My profile: The ethics of virtual ethnography

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Abstract

This paper advances some specific recommendations for an approach to studying the spaces of online culture that draw on aspects of cultural (anthropological) ethnography. It aims to offer some provocations for researchers setting out to engage sympathetically with online culture, to account for the particular kinds of intimacy these spaces enable. Each online scene or space, whether declared to be a community or not, is organised both by its specific form and by an order of appropriate identity practices associated with that form. At the same time, across these different cultures, modes of belonging mediate these practices which are recognisable across many online communities and formats. While the forms of intimacy developed online are far from consistent, this paper considers how best to engage with the consistencies and variations of online intimacy.

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Logged into an IRC channel one Australian Sunday afternoon, an academic sits with her glass of wine, fascinated by the many-layered interactions of a well-established online community. Formed around five years ago for a joint creative project, this is an intimate group. Although some may be newcomers only a year old here, others have been there from the beginning, and without exception they bring to this forum private and public lives; online and offline lives. For most of them it’s the early hours of Sunday morning in the U.S.A. and some are tired and irritable while others are slightly drunk, preoccupied with domestic affairs, partly distracted by music or television, or multi-tasking across different online platforms or communities. There’s a fight going on in the foregrounded text of this channel about what the community should do next, but the academic knows that some voices that sound the most annoyed are in fact playing with this situation. Some don’t care much what the community should do next, but the academic knows that some voices that sound the most annoyed are in fact playing with this argument out of curiosity as much as anything else, while some who are not saying anything at all are silently furious or engaged in hostile side-channel commentary on the situation. Some don’t care much about the future of the community, some are intensely invested, some would be perfectly happy to leave and re-enter or re-engage the community with a new identity, and some have not only bound much of their “real” social life into this group but experience it as the most important community in their life. She knows, too, that members often behave very differently in these weekly chat sessions than in the LiveJournal community the group produces, or in their frequent email and less consistent “real life” interactions.

Being paid to research online culture does not mean that this academic is among the least invested in the fate of this group; does not mean she would find it any easier to shift her attention to some other community. Her knowledge of this cultural location is rich, spanning the community’s history and stretching back into the social and creative networks that helped produce it. She thinks of herself as knowing most of these people well, and if she cares about some of them more than others she cares about the group as a whole. They are part of the fabric of her everyday life now, and she feels as obliged as anyone else, and indeed more than many, to turn up to chat on Saturday night/Sunday morning. Is she a “member”, then, or a “participant observer”? When she intervenes to appease or protest, is she “working”? When she writes about the style and mode of this group—about the culture they are part of and that they produce—what accounting needs to be made of her own impact on this group? They know she is an academic. They know she writes about communities like theirs, that she has written about them in the past and will again. But they do not see her as an academic any more than the member above her in the current channel listing is seen as an astrophysicist or the one above that as a graphic designer. She is an integral part of this community, and yet who pays her and for what does still matter, as does the possibility of her calling this “ethnography”.

This paper advances some specific recommendations for an approach to studying the spaces of online culture that draw from, if they can never finally replicate, the benefits of cultural (anthropological) ethnography. Our aim is to offer some provocations for

1 The politics of ethnographic claims to representation remain contested, and it is beyond the scope of this article to engage in detail with this history. From the extensive critical literature discussing the limits of ethnographic method, Clifford and Marcus (1986) remains a significant intervention, see also Wolf (1996) and Marcus et al. (2008). Recent examples of ethnography’s ongoing ethical force include Burawoy et al. (2000) and Back (2007).
researchers setting out to engage sympathetically with online culture, to account for the particular kinds of intimacy these spaces enable. In contrast to some of the more dominant uses of ethnography in the field of Internet studies, we do not use this method as a means to access an “authentic” “user experience”, rather our intention is to follow feminist predecessors in seeing the writerly voice as an important dimension of epistemological insight (e.g. Probyn, 1993; Schlunke, 2005). The voice we adopt in this article is not only that of co-authors, it is one that purposefully questions the confidence with which ethnography produces authority and representation. This is because we see in certain developments in online culture—particularly those that have been described under the label “web 2.0”—a significant challenge to the forms of expertise and insight that have been the traditional mark of the scholar, ethnographic or otherwise.2

Each online scene or space, whether declared to be a community or not, is organised both by its specific form—is it based on search-engines, on peer conversation or on network-formation, for example?—and by an order of appropriate identity practices associated with that form. At the same time, across these different cultures, modes of belonging mediate these practices. The browser, the stranger, the guest, the fringe dweller, the member, the manager and the star are recognisable across many online communities and formats. While the forms of intimacy developed online are far from consistent, our interest in this paper is to suggest how consistently intimacy can and does arise, and what methodological questions this raises.

2. Passing at life online

However it is defined, online culture extends without disruption across very personal scenes and practices, structured and unstructured leisure time, participation in public culture and in publicly visible popular culture, and compulsory as well as less compulsory elements of working life. These different spheres through which online culture extends are not separated by time or space or, necessarily, by different behaviours or identities. A fanfiction writer may reflect on the practices of fanfiction in their life as a fanfiction writer (a genre the communities call “meta”) and then, whether as a professional, a student, or in some other public mode, produce the same reflection in their “real life”. They may or may not change names or conceal identities to mark this shift. They may or may not have different audiences for both. They may or may not set lines between work and private time and space for this. So too, a researcher can, without intending any kind of pretence, advertise on a singles dating community and if they do so pseudonymously, if they use more than one such community, if they check these sites at work rather than home, if they are somewhat unclear or even misleading about the facts of their lives, if they have only very partial personal investments in whether or not their invitation to be dated is successful, they will still not have varied from the expected practices of that community for any member. Ethnography becomes a different kind of problem in such situations, where every other member of the community may have no less an entangled relation to it, and yet it remains unclear if any other scholarly method would clarify the situation.

Over a decade ago, Arturo Escobar anticipated this scenario in a series of large claims for the importance of the Internet to the ongoing relevance of ethnographic method. His undoubtedly optimistic and occasionally utopian call for the anthropology of “cyberculture” claimed that online culture offers a chance for anthropology to renew itself without reaching again, as it was the case with the anthropology of this century, a premature closure around the figures of the other and the same. These questions, and cybereculture generally, concern what anthropology is about. The story of life, as it has been and is being lived today, at this very moment (Escobar, 2000: 72).

Originally written in 1994, Escobar’s position was formulated before the dotcom bubble—and subsequent crash—in which Internet studies first emerged as a relatively coherent discipline. Despite the major economic and infrastructure developments since this time, his intervention is memorable for the opportunity it offers to reconsider some key methodological presumptions. This is especially so since notions of representation, community and presence trouble one another within discussions of online culture as much as they do in ethnography. Both ethnography and Web 2.0’s virtual presence vie for the very medium of intimacy by representing it; and both seek to capture community by representing intimacy as the proof of presence. What is perhaps most distinctive about Web 2.0 has been the way it renders these ethnographic premises ordinary and commonplace, which is why online culture remains a radical methodological challenge to traditional anthropology.

In conducting virtual ethnography that takes a sympathetic cultural studies approach we want to begin with three principles. The first restates the core reason for doing ethnography in the first place: because online culture is not partial we must participate as fully as possible in order to understand it. The second adapts a key characteristic of anthropological ethnography to the virtual environment: ethnography is powerfully affected by an inevitable blurring of work/life boundaries in the act of research, but virtual ethnographers must remember the degree to which, as academics and citizens of contemporary culture, we are already participants in online culture. Finally our third principle identifies a crucial new dimension of ethnography, one which we might term “virtual”, if we recognize the interdependence of presence, intimacy, and community online: intimacy is the currency of community; community produces presence; presence is the medium of intimacy; intimacy is the proof of presence. It is thus crucial to begin by considering where community appears and how presence and intimacy work for that community.

3. Virtual ethnography?

In The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods, Christine Hine acknowledges that “Ethnography has become embedded in academic culture as an appropriate way to explore how people make sense of the possibilities that the Internet offers them” (Hine, 2008: 260). The study of online communities as “cultures” has been framed by some conflicting and at times very unclear terms, including “media ethnography”, “cyberethnography”, “network ethnography” and “virtual ethnography” (see Carter, 2005; Wilson, 2002; Wilson, 2006). Sometimes these appear as groundbreaking new approaches (see Markham, 2004; Markham and Baym, 2008; Sveningsson, 2003), at others they are pitched as generally continuous with anthropological ethnography (Beaulieu, 2004). As was the case with cultural studies in the decade prior, suspicion has also been raised by some scholars that virtual ethnography is another version of “fast ethnography” (Cowlishaw, 2007) which is
taken to mean both arbitrary and strategic and, moreover, complicit with capitalist market temporalities that manage research. David Bell summarises some further concerns in these debates in his claim that:

The very existence of the Internet and its easy accessibility make it a very attractive ‘site’ for fieldwork. … Furthermore, in these days of tight finances in higher education, the Internet is a cheap—and-easy way to reach [strange new] worlds (2001: 195; see also Paccagnella, 1997).

Hine notes that research in which the ethnographer would “virtually travel” to “a particular online setting” assumed to have its own cultural integrity was part of early cybercultural studies’ celebration of the possibility of cyberspace as a new social domain” (Hine, 2008: 260). She suggests this sentiment “has tended to endure even in the ‘critical cyberculture studies’ more attuned to social, political and economic contextualisation of the Internet” (ibid.). In fact, “virtual ethnography”, while it could be seen as reifying a binarism we would otherwise reject as unhelpful (not to mention passe), seems to appropriately reflect some ethical dilemmas raised by Internet studies. We want to hold on to the real/virtual distinction in this instance precisely because it does not work: because of its usefulness in problematising certain disciplinary and methodological assumptions. At least it is clearer what “virtual ethnography” refers to—ethnography which attempts to mimic (which attempts to be as good as) ethnographic fieldwork. The evident differences between the relative stability of identity, cultural location and personal investment in such communities point to a real gap between ethnography and virtual ethnography (the former relies precisely on the apparent self-evidence of “real” culture). While the practice of ethnographic “fieldwork”—meaning travel to and immersion in a culture other than the ethnographer’s own—cannot be directly translated into research on online culture, the reasons why not forces us to consider some old questions about what ethnography is for and what it does for whose benefit. The certainties embedded in the real/virtual distinction are in fact issues for ethnography in general along the lines that Escobar suggests.

In a recent contribution to debates around ethnography, Gillian Cowlishaw defined “classical” ethnography as “writing that is based on extended, empirical fieldwork, the ‘being there’,‘going elsewhere’, immersing oneself in some other social space with other social subjects in order to change your mind”. This “entails both immersion and intimacy, the attempt to experience the world from another perspective by forming relationships with others and sharing their social world” (Cowlishaw, 2007: 1, her emphases). Cowlishaw makes her plea for the importance of this method in response to, first of all, critiques of ethnography’s politics of presence—its dependence on the authentic experience of a real otherness or difference (the proper object of ethnography). As Arjun Appadurai frames this critique, in terms that are telling for us,

Proper natives are somehow expected to represent themselves and their history, without distortion or residue. We exempt ourselves from this sort of claim to authenticity because we are too enamoured of the complexities of our history, the diversities of our societies, and the ambiguities of our collective conscience. (Appadurai, 1988: 37)

Cowlishaw’s second motivation is defense of ethnographic fieldwork against that “fast ethnography” that privileges representation and textuality over intimacy, community and presence. But if we agree with Cowlishaw on the limited usefulness of, say, interviews, focus groups and participation in public events as ways of understanding a culture—neither touring Second Life during “MIT3” in order to write about Second Life nor attending a fan convention or three in order to write about fandom as a whole is ethnography—that is not because we need to reinstate a definition of ethnography as first hand experience of “the other”. Careful virtual ethnography must move out of “visits” to an online site and into the everyday life of the researcher, including leisure and friendship and other troublingly unscholarly dimensions of life, because it is this “everyday” that constitutes the habitus that makes online participation both possible and meaningful.

Christine Hine was among the first advocates and proponents of virtual ethnography in the early to mid 1990s, when email could still be referred to as “Electronic mail”. In her retrospective “principles” for virtual ethnography, Hines argues that it aimed to find a way of taking seriously, as a sociological phenomenon, the kinds of things people did on the Internet. At the same time, the challenge was not to assume that simply by looking at what happened online we could get the full picture of why it might be socially significant or meaningful. (Hine, 2004: 1)

While she usefully highlights ethnography’s reflexive capacity to bring certain relations between individuals, groups and technology into view when brought to focus on the Internet, Hine nevertheless stresses the limitations of what this view can do and be. She describes ethnography as “a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion” and as “necessarily partial”, leaving aside where these are “communities in the ethnographic sense” (2004: 1).

It will be clear at this point that we do not see online culture as more partial than other cultural sites available to ethnography—such as a shopping mall, a classroom, or an island. But it does not matter to Hine if the communities she studies count as such in the traditional ethnographic sense, because her object remains the cultural artifacts produced by and as online communication rather than the fabric of community itself. In contrast, we argue that attention to the latter is exactly what ethnography can offer to the study of online culture.

So how would an ethnography of online intimacy and community begin? Firstly, we would suggest that the facility to write ethnography itself becomes a relatively minor distinction in communities where representation and analysis of the community are one of the community’s principal aims. In 2009, as opposed to the early 1990s when discussions about virtual ethnography were in vogue, “researchers” and “participants” are far more likely to share most of the skills required by online research. An attentive ethnography will not be relying on the representations of “users” but incorporate such representations as one thing among many experienced by the fully participating researcher. From this vantage point, interviews or focus groups do not afford the same benefits as virtual ethnography precisely because they remove online identities from their necessary contexts.

4. Our profiles

An intimate online ethnography would start by being specific about the histories and investments the researcher brings to his or her community of interest. In our case, our different online, personal

4 See also Escobar, Mason (1996: 4) and Paccagnella (1997).
5 As Hine notes, using cultural artefacts as social products rather than secondary data was already an important shift for ethnography (1994: 3). But the artefacts that make visible or record online community are not the same as any other cultural artifact. Revisiting her model in 2004, Hines has not shifted her generalization of “virtual” and “community”.

3 Geertz (1973), Adler (1997), Stacey (1994), and Appadurai (1996) represent some of these critiques.
and professional lives bring different stories and connections to our research of online culture. We bring different “profiles”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: Catherine Driscoll</th>
<th>Affiliation: University of Sydney, Gender and Cultural Studies</th>
<th>Years online: 17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of online user names: around 24, variations on about 6 names</td>
<td>Number of online user names lost or forgotten: 3 Second Life avatars and a Hotmail ID</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Active profiles: LiveJournal, LiveJournal multiple, Facebook, Dreamwidth

Preferred platforms: LiveJournal, Facebook, Dreamwidth

Likes: iGoogle, Foucault, Endnote, iPod, FTIC, Twitter, meta, Skype, majordomo (because I’m both retro and a control freak), ironic, walks on the beach

Dislikes: blog authority, autoethnography, meme friends, “subculture studies”, uncut journal angst, MySpace, telephone calls, funky Second Life avatars

Name: Melissa Gregg
Affiliation: University of Sydney, Gender and Cultural Studies
Years online: 12

Number of online user names: about 20, mostly the same name, except for dating sites
Number of online user names lost or forgotten: about 5 Yahoo email addresses, a Livejournal and a Hotmail ID

Active profiles: Home Cooked Theory, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Amazon, Last.fm, All Consuming, LinkedIn, University Login

Preferred platforms: WordPress, Firefox, Google Reader, Pirate Bay, de.licio.us

Likes: email romance, nerdy web comics, theory porn, voice recognition software, mp3 attachments, dancing at the disco

Dislikes: new age, fan studies, punditry blogging, gender ‘play’ in MMORPGs, continued use of cyborg metaphors, tiny default fonts, MySpace, careerist

Tweetering, compulsory Windows software

These boxes self-consciously draw together elements of certain on/offline personae, and each label within them articulates an orientation amidst intersecting fields of online practices. Every element adjusts the profile’s connection with every other possible profile, but at the same time is something more than an arbitrary choice. Whether sarcastic, revealing or a lie, such elements index the experiences by which we have come to be part of online culture. They are also tied to the temporality and flow of online culture, so that every revision of this section opens up the likelihood that the above description might change by choice or necessity (the latter being particularly true of peer-to-peer file-sharing sites, which tend to have a short lifespan in order to avoid download overload and litigation). Moreover, such a profile necessarily foregrounds particular interests over general experience. There is no representation here of our work on gamers or wikipedia, or our addiction to weather forecasts or astrology columns. It is therefore a demonstration of the wider point that every profile is a targeted representation of activity in relation to an imagined community. The challenge we take up in the following section is to convert the profiles developed by each of us on a female-only dating site towards epistemological benefits: to show how online profiles work for ethnography, at the same time as they allow us to come to knowledge of others.

5. Lessons from The Pink Sofa

Dating sites are among the most generative location for observing and participating in intimate online cultures, encouraging some of the most explicit exercises in disclosure. From vital statistics to sexual predilections, dating sites offer highly personal revelations and participating in intimate online cultures, encouraging some of the most clichéd understandings for why people go online. As gender studies scholars, the theoretical interest in engaging with popular websites is precisely to test out a predisposition to be biased against them — “to understand them as criticisms of those answers that... feminism might automatically provide” (Morris, 1988: 6). At the same time, given that dating sites are pitched to people like ourselves—professionals involved in computer-dependent jobs with long hours, who struggle to find the time for “traditional” dating—the curiosity that we might benefit from being a target market is a strong match for default academic scepticism.

Joining The Pink Sofa, specific categories allowed us to tick boxes in line with the type of person we considered ourselves to be — categories which could then be selected by other users as part of their search criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activist</th>
<th>Pagan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bookworm</td>
<td>Philosopher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expatriate</td>
<td>Sci fi fan</td>
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<tr>
<td>New age</td>
<td>Technodysteke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesswoman</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>Sports fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor adventurer</td>
<td>Vegetarian/vegan</td>
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If it is so far unclear that The Pink Sofa is a female-only site, it was also a condition of use to identify as particular sexual category: either lesbian, bi female, or female/female couple. This pressure to define ourselves in boxes obviously simplifies the theoretical and political arguments we are employed to debate in our professional life. But to be part of the community is to appreciate the strategic reasons for these groupings.

The Pink Sofa has a number of strategies in place to define and protect its audience (principally lesbian and gay-friendly) but it has no capacity to enforce this except when the use of the site breaches legal codes of behaviour. While ostensibly a dating site, of its major search categories—friends, dates, a relationship, casual encounters, chats—only one (at best two) is explicitly sexual. It is perfectly acceptable to use the site for friendship only, and many users were like us in seeking queer-friendly friends and relationships outside of the usual work-related circles. Identity categories were therefore a way of identifying like with like, affirming potential friendship through shared taste and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Identity categories were also useful in observing some of the differences in geography, experience, education, and politics between cities of encounter. In a relatively small city like Brisbane, Melissa noticed far fewer members would identify as “bi female” than in Sydney, Catherine’s home. Similarly, profiles without a photo were treated with suspicion because this was considered synonymous with avoiding full disclosure, or not “playing by the rules” (see Clark, 1998).

Over time, it became clear that there were intricate layers of judgment and classification affecting users’ behaviour which also fed back in to self-representations. This is in line with other research that shows members typically modify their profile based on accumulated experience and the feedback they receive (Valkenburg et al., 2006). A regular feature of chat between established friends on The Pink Sofa hinged on noticing interesting new members and also passing judgment on those who transgressed particular preferred forms of display, whether this was through inappropriate

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6 We should be clear that this paper is not focusing on The Pink Sofa as especially representative of gay/lesbian dating sites, still less as evidence of queer subcultures online — although see Race (forthcoming) and O’Riordan and Phillips (2007) for work that speaks to these issues. It is one of several case studies in our forthcoming book offering an outline of what sympathetic online cultural studies would foreground. Another account of The Pink Sofa, with explores notions of identity among young users, is provided by Hickey-Moody et al. (2008). The fact that several of our colleagues and friends are past and/or present members of the Sofa is not incidental to our point that offline work and leisure networks are crucial to the kinds of community practices scholars choose to observe and engage with online.
profile names, extraordinarily intimate revelations about previous heartbreak or sexual behaviour, photos that included pets, generic or overly general profiles (typified in such lines as “It’s really hard to describe myself in a box!”) or likes which included: “going out to dinner”, “walking on the beach”, or “socialising with friends”). Indeed, for seasoned users the amount of knowledge developed over time led to in-jokes on profiles, and even antagonistic descriptions (such as dislikes: “going out to dinner”, “walking on the beach”, or “socialising with friends”). Interestingly too, the profile space was a way of defining oneself as a particular identity—in this case, usually lesbian—by explicitly portraying oneself against stereotypes of that category clearly displayed elsewhere on the site, whether by users or the site owners themselves.

It often seems, in surveying the methodology sections of publications in Internet studies that claim to talk about users, that quantitative claims about defined periods of engagement and numbers of users surveyed or assessed displace just those ethical questions on which the relevant methods textbooks are now focusing. We have not, in this particular article, attempted to isolate representative users beyond ourselves, which is also a way of foregrounding several significant claims. To quote specific individuals as representing the fabric or texture of the community is not a neutral form of sampling but a strategy that slights community practices in favour of token others. While a delicate balance can be produced, and we have attempted such a balance in other pieces, in this context we want to stress the importance of how closely our own uses of these sites mirrored those of non-scholarly others. Careful attention to the experience of engaging research practices with the way knowledge, authority, and presence work in online communities must avoid solipsism, but at this point in the history of Internet studies a focus on sympathetic engagement seems more provocative for Internet studies than another meticulous account of a local sample.

If we retained any sense of exceptional status as gender studies academics, then, over time it became clear that the number of categories for gender and sexual identification was a shared cause for ambivalence among members. Meanwhile other users displayed forms of (potentially unethical) ethnographic behaviour, ranging from spying and other kinds of undisclosed surveillance to combining personal and paid interests. (One friend described her motivation in setting up a profile as providing research material for the romantic comedy TV show she was writing.) Distinct features of the site designed to make it appear and function as a community—ongoing archived discussion forums or the option to signal one’s individual presence by revealing “online now” or “message me” labels added further dimensions to the running tally of the numbers of users “currently online”. Watching these numbers fluctuate during the day and working week was a basic indication of how and when the need for intimacy arises, and it was this knowledge and habit that led to a feeling of engagement with the community overall. In terms of demonstrating intimacy, the technology behind the platform was programmed to reward regular use, in the sense that those who logged on most recently appeared first in sofa searches, increasing the likelihood of more contact. Presence was so important to the culture of the site that it was actually a design feature. However, unwritten rules also developed in response to the pragmatics and sympathies of longer-term friendships. A lack of contact with a friend over a period of time could be forgiven on the simple assumption that you had met someone else you “really liked”.

6. Foreclosing on the everyday

Virtual ethnography necessarily involves the generation of profiles in order to interact with those profiles presumed to be “native” to particular sites. In this and other platforms we have been focusing on in our research, we volunteer the same sorts of information about ourselves as participants offer about themselves. This is part of the functional engagement and exchange that takes place regularly between website users as much as it is about “researchers” and “participants”. While this parallel is crucial to the claim that online cultural studies is compelled to be ethnographic, a further parallel we are suggesting is that Web 2.0 presents its own difference as intimate and immersive experience. What we’re arguing for then is a methodology that can reflect the always interwoven thread of on and offline life that forms part of “ordinary” online participation and representations of identity as an array of imperfect choices about one’s place in a network of communities.

An adequate ethnography for online culture might involve as great a degree of intimacy as any other kind of ethnography—perhaps even greater when you consider the ambient technologies regularly used to signal when people get up and go to bed, what they cook, what TV they are watching or how they are getting along with their partners and their colleagues. The degree of distance and ambivalence implicit in traditional ethnographic approaches simply cannot access the tenor of this ordinariness which extends to our profiles as much as to those of any profiles we encounter. Such immersion in the ordinary may even seem more present in online interactions precisely because, in other ways, including the production of profiles, online interactions are framed as distant. Whether or not real life contact is involved does not determine the degree of intimacy available or enjoyed.

Profiles are impermanent gestures. This is true even of those clearly anchored to real life identities, insofar as we could shut down the blog or journal associated with our real life name and open another with a slightly or radically different profile. Such accepted transience inevitably affects the way individuals form friendships, build communities and so on, and how significant one’s online presence will be as an object of analysis. The generic structures shaping profiles also reinforce the importance of using specific examples in online research—the same profile on LiveJournal and Facebook will not, in fact, be the same. But profiles will vary within these parameters depending on pre-existing relationships, time of sign up, personal and public circumstances, the number of other profiles one already has and personal taste and comfort levels. In recognizing the transience and mobility of online profiles we can also note how some profiles matter a great deal while others are formulaic, parodic, or experimental. As researchers we must also consider how transience, mobility and controlled representation affect and characterize our own projections of self; how our own, sometimes generic, sometimes default, sometimes irrational preferences shape where we go and what we see online.

This puts a different spin on the ways that the ethics of representation have been debated in Internet studies so far. Ongoing discussion among Internet researchers as to their obligations in reporting illegal behaviour can be understood at least partly as an epistemological decision. It is the choice to retain allegiance to the institutionalised notions of authority and discipline in academia and wider society, rather than offering sympathetic account of online culture that can appreciate the different rules and behaviours it exhibits and values. Ethnography seems best equipped to support sympathy for the attitudes of the community being studied but the approach we are calling “sympathetic online cultural studies” (Driscoll and Gregg, 2008a, 2008b) is also not the same as ethnography. Indeed, the line between researcher and subject is even more complex than the now well known problem of “going native”, given that as contemporary scholars we begin our research no less and no more native than any “newbie”.

In classical fieldwork, which lays claim to its necessity via the strangeness of the culture being analysed, there is an ontological stake in being an ethnographer. This has translated into the
dominance of the autoethnography genre, as participant researchers work to resolve an ontological position amidst what they perceive as an unrepresentable multiplicity. It is almost impossible to avoid autoethnography when representing contemporary online culture, just as it is almost impossible not to have an online profile when functioning on so many sites requires them. Whether it is ethnographers attempting to pass at life online or ordinary web users effectively operating as ethnographers, today an ever widening group of participants are helping to narrate what Escobar called “the story of life as it has been and is being lived today, at this very moment”. If this is a move towards making ethnography more of an everyday practice, this can only be welcome when it also means a growing number of opportunities for intimacy in online and offline communities.

References


