' data we, as Anthropological fieldworkers, might be best served (and might best serve our discipline) by not simply assuming the absence of ethical conundrums, given the ubiquity of our 'data' -but that we have to be explicit, otherwise in essence we also abdicate a relationship with 'informants' (and that's okay -but is it anthropology or media studies or? - and I am NOT a disciplinary purist, but taking a bit of a devil's advocate position here). I guess at base I was arguing here for a transparency in the ethical equation; especially given that we, in our data collection, may be apt to capitalize upon the 'transparency' of others (a.k.a. informants' self-presentations).

Hence, last week at this time, I, for one, would argue in preferenc of a measure of qualification to the 'public access' logic. My stance for qualifying 'public access' ethics derived in part from (what I thought was?) the growing evidence to suggest that people ('users') do not necessarily relate to a cyber-venue as being a 'public' forum, or conceive themselves to be engaged in 'public' acts. My stance also derived from the artifact and archiving qualities and time-space capacities (perversions) that inhere in digital media - after all, how many of us would want things we said or did 20 something years ago to surface now as fair game territory for the anthropologist's grist,

replete with pictures or intimate details about our relationship-quests? Yikes! So perhaps we have an obligation to protect people from themselves(?) :)

Yet increasingly I wonder if this is just old-fashioned logic on my part, marking me as an old-fashioned anthropologist??

Perhaps research subjects' postures on just such questions (to the extent that the researcher could discern them) could provide criteria for framing the ethical codes adopted by the researcher. Again, we are on new ground here: solutions likely will and MUST vary greatly on a case-by-case basis. After years of thinking about the issue in my own work (on the parents of preterm babies websites), I have reached an elaborate multi-layered formula for ethical conduct with which I feel fairly comfortable. My strategy involves different obligations to the parents and to the babies, in effect arising from my conclusion that I have an obligation to protect babies from the (inadvertent) acts of their parents, acts that 'expose' infants to the prying of the world, including curious human scientists! As an asidel, I'll say I find it interesting that we all (not surprisingly) illustrate our points with examples from 'our tribe' - not unlike the allegorical days of old anthro 'tales from the field' – perhaps another marker of charting out a new terrain?

I believe I promised at the outset to keep my comments brief, and now must apologize, as that clearly did not happen! This is my last posting for this seminar, however, (and I hope I won't be left having the 'last word') so let me say that I enjoyed very much participating. Elisenda's paper was a pleasure to read and reflect upon, and I thank her and our chair for the opportunity to myself be initiated into the virtual Media Anthro circle via her interesting research.

best wishes to all,
Kyra

Dorle Dracklé (University of Bremen)

drackle@uni-bremen.de

Dear Elisenda, dear all,

first of all I want to thank you Elisenda for your interesting and thought-provoking paper! I appreciated reading it and following the discussion.

Before the deadline approaches, I would just like to add two ideas that came to my mind which haven't been addressed so far.

Online dating is very prominent nowadays, and people do not use it to play only, but its reality and an imaginary (dream-like) space full of desires, longings, emotions of all kind. And I missed the emotional side to it. Apart from the question if online ethnography suffices, I do not get closer to the persons involved but that's what makes ethnography so precious for me: to follow the narrations of fellow humans. How are they living? What are their reasons to act under which conditions and which premises? What are there dreams apart from mating or lurking around in "matching" websites? The interesting side to new technologies for me is to get to know how technology shapes our daily life and our fantasies, and here I felt unsatisfied, I would have liked

to get deeper into it. To know more about your key informant, for example, to get to know him via the relationship that unfolds in an interactive multimedia driven research relationship. How do our relations to interview partners and the field as such change under conditions of modernity? How can we translate reflexivity in ethnography into the new environments?

The last one of my remarks concerns our theoretical approach towards the virtual fields we are doing our research about. It comes to my mind, that – in several texts I have been reading so far – the authors do not make clear what their own attitude towards the field is. Elisenda using Baudrillard, Beck and others in that very way provokes my objection as it mediates the impression that those people using the dream gallery are meant to be somewhat confused, our classical fieldwork victims, the peasants we once dealt with, not serious interlocutors. Ah, they are all in market driven relations! Ah, modern society makes them superficial! Reality and representation are one in our times! Ah.... !

Elisenda says (15): This new rules of the social game on the internet are in line with the definition of a cultural model based on the consumer satisfaction..... etc. - an idea to which I would strongly object.

Those ideas leave me completely perplexed, because I do not see any connection at all to the ethnography.

What I see is, yes, an international corporation that earns money and puts up rules, intercultural ones. But – as already stated by someone else – what is the history of dating, hasn't there always been a market for lonely hearts and international companies? Yes, there has. And apart from that, privately spoken, so to say, around me a lot of very happy couples are living who found each other in those dream galleries – and although Kyra doesn't like to transcend the boundaries between online and offline research, I would like to see your wonderful work expand a bit beyond the virtual life - knowing that pure text analysis and interaction and situation analysis are certainly also completely safe and powerful tools. It's the persons and their emotions that I am missing.

Thank you all for the nice discussions, and all the best to Elisenda and your research!

Dorle

John Postill (University of Bremen)

jpostill@usa.net

Dear all

On that final note from Dorle, I wish to close the seminar by thanking Elisenda for sharing her fascinating research with us, our discussant Kyra for her painstaking comments on the paper, and all of you who've joined in the discussion or followed it in quiet reflection.

I think Philipp's suggestion of a future discussion on internet/online research methods is excellent. Perhaps someone could volunteer a brief statement (1000-1500 words) on their own

experiences with, and reflections on, this kind of research to get a discussion going sometime in September? Please drop me a line off-list if you'd like to volunteer --or know of someone who may be persuaded to. Alternatively, do let me know if you have any other suggestions regarding the seminars, bibliography, etc.

Best wishes

John