

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

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

**E-Seminar on Jonathan Skinner's working paper
"At the Electronic Evergreen: A Computer-mediated Ethnography of a
Newsgroup from Montserrat and Afar"**

(11-18 Januar 2005)

John Postill (University of Bremen)

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Dear all

I'd like to welcome you to the second EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar. The seminar begins now and will end in a week's time (Tuesday 18 Jan). Through this mailing list, we'll be discussing at a leisurely pace Jonathan Skinner's working paper on an 'online community' linked to the Caribbean island of Montserrat. I shall be chairing the seminar. To participate, all you need to do is email your comments or questions directly to medianthro@abyznet.net (i.e. not to me). You can download the paper from <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>

The slightly revised rules of the e-seminar are:

- 1. The discussion starts when the discussant emails his or her comments on the working paper to the list.**
- 2. The author 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 at his or her own convenience throughout the week.**
- 4. Full bibliographic references are not required, but they are welcomed.**
- 5. All contributions should be emailed directly to the list (medianthro@abyznet.net) not to the chair.**
- 6. Contributions should have a clear, concise subject (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. The usual offline seminar norms of courtesy and constructive criticism apply.**

I hope all these rules don't put off our new list members – after all, this is meant to be an informal seminar! Once the seminar is over, we'll 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.

So now it's over to our discussant, Birgit Bräuchler!

Best wishes

John

ps For those of you new to the network, if you wish to know more about the other seminar participants, we have a register of 50+ network members at <http://easaonline.org/networkspage.htm>

Birgit Bräuchler (University of Munich)

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Dear Mediantros,

I would like to wish you all a Happy New Year 2005!

I herewith send you my comments on Jonathan Skinner's paper and wish you all a fruitful second e-seminar.

Best regards,
Birgit Bräuchler

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

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

Introduction

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

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

"At the Electronic Evergreen" is a very good example to show of which importance a local context can be for an online community and how locality is reproduced online in cyberspace, a space which is supposed to transcend time and space as people like Manuel Castells argue. The Montserratian "EVERGREEN TREE" visualizes this 're-localization' in a nice way. Still, considering the interconnectedness of the online and the offline level, of interactions on the

Internet and its offline context, I ask myself why we still have to differentiate between the "real" and the "virtual" (being not real?), as Jonathan does. As became very evident in Jonathan's as well as in my own case study and as I argued in my thesis both online and offline level are part of one and the same reality.

As many other authors Jonathan focuses on text-mediated interaction online. Even if newsgroups, mailing lists etc. still are a lot about text I observed that visual elements, i.e. digital photographs, scanned drawings, maps etc., also play an enormous role to provide group cohesion, to arouse emotions, to visualize what people are 'talking' about. With computers, networks and transfer rates becoming more and more powerful visual elements will play a more important role, not only on web pages. Jonathan also gave us an example of the visualization of community in his online newsgroup: a photograph of the Evergreen Tree (originalevergreen.jpg, p.3). I wished he would have elaborated a bit more on this visual aspect. For me this is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Internet; it enables us to combine all those different media and sources, be it text, sound or images, on one platform.

Computer-mediated ethnography

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

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

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

ideoscapes.

Talking about online communities (p.7/8) and the interconnectedness of the online and the offline level we have to carefully differentiate between the various communication modes used online. MUDs, IRCs and mailing lists offer very different possibilities to communicate. The former two enable synchronous communication the latter one asynchronous c., for example; this implies a lot more for the communication style (not all CMC is asynchronous! p.8). On p.8, I think, Jonathan does not describe "different types of ethnographies of electronic communities", but rather different modes of communication. Differentiating between various modes also has consequences for the question about the interconnectedness of the online and the offline level. The online-offline relationship will be different when doing research on a MUD, an online world that was created as a parallel world to the offline world and which might have no links to it, or in a newsgroup, such as Jonathan's one, that only went online because this was the only place left where its members could socialize at the "Evergreen Tree" wherever they live. When we do research online, we do not only have to transfer and to adapt our research methods but also our theoretical concepts, such as 'community'. I totally agree with Jonathan (p. 8), citing B. Anderson, that communities cannot be false or genuine, we have to differentiate them according to the style they are imagined. This imagination can differ a lot depending on the mode of communication, the topic of discussions, the members, their origin, etc.

Montserrat and the Electronic Evergreen

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

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

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

The splitting of online newsgroups as a way to cope with conflicts is a very interesting observation, especially for me, as I did research on the expansion of a local offline conflict

into cyberspace. An important question for the future is whether the Internet (as an actor?) will manage to provide a neutral platform for warring parties to communicate without fear and to find a solution to their problems. In the Moluccan conflict, unfortunately, it did not work out this way.

On p.16 Jonathan interprets the bifurcation of the Montserrat newsgroup as a "community breakdown". Even if I have no figures available (I don't know how many people left, for example) I really wonder whether this was a breakdown. Does the Electronic Evergreen community not exist any more after some of its members decided to leave? Why? Do we not make the same mistake here as those nostalgic anthropologists who are still looking for a clearly defined community in a clearly defined locality? As Jonathan argued, these communities do not exist any more. Is it therefore not more interesting to look exactly at those fusions and fissions, those online dynamics? I would argue that those dynamics enable a community to adapt to changing environments and thus to survive, even in an ever changing way. (The use of) Traditions might only be one means to achieve this. If we have a look at the ever-growing number of newsgroups it seems to be an inherent characteristic of online communities to get more specialized, to split, to form new groups.

It would be interesting to investigate how the new members of the Electronic Evergreen changed its discourse, how the meaning of traditions changed or whether they were instrumentalized by some in opposition to the newcomers. These are just some thoughts.

Computer-mediated community from Montserrat and afar

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

Conclusion

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

Jonathan Skinner (Queen's University Belfast)

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Dear all (this feels like a shot in the dark as i am not sure who i am addressing, or how many!)

Firstly, thank you for taking on board this working paper - i will probably have learned the email etiquette for this by the end of the week?!

I'd like to start with a thank you to Birgit for her comments on my paper which are well

intentioned, well received, and very thorough. let me try to take them as the points arose, and to try and keep some issues open for further discussion (one trouble with the virtuality of this is the smallness of a screen and remembering the points!). Also, i will try not to appear curt on the net, for writing emails sometimes gives that wrongful impression.

In terms of following the research onto the internet, the 'cybertrain' is i think a very natural journey for anthropologists. Either they are choosing informants on the net, or they are following them on - the latter in my case. what was particularly interesting and appealing for me was that the emailers were all largely familiar with each other from offline interactions - as was i. we could verify each other easily by name and memory (though authenticity is an issue in virtual research). indeed, my research on the net did not start out as research - i was trying to stay in touch with developments on the island during the start of a volcano crisis, as were other emailers. hence, discussion on the net might be seen to be different to other net discussions, it started off as bulletins and briefings, postings and then started to 'fragment and fission' once the situation stabilised in people's minds.

One point raised is the differentiation between online and offline - though problematic and blurred - i found it maintained clearly by my informants and myself - though logging on i did seem to be taken there in my mind. if anything the online-ness of the group took me back to the island - possibly something which happened to many others who went on to talk about their villages. ie online was a memory experience? these were the 'virtual visuals' - those in our heads; websites and jpgs did not happen at the start of the 'group' like we have now.

I like the image and idea of fostering and destruction - both taking place online and offline - echoing each other. Traces of our corporeality taken with us into the virtual matrix?

I take the point about citing literature - this paper is not the most recently written and i don't claim to be an expert in the virtual field - merely an anthropologist following some of his informants in a significant direction. The context of the studies mentioned is a useful comment - though the suggestion that computer lab studies carry less weight than virtual pub studies i find curious - as though there are issues of realness and authenticity at place on the net and amongst net researchers (i hope i am using these terms correctly?).

One question arising from the communication types is to ask if we are getting b(l)ogged down in the medium - does communication really change that much (a la Leach, McLuhan and other more recent reception theories) whether we are considering MUDs or IRCs etc?

One of the problems i had with this paper - and still have (as well as generally) is how to balance description/ethnography with analysis. Several journals have disliked the reproduction of script and the topic, for example, preventing its hard-copy publication! the observation about long-term fieldwork online and following it as a flow rather than an archive relates to a phenomenological experience? unfortunately, this is lost in the follow-up research which relies upon printouts or other such archives.

In answer to points about my role and communication - i can and am happy to elaborate: i had no role according to others, i saw no role in my activities and did not start out as a researcher; later on i thought i had records - but i kept them almost arbitrarily from changing university and email accounts and saving the correspondence. I also had little communication - most of it was from MNT to the outside world. Emails 'in' were more inquiries after people and places - expressions of support and concern, help with links and groups etc. Interviews - none,

formally though i did exchange comments with 'Cudjoe' who i knew offline - I had been working extensively with him offline before the volcano situation, and i had a number of interviews from that. 'Arthur' was the moderator who was known to others who verified him tacitly and provided some archives and 'history' of the group in a few emails. Yes - Cudjoe was publically discussed - presumably with his presence there.

One question asked - more information about the members - again, is this an offline residual desire? As though knowing the people through contact - existential and philosophical questions spring to mind. Nostalgia comes to mind in my memory of the motivations behind the group - there was no conscious effort to build a group and sustain it - it happened, precipitated and maintained by offline volcanic activity. the most active 'actor' then (to take an actor network approach?) was the volcano rather than the internet!

Re the community breakdown - something was lost, members, the spirit and speed of interaction and exchange - - what i sense/perceive/analyse as 'community'. It felt like it changed. Yes they became more intolerant of new people who replayed old debates and questions - they marked territory too with the location of addressees.

Black and white split - manifest in perspectives and attitudes, proGovt and colonials or not, concern for houses or people, language and abuse in the messages - dialect would exclude the 'whites', for example. I was not sure if i followed the netetiquette comment being critical of an 'in-your-head' stance? Unless one is taking a Durkheimian line of analysis - which i wasn't!?

I look forward to further comment and response and hope that my words above don't read too abruptly.

greatly appreciated,

Jonathan

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Well, thank you very much to both Jonathan and Birgit for taking part in this exercise and for your thoughtful opening contributions! The floor is now open to all for any questions, comments, etc, on the paper. I suggest we have a number of contributions from the floor before Jonathan responds again sometime on Wednesday or Thursday. I should stress that unlike offline seminars, here you don't need to ask the chair for permission to join or rejoin the discussion. You just need to email medianthro@abyznet.net

As for Jonathan's query about who we are, a look through our register of 50+ members should give you a good idea about half of us (<http://easaonline.org/networkspace.htm>). There are, however, another 50+ people on the mailing list whose biographical profiles are on their way!

Best wishes

John

Kira Kosnick (Nottingham Trent University)

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Dear Jonathan and all,

Thanks for a stimulating paper. The point I'd like to comment on is a conceptual one, concerning the notion of community and its role in providing us with a legitimate object of ethnographic inquiry. It is an issue which obviously has a long history in our discipline, yet I think it is worth raising it again when it comes to research on 'virtual' groups and practices. I don't want to take issue with the group under discussion 'factually' representing a community of sorts – Jonathan makes the point quite convincingly that participants think of themselves as that, and also rightly challenges more narrow definitions of the concept.

What got me thinking is rather what seems to me a mobilization of the community concept in order to legitimate this group as an object worthy of ethnographic inquiry. I wonder if it is in fact necessary to confirm the internet participants as a virtual 'community' in order to legitimate them as an anthropological object of study. Could we not take a different route and ask, not do these activities qualify as those of a community (imagined, virtual, common-interest based or otherwise), but precisely what kinds of sociality are established through the internet practices that these people engage in?

More generally, I wonder if the concept of community has not become something of a stumbling block for cultural analysis, even if we free it from its narrow connotations of tight-knit groups with delineated boundaries. Freeing ourselves from the notion of community might to some extent facilitate research on 'cyber-sociality', in the sense that we would not have to ask whether it is possible to 'map anthropological and sociological notions of community onto the web' (p.7). Instead of concentrating on those aspects of computer-mediated communication that mirror aspects associated with 'real-life' communities, we might gain even more from challenging the wide-spread academic and political use of the term as a restrictive concept which often obfuscates rather than illuminates the complexity of different socialities that are brought forth and sustained through different practices, online or not. As Jonathan says: 'meetings may be temporary and dialogues fleeting, but this is also the case offline.' (9) Even if the people discussed did NOT make a convincing community, would they not nevertheless be worthy of investigation as an ethnographic object of study? Working on minority media and migrant media practices, I am constantly confronted with the notion of (ethnic) community as a starting point for analysis which tends to be taken for granted rather than problematized. Jonathan does of course problematize the concept, but I wonder if we should not rather leave it behind and focus attention on the variety of social ties and engagements made possible by CMC which the community concept cannot cover.

Greetings,
Kira

Simon Roberts (Ideas Bazaar)

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Following this debate from a 'distance'.

Readers might be interested in this publication

http://www.theworkfoundation.com/research/isociety/proxi_main.jsp which has much to offer the CMC debate and is a strong corrective to the death of distance idea...

I suppose the other thought, with reference to this "One question arising from the communication types is to ask if we are getting b(l)ogged down in the medium - does communication really change that much (a la Leach, McLuhan and other more recent reception theories) whether we are considering MUDs or IRCs etc?" is the idea of remediation

Bolter and Grusin's (1999) theory of "remediation" the idea that most new forms of media far from overthrowing those of the past actually reproduce and replay older forms of media in an updated fashion. And this theory goes further to maintain; that usually the most successful types of a new media are precisely those that manage to preserve intact the key benefits users derived from the old medium while translating it into the new. In this way photography re-fashioned (or remediated) painting, cinema remediated the theatre and photography, and television remediated cinema, music hall, and radio.

Best wishes

Simon

Jonathan Skinner (Queen's University Belfast)

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Dear all, now I have a bit of a sense of to whom I am addressing ... !

To respond to date:

I enjoyed and appreciated the comments which will give me a chance to rethink and rewrite (a timely email from John re Global Networks?! Call for Papers: Return to Cyberia: Technology and the Social Worlds of Transnational Migrants (Anastasia Panagakos and Heather Horst, editors)), and now I am in fear of contradicting myself at some stage in the proceedings, nevertheless, to respond: -

I like Simon and Kira's words on remediation and community (it takes me back to my old university when they tried to introduce a remediation programme for failing students so that they didn't, fail that is!).

Springing from this is a reaction that for old media memes, one could substitute social science debates - replayed in different ethnographies - that old game to invoke that old butterfly collector Edmund Leach (1982: v):

"[a]mong social anthropologists the game of building new theories on the ruins of old ones is

almost an occupational disease. Contemporary arguments in social anthropology are built out of formulae concocted by Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Levi-Strauss who in turn were only 'rethinking' Rivers, Durkheim and Mauss, who borrowed from Morgan, McLennan and Robertson-Smith - and so on"

Perhaps there is a link here too to eternal debates between individual and society/ community (Amit and Rapport's (2002) 'troubles with' ...)?

More seriously though, to qualify where I was trying to come from - I was thinking along the lines of basic communication and reception between individuals and how, in our heads, little changes regardless of the medium - processes of cognition do not appear to have changed greatly; they do not evolve so quickly - certainly not so fast as technology; it is more the way that we metaphorise and think about thinking which changes (rather like Synnott's ideas underpinning the Social Body understood differently through the ages though the body remains the same whether it is thought of as temple, sinning implement, split from the mind, mechanised, computerised etc). Perhaps this stance has some bearing on the orality/literacy debates - which now need updating to include 'visuality'? For all this, and new ICTs, we still build pictures and social realities in the same way, through the texts, visuals, sensory apprehensions.

Kira's comments on community moving on to 'cyber-sociality' are also useful: should I the ethnographer be emailing the newsgroup and asking them if they think of themselves as a community? Should I whole-heartedly take on board the respondent's point of view - if they say no to community, but act as a community of e-practitioners, a community of practice if not one of thought/ideational. This is where I sought to use the netiquette examples as evidence of boundaries and expectations emailers had for themselves and others and of when and how they were transgressed - and of their punishments/virtual banishments ("sent to Coventry" online!). This is what I deemed aspects of community (the analyst's categories and categorisations never-the-less). Different socialities - same communities??

Re - Question: if there were no convincing evidence of a community (in my mind), then would they have been worthy of study? - not as a group, NO!; yes as individuals on the net - something which I have done for Bill, an American who I found to live online for Montserratians and for himself (<http://bill.innanen.com/index.shtml>). This is something that I did get accepted for print: Skinner (2002) There I argued the following:

"Narrative, by its very nature, is changing as a consequence of internet developments. Hypertexts are, for example, changing not just the way in which we disseminate information, but also the ways in which we write, speak and think. In this paper a narrative approach is taken to assess a case study of a person's extensive home site on the web. Bill maintains an extensive web site documenting his life with Parkinson's Disease, his love for running and all matters relating to the island of Montserrat in the Eastern Caribbean. Bill's Parkinson's Disease hypertext diary forms the focus of this case study of a life spent on-line. Though set up just as a diary about this progressively degenerative disease, because of its hypertextual qualities, this paper argues that it is through the diary that Bill comes to produce and sustain - to narrate - his identity. This paper thus contributes to the position that though hypertext encourages the construction of fragmented and false identity narratives, it is also a medium for sustaining linear and coherent representations of self-identity."

And there we have it, my first (?) - almost - contradiction.

Let me stop there, and have a think ...

Best and thanks

jonathan

John Postill (University of Bremen)

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I'd like to take up Kira's point about community which I think is crucial:

- > Working on minority media and migrant media practices, I am
- > constantly confronted with the notion of (ethnic)
- > community as a starting point for analysis which tends to
- > be taken for granted rather than problematized. Jonathan
- > does of course problematize the concept, but I wonder if we
- > should not rather leave it behind and focus attention on
- > the variety of social ties and engagements made possible by
- > CMC which the community concept cannot cover.

Kira's remarks are in line with recent work on media anthropology which has stressed unbounded fluidity at the expense of small-scale boundedness, e.g.

* The earliest anthropological work on mass communications applied Malinowski and R-B functionalism to US and Europe towns and villages but community studies went out of fashion in anthropology as bounded assumptions were abandoned (M.A. Peterson 2003: 27-35).

* Media belong in 'a critical anthropological project that refuses reified boundaries of place and culture' (Ginsburg et al 2003: 1)

* The old notion of bounded, coherent communities is not too useful to internet studies; we need 'a more fluid concept of community' (Wilson and L.C. Peterson 2002: 455)

Yet I think Kira and other fellow anthropologists may have been too hasty in declaring the notion of community theoretically obsolete. Not only because it matters to a lot of people (Rapport and Overing 2000) and governments around the world, but also because it can still be a useful analytical tool, especially when contrasted with social network.

In 2002 I returned to Malaysia, where I did my doctoral fieldwork, in search of a locality where I could study the relationship between new ICTs and the politics of ethnic identity. I ended up studying ICTs and community-building in a place called Subang Jaya, a largely middle-class suburb of Kuala Lumpur where people are pursuing a whole range of 'community' initiatives, some of them mostly online, others mostly offline. These include a discussion forum, a neighbourhood watch scheme, a parenting group, a cybermosque, residents' associations, etc, etc.

I'm finding that the notion of community can be put to work by contrasting it to that of social network. For instance, the neighbourhood watch scheme is a community-building initiative that combines night patrolling, community 'media rituals' (Couldry 2002) and a web portal in a 'gated community' of around 100 houses. This is, quite literally, an *exclusive* community in the making. The idea is to keep its affluent residents secure while fostering closer ties within its walls, and it seems to be working. In 5 years, they have moved closer to the old anthropological ideal of a small-scale, bounded community, albeit in a suburban rather than rural context (of course, there is no need to assume that relationships will be harmonious, or that there won't be fissions, these are not community criteria).

In contrast to this physically and digitally bounded community, there is a township-wide network of influential people who use a host of new ICTs to cooperate and compete with one another. Unlike the gated community, this network is unbounded, geographically dispersed and unnamed.

To complicate matters further, there are groupings in Subang Jaya that seem to be both networks and communities, e.g. a semi-bounded online 'community' forum (boundedness is always a matter of degrees, not either/or). Jonathan's Evergreen newsgroup would perhaps belong to this category?

So in addition to Castells' (2000) 'network logic' I would suggest the need to add a 'community logic' as two ends of an continuum of social groupings. The internet and other ICTs are implicated in both logics.

Best

John

Jens Kjaerulff (Aarhus and Copenhagen)

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Dear Jonathan, and forum,

I read your paper with interest since I have spent considerable efforts myself trying to come to terms anthropologically with Internet. I should confess that I am sceptical with regards to notions such as 'internet-ethnography' and 'cyber-anthropology' as means towards this end - just to say here, that my critical comment in what follows is more widely informed than from reading your paper, Jonathan. I think it was a good paper in several regards, among them in terms of the literary overview it provides. My quarrel is that I (by contrast to Birgit Bräuchler) don't think you radically exceed the 'cyber-study' literature that you cite, at least not from a perspective of anthropology as I understand it.

As I read your paper, I was preparing a more specific comment much in line with the one that Kira Kosnick has now already made. So I will make a different one:

What brought you to Montserrat in the first instance? I assume it was not what you have written about here (given the unpredictability of volcanic eruptions!). I think it is unfortunate

that you are so silent on this initial motivation in your paper. I envision that you might better be able to carry through with your fine intent of contextualizing internet usage and so exceed the literature that you cite, if you situated such usage (e.g.) in terms of your ethnographic pursuits before the volcano eruption. Such wider ethnographic particular contextualization - internet quite disregarded - might 'paradoxically' (cf. Miller and Slater 2000) have provided a strong point of departure for a 'truly' ethnographic exploration also of internet-usage. This is Miller and Slater's plan of action (op.cit.), and I think this should be an important lead for anthropologists in trying to come to terms with internet, although I don't think Miller and Slater's execution of this lead is exemplary.

I think your general point that internet is worth serious anthropological attention is well taken, and an objective entirely compatible with doing 'experiential' fieldwork (cf. Hastrup and Hervik, and Okley that you quote, and as I sense you intend it?). But I doubt that templates of 'cyber-ethnography' will advance this objective.

This is admittedly a rather brief, and perhaps not very helpful comment, but I intend it in an amiable spirit, as an invitation for commentary and reactions on an issue I have been thinking about for long, though not much pursued exchanges on so far. Pardon me for taking you paper as an invitation to do so, Jonathan.

Best regards to all, thanks for taking time to engage in this format of discussion // Jens

Daniel Miller (University College London)

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OK I just want to make some quick comments/speculations that really follow from John's and Kira's comments on Jonathan, focusing on the concept of community.

Jonathan's emphasis in the first part of his paper is on the appropriateness of this concept which is reasonable since so much of the early work on Internet does seem fixated on the idea of 'virtual communities'. Until recently I would have preferred, as Kira suggests, to sidestep the issue or 'move on'. But recently I have realised that this is actually of huge importance. This is because I am now working (with Heather Horst) on an applied project which is intended to advise aid agencies and governments about the future use of ICT's. Once you start looking at the development literature you realise that so much of policy is founded on precisely this concept of community. So, for example, the Jamaican government has just committed itself to spending millions of dollars in setting up community internet computers around the country, based on loans from development minded banks. This is a country that already has a vast debt burden, but the reason is that aid agencies basically love to give money to anything that calls itself community development.

In these circumstances anthropologists really do have to work out what they think this concept is worth and act on their findings. Briefly, I am extremely sceptical, not because I think that the concept assumed bounded groups, which I suspect is a bit of a red herring, but because it assumed that people take their identity from a set of local and intensive relationships. Actually working in rural Jamaica I see no evidence for this. Most people are as likely to be linked in with relatives and friends in Kingston or abroad as locally, and the main people who try and foster something called a community are elites, for their own purposes. Community

computers will, I suspect, just cause friction and patronage, and I can see no grounds for the government putting vast sums of money into them. What one does get, however, are groups that connect around particular common interests of which the most obvious example would be a church.

Turning to Jonathan's case, what has always worried me about the focus upon virtual communities, is that these on-line communities are much more convincing than off-line communities. My worry was because they seem to be common and work, they might lead people to start believing that off-line communities are typical, when actually I think they are pretty rare, and often as in John's example work best when artificially created. But the contrast I would draw is not so much social network against community, but interest group against community. A church is more like an interest group, people come together because of a shared commitment to a set of beliefs. Some of them may then forge wider connections, look after children together, others just meet weekly at church. Similarly for political activists, or people who share a hobby they meet for that purpose. I would think that most on-line 'communities' are better seen as on-line common interest groups.

Now compared to communities as imagined, this has two (amongst other) important consequences. Firstly if they meet largely for the purpose of that common interest, this means that they retain considerable privacy and autonomy. By contrast the concept of community tended to imply that people were interconnected in multiple ways that created a network of co-dependence and therefore also less privacy and autonomy. On the other hand, an interest group that defines its commonality just in relation to that interest, is more likely to fragment or experience fission when people realise they have different views on that particular issue. Which is why zealous religious groups or political activists tend to constantly split and set up new factions.

This seems to me the core of Jonathan's case, because the event he describes is a split within the group. I would have thought that if this lot were all living together in a district of an island, then they might have sharp differences of opinion over some particular issue, such as their concept of roots, but there might be other matters that kept them talking, such as their kids at the same school, or watching the same soap opera. Who knows they might even have become a community (though I really think this is rare). But as an on-line group they strike me as closer to an interest group, and once they split around the identity of that group, they have no counter reason to retain the larger identity. If you look at the early writings about 'flaming' and posting, what people really took to was being able to say outrageous things, because they were relatively autonomous and had little to lose. A diaspora group has much more connectedness than those early postings, but it's still relatively easy to move on and form another group. So an interest group can intensify in two ways. An individual may become more deeply committed to this particular issue or identity but keep it separate from other relationships and identities, or they can overlay the one connection with a series of other mutual links, but the second is much harder for on-line interest groups. So the key issue for on-line groups may not be that they are virtual, but that they are partial.

Jonathan discusses these issues in his introduction in terms of sociological theory such as Habermas on lifeworlds, but the conclusion focuses more on the nature of ethnography. But I would argue the substance makes a very useful case study to reflect back on the introductory discussions. Finally I think this really matters, because the concept of community turns out to be not just some esoteric academic issue, but a vast illusion that to my mind misdirects huge

amounts of contemporary aid money that could actually be used to help people who really need it.

Danny Miller

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This is less a comment on Jonathan's paper than on Danny Miller's comments on John's and Kira's comments on Jonathan's paper (whew!).

I want to agree with Danny that the issue of what constitutes a community is of importance in the face of the myriad projects that make up "globalization." It is not only that aid-giving agencies take virtual communities as models but that they often assume without any empirical evidence that any kind of intercommunication constitutes something called community. Okay, but what does that *mean*? If we want our work to be at all relevant outside the small community of like minded scholars carrying on similar research, we need to grapple with these issues rather than just getting on with our ethnographic descriptions of what's happening (even though that is more interesting).

Egypt is another country in which nationalist rhetoric (coming right from the top, President Hosni Mubarak) is held out as a way to foster community, although it is simultaneously held out as a tool to continue the task of development by linking the local communities with the global in some ambiguous way. Ivan Panovic of the University of Belgrade and I just published a paper on the links between this rhetoric and the ways local dot coms at the turn of the millennium raised investment funds to create "Egyptian" web portals, assuming both that the "average Egyptian" (who was always conceived of as quite different from the web designers and the investors) was incapable because of their culture and tradition of using something like Yahoo! (the favorite model), AND that the creation of such a web portal would foster a sense of Egyptian national community both at home and in the diaspora.

I am currently working on a book about transnational elites in Egypt called "Connected in Cairo," in which I have a chapter comparing two kinds of mediated communities, those involving cell phones and those involving computers linked to the internet. The former has been considerable localized, as a technology for extending and intensifying social networks. The latter is seen very much as a global/ international" technology, especially since relatively few computers exist in individual hands. Both are the subject of considerable public metadiscourse, but my empirical data on the everyday uses of these technologies in no way matches the rhetorics of development in which they are embedded.

Miller's comments on what community means remind me of a functionalist model I learned in an intro soc or anthro course sometime in my distant past at UCLA. The focus was on kinship groups, but the model essentially suggested three levels of community. The first is the community defined by a shared common interest or other symbolic connection. This would be similar to what Danny is calling an interest group and he is right; they tend to be able to differentiate and redefine themselves rapidly and with little affect because they are not bound together by anything but common interests or symbolic identities which they can rapidly redefine.

The second level was communities that share common interest/identity AND share some level of face-to-face interaction. To pick up on Danny's church model, this would include people who attend Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches where people who share a common interest and commitment meet and have social interaction at various levels of involvement, but where the site of interaction itself is owned and operated by the Church, not the community which revolves around it.

The third level was communities that share a common identity, engage in face-to-face interaction and are bound together by sets of shared resources. Examples in the religious line might be American Jewish synagogues and some Protestant denominations, where the churchgoers not only make church/temple a center of their social interaction but where the community owns the buildings and the land, and controls the budgets and other resources, and the minister/rabbi is an employee.

This is not a very sophisticated model, but it has been frequently useful in clarifying my thinking when faced with the problem of "what do I mean by community in this or that context?" The issue is not meant to be a comparison of "real" vs. "virtual" communities or anything of that sort. Rather, the important question is the extent to which such degrees of involvement with other people make identities more or less deeply embedded, easier or harder to drop. It isn't only that the style in which a community is imagined is linked both to the content of the interactions and the uses of the media vehicles through which the style is expressed. It is also that the degree to which one has invested time, energy, wealth, labor and other resources in a community, and has rights and responsibilities in that community, affects the depth with which one imagines oneself a member of that community.

Mark

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To go back to Danny's point about gated communities of the kind I describe for suburban Malaysia being 'artificial' and rare, Setha Low (2003: 15) estimates that the number of people in the US living in gated communities went from 4 million in 1995 to 16 million in 1998. By 1997, there were over 20,000 gated communities with over 3 million housing units. A well-off minority perhaps, but a significant one nonetheless in that country.

Low then goes on to argue (2003: 230) that in America in the 1960s and 1970s, [folk?] definitions of community based on locality were eroded 'as social groups -- associations, ethnic or religious affiliations, race, and gender -- increasingly became the basis of social and cultural identification...[Yet a] location-based definition, one that includes walls and gates, but also the desire for the social homogeneity of an earlier era, is reemerging'. I have found similar processes at work in Malaysia, and no doubt they are unfolding in other countries as well. A comparative study would be needed here.

If I can throw in some more figures, the US had 500 homeowners associations in 1962, but by 1992 there were 150,000 with over 32 million people. In 'major metropolitan areas' today, '50 percent of all new housing units are being built and sold as part of a collective housing

regime. This increase is a social revolution in governance, with private organizations [rather than municipal authorities] now responsible for collecting trash, providing security, and maintaining common property' (Low 2003: 177).

What does all this have to do with Jonathan's online community of displaced Montserrat islanders?? It seems to me that worldwide, yet highly unevenly, two main kinds of successful community-building trends can be discerned: (a) the gated and semi-gated communities of the affluent, and (b) common interest e-groups that are striving to be more than simply a gathering of like-minded people.

A good example of the latter is provided in Slater's (1998) wonderful ethnography of internet porn traders; over time, some clusters of these 'sexpic' traders developed a sense of community which they built upon. They put in place a division of community labour, a flexible netiquette, sophisticated security systems to weed out immoral 'leechers' (people who take porn without giving any in exchange), etc. Not only were they striving to be spatially bound together against intruders by means of digital gates (with little success, though), they were also morally bound together against immoral 'others'. This is not the morality of society at large but rather the parochial morality of a particular *Gemeinschaft*.

John

Daniel Miller (University College London)

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I don't want to sidetrack too much off Jonathans paper, but I do think John's point is misleading. When my colleagues work with NGO's and communities using internet etc, of course they find them, and some of these development academics thinks everywhere is full of NGO's and communities, but if you are not actually looking for these things and just do an ethnography in an place chosen on other grounds you often find hardly anyone is actually involved actively in such things. I am doing some fieldwork in London at present, and most of the housing is now owned by housing associations of the kind John described, but so far in seventy families I have not found a single person who has ever been to a meeting or regards these as anything other than just a different bunch of people you pay rent to. Even with gated groups, I havn't read the low book, but I would worried about defining community simply through exclusion of others. I think the only fair way to judge community is to carry out ethnography that is not based on the concept, and find out whether the people you work with are actually involved to any degree with either the people or the activities one regards as constituting the various forms of community the last few discussions have addressed.

The same holds for web communities of the kind Jonathan is studying (or indeed Don's study). If we study web communities of course we find them, but if we just study people using the internet, you may find involvement in anything other than private email and MSN is pretty rare, and occasional with respect to the bulk of usage.

Please don't think I am knocking this kind of study, all variants of interest group and community are important and I applaud Jonathan's paper itself, but I do worry about extrapolating from the fact that we tend to look for these things, to believing they are

prevalent. Because to repeat myself, the other side of the coin is a development literature and practice that gives vast sums of money to anything they can call a community even if this misleading representation of people lives ends up being to their detriment.

But I promise not to add another word.

Danny

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Dear Jonathan and Media-Anthro-List,

In my comment I would like to contribute to the ongoing terminological discussion, which is, particularly in the effort of putting media like the internet on the agenda of anthropological research, of high importance.

I think that Jonathan's paper shows in a very intense way that computer-environments, like newsgroups are inhabited by "real" people, their expressions of feelings and ways of interaction. So why use the term "virtual" for community and ethnography? Why not consistently use "online-ethnography" and "online-communities" instead? That's exactly what these communities are: on-line on a computer-network and not in some "virtual place".

Of course this doesn't mean that they are formed and maintained in the same ways "offline" communities are. These new forms of communities need to be investigated with adapted anthropological concepts and ethnographic methods. And that's how, at least from my point of view, Christine Hine (2000) uses the term "virtual ethnography".

My second point addresses the use of the concept "community". In accordance with John, I don't think that communities are theoretical obsolete in anthropology. But I think that these socio-cultural "organisations" in cyberspace, portrayed in Jonathan's paper, can be better described and theoretical analysed as social networks (c.f. Barry Wellman's publications: <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/index.html>). Even the "virtual community" guru Howard Rheingold (2000) commits in a revised edition of his bestseller that a more appropriate term for "virtual community" is "online social network".

Particularly in discussing new media and technologies in an anthropological context, we need to make clear that these online social networks are "real", formed and maintained by "real" people and needed to be investigated with "real" ethnographic methods and techniques.

I know that this short comment is terminology-biased, but - as the discussion on Jonathan's paper indicates - there seems to be the need to clarify key-issues concerning new media and technologies, particularly in our discipline.

Best,

Philipp

Elisenda Ardevol Piera (Catalonian Open University)

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Dear all,

My impression of Jonathan article, my first reaction, was that he does not need to justify the legitimacy of his object of study through the arguments that this newsgroup is a “true” community or not, as Kira pointed out. We do not need to establish an “a priori” definition of community and then look for the presence or absence of such predefined characteristics. Maybe it’s better to try to “see” how social interaction is taking place and how the “actors” manage to make sense of what is happening, what kind of shared understandings and metaphors they use and what are their effects in terms of sociality, for example.

I also remembered the critics to that kind of approximation made by some Internet researchers. On one hand, the early studies of “virtual communities” as “communities” by their own right, were illuminating, because they showed that “social and cultural life” were “possible” in that electronic spaces. Not only that, but these studies showed how computer text-based interaction was creating own social categories, norms and netiquettes, flames, conflicts, power relations, regulations, shared meanings and so on, similar to those developed in “real” social life. The problem was that of the “autonomy” of those communities, conceived as closed, separated entities floating in a social vacuum, without relation to the “exterior” world, namely the “real” world. Virtual/online communities were imagined as Malinowskian islanders, which culture can be studied and described as autonomous, self regulatory whole. On the other hand, these studies were criticized for forgetting the “outside” world relations, the online/offline flux, as in the pioneer work of Miller and Slater. This was a very important income as it allows new kind of Internet studies and theoretical insights, because allowed to think Internet in every day life, as a cultural artifact, as articulating locality. Jonathan description seems to take both perspectives.

I have read all your comments since now, and I am a little confused...without doubt, community, as culture, is a central theme in our societies, it is used not only to describe, but also to “prescribe” policies, and, in that sense, our current debate is useful and worthy, but I think we are using the term "community" at least in three different ways:

-as an emic concept, what social context is defined by the actors, how it is used, and for/bringing what effects.

-as a conceptual tool, then it seems that the term has to be “substantive” and use some criteria to define some kind of social groups and exclude others.

-as an heuristic tool, to study some social aggregate as if it were a “community”, understood as a whole composed by different parts, whose actions are somehow interrelated and interdependent, and may be create the “whole” as an emergent propriety.

Thanks Jonathan for that "thinking" gift! I find this debate very interesting and stimulating, although I must confess that I always use the term (comunitat, in catalan) in my own

“common sense”, as a way to express my –voluntary or not- engagement to a collective identity, to be part of an abstract and imagined entity, by some kind of social ties.

Mmmm, and what about Turner and his idea of “communitas”?

best wishes for the new year!!

Elisenda

John Postill (University of Bremen)

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Many thanks for that contribution, Elisenda.

This would seem a good time for Jonathan to get us back on track as we've wandered off the paper somewhat (but we'd understand it if you'd like to take the weekend off, Jonathan!). Meanwhile the lines are still open until Tuesday morning Central European Time for further comments and questions.

A reminder -- the correct URL to access the paper is
<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>

And please remember to add a concise subject to your email.

Many thanks

John

Jonathan Skinner (Queen's University Belfast)

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dear all,

thank you again for comments and thoughts all of which are proving to be of use for revision etc. sorry to be offline for a bit i am presently at a conference in st andrews and so time and energy are disappearing at present (10hrs of papers y-day!! and no computer access).

to try and keep the momentum going till i return tomorrow night - i especially like Danny Miller's comments and will use this line to rethink the introduction. I think i mentioned in earlier emails about how i got to the cyber-ethnography - by following my nose ... whilst on Montserrat i was looking at performance expressions of identity and postcolonial resistance through calypso, carnival, oral and literary poetry groups (Maroon poets), trade union protesters, and travel writing. it is interesting that, like with the email paper which relies heavily/exclusively upon text, my doctoral research ended up with similar levels - perhaps there is something reassuring about the material i was collecting (papers, poems) more so than interviews and general observation and participation. i remember running around the island in

my final few weeks trying to collect hard data versions of the qualitative notes i already had but felt a lack of confidence in bringing back. there were thus a number of strange 'interviews' which took place for the record and were replays of conversations but for the tape. there is thus an attraction, perhaps, (and methodological weakness?) in feeling this same way - regarding research - in the same fashion?

I like the comments about 'gated' communities - this was the way that some of the Evergreen contributors went - you had to verify yourself to become a member and share the same politics. this was one of the 'fissions'. prior to that, the constituency - the inhabitants, as we are still tying down the cyber-ethnography in loaded physical words and images/metaphors - was a curious mix of affluent and concerned Montserratians (moderator), a number of wealthy Americans concerned for 'their' property on 'their' island, the agitators who had found a new mode to disseminate their stance!, and then the spattering of labourers and taxi drivers on the island (this was probably the most interesting group) who got caught up with the new online phenomena, and the ability to get a direct route to HMG (Her Majesty's Government). there was thus, a great thrill associated with being online, newness, addiction, and perhaps emancipation. some of this has died down as we got used to the medium, and HMG etc developed strategies for dealing with this persistent new voice that they suddenly HAD to hear! this is perhaps a different story of ICT development to that articulated by Danny Miller for Trinidad if i recall where there were govt initiatives and cyber cafes (not evident on MNT despite Cable & Wireless's huge and conspiratorial presence on the island - something which i wrote about in a book called *The Age of Anxiety* ed. J. Parish, Blackwells). hope this adds - will try to contribute more composed if i can 2morro nite when i get back - and now back to the conference, the grey seas, and granite medieval buildings! (time/space compressions and reality warps indeed - reminds me of how ICT became a threat to HMG and Claire Short when she was delivering aid to the island and the islanders in contact with emailers knew more and responded faster than MNG or HMG govt!)

best and thanks,

jonathan

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)
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Dear List,

I just want to add one more point to the "real" vs. "virtual" issue. The book "Virtual Society?", edited by Steve Woolgar (2002), contains results of several research projects, initiated in 1997. The then-title of the research programme "Virtual Society" changed in the course of research to the more sceptical "Virtual Society?". In the introduction, Woolgar (2002: 13-21) states five "rules" of virtual society that correspond to the case studies in the volume.

"Rule" 4 is: "the more virtual the more real". In short: the introduction and use of "virtual technologies" can stimulate corresponding "real" activities, for instance teleworkers ended up by travelling more than they had done previously and mailing list participation can lead to an increase of phone-conversation (p. 18).

Woolgar (2002: 22) and e.g. Pollner (2002: 246) states further that new media and technologies need new ways of social-scientific thinking and concepts.

I don't agree that "old" concepts, like community, are useless in these new computer-environments, but they need to be adapted. From my point of view social scientist have to be careful with choosing terms such as "virtual community", particularly within such a polarising field as ICTs.

Best,

Philipp

Vered Amit (Concordia University, Montreal)

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As someone who is not normally part of this media group, I want to thank John Postill for his invitation to 'listen' into the discussion and Jonathan for an interesting essay that has clearly achieved its intended role in stimulating discussion.

Given that this is a media group, I was intrigued by how quickly discussion shifted into a fairly general exchange about community, its usefulness as a concept, its application, various possible definitions and so on, a discussion that ranged well beyond the kind of electronic forums being addressed in Jonathan's paper.

What I think this discussion illustrated quite powerfully was the difficulty attending a key assumption that seems to run through Jonathan's paper. Running through the essay there appears to be an assumption that there are is an accumulated body of "anthropological and sociological notions of community" which are well known and agreed on by scholars. These notions aren't much developed in the essay but they appear for the most part to rely on Anderson's notion of 'imagined community', i.e. community as a set of 'ideas and sentiments' about affiliation. This particular rendering of community as a concept is then mapped rather quickly onto the 'Electronic Evergreen', not so much as a question for investigation but as an appellation. According to Jonathan, the members of the 'Electronic Evergreen' make a 'convincing community' because however ephemeral, members have a strong sense of themselves as members of a group. And this in turn makes them a worthy subject for ethnographic investigation.

In other words, this paper is not about community, it is really about the parameters of ethnographic investigation in a world in which many social exchanges and discourses are being electronically mediated. I leave it to those of my colleagues whose field of research focuses on media to deal with this set of issues. But I will note that using the notion of community as a convenient tag for delimiting and justifying a 'field' of social relations that may otherwise be diffuse, ephemeral, continuous and unbounded is a familiar if fairly tattered anthropological convention. The implicit logic which has successively been used to justify the gradual expansion of the anthropological repertoire whether earlier in the move into dense urban environments, or later into an exploration of transnational networks, electronic exchanges and so on goes something like this: 'Anthropologists study communities. This situation involves a community. So, it must be a proper subject of anthropological inquiry'.

This is of course tautological reasoning and because when it is posed in this way, it necessarily begs the question of how we conceptualize our mode and subjects of inquiry, its not surprising that in the response to Jonathan's paper, it has led to a series of questions of how we define the concept of community. So rather than community being a convenient tag on which to hang the enterprise, it becomes the 'problem'. I don't think this is a useful way to locate either the 'Electronic Evergreen' or face-to-face forms of communication. It doesn't tell us much about community in any form and it doesn't do much to locate the expanding range of ethnographic situations that are being productively explored by anthropologists. If we're going to raise the concept of community, then at least let's do so seriously, with critical and substantive rigor.

Personally I would be intrigued to hear more about the ramifications of the concept of 'belonger' status on Montserrat and the ways in which expatriate/belonger distinctions appear to have been exported to the internet. Similar kinds of dichotomies have been reported as key organizing categories of distinction for other Caribbean British Dependent Territories (eg. Maurer, 1997; Amit, 2001). In the Cayman Islands where I encountered it as a 'status-holders'/expatriate distinction, it connoted a very real and major struggle over the rights and entitlements of citizenship among people living in the Cayman Islands. What are the ramifications and political contexts of this dichotomy in Montserrat? To what extent have the implications of this distinction been changed by its extension to an internet discussion group, many of whose members are no longer living on Montserrat? What are the political entailments or intended outcomes, if any of Cudjoe's, establishment of a competing newsgroup?

I accept Jonathan's closing argument that anthropologists should explore new and unexpected avenues of social research as these arise, i.e. that ethnographic practice should adapt to the unfolding exigencies of the people on whom our research is focused and not the other way around. And there has been sufficient ethnographic material presented in this paper to persuade me that this is a situation redolent with intriguing comparative possibilities. But I think the somewhat defensive epistemological bracketing of 'community' and 'fieldwork' in this early version of the paper distracts from its more exciting promise: learning more about the intricate dynamics of this field of social relations.

sincerely
Vered Amit

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Dear all

If you're reading this on Tuesday morning CET, we still have a few hours left for your final brief thoughts on Jonathan's paper, till 1 pm CET to be precise.

Best wishes

John

Jonathan Skinner (Queen's University Belfast)
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Dear all,

thank you for the comments throughout the week and for bearing with me whilst i moved around so much and was with or without email access - now i have been caught in a sudden morning blizzard of snow getting to Belfast. (it is interesting that i feel that it is important to ground each of these exchanges in some physicality). i shall certainly re-appraise my paper and some other pieces of work in light of all the comments made, especially those of context, motivation and community. i had shied away from writing too much about the first two but am pleased to develop those angles - as well as the references generously pointed out (yes, it certainly needs updating from the 2000 version sitting in its electronic drawer which has just been thoroughly dusted!). i thought that Elisenda's distinctions between emic, conceptual and heuristic notions and applications of 'community' was a useful set up to look again at the paper; and i am keen to look at the revision of the paper as a process worked through this media anthropology group.

in closing comment, i would also like to attend to Vered's incisive and most useful addition - thank you for partaking and for adding comments that will set me mulling over well past the melting of the snow outside.

- yes, the discussion and paper both went in the direction of anthropological and sociological notions and applications of 'community', much based from Anderson's powerful 'imagined communities' thesis. whilst quickly mapped onto the ethnography - for want of word limit and balance in the paper if anything, though i can be more cautious and considered in its use in a rewrite - it was done so more because of the ethnography than because of the theory. the two did seem to correspond closely, and it did not feel like i was taking a large or off-balance step in marrying them - the 'sense of themselves' came from the emails which i was tracking only at a very late stage as a subject of anthropological inquiry (this ethnography and my dance ethnography both came about practically unconsciously as activities partaken in as a member of a group then finding a richness of material - BUT no more rich or worthy than my work with solitary individuals without that sense of community); in all - the community or lack of comes from the informant/s. in other words, 'my field' comes from me, my connections and relations, but less as the anthropologist with a clear notion of field - in my book, 'Before the Volcano' i try to collapse and play with this anthropological notion and application - weaving volcano excerpts about the destruction of the people and place i was working in, all in between chapters about life amongst them, and, more critically, by extending Anthony Cohen's critical idea of 'post-fieldwork fieldwork' (Cohen 1992) and Ottenberg's useful words about how the anthropologist's interpretations of the field change over time and can be heavily influenced by personal activities in their lives (Ottenberg 1990). I do not see the parameters of ethnographic investigation and activations of 'community' as being mutually exclusive - to abandon the term when it approximates those used by informants, or is in fact used by them would not be the disempowering way to go, in my mind. The tautology only arises if label is the analyst's category term, a portmanteau catchall/hold-all. This is why i am trying to angle around Vered's argument; the comments from so many of the discussants in the group asking

for more background and context and motivation perhaps arose from a need in this article to substantiate this inductive streak in the paper?

I am sure that this discussion will not be closed just today and i look forward to taking on board all comments to strengthen the methodological, logical and ethnographic sections in the paper.

in other forums, with other mediums, and with thanks,

jonathan

JohnPostill (University of Bremen)

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Dear network

Our second e-seminar has now come to an end. I wish to thank, first of all, Jonathan Skinner for agreeing to present his paper and respond to a whole host of comments despite being caught up in an offline conference and, earlier today, in a snow storm. Many thanks also to Birgit Bräuchler for being a thorough, incisive discussant, and to all of you who've contributed comments. I'm also very grateful to Philipp Budka in Vienna and Jens Kjaerulff in Vancouver for setting up and running the website and mailing list respectively.

We'll be uploading a PDF file of the discussion onto the website later today, including a consolidated list of bibliographic references. We hope that it will be useful for research and teaching purposes, so please spread the word! Some of you may have noticed that the website is still not search engine-friendly, so we'd be very happy to exchange links with your own websites.

What we need now are **WORKING PAPERS** for February onwards. If you have a paper to share with the network, please send it to me. We could also do with many more references for the media anthropology annotated bibliography, an epistemic commons that relies entirely on your voluntary contributions (see <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/bibliography.htm>).

Finally, we're hoping to hear soon about our bid for a second summer school in media anthropology planned for September in Bremen. We'll keep you duly informed through this list.

Best wishes (and I certainly look forward to your papers!)

John

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