

Comments on Erkan Saka's paper: 'Blogging as a Research Tool for Ethnographic Fieldwork'

Mary Stevens (University College London), 19 May 2008

It is perhaps a measure of the reach and topicality of Erkan's modestly titled 'field diary' that I was first alerted to it not through Anthropology blogging circles but through [the website of a friend](#) who is a Brussels-based freelance web designer and the author of a blog on European politics. My friend is one of Erkan's many regular readers and cites him as a reference on a range of topics from [the Internet as a resource for political campaigning](#) to '[EU politics and plenty more besides.](#)' There is no question that Erkan, perhaps more successfully than any other anthropologist-blogger, has escaped the trap described by [Strong](#) of [Savage Minds](#) (and cited by Erkan in his paper) of anthropology bloggers as 'writing for an audience of anthropologists online.' I do not know whether Erkan has any sense of the professional breakdown of his half a million plus visitors since July 2005 (not the same as readers – in most cases every visit is counted, so Erkan's fans returning for a regular fix will boost the numbers) but I have a strong suspicion that these days at least, anthropologists are probably in the minority. Indeed, Erkan's forced decision to [shift his blog from his university servers](#) and on to a commercial platform in August of last year because of the sheer volume of traffic could be seen as mirroring his own journey from the academy out into the broader public sphere. What sort of anthropology he has taken with him is a moot point; Erkan posts an average of about three times a day (how does he find the time?) but posts appear in the '[Anthropology](#)' category only about once a week so the criticism that bloggers are 'not *generally* communicating anthropology to non-anthropologists' ([Strong again](#)) might still apply (Erkan, arguably, is primarily communicating Turkish and EU politics).

On a personal note, as a once prolific and now lapsed [blogger myself](#) (against whom the same objections could also be raised, except for the fact that I never saw myself as affiliated primarily to Anthropology) I am in awe of Erkan's blog: the regularity of his posts, the range of his links and the technical specification of the site, not to mention the advertising revenue he must now be generating are all very humbling. His paper however belies only limited signs of this huge success; it would have been good to see Erkan use this opportunity to engage in a greater degree of reflexivity about, for example, the implications of his site becoming a prominent vehicle for adverts from businesses operating in Turkey and seeking to reach an international, English-speaking audience. This surely merits some serious thought given Erkan's research interest in the way international relations are mediated by both traditional and non-traditional information media? In this paper he touches on the extent to which, through his blog, he has become a more active participant in the world he is seeking to study, but the implications of his changing status (and growing celebrity) are not really explored in any depth.

The reason for this is that, sadly, it would seem that Erkan's exemplary professionalism as a blogger would appear not always to extend to his engagement with his peers. I realise this is a serious reproach, but it is not without justification. When I started writing my own blog I looked around for anthropologists who were engaging with blogging in a reflexive, critical fashion. At that time I came across a paper Erkan had written for a conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, which took place in Brisbane, Australia in September 2006. [The paper](#) has been publicly available as a Google document since then. The two papers share well over ninety per cent of their content. The abstracts and the structure are identical and there is only one new reference, [an article](#) from *Inside Higher Ed* by journalist Andy Guess (the text of the paper contains references to *two* of his articles however, suggesting that Erkan could have been more thorough here). Erkan's failure to revise the paper even makes it genuinely misleading in places; when he refers to 'last fall' he doesn't mean 2007 he means 2005 and his blog stats are also two years out of date. Nearly two years is a very long time in cyberspace and the both the technology and the debate have moved on significantly since Erkan wrote this paper. For example, while I was writing this response I received my first 'friend' request on a social networking site from one of my informants (nearly nine months after leaving the 'field', I should add). When Erkan wrote his article and I started blogging this technology just didn't exist: what are the implications for key issues such as rapport, 'being there', trust and so on? How do these new virtual friendships shape our real

world encounters? Does Erkan have a [second life](#) avatar, and if so what happens when s/he meets his informants in other guises?

Using the same material for different audiences can in certain circumstances be acceptable; the real problem is failing to acknowledge this. Nowhere in this paper does Erkan mention the fact that this piece was originally prepared for the Brisbane conference. Admittedly the Brisbane paper is self-published, and was not therefore subject to the same constraints of peer review (although the online text is sufficiently polished to make me suspect that the conference organisers must have requested the submission of full papers and that the article may well have been circulated to participants). In Erkan's conclusion he notes that 'the role of blogging and new media in general is still contested in terms of academic authority.' His own views on this debate are not made explicit, but it is not unreasonable to presume that he sees suspicion of blogging as a regrettable conservatism. There is no doubt however that the Internet, with its opportunities for free self-publication, is chipping away at the old structures of disciplinary authority. The consequences of this are potentially very exciting; there is perhaps more scope for the emergence of radical ideas. But the purveyors of the new radicalism also need to be stricter with themselves if they are to preserve the credibility of their chosen medium; self-plagiarism does little to make the case for the move online and gives credence to those who argue that the old ways may still have their merits.

To turn nevertheless to some of the substantive issues raised by Erkan one of the most interesting issues remains the way blogs extend the field and facilitate access for researchers. I fully recognise Erkan's experience of the blog opening fieldwork doors; in my case potential informants often checked out my blog before meeting me for the first time (often accessing it through the link in the footer of my emails) and the wealth of information and links it contained helped me demonstrate my seriousness. But it would have been interesting to read more about the consequences of this unusual publicness. In my experience self-censorship contributed as much to my authority as self-publication: informants saw the fact that I didn't write about them, or divulge confidential information, as proof of my trustworthiness. Demonstrating my willingness to withhold information was a way of guaranteeing the quality of the information with which I was entrusted. The anthropologist-blogger may enjoy greater visibility in the field, but this may not always be an advantage. What opportunities has Erkan's blog caused him to miss out on, I wonder? And what other risks are associated with blogging? How does gender affect both the blogging persona, and its reception? In Erkan's field environment would his self-exposure be equally acceptable if he were a woman? And what of language? Erkan writes exclusively in English, but many of his readers are presumably Turkish-speakers (I had the same issues with French). Does his language choice enable him to write about certain topics more freely than others, and how does it invite or restrict access to the public debate Erkan wishes to encourage?

The extent to which blogging remedies the 'after the factness' of writing is also worthy of more exploration. I suggest that what blogging offers does not in fact bring forward the time of analysis, it just makes it public. The difference between the post and the field memo is its readership and its inter-connectedness (through hyperlinks). But it is not necessarily its substance.

To conclude, Erkan's field diary is a fascinating example of the potential of new technologies for anthropological research. It merits a sustained reflexivity, particularly in relation to the impact of the blog on Erkan's relationships with his informants, and on the exclusions as well as the inclusions it may generate. But, for the reasons set out above, this piece fails to rise to this challenge. I cannot help wondering whether Erkan has 'gone native' in cyberspace and substituted the Internet's more questionable standards of authority and authorship for those of his discipline.