

**Comments on Jonathan Skinner's working paper
"At the Electronic Evergreen: a computer-mediated ethnography of a
newsgroup from Montserrat and afar"**

from Birgit Bräuchler (University of Munich)

May I say in advance that my comments hopefully do not sound too critical since I really would like to encourage that sort of work, that tries to transfer ethnographic research methods and questions into cyberspace. The social science Internet research could profit much from that.

Introduction

First of all thanks for giving me the chance to read Jonathan's interesting paper and to comment on it. I myself did extensive ethnographic online research during the last years and was, as Jonathan, quite frustrated by the fact that there are indeed - despite the recent boom in cyberspace literature - not many studies incorporating and transferring established ethnographic methods into cyberspace. Anthropologists were among the last ones to jump on the 'cyber train'. Other disciplines like communication studies, sociology and psychology did a lot of research on Internet use in the so-called West, while the so-called 'rest' was neglected for a long time (China seemed to be an exception attracting researchers because of the severe restrictions imposed on Internet use by the Chinese government). But things are changing to the better... Jonathan's paper proves that.

I very much appreciate Jonathan's efforts to deal with the Internet both as site of ethnographic research and as context for social interaction and the formation of communities online. The paper has a clear line of argumentation, only in the theory part I encountered some difficulties (see below). I would also like to emphasize the interconnection of the online and the offline sphere made so evident by Jonathan's case study. To get an ethnographic understanding of what goes on online, it is essential to take this interconnectedness into account, which also became very obvious doing research on the expansion of the Moluccan conflict into the Internet. As Jonathan mentioned (p.5) most Internet researchers don't care for the offline context of the Internet users. And even those who argue that taking the offline context into account is important for interpreting and understanding online interaction, such as Rheingold (1993) and Hine (2000), seem to neglect it in the end.

"At the Electronic Evergreen" is a very good example to show of which importance a local context can be for an online community and how locality is reproduced online in cyberspace, a space which is supposed to transcend time and space as people like Manuel Castells argue. The Montserratian "EVERGREEN TREE" visualizes this 're-localization' in a nice way. Still, considering the interconnectedness of the online and the offline level, of interactions on the Internet and its offline context, I ask myself why we still have to differentiate between the "real" and the "virtual" (being not real?), as Jonathan does. As became very evident in Jonathan's as well as in my own case study and as I argued in my thesis both online and offline level are part of one and the same reality.

As many other authors Jonathan focuses on text-mediated interaction online. Even if newsgroups, mailing lists etc. still are a lot about text I observed that visual elements, i.e. digital photographs, scanned drawings, maps etc., also play an enormous role to provide group cohesion, to arouse emotions, to visualize what people are 'talking' about. With

computers, networks and transfer rates becoming more and more powerful visual elements will play a more important role, not only on web pages. Jonathan also gave us an example of the visualization of community in his online newsgroup: a photograph of the Evergreen Tree (originalevergreen.jpg, p.3). I wished he would have elaborated a bit more on this visual aspect. For me this is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Internet; it enables us to combine all those different media and sources, be it text, sound or images, on one platform.

Computer-mediated ethnography

Jonathan's paper illustrates in a very vivid way how a sense of community can be fostered and maintained (and in the end even destroyed?) online. In the first paragraphs of this section Jonathan gives us an overview of theories on online communication and communities. Regarding the limited space available in a paper such an overview must always be limited as well. Still, one could have been a bit more critical with the theories mentioned. Sometimes I had the impression that different modes of communication were mixed up a bit. I will try to give some examples for both points: It is legitimate to mention Howard Rheingold as the 'father' of the so-called "virtual communities" (p.5). Still, I think, one should not quote his definition of online communities without pointing to the many critics (e.g. Stegbauer 2001, Zurawski 2000) of this very vague description, which is part of his optimistic, very Western oriented, often one-sided and contradictory work.

Jonathan further differentiates between "supporters" and "critics" of CMC, that is pros and cons of CMC (p.5/6). Some of them are enthusiastic about the "freeing" character of CMC, some are pessimistic about depersonalisation and anonymity. Here I would just like to remark that one has to check WHEN those people cited conducted their research. Kiesler, Siegel and Mc Guire, for example, were among the first ones to do online research in the early 1980ies. Their methodology (they did research in a rather artificial communication situation in a communication lab) had nothing to do with the one applied by more recent researchers who either observed interaction or web pages online or even became members of mailing lists and got involved in the online happenings. Kiesler & Co.'s findings have often and convincingly been refuted since. Nevertheless, this Internet optimism-pessimism dualism still exists. None of the 'cyber literature' cited in Jonathan's paper was beyond 2000. It might be a good idea to include more recent online community approaches like Wilson (2002) or Kendall (2002). Lori Kendall in her work on a "virtual pub" also emphasizes the strong interconnectedness of the online and the offline level. It might also be worthwhile to have a look at the evolving diaspora and internet literature like for example Sökefeld (2002) or also Vertovec (2002).

Just a minor comment: When mentioning the "decolonised and deterritorialised world, one of transnational cultural flows, shifting migrations, displacements and dislocations" (p.6) it might be good to make a reference to Arjun Appadurai (1996), whose theoretical concept of the "-scapes" is of importance for Internet research, be it ethno-, media-, techno-, finance- or ideoscapes.

Talking about online communities (p.7/8) and the interconnectedness of the online and the offline level we have to carefully differentiate between the various communication modes used online. MUDs, IRCs and mailing lists offer very different possibilities to communicate. The former two enable synchronous communication the latter one asynchronous c., for example; this implies a lot more for the communication style (not all CMC is asynchronous! p.8). On p.8, I think, Jonathan does not describe "different types of ethnographies of electronic communities", but rather different modes of communication. Differentiating

between various modes also has consequences for the question about the interconnectedness of the online and the offline level. The online-offline relationship will be different when doing research on a MUD, an online world that was created as a parallel world to the offline world and which might have no links to it, or in a newsgroup, such as Jonathan's one, that only went online because this was the only place left where its members could socialize at the "Evergreen Tree" wherever they live.

When we do research online, we do not only have to transfer and to adapt our research methods but also our theoretical concepts, such as 'community'. I totally agree with Jonathan (p. 8), citing B. Anderson, that communities cannot be false or genuine, we have to differentiate them according to the style they are imagined. This imagination can differ a lot depending on the mode of communication, the topic of discussions, the members, their origin, etc.

Montserrat and the Electronic Evergreen

This paper section was very convincing for me. It illustrated in a very profound way how ethnographic methods, especially participant observation, can be transferred online and what results we can get from it: the ethnography of an online community, its way of interacting (netiquette), its traditions, its ways of fostering a sense of community and solving conflicts. This is an essential step forward in the field of cyberanthropology. Hardly any of the many cyberspace studies are based on a long-term participant observation. Some of them did not even follow online interactions 'live' but preferred to analyse archives of online forums. One can easily imagine how much information gets lost this way.

It would have been great to get more detailed information on Jonathan's online research at an earlier stage (we only get to know more about his role in the Electronic Evergreen in his conclusion, p. 19). His arguments would have been even more convincing then. I would have also liked to know more about how Jonathan communicated with the members, always in public, or by one-to-one-email? How did he conduct his interviews and with whom? Always online, with all members? How does he know, that Cudjoe's behaviour is sanctioned, for example, by ignoring his mails (p.13)? Is this discussed publicly online?

I very much liked the way he described the development of the newsgroup and the fusions and fissions involved. It would have been interesting to get a bit more information on the members, by the time when there were only 10 or 50 of them. Who was that? Were they representative of the former Montserratian population? Reading the paragraph on "Montserratian identity" (p.11) I asked myself which elements the members chose to build their identity online, whether this was a strengthening, a revival or maybe even an invention of traditions?

The splitting of online newsgroups as a way to cope with conflicts is a very interesting observation, especially for me, as I did research on the expansion of a local offline conflict into cyberspace. An important question for the future is whether the Internet (as an actor?) will manage to provide a neutral platform for warring parties to communicate without fear and to find a solution to their problems. In the Moluccan conflict, unfortunately, it did not work out this way.

On p.16 Jonathan interprets the bifurcation of the Montserrat newsgroup as a "community breakdown". Even if I have no figures available (I don't know how many people left, for example) I really wonder whether this was a breakdown.

Does the Electronic Evergreen community not exist any more after some of its members decided to leave? Why? Do we not make the same mistake here as those nostalgic anthropologists who are still looking for a clearly defined community in a clearly defined locality? As Jonathan argued, these communities do not exist any more. Is it therefore not more interesting to look exactly at those fusions and fissions, those online dynamics? I would argue that those dynamics enable a community to adapt to changing environments and thus to survive, even in an ever changing way. (The use of) Traditions might only be one means to achieve this. If we have a look at the ever-growing number of newsgroups it seems to be an inherent characteristic of online communities to get more specialized, to split, to form new groups. It would be interesting to investigate how the new members of the Electronic Evergreen changed its discourse, how the meaning of traditions changed or whether they were instrumentalized by some in opposition to the newcomers. These are just some thoughts.

Computer-mediated community from Montserrat and afar

P.16: I have got a question here: How did this split between "black" and "white" come about? In the beginning it sounded as if those differences played no role in the Electronic Evergreen. But maybe that would be getting too far? The opposition "in-your-face" and "in-your-head" (p.17) did not really make sense to me. What about the netiquette described in the paper? Does this not illustrate that CMC is not all about "in-your-head"?

Conclusion

It became already very obvious throughout my comments that Jonathan's paper is an important contribution to the new field of cyberanthropology. Further elaboration of his case study will help to make a major step forward, both in theory and in methodology. Still, there are a lot of questions to be asked, many issues to be discussed. The paper is perfect to stimulate an interesting discussion which I am looking forward to; it should become much more than a "by-product" of Jonathan's "traditional ethnography of Montserrat" (p.20).

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