

Virtual Ethnography

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Current approaches in the ethnographic study of the Internet are diverse; the proliferation of proposals has been numerous in recent years. The methodological approach of virtual ethnography has been broadened and reformulated through new proposals such as digital ethnography, ethnography on/of/through the Internet, connective ethnography, networked ethnography, cyberethnography, etc. Each of these maintains its own dialogue with the established tradition of ethnography and formulates its relation to this tradition in different ways. There are those who consider that virtual ethnography involves a distinctive methodological approach and those who consider that researching the Internet ethnographically forces us to reflect on fundamental assumptions and concepts of ethnography, but that it doesn't mean a distinctive form of ethnography. The articles in this *FQS* special issue on virtual ethnography show a selection of the diverse approaches among researchers who study the Internet from an ethnographic perspective.

The different proposals for doing virtual ethnography are the results of the way in which the Internet is conceptualized as both culture and context for social interaction. The Internet is an open context for social interactions where practices, meanings and identities are intermingled. Social interactions on virtual environments present a challenge for social researchers and open up a new field for qualitative research. This special issue aims to contribute to the debate on ethnographic research and the Internet, while, at the same time, drawing attention to the need to reflect on the different contexts suitable for qualitative social research.

The label "virtual ethnography" includes a broad range of methodological approaches aimed at answering the complexities of the object of research and the different ways in which this object has been constructed. Virtual ethnographers, ethnographers of the Internet or of cyberspace are faced with the need to answer very pressing questions such as how to use heterogeneous data (text, audiovisual data, etc.) in their analysis, or how to combine research in front of the screen and in the virtual field. A perennial point of tension lies between the apparent ease of data collection and the difficulty of getting access and participating in the field.

Even though the problems of representation, perspective and participation are not new in ethnography, when taking the Internet as a object of research for ethnography, all these topics have to be considered again, together with other basic concepts like community, or fundamental processes like accessing and leaving the field, or the value of the researcher's field experience. In this sense, making the Internet the object of ethnographic research requires a broad reflection on central concepts of ethnography.

Virtual ethnography is not just an anthropological methodology. Many different disciplines use ethnography to approach their objects of research, such as sociology, pedagogy, philosophy, psychology or economics. These disciplines have incorporated ethnography as another methodological option for researching the cultural dimensions of phenomena related to their areas of interest. This multi-disciplinary embracing of ethnography enriches it and broadens the set of answers to the methodological questions raised. This diversity of approaches, together with some classic debates on ethnography—such as the relation between the researcher and the field, ethical questions, the participant observation or the "construction" of the ethnographical discourse—, take a new form when researching the Internet. All of them have inspired the call for this FQS special issue.

In the article "Field Ethics: Towards Situated Ethics for Ethnographic Research on the Internet," [Adolfo ESTALELLA and Elisenda ARDÈVOL](#) approach some of the ethical issues and open new fronts related to Internet ethnography as a method and methodology. They also point out to the ethical aspects of the researcher's activities in the field when the virtual is surpassed by the physical world. The work of ESTALELLA and ARDÈVOL opens up new avenues of reflection based on the use of the ethnographic practice around artefacts such as the blog, in its double condition as an instrument for obtaining data and as a medium to establish relationships in the field.

This last perspective is similar to the one explored by [Rubén ARRIAZU](#) in his article, "On New *Means* or New *Forms* of Investigation. A Methodological Proposal for Online Social Investigation through a Virtual Forum." He argues for the important role of artefacts and technologies in virtual ethnography. Through an analysis of socialization in virtual forums, the text discusses what ARRIAZU envisages as a shift in the way qualitative research on the Internet is performed. For him, communication plays a key role in the socialization on the WWW and he suggests the need for theoretical and methodological adaptations for the development of this premise.

The article: "Riereta.net: Epistemic and Political Notes From a Techno-Activist Ethnography" by [Blanca CALLÉN, Marcel BALASCH, Paz GUARDERAS, Pamela GUTIÉRREZ, Alejandra LEÓN, Marisela MONTENEGRO, Karla MONTENEGRO and Joan PUJOL](#) presents new analytical perspectives and elements for reflection. The proposal combines an activist project and a virtual ethnography on the Net. They consider in their analysis, on the one hand, the translation to the virtual space of some intervention practices and on the other hand, the implications that social intervention has for ethnographic methods.

[Heike Mónica GRESCHKE](#), in her article "*Logging into the Field—Methodological Reflections on Ethnographic Research in a Pluri-Local and Computer-Mediated Field*," reports on a study on an Internet platform. The network [www.cibervalle.com](#) is basically used by the Paraguayan Diaspora, combining online and offline activities. The author discusses this experience in relation to a methodological argument: the virtual ethnography can't be limited to "screen

research," but it has to be combined with physical observation in multiple sites, in order to explore how the mediated activities are inserted in the everyday life of participants.

[Simona ISABELLA](#) presents a methodological article: "Ethnography of Online Role-Playing Games: The Role of Virtual and Real Contest in the Construction of the Field," based on her fieldwork in two MUDs. She discusses some methodological issues and addresses questions regarding the integration of data collected by mediated interactions with different technologies into an object of the study, in this case, data from e-mails and instant messaging. She further reflects on how to integrate the local contexts of the players. Once again, as in many articles in this issue, she proposes to also study the offline interactions between individuals. Simona's work has two other key elements. First, it is a comparative study between two MUDs, and comparative ethnographies are very few in the field. Second she is audacious by taking the MUD as a study object, since this technology is more than a decade old and has lost its glamor—a point on which she comments that relevance in social research of the Internet is not equivalent to the study of the "new, new, new thing."

[Kip JONES](#) opens a door to the representation of qualitative data on the Internet in "How Did I Get to Princess Margaret? (And How Did I Get Her to the World Wide Web?)." In this article, JONES narrates with detail the translation of the signifiers included in an auto-ethnographical narrative developed for a audio/visual presentation that then migrated to the Internet. The path is not casual, and is the result of intense audience feedback and re-evaluation. In the course of this process, the article offers an interesting point of view to the debates about qualitative research ethics, the ability of digital media to impact on the scientific discourse, and the possibilities for performative social science to represent qualitative data in unconventional ways.

In their article "Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities," [RYBAS and GAJJALA](#) provide us with a reflection on the pedagogical and analytical potential of participant observation in a classroom situation. Issues of identity can be fruitfully explored, the authors argue, through an ethnographic engagement in sites of identity production, namely, settings such as Facebook and MySpace.

[Maurizio TELI, Francesco PISANU and David HAKKEN](#), in their article "The Internet as a Library-of-People: For a Cyberethnography of Online Groups," analyze some derivations of computer-mediated communication when the phenomena gets bigger on the Internet and the collectives use synchronic and asynchronous tools. Based on a conception of the virtual ethnography as cyber-ethnography, the authors focus their ethnographic research on the intersection between online and offline communication. Their study concerns groups that interact in both situations, and is based on classic concepts from Science and Technology Studies literature like the cyborgs or the cyberspace.

The text of [Michaela FAY](#) "Mobile Subjects, Mobile Methods: Doing Virtual Ethnography in a Feminist Online Network" provides an interesting and theoretically informed discussion of feminism, mobility and technology. Taking as a case study the International Female University (IFU), the author elaborates an "unlocated" ethnography to understand the role of technology in the mobility of a female group that participates in this university.

In a highly mediated culture, where the Internet is more and more a protagonist in the everyday life and in social and emotional interactions, it is necessary to develop new research tools and adequate analytical methods to manage the data that has been gathered. The articles in FQS 8(3) aim to open up the debate around these issues, providing examples of studies and promoting reflection upon the methods utilized in each case. In this sense, this issue presents an opportunity to extend the reflections on a growing field that is becoming very relevant.

Across the articles, ethnography is articulated in a great variety of ways. While each of these versions of what constitutes ethnography is inscribed in particular traditions and institutional contexts, it remains that the desire to *understand by engaging* stands out as a key motif in the work of most of the authors. Challenges of mediation, of online settings and shifts in distance or in time, here subsumed under the term "virtual ethnography," are all met in the course of trying to establish this engagement. We hope that the ways in which engagement is reaffirmed and articulated in particular ways will be stimulating to researchers and students who are interested in networked and digital (or otherwise mediated) phenomena.

Citation

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