

# Researching the Internet

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Dear List,

I hope you all had a nice summer holiday!

Before the summer break Philipp suggested to discuss cyberanthropological research methods in our network, which I think is a great idea. John asked me to start off our discussion with an informal statement. My cyberspace research experience is mainly based on my long-term research (1999/2000 – 2002/2003) on the Internet and the Moluccan conflict in Eastern Indonesia. It was this conflict and its (re)presentation online that introduced me to cyberanthropology. The conflict was violently fought out for more than three years in Eastern Indonesia and expanded into cyberspace by local actors. Therefore the local/national/international context of my research topic was always very relevant for my research, as well as its online context. Here I would like to provide a (translated) passage of my PhD thesis (Bräuchler, B. 2005., *Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: transcript) on field research and participant observation online, which will hopefully encourage further debate on the matter. As a start I would like to direct our attention to two topics:

**1) The transfer of tried and tested anthropological research methods into cyberspace:**

Some interesting questions might be: Is a transfer possible at all? How can participant observation, various interview techniques, etc. be transferred online? What kind of adaptations or transformations have to take place? What does participant observation mean in cyberspace? What kind of participation/observation are we talking about? What is possible? Another question is the time factor of field research: How long shall we conduct online field work? Are there any recommendations as we had them for 'traditional' ethnographic research? Do we have sort of a 'cycle of the seasons' online?

**2) Online and offline research:**

What is the relationship between the online and the offline level (so often referred to as 'the virtual' and 'the real', which I do not approve)? Whether and how should online research be combined with offline research? Does it make sense to complement online with offline research? If yes, when and why? What are the (dis)advantages of this fusion/fission? How are online and offline results related to each other? What does all this mean for the ethnographer's work?

Don't worry, I will not deal with all those questions in the following passage, but we might pick up one or the other in the course of our discussion. I very much looking forward to this next e-workshop and the discussions,

best regards to all of you,  
Birgit Bräuchler

## Field research and participant observation on the internet

(in: Birgit Bräuchler, 2005, *Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: transcript: 46-49)

As for 'traditional' ethnographic field research participant observation also seems to be of considerable importance for ethnographic internet research, even if opinions differ regarding its realization. Participant observation within and through technologies, that are used by a group of people, who are the focus of one's research, is prerequisite to draw conclusions regarding the nature and the significance of the interrelation of man and her/his technical environment, as Schwara argues (1999: 271). According to Miller and Slater (2000: 21/22) the immersion in a particular case, the reference to a specific locality and participant observation (e.g. in a chat room) result in long-term contacts and are the cornerstones of an ethnographic approach in internet research. The notion of field research is radically altered, as Morton is convinced (2001: 5), since 'the field', so to speak, appears as text on a screen and the group of people involved is scattered worldwide. In principle there are two ways of conducting research online: distanced or involved (Morton 2001: 6), or rather distanced or discursive and communicative (Schwara 1999: 271). Examples of distanced research include the evaluation of material sources (texts, images, nicknames, emoticons, etc.) and the observation of social interactions. We can analyse mailing lists and newsgroups contributions as well as web sites and the way they present a specific subject, who owns and maintains them, who is the intended audience, etc. According to Morton involved is who participates in chat rooms and other synchronous ways of CMC or who uses e-mails for interviews. Through the establishment of discursive and communicative relationships, as stated by Schwara (1999: 271), the "subjectivity" and the "Eigen-Sinn" of social actors can be revealed. Participant observation enables the researcher to develop a better understanding of the identity performance of an internet user and its significance for this user (Kendall 1999: 71).

Christine Hine (2000) tried to work out a methodological framework for ethnographic internet research. She investigated various web sites and newsgroups concerned with Louise Woodward, a teenage nanny, who was charged with murder of the baby she was supposed to take care of; while doing so Hine developed ten "principles of virtual ethnography". With these principles she does not propagate a concrete methodological way of proceeding, but some fundamental statements, which are prerequisite to enable us to conduct field research in and through the medium internet. Some of the ten points were already discussed by other authors before Hine or at the same time, others can be regarded as a matter of course in the *imagined worlds* portrayed by Appadurai. Hine summarizes these principles on two pages. Since they are also useful for the understanding of my work on imagined communities and identity projects on the internet, I will give a shortened version of them:

- 1) The sustained presence of an ethnographer in the field setting, combined with intensive engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants of the field site, make for the special kind of knowledge we call ethnographic... The status of the Internet as a way of communicating, as an object within people's lives and as a site for community-like formations is achieved and sustained in the ways in which it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted.
- 2) ... Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact...
- 3) ... We can usefully think of the ethnography of mediated interaction as mobile rather than multi-sited.
- 4) ... The object of ethnographic enquiry can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle.
- 5) ... The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the 'virtual' and the 'real'...
- 6) ... Virtual ethnography is interstitial, in that it fits into the other activities of both ethnographer and subjects...
- 7) Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial...
- 8) Virtual ethnography involves intensive engagement with mediated interaction... The ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight. Virtual ethnography can usefully draw on ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension...
- 9) ... The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the

available technologies is the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through the virtual. 10) ... It is an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself (Hine 2000: 63-65).

These are rather general statements that have to be put in more concrete terms when applied to specific cases. Critics reproached Hine for not nearly fulfilling her own principles with her empirical case study (Zurawski 2001b). Hine replied that it was just her intention to deliver a framework:

It is true that the principles which I outline are broader than the empirical study which I actually carry out to illustrate them. The whole idea of having 'principles' for ethnography, and the grandiose declaration of 'virtual ethnography,' were supposed to be a bit tongue in cheek. Ethnography always has been adaptive, and ethnographers always have explored myriad cultural connections, but sometimes we risk forgetting these facts. The principles are meant to be provocative, and to encourage imaginative thinking about ways of shaping ethnographic projects that address the Internet. By taking on a media event as the theme for an ethnography I was hoping to demonstrate that one could take seriously as ethnographic encounters the many different kinds of interaction and information that the Internet provides, and that one could actually embrace the uncertainty that comes from not having a specific location to study (Hine 2001).

Thank you, Christine. That does not mean that I principally agree with the conclusions she draws from these principles for her case study. Hine very aptly regards the internet as culture (2000: 14-26), but also as cultural artefact (2000: 27-38), which is shaped by its social context (e.g. expectations of various interest groups towards the medium, future use, intended audience). She describes the internet both as *performative spaces* and as *performed spaces* (116). That's why we must not only see the internet as bearer of information and symbolic contents, but we also have to investigate the new kinds of action, interaction and social relationships online (see also Thompson 1995: 4). With this dual principle Hine (39) wants to contribute to the dissolution of the border drawn between 'the virtual' and 'the real' by many internet researchers. Nevertheless, in various passages of her book she herself does not get beyond the dichotomy between the real and the virtual (see e.g. point 5 of her ten research principles). Zurawski (2001a) criticizes that Hine does not abolish the polarity since she does not really perceive the internet as social practice, the extension of existing social relationships.

Furthermore, the question arises whether and how online field research has to be combined/complimented with offline field research (Bell 2001: 194-198). Hine (2000: 44/45) argues that physical travel to the field becomes superfluous for an ethnography of the internet, since interaction with the field of research is now mediated via the internet. The ethnographer negotiates her/his access to the field online from home, s/he observes interactions of the respective individuals and groups online, and s/he communicates online with the participants. As in 'traditional' field work "the relationship between ethnographer, reader and research subjects is still inscribed in the ethnographic text. The ethnographer is still uniquely placed to give an account of the field site, based on their experience of it and their interaction with it. ... ethnographic authority resides with the ethnographer who was there" (Hine 2000: 46).

Other internet researchers combine/compliment their online results and experiences with face-to-face contacts, as e.g. Nancy Baym (1995), in order to gain an insight into the socio-cultural surroundings of the respective persons. Hine (2000: 48/49) considers the inclusion of the offline level into the research as an attempt to verify online observations and to make the results look more authentic, or as a result of the pursuit of ethnographic holism. She argues that this places the ethnographer in an asymmetric position "using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by informants themselves" (Hine 2000: 48). This way, Hine continues, the ethnographer jeopardizes her/his empirical authenticity. According to Hine online field work should therefore stay exclusive. I would like to elaborate a bit on this point.

In case the anthropologist is investigating a social space, which is solely constituted on and through the internet, as it is the case with most MUDs and maybe with some chat rooms for example, I agree with Hine. But in case the social space on the internet is mainly constituted because of and with reference to events (or an event) on the offline level, it is appropriate, if not essential, to combine online with offline research. Morton (2001: 6) argues accordingly: an insight in the cultural background of cyber-actors and -presentations is important in order to understand a lot of the messages in cyberspace. If possible, Kendall (1999: 71) proclaims, the research should try to get access to the offline context of her/his research subjects. If we do not take the offline level/context into account, how does Hine want to judge, whether the members of an online forum themselves additionally use other means of communication or are in contact with other participants offline? In my opinion, online and offline research should be combined not in order to obtain an authentic knowledge, as Hine suggest, the existence of which I question anyway, but rather in order to analyse the presentation of topics, groups and persons on the Internet, to interrelate the various presentations, and to make the connection with the socio-cultural context of the people involved and with relevant events on the offline level visible and meaningful. All this is definitely not about the truth of online presentations, but about the presentation of this alleged 'truth'. We have to investigate, and here I can follow Hine again, what the informants perceive as authentic:

Assuming a priori that authenticity is a problem for inhabitants of cyberspace is the same kind of ethnographic mistake as assuming that the Azande have a problem in dealing with the contradictions inherent in their beliefs about witchcraft. It should be addressed as an issue for the ethnography as and when it arises during interaction (Hine 2000: 49).

Precisely to break down the virtual-real-dichotomy and to achieve a better understanding of the expansive potential of the offline through the online level, it proves to be quite appropriate in many cases to get to know offline the context of the people, who put these presentations online, and the terms and the processes of production of the (media) texts available on the internet - "the situationality of those texts" (Thompson 1995: 84).

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