Ethnographic Presence in Nebulous Settings: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon an ethnographic study of the sociability practices of a virtual community, this paper identifies certain paradoxical respects in which the ethnographer can be regarded as both present in and absent from the setting. By definition, virtual ethnography describes places that are not spaces. Disembodied persons inhabit those places. Negotiating access to the setting and core aspects of data collection seem to involve deskwork rather than fieldwork. The virtues of conventional fieldwork activities for virtual ethnography are outlined. In particular, it is the trust bred by face-to-face dealings that enable some of the practical obstacles that researchers face to be overcome. Trust founded in the face-to-face also helps deal with some ethical dilemmas. Online ethnographers still encounter difficulties in precisely identifying the boundaries of their research settings. However, there seems every reason for continuing to insist upon the application of traditional standards of ethnographic conduct and recognized criteria of adequacy in this new field.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine some methodological and ethical aspects of our first venture into the developing realm of online ethnography. We are in no position to make an overall characterization of online ethnography. The online realm, it seems to us, comprises a range of technologies supporting a diversity of social worlds that are no less real because they are virtual. In this paper we review our specific ethnographic experiences in light of some of the more general concerns of ethnographic researchers. Our concerns focus upon the issues arising from "presence" and "absence": the ethnographer "being there" while also, in a nontrivial sense, "not being there".

Our paper follows a conventional structure shaped by the ethnographic practicalities of getting into research settings, getting along with members of the setting and getting out of the setting (Goffman 1989). We also comment on some ethical issues raised by the research. First we must give a brief overview of the basic conceptions that informed the project.

RESEARCH AIMS AND SETTING

Our original research design involved a comparison of general newsgroups offered by four

Internet Service Providers (ISPs) with a significant presence in the North West of England. We sought to analyze the nuts and bolts of sociability practices in newsgroups: how sociability is discursively constructed in a text-based environment. We conceived our research as pitched at the processual, social organizational level "underneath" the more generalized debates about the characteristics of virtual communities (Doheny-Farina, 1996; Fernback, 1999; Rheingold 1993). The project was designed to focus on sociability practices. We envisaged it as primarily a piece of analytic ethnography, informed by the approaches of Goffman's sociology of the interaction order (Smith 1999; Fine and Smith 2000) and conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992). Broader concerns with online selves, virtual communities and the general features of CMC were seen as secondary matters that close study of the messages themselves might possibly illuminate.

The comparative element receded as one ISP, which we shall call "RumCom", and in particular one of its newsgroups, "RumCom.local", became the center of our inquiries. Our selection of RumCom.local arose from our early appreciation of the rich culture it manifested. There was a high flow of messages - we archived some 17,000 messages over a five-month period in 1998 - and ample evidence of liveliness. The messages contained much teasing, joking, argument, seeking and giving of information and advice. We soon came to know the "characters" in the group, their foibles and hobbyhorses. A number of prominent posters had webpages from which we could glean more information about their identity and interests. We seemed to have stumbled upon a flourishing virtual community (howsoever that is defined) that presented us with fertile ground for a study of sociability practices. Our decision to concentrate our efforts on this single newsgroup was confirmed when we attended an organized social gathering convened for RumCom.local posters ("RumRendezvous"). Initially apprehensive about how our open admission of our research purposes might be taken, we were gratified to be received by the assembled RumCommers with only minimal skepticism. Leaving the gathering late on a Saturday night we felt like anthropologists who had just discovered their "tribe", their "people".

We should not have been surprised. In a manner similar to the virtual communities examined by Rheingold (1993) and Baym (1995), RumCom.local has a reputation for "friendliness". In interview one poster put it this way:

> ... Demon dot Local, I mean you go in there, you're *[laughs]* within your first few posts you're likely to be flamed. People that come into RumCom dot Local are made welcome. So the hand of friendship is offered there, which in other news groups quite often until you become established people will ignore you or be downright rude to you. The ethos of dot Local, you know, it's like going into your local pub, does seem to be true in that respect. . . it's just the fact that it is quite a friendly place. It's an easy place for a newbie to step into and know they're not going to be particularly flamed.

The unofficial FAQ webpage welcomes readers to "the wonderful world of RumCom" and continues:

> You see, that's what RumCom is - a community, not just another ISP. Through the world of RumCom.local (although there are other RumCom based newsgroups for general discussion, RumCom.local is the most popular) people can talk; get to know each other; discuss problems, current issues and bizarre facts of life; even have heated discussions and arguments - within limits of course <g>.

Interestingly, it is an enthusiastic subscriber, not a member of RumCom staff, who maintains this page. A similar example of the supportive blurring of the division between ISP staff and customers is found in RumCom's list of newsgroup definitions, which is compiled and updated by a subscriber who undertakes the task on a voluntary basis. The "friendliness" of .local seems to extend to the ISP itself. The staff of RumCom - including the most senior members of the company - are not remote from their customers: they are accessible at the end of the phone or an email and have attended organized social gatherings (RumRendezvous) of RumCommers. Contrasting RumCom practice with that of a much bigger and better-known ISP, one interviewee noted, "I don't think the ordinary punter normally could get through to the Managing Director of AOL."

These features of the culture of RumCom are tied in with its history. The company was founded in 1994. Its administrative headquarters is on a small island off the Scottish coast. A significant proportion of the ISP's early customers were people from the island who wished to support local enterprise, or were from mainland Britain and intrigued by its remote location. However, it began to grow rapidly in the mid-1990s in part due to its very competitive pricing system. For a time it held an advantageous market position because of its in-house software that allowed emails to be read offline and thus not incur the telephone costs that are still charged for local calls in the UK. One of the developers of the software was a programmer with extensive experience of bulletin board systems. This programmer was also responsible for implementing the acceptable use policy and dealing with complaints. Through this key staff member the assumptions informing BBS were carried forward into RumCom newsgroups. He was also responsible for securing closure of the newsgroups to non-RumCom subscribers. The relative seclusion of the newsgroup from the wider Internet further helped the cultivation of a friendly ethos on RumCom.local: the technology rules out hit and run flaming from the outside.

History, culture, seclusion and acceptable use policy all contribute to a distinctive culture and the acknowledged friendliness of RumCom.local. One of our first research questions was to ask how this friendliness is manifested at the message-by-message level (Rutter and Smith 1999).

GETTING INTO THE RESEARCH SETTING

By definition online ethnography describes places that are not spaces. Disembodied persons, further, people these places. Such facts are the fuel of the cyberpunk imagination. For the ethnographer they create a more mundane dilemma: there is no obvious place to "go" to carry out fieldwork. Rather, data collection seems more a matter of deskwork than fieldwork - getting the seat of your pants worn but not exactly dirty since we worked in our own offices, not the dusty archives and grimy bureaus that Robert Park urged his students to labour in. In this respect online ethnography is surely a researcher's dream. It does not involve leaving the comforts of your office desk; there are no complex access privileges to negotiate; field data can be easily recorded and saved for later analysis; large amounts of information can be collected quickly and inexpensively. A techno-savvy researcher can even automate most of the process of data collection with the right software and artificially semi-intelligent 'bots. Doubtless Malinowski or Whyte would have been appalled by the ease with which the online version of their craft can be done.

We were attempting naturalistic research (studying people in their natural settings) though because of the nature of our topic (the communicative practices that make for sociability in a virtual community) we did not practice PO, at least, not as it is conventionally understood. We veered more to the "observer" than to the "participant" pole. RumCom.local messages were objects of technical interest to us, to be noted and stored in a database. We did not encounter them as newsgroup members might, as messages of relevance and interest for the information and views they contain, as statements that might even warrant a response. While we audited the messages in accordance with the demands of carrying out a piece of sociological research, RumCom posters wove their reading and postings into the fabric of their daily lives. The husband and wife with their own village shop told how they dialed in to read and post messages in the lulls in the rhythm of their working day. A housewife composed many of her postings mid-morning after the children had gone to school or in the late evening after they had gone to bed. A recently divorced man (and by far the heaviest poster in the period we intensively studied) told how entire evenings from getting home from work at 5.30pm until going to bed around 2am might be spent reading messages and composing replies. RumCommers monitored messages in the flow of everyday activity that was very different from the frame that we as researchers read them.

Furthermore, the electronic storage of newsgroup messages and the asynchronous nature of newsgroup communication meant that everyone involved in the newsgroup stood in a different temporal relationship to the messages, based upon their local exposure to them. The messages have no "natural" link to the time and space in which they were created, only to that in which they were consumed. The ordering, timing and association with other messages was not uniformly constructed within the newsgroup and the virtual space created for it by the participants, but in their own everyday use of the texts. On the face of it our collection and analysis of newsgroup messages has much in common with the methodology of unobtrusive measures (Webb *et al* 1966) than PO. Yet we did observe, and we did in a limited way participate and make ourselves known to RumCom subscribers and staff. Hence our deployment of "presence and absence" to describe the peculiar way in which we were "there" but also "not there" in studying this virtual community.

Our research experiences have also led us to problematicize the conventional notion of a "research setting". We took as our research setting the social network around RumCom.local, not a social group or subculture or geographically defined locale. Our decision to focus on a newsgroup is in keeping with studies of other newsgroups, MUDs, MOOs and the like (e.g. Baym 1995; Markham 1998; Mnookin 1996). But an alternative egological methodology might be devised that in a biographical manner centers on the individual's use of the Internet, travelling with people through newsgroups, IRC, meets, email etc. Such a surfing strategy might permit ethnographic examination that is non-site bound, or at least multi-sited or trans-sited in its scope.

All this suggests that as online ethnographers we need to be very cautious about the *where* that we are studying. Defining the field, conceptualizing how the research setting is constituted as such are issues that are never far away. These difficulties are as old as ideas of cyberspace and its associated literature but remain unresolved (perhaps because they are permanently resistant to solution). Like a telephone call, the place that RumCom.local newsgroup inhabits is defined only by acts of interaction and communication, as there is no "place" in the virtual beyond the

metaphor. For the virtual ethnographer this repositions the notion of place or setting as no longer an artifact of geography or custom but of behavior. Consequently, the definition of the research setting becomes not a starting point but a primary research question requiring careful examination by the virtual ethnographer.

GETTING ALONG IN THE SETTING

Our data collection did involve real places outside the office and real research activities beyond databasing RumCom.local messages. We visited the homes of RumCommers who allowed us to interview them; attended four RumRendezvous in a variety of locations in the UK. These meetings were held over a Saturday and Sunday and offered an opportunity for those who had only met online to test their assumptions face-to-face. We took notes after these meetings and compared them to the accounts lodged on the newsgroup and on personal websites in the days that followed. We drank coffee with RumCommers, ate meals and got drunk with them, sat on their furniture or floors and slept in their homes. No great privations to be sure - certainly nothing on the scale of those faced by anthropologists - but we "went out" (Molotch 1994) rather than adopt the supposedly easier task of just watching our VDU screens. We ran a simple questionnaire that then was used as a basis for carrying out some 40 interviews. A website to disseminate research findings was set up (but was never used when we realized it would compromise our assurances of anonymity and confidentiality).

We adopted overt roles as researchers in all our dealings with RumCommers. These dealings mainly concerned arrangements in connection with interviews and RumRendezvous meetings. In our self-presentations we endeavored to be innocuous in appearance and attitude. There was a slight division of labor when interviewing. One of us (JR) is still young and highly computer-literate. The other (GS) is older and became adept at covering his ignorance about computing matters. In fact the level of technical knowledge needed to address the sociological questions that concerned us was not high.

We cultivated the role of nonobtrusive, interested outsiders seeking to learn about the history and ways of RumCom. So our participation was "minimal" and "restrained" (Emerson 1981:368). We seldom posted to the group.

Our major method of data collection was the messages that were placed in a database for ease of retrieval. This proved a valuable resource since many RumCommers did not have a clear recollection of threads, even the ones they participated in themselves. We constructed a simple questionnaire (N=59) that gave us some very basic demographic information but which more importantly led to an interview in a substantial proportion of cases. Phone and face-to-face interviews were carried out mainly in the second half of 1998 to find out how people became involved in computing and the Internet, what they got out of participating in RumCom. We managed to interview about 18% of the total number of active posters on .local, including several of the heavier posters. Interviews were taped and transcribed. One of us visited the administrative headquarters on a Scottish island, a visit that also permitted interviews with some of .local's longest-established members. The Managing Director supplied organizational data. These were the data gathering activities that, along with the RumRendezvous in which we participated, helped established a conventional ethnographic presence.

"Passing" or acceptance by those we were studying rarely proved much of an issue for us. For most of the time to most posters and readers of RumCom.local, we were invisible. The social acceptability of "lurking" and the optionality of participation was one factor. Our primary "researcher as lurker" role was also aided by the accommodative character of the interaction order: "it may be possible to pass as a member without actually performing as a competent insider (owing to the politeness or face-saving graces of members, for example)" (Emerson 1981: 363). The social composition of RumRendezvous was sufficiently heterogeneous in age, gender and class terms for no one to stand out (our first meeting was attended by a range of people from 18 to 80 years of age). Among the conduct we took as tests of passing, we noted that some RumCommers teased us and joked and argued with us (the body piercings of one of the researchers attracted comment on occasion). We were "let into" group and individual secrets. Personal likes and dislikes, candid judgements of character flaws or confidences about "inappropriate relationships" were given to us, usually when the tape was turned off. Further, it was not uncommon for RumCommers to offer to share personal histories of the newsgroup with us. They would present views of the RumCom context and report interaction that took place outside the highly public forum of the newsgroup in small get-togethers on Internet Relay Chat (IRC), or in personal e-mails and phone calls. (This, once again, adds a further layer of confusion to definitions of place when approaching a newsgroup-based community.) Of course, we were seeing a biased sample, for those who did not accept our project (or us) simply did not cooperate or contribute to our research work.

Our participation in the activities of RumCom.local was limited and circumscribed: It was driven by a wish to answer questions that could not easily be obtained in a public forum. But we also wanted to add some depth beyond what we could discover through the analysis of messages. We felt that our online ethnography had to do more than merely observe and collect textual data (but see Mason 1999 for a valorization of the argument that full immersion in the setting investigated in *its own medium only* is what distinguishes virtual ethnography from other kinds). Different kinds of research question will of course generate different degrees of participation for the online ethnographer. Our concern with the discursive construction of convivial sociability places relatively small demands on the kinds of data that can best be obtained by PO. Nevertheless, on one occasion our face-to-face acquaintance with some posters proved fateful. We sent out questionnaires to posters who figured in our database. While these were administered individually via e-mail, some posters decided to air their misgivings about certain of our questions by posting direct to .local. Our bona fides were queried in a very public forum. We were "rescued" by established RumCommers whom we had met earlier in the year who replied to the effect, "these guys are OK". Without the trust that the face-to-face meeting had helped to secure, it seems unlikely that anyone would have leapt to our defence.

GETTING OUT OF THE SETTING

Although our visibility reduced after our fieldwork year, we do not consider that we have left the field yet. Perhaps it is because we are still grappling with where we were when we were in RumCom.local that we couldn't create a sense of closure about having left it. However, unlike leaving a physical site, our contacts with RumCom remain active: the tools that facilitated our presence in the virtual environment still reside on our desktops. Sporadically they come back to life when we dip back into .local to update ourselves or just out of curiousity tolook at what is

going on there now. On occasion we receive e-mails inviting us to new RumRendezvous or requests for information about how the project progressed. Our web pages still reside on the RumCom serve with our the RumCom screen saver we built as a thank you to our virtual hosts. Every now and again the more web-active of us runs into RumCommers in different parts of the Internet.

We recognize that members of a studied group may have mixed feelings about reports published about their activities As noted, we have been reluctant to publish our initial papers on a website for reasons of confidentiality. There is the question of "host verification" which we have yet to work through. Issues of presence also arise at the stage of leaving the field. To pose the question sharply, what does withdrawal amount to when you've never been fully "there"?

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

The negotiation of absence and presence is an important ethical issue, not just in online ethnography but also in its more conventional variety. In the field the researcher may include a considerable amount of time to encouraging those around them "forget" that they are there as a researcher and begin to see them as a person. For the online ethnographer the problem is how to be seen as a person or a researcher when we cannot be seen at all. Once again the idea of visibility becomes useful. Whereas in a physical environment physical presence can act as a reminder of one's presence as an agent, "net presence" (Agre, 1994) turns out to be a very nebulous thing. While we can accept the general rule that the practicing ethnographer should declare their research identity in the field and be reasonably open about their research agenda[1], the play of absence and presence has specific implications for online research.

It is very difficult for the online ethnographer to maintain a stable presence in a virtual environment when people cannot see that you are there. This is made worse with the constantly changing composition of many virtual environments as new people arrive and others leave – mostly unannounced. Ethically, how are we supposed to negotiate informed consent? Do we opt for maintaining the letter of the law with regular postings that announce our research identities, our presence as researchers or do we, after a general announcement of our presence, slip into a more naturalistic mode?

The former carries with it the risk that the researcher alienates regular users of their online environment whereas the latter, advocated by Ward (1999), means that it becomes "the participants' responsibility to read the message". Surely, when we suggest that members of a community, whether online or physical, have a responsibility to help us with our research we are treading on very thin ethical glass? The compromise we opted for was the adoption of a specifically non-personal e-mail address <ethno-research@rumcom.co.uk> and mention of our research in our sig. Ironically, as discussed above, the most effective tool for gaining trust and negotiating consent was not any of our online activities but our self-presentations in the non-virtual venues of RumRendezvous meetings and face-to-face interviews. (As a result of this attendance we found that our pictures would appear with those of other RumCommers on web pages and that people would recognize our postings.) In the incident mentioned in the previous

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[1] See Bulmer (1982) for an argument about circumstances where such openness is not a valuable approach.

section, we found that those whom we had met face-to-face vouched for our credibility to those with whom we weren't acquainted non-virtually.

Further ethical issues exist when approaching notions of what kind of "space" online ethnography takes place in. For example, how public is the interaction that goes on within newsgroups on the net? Often a very naive perspective is taken to this problem, with authors arguing that online interaction in MUDs, newsgroups, and on listservs is public in an absolute sense that has little need for qualification. For example Paccagnella (1997) quotes Sheizaf Rafaeli:

> We view public discourse on CMC as just that: public. Analysis of such content, where individuals', institutions' and lists' identities are shielded, is not subject to 'Human Subject' restraints. Such study is more akin to the study of tombstone epitaphs, graffiti, or letters to the editor. Personal? - Yes. Private? - No

Surely this is an over simplification. Just because talk takes place in public it does not mean that that talk *is* public. Surely there must be some distinction between what is said among friends in a café, pub or public arena and the talk of politicians or celebrities to open meetings or interviewers; between social chit chat and the form of pre-composed statement that Rafaeli draws comparison with. So too is such a distinction maintained in online interactions. Those involved have a recognition that their words and actions are viewable by others but this does not mean that everything that goes on in the groups is essentially public discourse and as such ethically available to the online researcher. Distinctions are made within the community-like networks between core members, newbie, the occasional contributor and, indeed, the online ethnographer. Not all these people are addressed in the same way gain the same response rate to their posting or have the same status within the list (Baym 1995). As we have suggested elsewhere (Rutter & Smith 1999) just because newsgroup interaction is transparent it does not mean that certain postings are directed to specific individuals. Newsgroups such as those we looked at may, broadly speaking, be public spaces but they are bounded such that people can leave (or effectively be expelled) from the group and encroachments such as spam and off-topic contributions are thoroughly frowned upon.

Further, even if we accept the discourse of online interaction as public what right does that give us as researcher to appropriate that talk and do with it what we will? Do we have the same right to report that X is regular topic of conversation as we do the personal contents of a posting sent to a newsgroup in error rather than e-mailed to a confidant(e)? We suggest not. However, the decisions that need to be made are to be done so topically and contextually and they are essentially reliant on the researcher's sensitivity towards the environment (virtual or otherwise) that they are exploring. The interaction that goes on within newsgroups may be largely virtual but the ramifications of unethical disclosure are certai

If we are uncertain as to the public/private status of the sites of our online ethnography, how can we begin to approach the ethics of identity and anonymity within our work? Unlike many other online ethnographers we chose to make anonymous not only individuals but also the Service Providers that hosted the newsgroups we looked at.[2] Concurring with Paccagnella (1997) we

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[2] This distinction between organization and individuals is used here as one of convenience. Especially in the case of Rumcom major figures in the running of the ISP would contribute to the newsgroup threads and attend

saw that "[c]hanging not only real names, but also aliases or pseudonyms (where used) proves the respect of the researchers for the social reality of cyberspace." This we did at an early stage of the research and offered this promise of anonymity to people involved in our research as we assured them of our good intentions and commitment to good research practice. However, what we discovered is that RumCommers generally did not share our concerns for confidentiality. When interviewed, many expressed disappointment that they would not be personally identified by our publications.

CONCLUSION

As suggested at the beginning of the paper, what we have tried to avoid sweeping generalizations about how virtual ethnography should be undertaken. Rather we have reviewed some of the issues that were raised as we embarked upon our first extended ethnographic exploration of a virtual community. We feel sure that the issues thrown up by the ethnographic study of online worlds are already very familiar to ethnographers of other domains of social life and that in parts of the paper we have thrown up more questions than we can currently answer – especially within the limits of a conference presentation.

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that the virtual ethnographer does not enter into a long- established, clearly-defined social arena characteristic of canonical conceptions of anthropological fieldwork. Exploring beliefs and practices facilitated by rapidly changing technology, the archaeology of which can involve going back all the way to the late 1980's, means that the we as researchers are not only studying but participating in the development of new and emergent methods of constructing identity, community and interaction.

Given this, the online position of the ethnography becomes even more precarious than in traditional environments. Ironically, this difference underlines the conventional necessity for spending time within the setting to explore the culture within it. In online ethnography there is so often an assumption that the researcher is not going into a culture that is substantially different from their own or that the organization of the culture can be rapidly assimilated through a few brief visits or even the automatic collection of data. Online ethnography may look deceptively easy to do but there are very good reasons for insisting on the application of traditional standards of ethnographic conduct and criteria of adequacy.

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