

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

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

**E-Seminar
“Researching the Internet”**

(27 September – 6 October 2005)

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear all

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

Welcome to the 7th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar! The seminar will run for a period of a week and end on Tuesday 4 October 2005 at 4 pm Central European Time. We shall be discussing on this mailing list the topic 'Researching the Internet', taking as our point of departure a brief statement by Birgit Brauechler (Munich, <http://easaonline.org/networkbios-a-f.htm#BB>). You can find the statement at <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>

Birgit has recently published on this topic in her monograph Bräuchler, B. (2005) *Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: transcript.
<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/bibliography.htm>

The discussant will be Christine Hine, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey who has written extensively on Internet ethnography, e.g. see her book *Virtual Ethnography* (2000, Sage).
http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/christine_hine

To participate all you need to do from Wednesday onwards 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. 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. In fact, I know of at least two lecturers who are already using these materials in their teaching.

Finally, I wish to thank both Birgit and Christine for their contributions to this seminar and invite Christine to post her comments later today.

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>

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

**Comment on Birgit Braeuchler's statement on "Researching the Internet"
by Christine Hine**

I'm delighted to be acting as discussant for this e-seminar on Researching the Internet. Well, I should be honest, I was delighted at first, but then became rather daunted when I first received Birgit's statement, and found how much her thesis extract focused around comments on Virtual Ethnography. I'm sure you'd all find a session of "you said that" "no I didn't" "yes you did" pretty dull to watch, so I'll do my best not to do that. Instead, I'll respond to Birgit's statement with some thoughts that reflect where I'm at right now with my own research and that connect with the two topics she asks us to consider: how far anthropological methods transfer into cyberspace; and how to relate online and offline research. I'll try to take those thoughts in the direction of thinking about what makes research approaches adequate for the tasks we set them. First, though, a bit of a disclaimer. I'm not an anthropologist, and whilst I use ethnographic methods extensively, I don't use them to contribute to mainstream anthropological issues (however you might define them), so that gives me what for some of you might seem a quirky, irreverent or downright mistaken take on ethnography. When it comes to talking about the adequacy of research methods the anthropological take on ethnography is quite distinctive, and while I'm very interested to be in dialogue with anthropology on these issues, I can only speak really for the ethnographic approaches deployed in my home fields of sociology and STS (science and technology studies).

The starting point of science and technology studies does inflect my methodological approach to the Internet, since the basic principle from STS that technologies should not be assumed to determine particular social outcomes seemed to me from the outset to imply that there would not be one methodological approach to the Internet. Approaches would have to be situated and negotiated. Whether or not methodological approaches transfer from online to offline couldn't be settled once and for all, since we couldn't assume that we knew in advance, or would ever know in a singular way, what the Internet did to social interaction. In many ways, then, it's not a straightforward case of transferring methods from offline to online, but of finding ways to make

methods recognisably continuous between settings. Making research methods "transfer" is an active achievement on the part of the researcher, including making their writings suitably ethnographic and recognisably grounded in disciplinary/methodological heritage.

Birgit talks about her concerns that ethnographies of online phenomena shouldn't be confined to online settings alone, and I'd very much agree with many of her conclusions here. I'm interested in research methods that help us to explore the varied textures of contemporary lived experience. That means that I'm worried by approaches that limit themselves, as an a priori decision, to online spheres as much as I'm worried by approaches that focus on face-to-face interactions and exclude, from the outset, the myriad other mediated connections that comprise contemporary social life. It's a question, for me, of exploring meaning making structures and practices as we find them, without assuming that we know in advance what form they will take. This having been said, there are also practical limits to be drawn. Such is the degree of connection in everyday life, across multiple forms of media and diverse geographic locations, that the individual researcher is increasingly drawn to a sense of their own limitations. If the values that drive our research define the field as, in principle, unbounded, then it becomes clear that it is our own practices that will have to do the bounding for us. This, for me, means that research projects often become tentative and exploratory, and involve crafting a field site as I go along. I learned a lot on this issue from the collection Vered Amit edited on *Constructing the Field*. This kind of approach also places an interesting focus on defining the audience for the research and on specifying the set of problems in which the research intervenes, and crafting the field site to suit.

This is a long winded way of saying that no, I don't think that online research settings are always adequate in themselves, but I can envisage circumstances in which the set of research problems in which I want to intervene might mean that an online setting was a useful focus, for reasons both pragmatic and principled. The pragmatic point would be where moving offline, in a context of limited resources, might simply not be a priority in order to address a particular set of research issues (maybe this is one of the points that makes my ethnography very definitely not an anthropological one). The principled reason for not going offline would be that if for this particular piece of research you are interested in gaining a deep ethnographic understanding of online life and the people that you're dealing with don't meet face-to-face, I think you have to take the possibility of symmetry seriously, by at least trying out how it feels only to have online interactions to work with.

I don't think that researchers should automatically shift to offline interactions to "verify" what people say online. That approach inappropriately celebrates face-to-face interactions as a site of veracity, and threatens the researcher's experiential understanding of how life is for the people we seek to understand. I would take research offline to explore a set of issues that might be important for some research projects, including the ones Birgit identifies about exploring socio-cultural contexts. But the key point I was trying to make in *Virtual Ethnography* was that doing so involves loss as well as gain. Adding another medium of interaction with informants doesn't automatically increase our understanding or gives us better insight. On these issues I'd thoroughly recommend Shani Orgad's work (*Storytelling Online*, Peter Lang, 2005) on moving research between online and offline settings, for some really thoughtful reflection on why both are useful but neither location is a bottom line source of authentic insights. I'd bring many of these issues back to the question of negotiating the adequacy of research approaches: in the end much depends on what it is that you wish to understand, and whom you wish to convince with your

findings. I'm very persuaded by a situated approach to the adequacy of research methods: it's not a question of "can you do online ethnography?", but more an issues of for whom you might want to do it, and for what purpose.

In the recent research that I've been doing I've been exploring how scientists, in particular biologists working on classification and evolutionary relationships, have been using the Internet in their work. I've moved much more between online and offline in this work.. I would argue that if we want to gain a deep and multi-faceted understanding of the culture of this discipline as it is now you can't leave either aspect out. That's the hunch that I started out with, and which was reinforced as I explored online and offline landscapes and the ways that they were interconnected. By observing and participating in online discussions and by using the Internet to locate people and contacting them online I found out a lot about the ways that this medium was routinely used within the discipline. I explored the emergent online landscape as an interesting phenomenon in its own right. But for this research, this time, I spent a lot more time exploring the ways that online phenomena were interwoven with the material culture of the discipline, its institutional landscapes, the career projects and aspirations of individuals and the political concerns and policy influences that suffused disciplinary life. Again, this doesn't fit in with many definitions of what anthropology aims to achieve with ethnographic approaches, but it's the approach I ended up with to do the job that I wanted to do, to explore how use of the Internet both illuminates and is made meaningful within the life of a contemporary scientific discipline.

I've gone on too long. Sorry. I hope there are some points here that people can pick up on, whether to agree with, to argue with or to illuminate. I think one of the upshots of methodological pluralism and situated adequacy is that it becomes very important for people to share approaches. So, one thing I'd very much like to ask Birgit to do is to talk more about her own research. I'd really like to know more about the approaches you used, the problems you encountered and the kinds of field that opened up to you through the Internet. I'm really intrigued by your research focus, and would love to hear more about how you negotiated online contacts, what you found when you took them offline, and what kinds of reception you've had for your work.. I'd also like to open up for wider contributions the issue of online research and audience and add some questions to Birgit's: have people encountered audiences who don't accept the possibility of online ethnography? Is there anyone for whom it has been particularly challenging to gain acceptance for online research? Have there been audiences who are particularly welcoming or enthusiastic about online research approaches? Are the sticking points that many people have reportedly encountered in gaining ethical clearance still an issue?

I'd like to thank Birgit for giving me a nudge into thinking about the issues around online and offline research again, and I'll now hand over both to Birgit to respond, and to wider contributions.

Best wishes,

Christine

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Thank you very much for those comments, Christine. It's over to Birgit now for a response, after which the discussion will be open to all on the list.

John

Birgit Bräuchler (University of Munich)
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Dear Christine, dear List,

Thank you very much for your comments on my introductory statement for our “Researching the Internet” e-seminar, Christine. I think we agree on important basic points. As a start, I would like to repeat and shortly comment on some of them here:

- “Approaches would have to be situated and negotiated” – That’s one of the main principles of qualitative and interpretative anthropological research: we have to handle our research methods flexibly and always have to adapt them to our topic of research. Talking about your new research project, Christine, you clearly demonstrated that you do not only theorize about such a paradigm, but also seem to implement and practice it. For me, internet research is a logical further development of social anthropology in the age of globalisation and continuously increasing networking. The internet does not break with the past, but simply takes these developments one (big!) step further. Of course, this does not imply that there are no new types of communication, social interaction and community building in cyberspace or in the integrative online-offline-space. Quite the contrary, as becomes obvious in my thesis.
- “Practical limits” – What concerns the practical limits of research I agree with Christine, that we are always limited by financial budgets, time, etc. This is a general problem when doing research in a globalised world, where people and communities are spread around the globe, be it migrants, tourists, academics, refugees or internet users. We cannot go to all the places involved, we cannot go to all the places the subjects of our research go to and we cannot go to all the places where the members of a mailing list live. Still, I think we have to analyse the online and the offline context and try to make out important nodal points (Knotenpunkte) of the social network, which is the focus of our study. These nodal points, online or offline, should become the focus of our research and we should try to find ways and means to do so.
- “Going offline” – Whether we should combine online and offline research very much depends on our research focus and subject. And here I agree with Christine again, I think.

It makes a big difference whether I plan to do research on online gaming communities (online research only might be the proper approach there) or whether I would like to investigate a social movement, that expanded into cyberspace or uses the internet as a means for its interests (in this case an integrative online-offline-research is necessary).

Having said this, I would like to push the discussion a bit further into directions I indicated in my introductory statement, namely the transfer and the adaptation of well-established anthropological research methods, such as participant observation (PO), to cyberspace. I have already formulated a couple of questions that seem relevant to me and I would like to add some of my research experience here, as Christine suggested.

The Moluccan cyberspace is the online space constituted by people, who are involved in the Moluccan conflict one way or the other, and who use the Internet to spread their views on the conflict, to seek support, etc. The Moluccan conflict - fought out for more than three years in Eastern Indonesia - was thus expanded into the internet. I analysed this space applying PO and informal interviews as research methods. First I concentrated on the online space. I wanted to understand and reconstruct the impression online-only members get, when participating in this space. But since the conflict and the role the internet plays in this conflict were the main focus of my research interest, I also applied an integrative approach, that is the combination of online and offline research. Even if there were a couple of problems (I will come back to them later), I soon realised that the time factor involved in profound PO offline is as important in online research. I am very sceptical towards academics, who see the internet and its archives as a ready-made database, that we can analyse, thus saving time and money. PO is always a long-term involvement, online or offline. In my case long-term participation (more than two years) enabled me to follow the mailing lists' discourse through different phases of the conflict, to comprehend the dynamics of the lists and web pages, and to acquire cultural competence, which was prerequisite to trace the rather complex online processes of community building and identity construction in the Moluccan cyberspace. A long-term participation was also essential in order to grasp the intensity of the members' experiences: What does it mean, for example, to be confronted with hundreds of e-mails each day? What does it mean to be confronted with innumerable documents depicting indescribable atrocities, which are delivered right from the battle field into the members' homes?

Of course, access to the online field is not without its problems (anyway, I doubt this is different offline). In my case the mailing lists and web pages constituting my field of research all dealt with sensible topics related to the Moluccan conflict. As offline, access had to be negotiated, either with the webmaster or the initiators of the online projects. Offline contacts I already had among the Moluccan community in the Moluccas and the Netherlands helped me to get over these initial hurdles. Still, having finally entered the Moluccan cyberspace, I had to cope with other problems. It took me quite a while to 'get to know' people. The initiators and most active members seemed to be close acquaintances even before they entered cyberspace. That's why identities were hardly explicated in the list's 'public', at least not in the initial stage. Another problem was to decide, how and in which way I should participate in the Moluccan cyberspace. On the one hand I wanted to get in touch with people involved, on the other hand I did not really want to get involved into or influence the conflict.

But even if it might be a bit harder to deal with that kind of problems online, I think that we have to cope with a very similar set of problems offline. Even if I only stayed for two months in the Moluccas during times of conflict, it was a major methodological challenge as well. Talking about safety, I must say, the internet approach to the Moluccan conflict had one immense

advantage: it saved me to conduct long-term field research in a war zone, but it still allowed me to grasp the perspective of some of the conflict's protagonists and the dynamics of the conflict (or better its presentations), which were directly transferred online by the Moluccan cyberactors. This way I automatically got involved in research on what I would call a new era of presenting and carrying out conflicts.

I think I better stop at this point and hand over to the list. Looking forward to your comments, criticism, thoughts, contradictory statements, or research experiences ...

Best regards & wishes,

Birgit

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And thanks very much to Birgit for that response! We can now have a round of questions and comments from the list. Please remember to:

1. send your email directly to medianthro@abyznet.net (not to me)
2. write a short subject line that sums up your point or question, avoiding formulations such as "Re: your comments" or "Birgit's statement".

John

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Hi, List!

First of all, thanks, Birgit for your introduction to Internet research, your open questions and your exposition about your problems and questions during fieldwork. Thanks Christine, too. It's really a pleasure having you among us discussing those touching issues.

Let me be "proustian"... I remember the first time I got 'Virtual Ethnography' in my hands, and while reading it, I was just telling myself that "this is what I was waiting for", sharing in my mind

(and in my way) most of her experience in trying to make sense about what was happening during online doing ethnography. It was just a matter of feeling complicity. I shall say that I experienced my beginnings in online ethnography as easy and challenging, in part because I had been dealing with similar epistemological and methodological questions some years ago, just trying to do 'visual ethnography'. Then, I developed my own idea about 'transforming ethnography methods' through the use of a video camera, and also the idea of an 'adaptive' strategy of camera use to the textures of the field I was delimiting and creating. When I began to do online fieldwork I saw some analogies with visual ethnography. To introduce a technological tool make us to rethink the way we conduct fieldwork and take notes, and what kind of data and social processes we are generating (Sarah Pink's Visual Ethnography was for me another discovery by the way she was theorising that kind of field experience!). Anyway, I found exciting to 'adapt' ethnography and participant observation to virtual spaces. I did not believe then and now that I was just using 'old tools' to 'new' objects. To find out those days that Christine was also accepting that she was creating her field just while doing fieldwork was just incredible!!!

In fact, now, Christine discussion questions make me think that 'virtual ethnography' has been more easily received in anthropological circles than 'visual ethnography', at least in my academic context. It seems that 'virtual ethnography' does not represent a serious challenge to anthropology practice at all!! It seems that we are just 'doing the same' but by different means. That was surprising!! The only problem that I have found is that some colleagues disagree with the label 'virtual'.

That makes me think of Birgit intervention about the flow online/offline, and the current reticence of some researchers to use the term 'virtual' to refer to 'electronic spaces of Interaction' or to the 'online'. Despite I agree with Birgit and other authors as Daniel Miller and Don Slater (another great hit in my Internet bibliography) that first studies in life on screen where offline context free and that 'inner worlds' can not be understood without the 'outside' ones, and also vice versa, the problem, I think, is still unsolved. People use this dichotomy, and also in Spanish it sounds terrible to have to use all the time the anglo terminology on/off and, on the other hand, the metaphor on/off also have some implications is there some asymmetric relation?

I would not agree completely with the statement that online gaming communities are a good example of 'self sustained online worlds' that online research only might be the proper approach. Again we are defining our field aprioristically, through some 'inherent' proprieties here, the metaphor of adaptability seems to fail, as we 'adapt' to a pre-existent object of study. As I understand, the 'adaptive process' is related with the method, the field we enter and our research aims.

I agree with Birgit when she says that she is very sceptical towards academics, who see the internet as a ready-made database. I remember here my first immersion into an electronic forum and the distinction we make about the data we collect during observation from the data we obtain from the archives or just the printed text of the emails. There is no apparent difference between these kind of data but for us, there was a big difference related with the experience we had while participant observation. I tried to theorize this 'qualitative difference' appealing to a visual anthropological concept developed by Claudine de France, that she called as 'differed observation', in relation with the quality of the audiovisual data experience as compared to the participant observation experience. Jeje, the archives were for us like "fossilizations"!

Mmmmm, the current debate has brought to me a lot of memories and evocative open questions about my own research experiences, thanks again both of you for that evocative discussion, and sorry if I have taken a 'proustian' detour and have been a little bit long in sharing my thoughts and kleine discoveries.

Elisenda

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In response to some of the issues that are emerging I'd like to throw in some questions.

It seems that we are finding it hard to find distinctions between online and offline ethnography. We seemed to be following the line that prolonged immersion and interaction is what characterises ethnography. However are there not other characteristics of ethnography that become problematic online?

One issue pointed out in Hobart's work is the issue of the gaps between the ways that people textualise their lives into coherent meaningful accounts, and the underdetermined, complex, contingent and generally messy character of people attempting the performances in practice that every-day life involves.

However, the everyday online is textual in character. We are assuming here that with online ethnography we can somehow be present with interactive practice, which has some quality of underdetermination and contingency that we can observe as a counter-point to the ways in which people might textualise their lives, perhaps to us as researchers through interviews and so on, or to each other, when their contributions to the net take on the character of composed set pieces.

And yet how do we make such distinctions between 'text' and 'practice' on the net? If that is not useful, what is it about being 'present' at interaction points on the net, that gives us more than just interviewing those involved?

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Don Slater (LSE)
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Hi,

Some nice points raised though with so much agreement i'm intrigued as to what people will end up talking about. It's also always a pleasure to hear Christine elucidating her methods (particularly in the current research).

But one rather obvious point that has struck me so far: there's lots of agreement on the fundamental principle that we choose methods appropriate to the research site and people involved; the point is not online/offline but following the actors where they go. In my own experience, my first internet research was largely online because the actors involved were devoting huge resources to constructing something called the 'online', and the distinction was clearly socially salient; subsequent research was substantially offline because the actors involved really didn't make very much of the idea of 'life online' - it wasn't part of their understanding of the internet, and of course made no sense whatsoever in the case of mobile phone use.

However, all this is about what is methodologically appropriate to the *actor's* lifeworld, and we all know that that is only part of the equation: choice of methodology, including how we bound the field, has everything to do with what *we* the researchers are interested in, how we ask our questions and who is paying us to find out what. And what (inter-)discipline defines our research agendas. Much of the early 'cyberspace' style research was overdetermined in its focus on life online by a conjuncture of (perfectly legitimate, but fairly North American-specific) questions/frameworks concerning 1. the nature of identity, pursued via postmodern or poststructuralist concerns with identity fragmentation; 2. a rather social psychological take on the nature of 'communication'; 3. a conflux of technoutopian and nerdish countercultures; and no doubt much more. This conjuncture of intellectual agendas meshed reasonably well with emerging metropolitan uses of the internet, particularly in the earlier days when the people who were configuring internet use were either the same type of people or the same people who were configuring the intellectual climate. It was singularly inappropriate to non-metropolitan configurations of internet (try talking to a poor Ghanaian about the dissolution of identity online...) and to contemporary commercial uses of internet (my online identity is not characterised by fluidity and motility but by firm anchorage in my credit card details).

Speaking personally, my own research questions shifted - along with a shifting institutional context for asking them (working now with donor and development agencies) - to how new media are configured within livelihood and development strategies that frame the lives and futures of poor people in third world countries. Hence, the 'field' went wildly offline (including, significantly, to fieldsites where there was no internet or mobile access at all, as necessary places in which to study the relationships between poverty and communications, and a background against which to formulate ICT and development strategies) - and it did so not simply because we were following the actors (to whom, again, the ideas of the virtual or the online had little salience), but because we were putting ICTs into quite different analytical frameworks.

A rather roundabout way of saying, the whole question of internet research really does have to be fully reflexive, and in the rather Weberian sense of bring it all back home to where *we* are starting from analytically, politically, culturally - as I tend to tell my doctoral students, the only

proper answer to the question, 'what method should I use?' is the question 'What dya wanna know?'

Don

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John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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I'd like to comment briefly on Birgit and Elisenda's scepticism about the uses of internet archives (described by Elisenda as 'fossilisations') for anthropological research. They both agree that immersing oneself in the lifeworlds of the people we're studying through participant observation is a far richer and more productive experience than using internet archives merely 'as a ready-made database' (Birgit).

Perhaps there's something wrong with me, but one of the most exciting parts of my recent fieldwork into internet and the politics of community development in a Malaysian suburb was precisely rummaging through the vast archives of a local 'community forum', especially teasing out the more frayed threads back to the foundational months of late 1999. I'm very interested in reconstructing the 6-year history of this thriving forum, so participant observation alone cannot suffice, although it has certainly helped me towards such a reconstruction.

But there's also the other side of this (pointed out to me some time ago by Penny Harvey), namely the uses local people themselves make of their community archives, e.g. when they reactivate a thread that has lain dormant for months or even years on end. Surely this archival dynamism of the internet (provided you have a critical mass of users) is worth researching?

John

Mark Paul Highfield (University of Aberdeen)

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I agree with John on this.

Surely one element that differentiates, say, an email discussion list from a real-time internet 'chat' (or an ordinary face-to-face conversation) is that the discussion list demonstrates greater fragmentation, both in how long it may take for one participant to reply to a previous issue raised by another and in the number of current threads of conversation. No conversation is assuredly

dead when it is archived away for it remains there and is ready and awaiting resurrection. In a discussion list in which I am presently participating and observing, points that were raised a week ago are still being addressed by some members, while others have moved onto fresh subject matter, thus there is no one contemporary thread. Furthermore, members regularly dip into the archives themselves, drawing on these records to inform their present discussion. I would argue, therefore, that the archive, in the internet environment, is a memorybank concurrent to dialogous activity, which is reviewed alongside and utilized within contemporary discussion creating a patchwork of threads, rather than there being a great distinction between old and dead archived material and live and active participation. This may be analogous to a conversant in an internet chat room referring to an external website. They are aware of it, it is possibly in existence contemporaneously, and it dips in and out of conversation whilst having a separate location and presence.

Mark

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I agree with John, at least to some extent ;) I did not want to say that online archives should not be used in general. I also tried to reconstruct missing weeks/months via list/forum archives, and, you are absolutely right John, it is great being able to go back right to the very first beginnings. I also agree with John, that archives are of importance for the members themselves, out of diverse reasons. One of the Moluccan cyberactors, for example, explicitly mentions in the Mailing List description that the organizers hope that the archive will be used as a source for campaign and study efforts concerning the Moluccan conflict. I also emphasized this point in my thesis (p. 328/9). Archives can have two functions: First, they depict the discourse (or the monologue) in the course of which identities were negotiated, developed or presented online. They provide the members of a list important information and identity symbols and enable the newcomer to undergo sort of an enculturation process whenever and wherever s/he wants. The archives are available 24 hours a day, worldwide. The second function is the writing of an online group's/community's history, so to speak - in my case the history of the Moluccan cyberactors and their communities, and a specific phase of the history of the Moluccas (as it is perceived by those cyberactors). These archives are the common past for the list members. One might even go so far as to say that they are the lists' social and cultural, or in Maurice Halbwachs' words, collective memory. Kurz und gut, what I wanted to say is that I am very sceptical towards an ARCHIVE-ONLY research. Two things that we would definitely miss then: 1) the online and/or the offline context (see our discussion on this point) and 2) the dynamic of the lists/forums. Both are essential, as I see it, to develop an 'ethnographic/anthropological' understanding for the online processes.

Another point I wanted to make is the online/offline issue. Daniel stated that "It seems that we are finding it hard to find distinctions between online and offline ethnography." In one way yes, since I see internet research as a logical development in our globalised world etc., as I said before, but in another way no. I am convinced that social anthropology, its methods (e.g. PO), its theories and concepts (e.g. identity), can be of utmost importance for the social sciences' internet research. But they have to be adapted, they have to be transferred, we have to handle them flexibly ... and this is a point, we all agreed upon, I guess. And here I better stop, because I think I start repeating what other people like Don already said concerning these matters in a much more eloquent way. The online and the offline level are part of the same reality, but the online level offers a lot of opportunities and possibilities we do not have offline (and the other way round ...).

Thanks & Good night,

Birgit

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Many thanks for those reactions to the first round of contributions, Birgit! We can now have a second round today and over the weekend (the network never sleeps) which Birgit could take up early next week.

John

Christine Hine (University of Surrey)

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Another twist to the use of archives occurs to me, based on my recent research experiences. I was studying list archives, looking for the origins and the previous incarnations of some of the debates I was experiencing in the present day. Some messages that I found I knew I would want to write about, but felt cautious since this list is one where people are very aware that their professional reputations are influenced by what they write. I felt I really must, then, approach people directly for their consent where I wanted to quote them. I found that this practice, far from an onerous "ethical duty", was a highly productive and interesting research encounter - people told me what they had been thinking and experiencing at the time they posted those long ago messages, offered ideas about the way things had developed since, and got interested in my research topic and looked at some of the writings I had placed online. Of course, you also learn some interesting things about the texture and dynamics of the field by finding how easy or hard it is to trace the people who were sending messages 10 years ago, and how many of them are still active in the same area. Using archives became a very live research encounter.

Christine

Jens Kjaerulff (Aarhus University)
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Let me be to the point in throwing my 5 cents' worth in:

Where is 'Moluccan conflict' in what has so far emerged in this seminar extending from Birgit Bräuchler's initial statement???

It seems to me completely eclipsed by cyber-intellectualist deliberations that in my view has little to do with what ethnography and anthropology should be about. And, I cannot resist to add, I find this symptomatic for very much declared 'cyber-ethnography'.

I am a social anthropologist, and have just completed a Ph.D. entitled 'Internet and Change'. I would claim that my method is 'ethnographic', and that my focus is, in part, 'Internet'. But as Miller and Slater suggested in their much cited 'ethnography' from 2000, the paradox of doing ethnography centered on Internet is that it really should focus in considerable part on the wider contexts in which internet is engaged, rather than on internet per se. Ironically this is precisely where Miller and Slater's own work is also seriously wanting (Kjaerulff 2000), and from what I have seen so far extending from Bräuchler's initial contribution, this seminar is headed towards a similar fate. That is a shame, because I think Miller and Slater were on to something very important, that remains the key challenge for anthropologists and others claiming to do 'ethnography' in some way focused on internet. I believe internet really is a remarkable innovation of great significance also for human living as studied by anthropologists, but I don't think we do the inquiry a service by thinking of the challenge in terms of doing 'on-line' or 'cyber' ethnography focused narrowly on internet.

I would be quite excited, Birgit, to learn a whole lot more about the Moluccan conflict itself, and how you concretely see your research on internet tying in with that context (apart from the convenience of not having to do fieldwork in a war zone, as you write) so that the methodological discussion may take on a little more substance. Being a forum of anthropologists, I think we deserve that. I am quite happy to read more PDF excerpts from your dissertation.

Cheers // Jens

cited literature:

Kjaerulff 2000: [Review of] Miller and Slater: The Internet. An Ethnographic Approach. (Antropologi, Vol 42: 117-121 [Copenhagen])

Kjaerulff, Jens 2005: Internet and Change. A Generative Approach to Cultural Variation in Practices of Telework. (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology and Ethnography, University of Aarhus, Denmark)

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)
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Dear List,

First I would like to thank Birgit for sharing her experiences with working as an anthropologist on/with the internet and its' applications and Christine for commenting on those experiences.

The internet has become a crucial part of my life. I am working on the development and implementation of online learning systems and I try to spend as much time as possible for doing my PhD research – on- and offline – on indigenous organisations and how they are using/practising internet technologies. In my spare time I use the internet to communicate with friends, family, gather information, download movies and music, etc.

Internet has become part of many peoples' lives and I therefore think it is absolutely necessary to integrate all the diverse media and technologies related to 'the internet' into anthropological research by using well established methods, instruments and concepts of the discipline. In doing so, socio-cultural anthropology contributes to the necessarily interdisciplinary investigation of the internet. There is an already existing bunch of books on the internet written by researcher from sociology, STS, communication, psychology, politics, etc. And, thanks to anthropologists like Birgit, there is a slowly but steadily growing list of anthropological literature.

Coming back from a conference on e-learning, and therefore joining the e-seminar so lately, I am more convinced than ever, that there is an urgent need for anthropology to contribute to the scientific discourses about internet media technologies. Culture, identity, symbolism, religion, etc. are aspects of growing importance for, e.g., the development of e-learning platforms, virtual classrooms, learning software, etc.

After agreeing that the internet and its' applications are part of the anthropological research world we should now take one step forward by actively contributing to the ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue about internet media technologies. In doing so, we should not forget that these fields of inquiry are rapidly changing: from homepages, newsgroups and mailing lists to Blogs (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblogs>), Wiki systems (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>), social network services like Friendster (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network_service, <http://www.friendster.com/>), Delicious (<http://del.icio.us/>) or Furl (<http://www.furl.net/index.jsp>), e-portfolios (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_Portfolio), and personalised web search engines (e.g. Blinkx: <http://www.blinkx.com/overview.php>).

Best,

Philipp

Ivana Bajic (University College London)

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jens made an excellent point by raising a question about the moluccan conflict and by reminding us that he speaks from a position of social anthropologist. I would like to take this further on and to ask: what can we, social anthropologists contribute to the study of the internet and what can we learn from each other here? fair enough, christine put a disclaimer in the very beginning that she's not an anthropologist and it seems there's no point entering a discussion on methodological issues stemming from disciplinary differences between sociology and social anthropology. christine did excellent work in her field and if we as anthropologists feel a bit uncomfortable within her methodological framework, maybe we should develop the one more appropriate to our discipline instead of trying to fit cinderella's shoe on our muddy anthropological feet. to begin with, it would be useful to hear more about what internet meant, how it was appropriated and what sense people made of it in the moluccan conflict. As there are other anthropologists on this list doing internet-related research, maybe they could add something as well either on this or some other occasion. i am doing a phd on (dis)connections between serbian immigrants in london and families in the homeland; internet represents one of the aspects of communication i am looking at and i would be happy to discuss methodological issues which are emerging from my current fieldwork.

ivana

phd candidate
university college london
social anthropology (material culture)

Birgit Bräuchler (University of Munich)

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Thanks for your comments, Jens & Ivana.

FYI, Jens, a couple of words about the Moluccan conflict:

Unlike most other parts of the predominantly Muslim Indonesia, the population in the Moluccas, an archipelago in Eastern Indonesia, is half Christian, half Muslim. It was praised for its religious harmony up until December 1998. Nobody seriously expected that a minor quarrel between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger in Ambon town in January 1999 would end up in a bloody and enduring multidimensional conflict: Hundreds of churches and mosques were destroyed, thousands of people on both sides were killed, and hundreds of thousands had to flee. Even if religion itself was not the cause of the unrest, the people involved in it very soon grouped around religion as their main identity marker...

Ivana wanted to hear more about "what the internet meant, how it was appropriated and what sense people made of it in the Moluccan conflict". That's exactly what my thesis is dealing with. Shortly after the conflict broke out hundreds of web pages, mailing lists etc. focussing on the Moluccan tragedy popped up (all of us already experienced what David Shenk aptly called 'data smog'). This massive online presence of the Moluccan conflict stands in stark contrast to the availability of internet access in the Moluccas itself: Internet access is only available in Ambon town (Central Moluccas) and in Ternate (Northern Moluccas). Not being able to cover this

massive data flow on the Internet, I had to make a selection. In my research I concentrated on those actors who are directly involved in the conflict and which are continuously being represented on the Internet. They are the ones transferring information from the battle field right to the outside world via the internet. This "first hand information" is enthusiastically received by the national and the international audience, thus massively shaping the perception of the Moluccan conflict in the outside world. Each of the "Moluccan cyberactors" employs other online communication facilities and other means and strategies to spread information, to seek support, and to extend the conflict into cyberspace...

I would love to tell more about the Moluccas, the Moluccan conflict, its online presentation... For more information on the Moluccan conflict and my ethnography on its online presentation by local actors please have a look at my PhD thesis "Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet", 2005, transcript: Bielefeld. In case you do not read German you can also read a couple of articles I published in English on the subject (2003, 2004a, b, c, other ones forthcoming). I am looking very forward to your comments.

Concerning Jens' other questions/comments: I don't know whether you followed our discussion so far, Jens. If you read my contributions, then, of course, you became aware of the great emphasis I put on not doing online research "only" but on the importance of taking the online AND the offline context into account. That's why I did not only do research in the "Moluccan cyberspace" (which was my main focus) but also on its online context and offline, in the Moluccas itself. The internet does not and should not save us from doing offline research in conflict or war zones, but it opens up a new perspective on local conflicts which we have to take into account when studying and analysing such conflicts in the future. The internet enables local actors to expand such conflicts into cyberspace, thus extending its reach enormously and adding a further dimension to a local conflict which this way becomes "globalised" in a certain sense.

Having mentioned your PhD thesis, Jens, I would also be quite excited to learn more about your specific contribution to the discipline of cyberanthropology. Being so sceptical about our discussions so far I would have expected your contribution to be a bit more substantial ;) Looking forward to your further contributions.

Ivana asked what we as social anthropologists can contribute to the study of the Internet and what we can learn from each other here. This is quite an important question and this is exactly what we should focus on in this forum, most of us being social anthropologists focusing on internet/cyber/media anthropology. I tried to get a discussion on these matters going by putting PO (Participant Observation) as tried and tested method of ethnographic field research on the table and its possible implementation/adaptation/transfer to cyberspace. There are many more things to discuss, be it research methods, research questions, theoretical issues etc. As people like Ben Anderson (1992) and Arjun Appadurai (1996) already emphasised quite some time ago, the internet became an important means for diasporas to get connected to their homelands, for all sorts of purposes. Ivana, it would be great to get to know a little bit more about your PhD research on the (dis)connections between Serbian immigrants in London and families in the homeland and the research methods you apply. Thanks in advance for sharing your experiences with us.

Since I am soon off to the conference of the German Association of Social Anthropologists (GAA or DGV, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde, see <http://www.dgv-tagung2005.de>),

where we will also have a workshop on cyberanthropology, this might be my last contribution to this e-seminar. Anyway, I hope you will continue the discussion and I will be more than happy to reconstruct the discussion with the help of the Media-Anthropology-Network's archives when I am back from Halle ;)

Best wishes,
Birgit

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1992 Long-Distance Nationalism. World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics. The Wertheim Lecture 1992. Amsterdam: CASA - Centre for Asian Studies.

Appadurai, Arjun

1996 Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bräuchler, Birgit

2003 Cyberidentities at War: Religion, Identity, and the Internet in the Moluccan Conflict. Indonesia 75 (April 2003): 123-151.

2004a Moluccan Cyberactors. Antropologi Indonesia XXVIII (73): 40-57.

2004b Public Sphere and Identity Politics in the Moluccan Cyberspace. Electronic Journal of Communication 14 (3/4 [Theme issue, 'Electronic Networks & Politics', edited by Nicholas W. Jankowski]). http://www.cios.org/getfile/01438_EJC (06.07.2005).

2004c Islamic Radicalism Online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in Cyberspace. The Australian Journal of Anthropology 15 (3): 267-285.

Shenk, David

1997 Data Smog. Surviving the Information Glut. New York: HarperEdge.

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

jpostill@usa.net

Dear list

In view of the late unfolding of the discussion, I'd like to propose that we extend the seminar 48 hours to end on Thursday at 4 pm GMT. Please drop me an email off-list if you object to this break from our hallowed tradition of 7-day seminars.

John

Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)

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Hi People,

First I want to thank you all for making late Monday lunch so particularly enjoyable, catching up on the seminar with sandwich in hand, as it were. One advantage of joining the stream of discussion so late in the game is that many of my first impressions, objections and the like were subsequently preempted or anticipated by other commentators as I continued to read downstream. Yet I am struck by some currents of the larger discussion, which I'd like to throw out for reflection here, if you'll permit the indulgence of my taking a kind of ethnographic perspective on the seminar itself.

In the opening discussions, it struck me that at times we (meaning all us/you discussants) - in our enthusiasm to assert the validity of online, virtual, cyber, whatever as a legitimate object of ethnographic inquiry as well as a valid fieldsite, etc. - came perilously close to erasing some important distinctions and possibilities inherent in these media (whether or not such are 'in play' any given moment or object of analysis). The discussion had about it a ring of 'the lady doth protest too much'; all the more so, since it seemed to rehearse (by now already dated) pro/con debates concerning an anthro of the net and because it seems that we are largely singing to the choir. In any event, I found it rather curious, and wondered if anyone shared this observation? Are we simply staking out common territory and mapping perspectives here, or is this a confession that we have become so accustomed to justifying our 'online anthro' to skeptical colleagues, or is there something naggingly unsettled in our own minds that we are rather preoccupied trying to convince ourselves? Likely (me thinks) all of the above and more, but I am most intrigued by the last explanation - which I take to signify that the present situation is ripe with reflexivity and the fruits it promises: but also that we have so much more thinking to do!.

Hence I was troubled by what I read as an over-compensatory tendency to 'reduce' new media and mediated interactions (and one should include non-actions) by proclaiming them 'just another arena/space of sociality, human meaning-making, etc.'

(and hence, so the somewhat circular argument goes, sites/phenomena equally valid for ethnographic methods, and so on). ((Also one might add that there is nothing 'just' about most any human activities!)) ICTs in some usages clearly do follow along as surrogate sites of cultural production, as continuations online of happenings and trends taking place offline, etc. But there are numerous examples of usages when/where they are more than this (and Philipp provocatively contributed some at the close of his comments). I am not confining my thoughts here to MUDS and MOOS and imagined spaces that only exist online (although these clearly count); I am (selfishly) thinking of my own work with a more 'grounded' (for lack of a better word here) ethnographic object - these concerning homepage webrings for parents of preterm babies. Without getting into too much detail, I'll simply say that these graphically rich, painstakingly narrated, emotionally-dripping and (auto)biographically naked homepage 'rings' have no offline counterpart that I have found (they are radically different from support and self-help groups for parents of preemies that I have also studied). Yet, they in no way can be reduced to an online phenomenon - suffused as they are with multiple connections to the existential plight of the baby and parents and moreover foregrounding just these connections, in ways too numerous to detail here. My point in this detour is to argue for us not to lose sight of the incredibly rich array of genres, and the many more undoubtedly on the horizon, that will likely require of us new tools,

whilst also allowing for us to tap into and re-use some of the wealth of the anthropological discipline (among others of course, but myself here speaking from that perspective: indeed, in grappling with preemie webrings it seems to me that they most closely approximate pilgrimages)...

The reduction of online to a mirror or prosthesis of offline may blind us to a lot of what is going on, or preclude objects of study a priori. I read this bias as lying behind the criticism unduly levied against archives - an objection that John tackled, and a matter on which it turns out that many of us do concur - so I'll restrict myself to the question of temporality. Namely> in rushing to underscore the 'synchronous cross-planetary communications', and so forth, or the theoretical possibilities of such, we risk missing what might be equally if not more fascinating - just this fact of A-synchronous communications, the possibilities of archiving what Birgit called a 'collective memory' as a reflexive group project, the existence of a homepage webring as an affirming 'been there too' therapeutic resource, the repository of scientific communications, from which researchers (like Christine) gain great insights about expert debates, paradigm shifts, etc., but to which members/participants can also return (and as an aside here, picking up the thread of discussion about the presumed 'quick fix' of online ethnography: as I think we all know far too well, there is nothing simpler or faster about making sense of the deluge of digital data that we now swim in!)

The issue about temporality reminds me of another undercurrent I found in the discussions: for us (on occasion and in certain respects) to adopt some of the cliches about 'things cyber.' I've gone on far too long here, so I won't elaborate< but merely note where I took exception: the question of online as inherently safer (for the fieldworker); well we can certainly hope so, but there is at least one stark example in print about the mortal dangers of 'virtual' engagements, at least for informants (see Whitaker). And in terms of cliches, I had a query (I suppose for Don and Daniel mainly), regarding the 'emancipatory' rhetoric that frames many of the ICT development projects that I am aware of (in the N.American context). Agencies and indigenous leaders echo such rhetoric in eagerly embracing ICTs (and the e-health, e-voting, etc. they promise), but I'm too much of a cynic not to imagine that there is at least one public bureaucrat out there who envisages a chance to transition 'welfare/recipient natives' off the public dole and into/as the next frontier of 'tele' outsourcing laborers! And I remain uncomfortably undecided as to what role charitable foundations (e.g. the Gates Foundation and similar corporate donors) are 'really' playing in 'wiring the outback': are they philanthropists or pushers, with much to gain in hooking entire populations/next generations on commodity forms upon which they profit. It may seem I've taken a detour here, however I am not only keenly (personally) interested in these issues, but I believe the issues of rhetoric and hype (and what filters into our theories; what motivates or disillusiones our informants) have relevance for the work of most of us here.

That's all (enough too!)

Best wishes,
Kyra

Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)

kyra_landzelius@yahoo.com

Dear All,

I forgot to post the Whitaker citation:

Whitaker, Mark 2004. "Tamilnet.com: Some Reflections on Popular Anthropology, Nationalism, and the Internet," *Anthropological Quarterly* 77(3): 469-498.

Also he has a piece in an upcoming volume I've edited, which sadly a tragic accident for myself and child and years of aftermath derailed, but which is now back in the pipeline, and hope to see late this year or early next:

Native on the Net: Indigeneity and Diaspora in the Virtual Age, Routledge.

Also, my 'virtual pilgrimage' work that I mentioned the only thing published thus far (not highly available, but I'm happy to send a hard copy to anyone whose truly interested):

Landzelius, Kyra, 1997. "Screening Preterm Babies: From Cyborg Wombs to Virtual Attachments," In S. Lundin and L. Akesson, *Amalgamations: Fusing Technology and Culture*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

Cheers,

Kyra

PS: Birgit, if you don't know Mark's work, I highly recommend it, as you both are grappling with the role of media in war-torn places and I found many points of resonance in reading your work/about your work.

Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)

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Mmmm, thanks John for expanding the seminar about Internet research. So many things!

As Birgit say, I also do not agree that archives of any kind are not useful for research, or that they are not important to sustain collective or personal memory. Of course, they play an active and important role in computer mediated communication! And it's a good point to see how people are using them! In fact, Internet does not provide a static memory at all, since while thinking in what Philipp said, there is potent software that reuses and modifies old archives, changes the order of files, recategorizes them in different ways, makes new connections, and makes e-memory very different from a container!

Following Kyra last intervention and also following Daniel question "how do we make such distinctions between 'text' and 'practice' on the net?", doing virtual ethnography is more complex that it seems, because the kind of communication the mediating technologies allow and perform. In that sense, being 'present' implies use body engagement and enhance tacit knowledge

that give us more than just looking at the archives and interviewing those involved (although the three actions are useful in ethnography research). Being 'present' means to act as a member, and in that sense, have personal experience of what implies to use some concrete software and to interact in a specific environment and social context. These new cultural forms and variations that emerge from our technology shaping, use and appropriations are at the core of social and cultural Internet studies, coming from the anthropological discipline or from other areas. For me, is important do not forget this technological component.

For those who study 'virtual spaces' it is clear that electronic spaces are socio-technological dynamic constructions and that cannot be studied in isolation from 'real life'; the utopia of a non class, no gendered, no race in a new metaphysical world has fallen down long time ago, I think. Also, the idea that you can study social interactions without considering the technological aspects has to be revised. But what happens now, is that for those who study 'real life', Internet has became also a significant social space, just as they have to take into account mobiles, planes, and tv sets. You cannot understand current political conflicts o migratory movements without going to the net, because our subjects of study are doing things there! There is fluency traffic in our daily life between off and on, but, as Jens pointed out through the necessity to touch the ground - to go to the 'real' -, people do not 'really die' in Internet, even though people can experiment some kind of psychological or social 'death'.

I feel the impression that It is difficult to go straight to the point in dealing with methodological issues, it seems that important methodological questions evade a direct sight, only we can deal with by taking a detour or by fixing our discussion in concrete contexts, discussing concrete research, as the Moluccan conflict Birgit made important decisions such as to concentrate on those actors who were directly involved in the conflict and which are continuously being represented on the Internet. But how she managed to deal with audience? What kind of implications had her decisions? So many things!! But, yes, let's go back to the fields!

Elisenda

"The reduction of online to a mirror or prosthesis of offline may blind us to a lot of what is going on." (Kyra)

Kerstin Andersson (University of Gothenburg)

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Dear list,

Entering into cyberspace from a different angle, a point that I have reflected on is what about the cyber actors? shouldn't the on line/ off line methodological discussion also include issues concerning the cyber actors and their perception of the media?

My research focuses on intellectuals and the intellectual discourse in Kolkata, India. As the new ICT technologies have entered the arena among them I integrated research on the new forms of media i.e. Internet during my fieldwork in 2000. My primary focus was the influences that those new forms of communication had on the intellectual discourse but it entailed several different

points. The technological side as the spread and outreach of the use of the media, infrastructure, the specific technical requirements and problems encountered in the field etc. the use of the internet among the intellectual category, the extent and the purpose of the use etc. I also made a lot of online research on websites and other archives.

Although my main focus was how the new forms of media enter into the intellectual discourse, their influences, the way they form and react with the discourse among the Kolkata intellectuals. In other terms how the life worlds and the “meaning making” of the Kolkata intellectuals are /not/ affected and transformed by the new media. An issue that crystallized out as important among my informants during my interaction and discussions in the field was how THEY, the actors, perceived the form of the interaction on the net. They were clearly aware of and often pointed out the differences between interaction on the net, email etc and other forms of interaction, telephone, and “physical” interaction in i.e. daily life. They agreed to that online communication was important, for example since it transcends boundaries between religions and nations. But they also put forward statements as that communication online lacks the emotional aspect. Talking give s better emotional communication, face to face communication conveys Values and the attitude. It’s easy to misunderstand the content of the message communicating online. And they engaged in different examples of online misunderstandings.

I have stumbled over some statements regarding the relationship between the forms of media and content that might illustrate my point. Eyerman (1994) puts forward the point that the means of communication are formative aspects of the content. Hannerz (1992) suggests that the message is formed by the character of the media and it’s system of symbols. Appadurai, Korom, Mills (1991) states that to the processes and means of transmission, the forms of media and forms of distribution and production influence and form the content.

The point that I want to make is in short that this is a factor that has a place in discussions regarding online /offline methodology. Often the discussions on the different positions seems to focus on the observer, the ethnographer, and the problems encountered in the process of PO on-net and off-net leaving out the according to my point of view very important anthropological asset, the subject, and the different implicit /or not/ suppositions, assets and perceptions they integrate when they enter into human meaning- making on the net.

A second point that I want to touch briefly concerns Kyra’s statement on the emancipator rhetoric and ICT technologies, development projects and organizations. I’m myself into this kind of discussions in a forum integrating academics of different brands on IT, development workers and organizations and government people, trying to elaborate on and evaluate different aspects of the issue. Some actors might have secondary interests and motives but if used in the right way, ICT technologies might have a great potential in issues regarding poverty alleviation....

I hope that I have made some sense and not having taken part of earlier seminars, I excuse if I’m getting into well-discussed areas and repetitions of earlier stated points....

Kerstin

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Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)

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Dear Media Anthros,

Just a note following up on Kerstin's call to re-situate the anthropological subject - the figure whom (I would concur) our discussions seem to have characterized more as a lurker than as an actor, virtual or otherwise.

She also tweaks another perennial concern for media theoreticians; with citations from a number of key perspectives, she reminds us that the 'medium is the message'. Yet I wonder: is this always so? or when might it be the reverse?

Finally, I just want to thank Kerstin for emphasizing the important role ICTs might play (are playing?) in poverty alleviation programs. In truth, I'm somewhat of a hopeful devotee of ICTs as potential 'sustainable development' platforms (even years ago wrote a grant proposing to examine this, but it didn't fly). Approached especially from the perspective of indigenous peoples who own/control their territories and resources (speaking mainly for the N. America context, where I have worked) - it's far better than selling off your raw materials and sub-surface minerals! The issue I have is with transparency concerning language and language games. In taking a negative slant with my earlier comment, I also wanted to raise discussion about how our own attitudes (embedded and perhaps uninterrogated) inflect our interpretative models, the questions we ask and don't ask, the avenues for our knowledge and its values, the actions we endorse and why, etc.

That's all,

Best Regards,
Kyra

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Thank you, Kirsten, for that contribution, and welcome to the discussion! I'd also like to warmly welcome those of you who've just joined the list, namely Francisco Osorio (U. of Chile), Roger Brown (Staffordshire), Bart Barendregt (Leiden) and Katrien Pype (Leuven).

Ivana wrote:

>>jens made an excellent point by raising a question about the moluccan conflict and by reminding us that he speaks from a position of social anthropologist. i would like to take this further on and to ask: what can we, social anthropologists contribute to the study of the internet and what can we learn from each other here?>>>

Two things spring to my mind:

1. Serendipity. It appears that quite a few anthropologists who've worked on media stumbled upon the subject-matter while in the field; back in the 80s it was television, more recently the internet. Two papers in this series, in fact, have been by anthropologists who had set out to study something else but had to go 'online' because their field sites were no longer safe to visit in the flesh (Jonathan Skinner following the Montserrat volcano eruption, Birgit Braeuchler the Moluccan conflict). The obvious disadvantage is that we start off not as well versed in media theory as those who set out to study media. But the advantage I see is that we make up for it by looking at problems afresh, and linking them to a broader theoretical and empirical project. (One of the most enjoyable parts of the Hamburg summer school in media anthropology in 1999 was to hear how individual scholars had come to study the media; and in some cases, move on to other topics).

2. Anthropology's commitment to questions of both social organisation and cultural form. An example from my own recent work: having surveyed the vast interdisciplinary literature on local e-government, e-democracy, community ICTs, smart communities, etc, it was only when I went back to an anthropological text, Vered Amit's Part One in 'The Trouble With Community' (Amit and Rapport, eds, Pluto 2002) that it all fell into place -- even though this text has nothing to do with 'new media'! Amit takes pains to disentangle the often conflated concepts of personal network and community. She also discusses other social relational notions such as consociation and social field (the latter only in passing). This is stark contrast with a lot of the e-literature in which authors tend to favour a key social organisational concept (public sphere, community, network, etc) but frequently fail to problematise it or contrast it with alternative concepts -- although there are notable exceptions, e.g. Venkatesh 2003. I'm not saying anthropology has a monopoly over these issues, but I certainly think we can make a strong contribution in this area.

John

Venkatesh, M. (2003). The Community Network Lifecycle: A Framework for Research and Action. *The Information Society*, 19, 339-347.

Jens Kjaerulff (Aarhus University)

etnojens@abyznet.net

Thanks for responding to my 'Moluccan conflict' thread, Birgit. In part inspired by Don Slater's comment that he was 'intrigued by all the agreement' on the list, to the point of wondering what people might end up talking about, I figured a measure of flat-out 'disagreement' was in order. I hope my effort didn't come across as inappropriately aggressive.

I found your expansion on the Moluccan conflict very interesting, I would still like to hear much more. But let me contend to just react to some of that which you in turn invite me to comment on - you wrote in part:

> Having mentioned your PhD thesis, Jens, I would also be quite excited to learn more about your specific contribution to the discipline of cyberanthropology. Being so sceptical about our discussions so far I would have expected your contribution to be a bit more substantial ;)>

Yes, that wasn't quite fair. I don't think this occasion, nor my space here, really allows for a major account of my own work. I will briefly return to it further below though, but above all I want to say this: my ambition is not to contribute to 'the discipline of cyberanthropology'. Indeed, I question whether 'cyberanthropology' is, or ought to be, 'a discipline'. What is the advantage, really, of carving out small 'cyberias of enclosed apartness', to paraphrase (and second) Miller and Slater's take on this (2000: introduction)? It strikes me as a more rewarding aim to study internet as part of a much more encompassive and versatile comparative agenda, firmly within - informed by, and aiming to further inform - mainstream anthropology.

Which leads to the other thing you write, that I briefly want to comment on:

> I don't know whether you followed our discussion so far, Jens. If you read my contributions, then, of course, you became aware of the great emphasis I put on not doing online research "only" but on the importance of taking the online AND the offline context into account. That's why I did not only do research in the "Moluccan cyberspace" (which was my main focus) but also on its online context and offline, in the Moluccas itself.>

Yes, I did follow the seminar. But, to invoke an anthropological figure of speech, while I read that you 'say' a lot about the importance of the 'off-line', I don't see that you in fact 'do' anything of much consequence with it. That was why I solicited your substantial input on the ostensible connection. And pointed to the fact that you are not alone in the club. Miller and Slater (2000) for example, devote an entire chapter to laboring how internet is used, not only by 'the rich', but by a socially much more diverse crowd in Trinidad. Yet, this ostensible 'contextualization' is of absolutely no consequence in the subsequent chapters where a more focussed exploration of 'Trinidadian' internet engagements is pursued. Those socially diverse 'contexts' (quotation marks intended) are simply never mentioned again beyond that chapter (and so what sort of 'context' is it, beyond mere lipservice to the word?).

So what do I want - what do I do myself? Most briefly, I look at practices of 'telework' in my dissertation. 'Telework' is a way of working, partially from home, by aid of internet, of course among many other 'aids'. My analytical focus is 'work' as a cultural domain if you will (e.g. Wallman 1979). So as but one small concrete example, I look at how work-discipline, formal and informal, in terms of 'time' among other things, is incrementally altered in settings where telework is practiced. Internet usage is of consequence 'out there' in social life beyond cyberspace. At the same time, people in different ways deploy internet for purposes of impression management to tangible effects well beyond the realms of cyberspace, again in terms of work time, among other things. In this way activities 'in cyberspace' have very real consequences, even in terms of making or breaking careers, with all that goes with it, and those tangible realities likewise inform 'behavior' if you will, in digital terms.

And so I was wondering what kinds of connections of that sort you might have uncovered, if any, in your Moluccan context? Elsewhere ['Re: [medianthro] Birgit's response to Christine's comments', Wed, 28 Sep 2005 11:10:07 +0200] you write that:

> The Moluccan cyberspace is the online space constituted by people, who are involved in the Moluccan conflict one way or the other, and who use the Internet to spread their views on the conflict, to seek support, etc. [and a little later on] since the conflict and the role the internet

plays in this conflict were the main focus of my research interest, I also applied an integrative approach, that is the combination of online and offline research.<

My point is that you don't seem to develop any sense of real CONNECTION between 'the on/off line'. What indeed came out of that 'combined approach' of which you talk, in terms of anything of consequence beyond cyberspace itself??

E.g.:

- in terms of flows of money, to finance arms, medical and or food supplies, or the like, directed via internet initiatives? - attempts at organizing warfare or other coordinated social activities on the ground in the Moluccas, 'recipes for bombs' to be 'enacted' out there, or whatever, via internet?

In this day and age where 'terrorism' is a favourite buzzword for mainstream media and politicians alike, the 'rhizomic' structure (following Deleuze and Guattari 1988) of both internet and guerrilla warfare might converge and enforce one another in ways that could make for some fantastic anthropology of internet and 'life' more widely, given a ripe opportunity for investigating such connections.

what do I know - you have left me to guess, just to provide some crude indication of the kind of direction I solicit in terms of a more mainstream and grounded anthropological approach to studying Internet in a broader context. You may very well have done something to that effect in your dissertation, but from what I have seen so far in this seminar, I can't read that you substantially pull it off. And maybe you don't see a need to. But then I feel entitled, more than that, provoked, to challenge that.

Best heart-felt collegial regards

:-) // Jens

Cited literature:

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari 1988: A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Athlone Press)

Wallman, S. (Ed) 1979: Social Anthropology of Work (ASA monograph, Academic Press)

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear list

The seminar on Researching the Internet will close tomorrow (Thursday) at 4 pm GMT. May I suggest we have a range of brief concluding remarks by then?

Many thanks

John

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)
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Dear List,

Before the e-seminar has ended, I briefly want to mention the brand new book *Virtual Methods* (Berg, 2005), edited by Christine Hine. It provides an excellent overview on the diverse methods that are used in several disciplines to research the internet and its socio-cultural contexts.

Best,

Philipp

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

On that note from Philipp, I wish to close our 7th media anthropology e-seminar by thanking Birgit Braeuchler for her opening statement and subsequent participation, Christine Hine for being our discussant, and all other contributors!

As usual, the seminar transcript will soon be available on our website in PDF format.

A number of working papers are in the pipeline for the coming months (details to be made at a later date) on the following topics:

- * orality and literacy
- * press culture in Senegal
- * Native American media in the USA

If you have a paper or topic in mind for an e-seminar, please drop me a line off-list.

Best wishes

John