
Article

Internet Ethnography: Online and Offline

Liav Sade-Beck
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
Beer-Sheva, Israel

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Abstract

This article proposes a new methodology for qualitative research on the Internet, based on the integration of qualitative data-gathering methodologies both online and offline. This combination enables the creation of rich ethnography or, as Geertz (1973) has called it, “thick description,” not limited to the Internet alone. The importance of this article lies in its contribution to a better understanding of the research potential of the Internet and its implementation in qualitative research methodologies.

Keywords: methodology, virtual, data collection, qualitative

Acknowledgment: The author would like to thank the Hubert Burda Center for Innovative Communications and the Bereavement Fund for funding this research.

Introduction

The growing number of Internet-based studies, along with constant developments in computer-mediated communication, offer anthropologists a new and fascinating field for social research, while simultaneously presenting a long line of methodological difficulties. These problems involve the question of whether the traditional practice of anthropology can cope with the redefinition of the research field and the expanded possibilities of conducting qualitative research.

The present article describes the methodological issues resulting from Internet-based qualitative research, and suggests a new path that can assist anthropologists in coping with the problematic aspects of such research. This path is based on integration of three complementary qualitative research methodologies of data-gathering: online observations, interviews, and content analysis of supplementary materials.

The description of the methodology is based on a study that I conducted about Israeli support communities on the Internet involved in loss and bereavement. The study examines the question: What are the characteristic traits of expression of very painful and difficult emotions of bereavement over the Internet in the Israeli context? Because the Internet is a new medium, with many social implications that I will examine here, I feel it is best to begin with a brief description of the Internet and how it affects society.

The Internet and its social implications

In contrast to other media, the Internet integrates personal and mass media. It has, in fact, created a new mode of human communication, enabling participants to take part in two-way mass communication. Users of the World Wide Web are no longer passive audiences of data consumers, as in media such as television and radio, but are active participants controlling the content of the information. They shape the quality of the data and respond to them.

The Internet opens up a simple virtual topography of sites and “addresses” to users, allowing travel from site to site by moving from link to link. Cyberspace, or cybernetic space, through which users move, does not imitate the real world, but rather creates a rapid, new, immediate, multi-layered world, thanks to the 24 hour per day, 7 days a week accessibility to the Internet and site structure (Nunes, 1997).

Vast amounts of data and links to additional, related sites provide a huge storehouse of available information; thus, the Internet is a technological innovation tightly linked to social change. These social changes have clear implications for the patterns of expression of emotions. Online communication on the Internet facilitates the expression of emotions (output) and the input of emotional messages, thus developing and reinforcing important social ties between users, forming a system of relationships similar to ties of family and friendship, all taking place without participants being physically present.

Thus, the Internet may be said to aid in preserving personal and intimate ties in cases where face-to-face contact is impossible due to physical distance between parties. Online interaction through the Internet exists mostly as a written medium, operating within a communications framework that takes place either in “real time” or as delayed interaction; in either form, however, the Internet transforms the act of writing into “speech.”

On one hand, communication through the Internet provides immediacy, accessibility, and continuousness to the expression of emotion; on the other hand, it differs from face to face communication. When both parties are present, physical and visual interaction provides details on the identity of users and about the situation eliciting the emotion. This phenomenon questions the essence of emotions, the degree to which they are concrete, and their mode of expression in virtual space. Can emotions really be expressed through an “impersonal” or “alienated” computer technology? Can we express emotions of love, pain, or sorrow through a communication medium based on reading and writing, but lacking any visual physical expressions?

The social space from which we can learn about the expression of emotions through the Internet is formed by virtual communities, such as e-groups. Studies that have investigated interpersonal communications in these communities, primarily studying virtual support groups, have found that online communication enables users to freely express emotions and reach a high level of self-disclosure. This exposure is accomplished through expressive codes developed among users as a sign language and vocabulary of abbreviations, and through written descriptive emotions (in short or expanded form) in “real time” in a genuine, spontaneous manner (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken & Wessel, 1996; Salem, Bogar & Reid, 1997).

The social implications of the internet have raised questions concerning the nature of ethnographic taking place in such contexts as cyberspace. A closer examination of these phenomena brings us to focus on our main issue.

Qualitative Internet-based research

The Internet is a very broad medium with extensive, or no, borders. It constitutes a huge database to be scanned, serving as a means of communication for individuals as well as the public sector, opening up a complex structure of functions to the user: face-to-face communication (through video transmission); virtual telephone link; broadband communication; online press; and advertising and promotion. Over recent years, there have been many research studies on computerized online Internet communication, vital to our understanding of the reciprocal relations between language, society, and technology. The studies focused on the Internet's economic, social, political, and ethical implications. Among the most outstanding themes were the aspects of Internet communication and human behavior, social interaction on the Internet, and self-introduction online. Most studies used traditional methodologies of qualitative and quantitative research, while attempting to adapt them to the new research field (Jones, 1999).

Quantitative Internet research focuses mainly on the sphere of trade, economics, and marketing (including academic studies) while focusing on the specific user-sector. The research goals have been, for example, maximizing profits through sales to individual consumers, as well as creating a valuable database for future business-to-business sales.

Qualitative research studies were conducted through ethnographic editing of data from virtual social spheres such as chat rooms, virtual communities and museums, and so forth (Sudweek & Simoff, 1999; Hakken, 1999). The ethnography of the studies is based primarily on analysis of texts and chats (Herring, 1996; Mitra & Cohen, 1999) or on interactive online studies as participant-observer; interviews and recording of actions in Internet communication groups such as forums and communities that supply clearer boundaries to the qualitative researcher (Sharf, 1999; Fernback, 1999; Kendall, 1999).

Markham's (1998) description stated that ethnography such as the above should include the:

Text of people who constitute these social spaces. This medium offers unique ways of...expressing the self and constructing social reality. The process of building relationships and social structures, though, is thoroughly dialogic: online cultures exist because people interact with each other through writing over time. (p. 210)

Though much has been written on studies conducted on the Internet, there have been very few analyses of the integration of the Internet into qualitative research approaches. Jones's (1999) book, *Doing Internet Research*, was one of the groundbreaking works exploring both theoretical and practical issues involved in Internet research; another was *Virtual Ethnography* by Hine (2000), which emphasized just how deep is the need to study the Internet both as a cultural product as well as in its cultural context. A third important work is *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research* (Mann & Stewart, 2000), which defined the Internet not only as a research field, but also as a data-gathering instrument in qualitative research.

However, as Jones (1999) has noted, the Internet presents very many methodological difficulties in conducting ethnographic research due to its complex, diffuse, multi-faceted structure that makes it difficult to focus on a specific research object, and to take a particular sector of the population as the research subjects. Such a research population cannot be determined solely according to regular criteria, since use of the Internet is not limited to a particular social space. When we determine the research population, we are then faced with the difficulty of data analysis of findings from the Internet, as this constitutes a huge database that is not concrete. It is not "hard copy" on paper, such as a library of books. This is a database that changes as it is updated daily (and can even disappear), and therefore must be monitored on a daily basis over the long term.

This difficulty stands out especially in attempts to carry out observation and monitoring of users; the liquidity and constant movement on sites on the Web makes it difficult to follow up on a regular and methodical basis, or to define users, as people can change their identities from site to site. We cannot always check this due to the anonymity that characterizes Internet communication.

Additional difficulties are posed by the main methods of data-gathering during the conduct of the ethnographic study: the interview and the online observation. Interaction on the Internet usually takes place in writing, thus transforming patterns of interpersonal communication taking place among Web users. This change influences the character of the online interview taking place between researcher and users, as they do not meet physically face-to-face, which leads to loss of many additional layers of meaning added to the purely verbal exchange, such as the tone of speech or body language such as gestures and facial expressions. In addition, the time lapse between thought and writing as in speech gives interviewee time to think and organize the answer, in contrast to the spoken interview in which the direct answer is given to the questioner. Changes can be monitored on the Internet, as can changes on sites, but we cannot follow the activities of actual people, and therefore the traditional definition of “participant-observer” cannot be applied to the description of the online researcher. The current study “domesticates,” in the literal meaning of the word, anthropological research studies by taking the researcher out of fieldwork in a society and placing the researcher into a virtual field of study through computerized communication.

Due to the egalitarian nature of Internet communication, an additional difficulty faces the researcher in defining one’s status, which is similar to the status of all users on the Web. This shakes the position of the researcher as the professional authority, although it also facilitates easy and direct access of equal to equal to the subjects being studied. At the same time, the Internet enables the researcher to become anonymous within the research field, a point that raises ethical questions, such as: Under what circumstances could or should the researcher act as a non-active observer? When should the researcher reveal one’s identity as an active participant? And how should the researcher do so?

Difficulties described up to now emphasize the main problematic aspects of ethnographic Internet research. Ethnography solely based on online research supplies much information with a high degree of accessibility to subjects physically distant from the researcher. However, such research cannot be the sole source of data as it provides only a partial and limited picture without the link to the “real world,” and from which it is difficult to obtain an “overflowing description” (Geertz, 1973). This problematic dimension is created in the wake of the common dichotomous outlook that developed in social research on the Internet that makes a clear and sharp distinction between concepts from the virtual world online and the ‘real’ world offline.

This conceptual difference creates a duplication of reality that is currently unacceptable, given the studies in the area of technology shaping society that examine how technology enters, and is gradually integrated into, people’s daily lives (Lie & Sorensen, 1996). Studies in the field emphasize the process of “domestication,” the process in which people adapt new technologies and bring it into their home lives. This virtualization process is the third dimension of the domestication process in which we transfer life, actions and objects from the physical world into the virtual environment, thus making our very lives and homes into virtual lives and homes (Agren, 1999).

Under these circumstances, the virtual world and the ‘real world’ merge, creating a broader definition of reality. Instead of relating to the features that distinguish the virtual world from the real world, we must adopt an approach focusing on imagination, associations and reciprocity between the two worlds. This approach can be expressed only through a re-examination of the fieldwork (Wittel, 2000).

This conclusion served as the basis for this researcher under the framework of the research to structure a methodology to produce rich ethnographic material not solely Internet-based. During the fieldwork that I conducted, active Israeli support communities on the Internet involved in loss and bereavement were studied, with the objective of investigating what characterizes the expression of painful and difficult emotions of bereavement over the Internet, a mode that is built on “alienated” communication rather than on physical and visual interaction.

Israeli virtual support communities for the mourning and bereaved: Case study

Israeli support communities on the Internet for the mourning and bereaved are a virtual space in which commemoration, bereavement, and private and public mourning meet and maintain a dialogue with events in the real world. Virtual support communities therefore supply complex and varied materials for ethnographic research, although studying these data only through virtual fieldwork produces one-dimensional and simplistic findings. In order to fully study the entire complexity of the fieldwork, I integrated three online and offline methodologies of qualitative data-gathering that complement each other: online observations, offline (in-person) interviews, and analysis of a mixture of documents: traditional, “hard copy” press, the online press, Internet databases, and so forth.

In the initial stage of the fieldwork, I chose to gather data through the online observation in order to take full advantage of the relative advantages of Internet research: the expanded field of research, which covers more ground geographically and has higher accessibility to subjects than traditional fieldwork. As part of the observations, I followed-up the support communities involved with bereavement and loss, focusing on various issues such as the “Second Generation” of the Holocaust and victims of Arab terrorist attacks, documenting the processes and activities that took place in these sites over a one year period.

At the same time as performing observations, I carried out content analysis on documents and various articles on the issue from the press and databases on the Internet, including virtual newspapers such as “Captain Internet” and “TheNet”. Using these two methods enabled me to collect factual data “from the field.”

At a more advanced stage of the research, I made the connection between the virtual field and the real field through a transition from online data-gathering methods to offline data collection structured around thirty interviews with research subjects. Based on the observations and content analysis, I took a random representative sampling of layers among the research population including discussion facilitators/directors and members of virtual support communities dealing with loss and bereavement. Interviewees were approached through email, including a short description of the research and the request to take part, as well as phone numbers to contact me. The email addresses of potential interviewees were located through on-site links such as “Contact Us,” “Write Us,” “Reactions,” “Visitors/Guest Book,” or “Forum Manager” on various sites.

The “offline” interview provided me with a means to attain information about a particular person and the wider social-cultural context in which the interviewees live. In the interview setting, subjects acted both as respondents who described their personal experiences, outlooks, and place centering around the virtual support community, and as informants, when they examined and described in general the processes and phenomena associated with memorialization on the Internet.

Use of three complementary methodologies of data-gathering, online and offline, enabled me to collect comprehensive information from various realms about the sites and to assemble a complex ethnography. The study of the communities that are involved in painful emotions of loss and bereavement provided me with an outlook on the expression of emotions on the Internet. I study issues

such as how emotional messages can be transmitted, despite limitations of lack of physical and visual interaction, what are the characteristics of expression of emotions on the Internet, and why people select this medium for transmitting their deepest feelings.

Conclusion

This article supports the use of qualitative methodology to conduct Internet research based on the integration of data-gathering methods online and offline as the key to achieving rich ethnographic material. There are reciprocal relations and links that exist between the culture of the Internet and between the wider processes taking place in the society. Through the integration of the data-gathering methods, on one hand, we can expand the geographical dimension of the research field and increase the researcher's accessibility to the research population, on the other hand, we also get greater access to "behind the scenes" people who operated the Internet. Thus, interviewees have the power to influence the way in which their site was understood and analyzed.

The primary advantage of the use of several complementary data-gathering methodologies used in the Internet research was the ability to provide the key to analyzing Internet sites online and cross-matching data with the offline interviews with those working to establish and maintain the sites. Researchers who use online data-gathering methods exclusively are in danger of focusing on findings arising from the sites themselves, thus missing additional themes that are expressed otherwise; their research will not be as rich as studies based on integrated methodologies.

Implementation of the proposed methodology raises the question as to which stage of the field research is the one best to begin with offline research. It seems that the researcher may choose any convenient point to do so, in order to serve various purposes. For example, offline beginnings produce findings that guide the analysis and understanding of the Internet sites; using these methods after the initial online data gathering allows the offline findings from the interviews to be used in cross-matching, as was accomplished in the present study.

To sum up, it seems that there is a good foundation for the use of qualitative research methodologies based on the integration of online and offline data gathering in Internet ethnographic research, in order to obtain the "overflowing description". Nevertheless, we must conduct additional studies in order to examine other data-gathering methods as well as the most suitable time for the transition among the various methodologies. At this stage of method development, we recommend use of one of these instruments in order to overcome the problematic aspects involved in ethnographic Internet research following the false dichotomy between the virtual world and the actual real world, and the need to redefine fieldwork so as to mediate between the two worlds.

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