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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Navigating internet-mediated ethnography for socio-legal researchers

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Abstract

As legal phenomena have become entangled with information and communication technologies, and the internet in particular, it is important for socio-legal researchers to engage with online-focused methodological approaches. This article contributes to this need by offering an exploration of some significant theoretical and methodological problematics presented by ethnographic approaches to internet research. Drawing on the methodological literature and reflections on my own research experience, the article discusses how internet-mediated ethnography differs from other online-focused approaches and considers the relationship between online and 'traditional' 'real-life' ethnography. The article suggests that notwithstanding its internal diversity and fluid boundaries, internet-mediated ethnography is a distinct approach to research, albeit one that bears a 'family resemblance' to traditional ethnography and offers advantages in terms of flexibility, depth of analysis, and understanding of the social contexts surrounding mediated life.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Pioneering ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski famously wrote that '[t]he anthropologist must relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair … where, armed with pencil and notebook and at times with a whisky and soda, he has been accustomed to collect statements from informants'.[1] This extract is often quoted to signify the emergence of a new, modern anthropology distinct from the theory-oriented tradition of a previous generation of so-called 'armchair anthropologists'. Armchair scholars tended to privilege large-scale cross-cultural comparisons rather than meticulous descriptions of local cultural and social practices in their minute details. They also relied on second-hand accounts of native peoples' lives from other actors – usually missionaries, explorers, or colonial officials – as the main source of their theorizations. Distancing himself from this 'armchair tradition', Malinowski believed that only by going out into the field and gathering solid, first-hand empirical evidence of social life in a particular place and at a particular time could one produce valid anthropological knowledge of societal institutions and cultural phenomena.

What Malinowski could not have envisaged is that anthropologists and other social scientists would one day reach back for their chairs and sit in front of their laptops in order to attain first-hand access to otherwise inaccessible cultural phenomena. Nevertheless, the rapid social and technological change of the past 50 years, and specifically the development of sophisticated information and communication technologies (ICTs), call for methodological adaptability to make sense of an ever-changing social landscape in which new, mediated forms of interaction have become possible, with an impact on different kinds of human relationships and institutions.

Due to its rapid and profound effects on society, the emergence of the 'online' and its relationship with the 'offline' have become burgeoning areas of interest for social researchers, and in the past few decades methodological approaches to internet data have multiplied and developed considerably.[2] In this article, I focus specifically on internet-mediated ethnography, reflecting on its nature and its points of connection to and divergence from both alternative qualitative approaches to online research and 'traditional' ethnography.[3]

The article is divided in four main sections. In the first section, I outline some essential features of ethnography, focusing on the key interrelated notions of 'thick description', contextuality, and researcher engagement in the field through participant observation. In the second section, I address the issue of external boundaries between internet-mediated ethnography and alternative approaches to online research. The third and fourth sections of the article move to consider the internal relation between online and traditional 'real-life' ethnography. In the third section, I look into ethnographic notions of 'field' and 'community', asking if and how it is possible to define ethnographic field sites in increasingly complex and fragmented internet landscapes. The fourth and final section considers specifically the issue of conducting ethnographic observations in online contexts, looking at possible ways in which participant observation can be carried out on the internet but also querying the status of 'lurking' ethnographers. Acknowledging some significant areas of divergence between internet-mediated and traditional ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the former can still provide the sort of rich contexts arguably required by all forms of ethnographic research. To theoretically account for this interweaved pattern of overlapping

[1] B. Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926) 5.

[2] For a timeline of major developments in online social research methods, see T. Hooley et al., *What Is Online Research? Using the Internet for Social Science Research* (2012) 7–24.

[3] In this article, I use the catch-all expression 'internet-mediated ethnography' to refer to any ethnography-influenced methodology that relies significantly on online fieldwork.

divergences and similarities, I propose a framing of internet-mediated ethnography as a distinct, internally diverse set of methodologies bearing a 'family resemblance' to traditional offline ethnography.[4]

2 | A BRIEF OUTLINE OF ETHNOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Etymologically, the term 'ethnography' links back to the idea of writing about peoples, customs, or cultures. A popular definition of ethnography synthetically describes it as a 'written representation of a culture', or of certain aspects of a specific culture. John Van Maanen, who formulated this definition in *Tales of the Field*, also maintained that

> [e]thnographies join culture and fieldwork. They sit between two worlds or systems of meaning – the world of the ethnographer (and readers) and the world of cultural members (also, increasingly, readers, although not targeted ones). Ethnographies are documents that pose questions at the margins between two cultures.[5]

As texts, ethnographies may therefore be seen as acting as kinds of bridges allowing enriching encounters between the social and cultural lives of the researched and those of the researcher and her readers. However, the term 'ethnography' is also used to indicate an active approach to social research. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson have called ethnography 'the most basic form of social research', a methodology that 'bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life'.[6] Ethnography then signifies at once a material thing – a 'written representation'– and a process, guided at least to an extent by one or more researchers – the ethnographers – who undertake fieldwork to collect the data needed to craft the ethnographic text.

Ethnographic findings should not be used to achieve population representativeness, they are not exactly replicable, and they do not claim an objective or privileged role for the researcher and her findings.[7] However, the interpretive nature of ethnographic research, along with its focus on interaction in a situated environment, allows for an in-depth investigation of complex social realities through the lens of the subjects observed. The peculiarity of doing and writing ethnography is indeed frequently identified in the special attention that the ethnographer pays to the worldviews of the members of the groups and societies being studied.[8]

The depth or degree of understanding of a cultural landscape pursued by ethnographers is often linked to the notion of thick description. This was introduced to the social sciences by social anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who was the first to suggest that it is what defines ethnography as a specific 'kind of intellectual effort'.[9] In a well-known example (borrowed from philosopher

[4] The notion of 'family resemblance' has been drawn from L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1958, 2nd edn, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe) §66 ff.

[5] J. Van Maanen, *Tales from the Field* (1988) 4.

[6] M. Hammersley and P. Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (2007) 2.

[7] J. Blommaert and D. Jie, *Ethnographic Fieldwork: A Beginner's Guide* (2010) 16–17.

[8] D. A. Snow et al., 'Elaborating Analytic Ethnography: Linking Fieldwork and Theory' (2003) 4 *Ethnography* 181.

[9] C. Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture' in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973) 3, at 6.

Gilbert Ryle), Geertz explains thick description by referring to an observer able to distinguish a wink, as a social behaviour, from an involuntary twitch.[10] Reading human behaviour in the context of a 'socially established code' or – as Geertz also puts it – 'a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures' in which such behaviour can be 'produced, perceived and interpreted' is what characterizes ethnography, taking it beyond a mere 'thin description' of material events.[11]

Thick description, in this sense, relates social relationships to a broader social world, providing 'contexts' that are essential to ethnographic research. This is consistent with Hammersley's broad definition of ethnography as a 'form of social and educational research that emphasises the importance of *studying at first hand what people do and say in particular contexts*'.[12] This notion of ethnography as a mode of research expressing thick description moves away from views essentially equating it with (ethnographic) fieldwork. Rather, as suggested by Sherry Ortner, 'the ethnographic stance … is as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality, a constructive and interpretive mode, as it is a bodily process in space and time'.[13] According to her, 'thickness (with traces of both exhaustiveness and holism) remains at the heart of the ethnographic stance', meaning that there is a connection between thick description, textual 'density', and the integrated or 'holistic' character of the socio-cultural realities that are the object of ethnographic study.[14]

In order to gain a deep understanding of shared internal meanings within their contextual social realities and attain a thick description of such realities, ethnographers are expected to actively elicit, analyse, and interpret data from their informants. To bridge across different cultures while meeting their responsibilities as researchers, ethnographers have to forge a strong experiential connection with the different ways of life that they encounter during fieldwork, reflexively questioning their assumptions about what they might find in the field. There is then, I would argue, a significant link between the nature and depth of involvement of the ethnographic self in the field and Geertzian 'thickness' – which involves 'understanding through richness, texture, and detail'.[15] Traditionally, ethnographers have been deeply embedded in their research settings or fields through 'participant observation', which has been described by Atkinson and Hammersley as 'observation carried out when the researcher is playing an established participant role in the scene studied'.[16] As will be seen below, participant observation can materialize in different ways in ethnographic research. Nonetheless, it is normally regarded as a long-term and in-depth mode of research, requiring 'extended immersion in a culture and participation in its day-to-day activities'.[17]

It may be asked whether the intense degree of engagement required by ethnography may be at all attainable if the fieldwork is set to take place in the digital realm. One may even query, as Hammersley has done, if there are such things as 'online cultures that can be studied by internet

[10] Id.

[11] Id., pp. 6–7.

[12] M. Hammersley, 'Ethnography: Problems and Prospects' (2006) 1 *Ethnography and Education* 3, at 4, emphasis added.

[13] S. B. Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal' (1995) 37 *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 173, at 173.

[14] Id., p. 174.

[15] Id.

[16] P. Atkinson and M. Hammersley, 'Ethnography and Participant Observation', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (1994) 248, at 248.

[17] 'Participant Observation', in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, ed. C. Calhoun (2002).

ethnographers'.[18] These questions problematize the notion of internet ethnography and its relation with traditional ethnography, at the very least challenging the idea that these would simply constitute one single approach applied to different kinds of data. On the other hand, they may raise further methodological issues regarding how to differentiate internet ethnography from alternative qualitative approaches applicable to internet-based research. What does it mean to study the internet 'ethnographically'? What makes internet-mediated ethnography distinct as an approach to online research, and why choose it? In the following section, I seek to address these interrelated questions.

3 | CHOOSING ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH APPROACH TO ENGAGE WITH DIGITAL DATA

Considering the ever-expanding range of methodologies available to deal with internet research, choosing a particular approach may prove far from straightforward. The so-called 'big data revolution' of recent years has opened up the possibility of creating and managing massive amounts of digital data, far beyond the scale of human processing capabilities. Inevitably, big data's potential to reveal trends in people's behaviours and attitudes has attracted significant interest from the corporate sector. However, academia has also been drawn to the use of digital technologies and computer-assisted methods to process large datasets. David Berry has notably used the phrase 'computational turn' to refer to the increasing incorporation of digital technologies in the humanities and the parallel emergence of 'digital humanities' as a novel field of scholarship.[19] Big data processing techniques play an important role in digital humanities, with Frédéric Kaplan arguing that, 'given the growing importance of massive and networked cultural datasets, it is likely that Big Data digital humanities [will] become a significant part of the whole digital humanities field'.[20] Meanwhile, in the social sciences, approaches involving data-mining techniques and large-scale quantitative analyses have been regarded by some as the best suited to carrying out internet-based research, due to their perceived convenience, comprehensiveness, and objectivity.[21]

However, the use of such approaches has also attracted critical scrutiny from a number of scholars, with some cautioning against the blind acceptance of big data as an unproblematic resource.[22] For example, danah boyd and Kate Crawford have noted how 'in the era of the computational turn, it is increasingly important to recognize the value of "small data"', arguing that 'not all data are equivalent' and, crucially, that small-scale research designs may be more appropriate to answer certain research questions.[23] Among the problems identified with big data approaches, one that

[18] Hammersley, op. cit., n. 12, p. 8.

[19] D. Berry, 'The Computational Turn: Thinking about the Digital Humanities' (2011) 12 *Culture Machine*, at <https://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/49813/1/BERRY_2011-THE_COMPUTATIONAL_TURN-_THINKING_ABOUT_THE_DIGITAL_HUMANITIES.pdf>.

[20] F. Kaplan, 'A Map for Big Data Research in Digital Humanities' (2015) 2 *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* 1, at <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fdigh.2015.00001/full>.

[21] P. Varis, 'Digital Ethnography' in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication*, eds A. Georgakopoulou and T. Spilioti (2016) 64.

[22] d. boyd and K. Crawford, 'Six Provocations for Big Data' (2011) A Decade in Internet Time: Symposium on the Dynamics of the Internet and Society, Oxford Internet Institute, 21 September; A. Bruns, 'Faster than the Speed of Print: Reconciling "Big Data" Social Media Analysis and Academic Scholarship' (2013) 18 *First Monday* 1.

[23] boyd and Crawford, id., p. 8.

is particularly relevant for our purposes refers to the difficulties that such approaches encounter when trying to capture and preserve research contexts. There is a risk that cultural references and meanings shared by online groups may be lost or misunderstood when data is drawn and read out of the social environments in which it was originally created.[24] Ethnographic approaches can arguably enable researchers to avoid these risks. Writing specifically about researching stigmatized populations online, Monica Jane Barratt and Alexia Maddox suggest that 'interactive digital ethnography can act as a contextual counter-balance to the increasing use of unobtrusive analyses of digital traces'.[25] This is because ethnographers can learn insider cultural logics directly in the field through engagement and interaction with researched group members. More broadly, it may be argued that internet-mediated ethnography (like its offline counterpart) pursues different goals than quantitative approaches, aiming not at representativeness or objectivity, but at depth and detail in order to understand how digital practices are woven into everyday life.

There are, however, alternative qualitative research methodologies that may allow researchers to avoid 'loss of context' issues and focus on the complexities and nuances of lived experience. For example, qualitative-analytical approaches such as narrative analysis and discourse analysis have already been proposed for and applied to online-based research.[26] The rationale behind choosing ethnographic over different *qualitative* approaches to online research is not something expanded on in much detail in the methodological literature on internet-mediated ethnography. In my own research experience, I faced various challenges trying to trace definite boundaries between what constitutes an ethnographic online study and what is more appropriately described as online archival research.

Before getting into the detail of these challenges, I will briefly introduce my research project. This deals with the role of media – specifically the internet – in grounding and shaping opposition to routine childhood vaccinations, with a particular focus on UK- and US-based vaccine-critical blogs. By 'vaccine opposition', I refer to a trans-national collective phenomenon involving active and vocal critique of vaccination as a public health practice and a set of public policies. My research seeks to address the question of how internet-mediated vaccine opposition can best be understood, exploring some particularly engaged vaccine-critical groups emerging online and interrogating their multifaceted relationship with their surrounding legal systems.

At an early stage of my project, with my area of research still quite fluid and an initial interest in motives and personal reasons explaining vaccine opposition as expressed by individuals on the internet, I started to consider conducting an internet-mediated, multi-platform ethnography. I decided that this would be an appropriate choice for my project since it would allow for an in-depth, situated study of vaccine-critical activists across a range of social media platforms. My idea was to join a small number of online vaccine-critical communities and, after an initial period of 'lurking', get involved in the communities as a participant observer, not too dissimilarly (in my perspective) from how a traditional ethnographer would engage with her real-life participants. For ethical reasons, I decided to start by collecting and analysing publicly available texts from

[24] Id. See also Varis, op. cit., n. 21; T. Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012); M. J. Barratt and A. Maddox, 'Active Engagement with Stigmatised Communities through Digital Ethnography' (2016) 16 *Qualitative Research* 701.

[25] Barratt and Maddox, id., p. 703.

[26] On 'mediated narrative analysis', see R. Page, *Narratives Online: Shared Stories in Social Media* (2018). On online discourse analysis, see for example S. C. Herring, 'Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior' in *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, eds S. A. Barab et al. (2004) 338; K. Weir, 'Critical Discourse Analysis and Internet Research' (2005) 46 *Melbourne Studies in Education* 67.

a purposeful sample of vaccine-critical blogs selected to include a range of different topical areas and authorships. However, it soon became clear that there was a vast amount of rich data available for what was supposed to be only the initial stage of the project, which led me to a methodological crossroads.

One path that I could have followed would have involved a cursory, exploratory look at the data, then a selective 'pruning' of this, allowing me to draw new networked connections to other data and follow new online (or even offline) spaces, content, or potential informants. This way, I would have pursued the role of internet ethnographer as 'networked field-weaver', a position that requires 'cutting sprawling sociotechnical networks down to size into manageable multi-sited fieldsites'.[27] In my judgment, however, the blogs and their content were deserving of study in their own right through a structured and detailed analysis. The issue with this second path was that it would have required many months to complete, leaving little time to get involved as a participant in blogs or other online spaces.

Perhaps even more importantly, while reading the blogs, I was struck by the particular ways in which vaccine critics seemed to use the communication opportunities offered by these online platforms to capture, re-make, share, and diffuse their 'versions' of both scientific and legal knowledge in support of their advocacy activities. This shifted my attention from the motives underlying vaccine opposition to how online vaccine-critical activism worked, and my main research goal became to explore theoretically and thematically what activists do and say online, understanding their internet communications as a form of mediated resistance. As it became clear that my study would focus on the analysis of published textual and visual data, however, I faced a challenging methodological question: was I conducting an ethnography, or was my study more akin to a form of archival research?

To answer this question, I realized that I needed to take a position on another key methodological point – that is, whether there is something distinct about internet ethnography compared to other (epistemologically compatible) qualitative-analytical approaches applicable to online data. Throughout this article, I defend the position that internet ethnography is indeed a distinct methodology, albeit one with significant internal variation. This might seem like a relatively common-sense perspective, yet it is not one for which I could find a straightforward justification in the literature. As will be seen in the next part of the article, neither the existence of a closed online 'community' nor the active engagement of the ethnographer with research participants are universally accepted requirements of internet-mediated ethnography, with proponents of different methodological approaches taking different positions on these matters.[28]

What I suggest is that, despite its internal diversity, there are certain broad research aims that characterize internet-ethnographic research, and that are in turn linked to the adoption of particular combinations of methods and techniques by its practitioners. It is true that, like other qualitative approaches, internet ethnography often focuses on 'texts' – that is, textual data unsolicited by the researcher.[29] Internet-mediated ethnography also shares with other constructivist approaches an interest in texts as *constitutive* of social phenomena rather than representational of

[27] G. de Seta, 'Three Lies of Digital Ethnography' (2020) 2 *J. of Digital Social Research* 77, at 93. The concept of 'field' in internet-mediated ethnography is discussed further in the following section of the article.

[28] For a brief introductory outline of the differences between two of these approaches, netnography and virtual ethnography, see R. Kozinets, 'Is Netnography Just a Synonym for Online Ethnography?' *Brand New Worlds*, 28 April 2013, at <https://kozinets.net/archives/475>.

[29] D. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (2009).

external, objective 'facts', and is therefore not directly concerned with whether textual accounts are truthful or not.

Much like 'real-life' ethnography, however, internet-mediated ethnography is arguably less concerned with the intrinsic features of texts, including technical aspects of language usage and narrative structures, than it is with the 'social contexts in which narratives are articulated'.[30] I would argue, therefore, that whether the main focus of the research lies in online narratives themselves or in something beyond these narratives – their 'social contexts' – is a key aspect distinguishing internet ethnography from other qualitative-analytical approaches. This concern with broader social contexts arguably goes hand in hand with the ethnographic goal of thick description discussed in the previous section and provides justification for the use of interactive and immersive research techniques in internet-mediated ethnography.[31]

In my case, as I realized that my interest lay primarily in particular evocations of law and science found on blogs, and that I wanted to focus on offering a structured, theoretically informed interpretation of the data, I decided that a thematic analysis approach would be best suited for my project. Admittedly, this decision was at least partly based on my assessment that the blogs, on their own, could not constitute a 'whole cultural context' as needed for 'being there' in an ethnographic sense. As Laura Nader reminds us, however, '[t]he whole of a culture cannot be assumed, and there has never been a total consensus on how whole is whole enough, especially when dealing with questions of boundaries'.[32] Therefore, my boundary-setting work was necessarily particular (to my research project) and subjective, as another researcher could have come to different conclusions and identified a similar project as ethnographic, perhaps pursuing an online-only, 'lurking-observational' netnographic approach.[33]

The point is that there is no such thing as a clear-cut, objective boundary that can be drawn between certain internet-ethnographic approaches (concerned primarily with online texts) and other kinds of online-based archival research. This is not to say that it is always legitimate to define a qualitative internet-based study as 'ethnographic'. However, there are some significant ways in which internet-ethnographic research diverges from its 'real-life' counterpart, blurring the lines around the meaning of 'ethnography' and, consequently, unsettling certain methodological distinctions previously taken for granted. This leads me to the question of the relationship between 'real-life' and internet-mediated ethnography, which is considered in the following sections.

4 | DEFINING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH 'FIELDS' IN DIGITAL SETTINGS

Doing ethnographic work on the internet is not a novel enterprise. As Anna Haverinen has commented,

> [s]ince the late 1980s, anthropologists have been increasingly interested in the internet and what it means to create "thick descriptions" in such a space, in other words,

[30] Id., p. 169.

[31] See for example L. Costello et al., 'Netnography: Range of Practices, Misperceptions, and Missed Opportunities' (2017) 16 *International J. of Qualitative Methods* 1.

[32] L. Nader, 'Ethnography as Theory' (2011) 1 *HAU: J. of Ethnographic Theory* 211, at 211–212.

[33] See Kozinets, op. cit., n. 28. 'Lurking' and netnography will be further discussed in the following sections.

> they are interested in conducting contextually rich analyses of networked lives and relationships.[34]

However, it has taken quite some time for digital data to be properly incorporated in research methods textbooks, and internet ethnography to this day arguably remains a fairly niche methodology in the social sciences. As Dhiraj Murthy has noted, a certain amount of scepticism towards innovations in methods is not new to social scientists, especially when they involve the deployment of novel technologies.[35]

It is therefore not surprising that, despite an initial enthusiasm in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the notion of internet ethnography has been approached critically by some commentators. Hammersley, for example, has raised important questions about the rationale for conducting ethnographic research online, including whether such a thing as an online culture that can be studied ethnographically exists and – conversely – whether it is not just possible to explain the online in terms of what is happening offline.[36] Such questions, I would suggest, link back to the idea of the (ethnographic) 'field' and how researchers can determine its contours. The concept of 'field' in the social sciences is mutable and has evolved with time. Anthropologists have historically found their fields among (relatively) isolated, faraway communities: the Kwakiutl people for Franz Boas, the Trobrianders for Malinowski, the Azande and the Nuer for E. E. Evans-Pritchard, the Samoans for Margaret Mead, and so on.[37] On the other hand, starting with the work of the Chicago School in the late 1920s, sociologists used ethnography to make sense of realities much closer to home, writing about social life in settings such as street corners in urban neighbourhoods, residential districts, and dance halls.[38]

Although conducted in very different localities and underscored by different theoretical perspectives, these early ethnographies all involved the study of easily locatable, geographically circumscribed groups of people sharing common cultural backgrounds. In both sociology and anthropology, this was the era of so-called 'community studies'.[39] Even though in contemporary ethnography the existence of an 'iron link' between community and place is no longer taken for granted, ethnographic research still arguably needs a context in which to take place.[40] As Lodewijk Brunt puts it, '[t]he community is as good a context as any, even if imagined'.[41] This raises the question of whether there are, or if it is possible to identify, such things as online-based communities. Indeed, although references to 'virtual communities', 'cyberspace', and 'cyberculture' have become commonplace, it has not always been accepted that virtual communities can provide the context needed for an ethnographic study.

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[34] A. Haverinen, 'Internet Ethnography: The Past, the Present and the Future' (2015) 42 *Ethnologia Fennica* 79, at 79.

[35] D. Murthy, 'Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research' (2008) 42 *Sociology* 837.

[36] Hammersley, op. cit., n. 12.

[37] For an engaging historical account of this anthropological tradition, see T. H. Eriksen and F. S. Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology* (2013).

[38] See W. F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (1943); H. Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (1929); P. Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life* (1932). For further historical background on the Chicago School of ethnography, see M. J. Deegan, 'The Chicago School of Ethnography' in *Handbook of Ethnography*, eds P. Atkinson et al. (2001) 11.

[39] L. Brunt, 'Into the Community' in Atkinson et al. (eds), id., p. 80.

[40] Id., p. 89.

[41] Id., p. 90.

An early, popular definition of 'virtual communities' was offered by Howard Rheingold, who defined them as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'.[42] However, this definition has not gone unchallenged. It has been argued that communities do require personal contact and face-to-face interaction.[43] Robyn Bateman Driskell and Larry Lyon have also suggested that if community is understood as *Gemeinschaft*, involving 'close, emotional, holistic ties', then 'virtual community is not true community'.[44]

Other commentators have been more sympathetic towards Rheingold's notion of virtual community. Andrew Feenberg and Maria Bakardjieva, for example, have drawn on Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' to argue that 'some sort of virtuality is a normal aspect of community life, regardless of the nature of the medium on which it relies'.[45] According this view, communities are not static, immutable entities; rather, they evolve through history and manifest in different forms, with communication and media technologies playing an especially important role in how they are shaped and 'imagined'. Quentin Jones has also written about the possibility of researchers conducting 'cyber-archaeologies' of 'virtual settlements', which, similarly to Rheingold's virtual communities, he defined as interactive 'cyber-places' with a 'variety of communicators', a 'minimum level of sustained membership', and 'a virtual common-public-space' in which a significant portion of the group members' interactions occur.[46]

It is relatively easy to identify virtual communities and settlements presenting the features described by Rheingold or Jones in circumscribed areas of the web, such as virtual worlds, blogs, or forums. 'Closed' online spaces have indeed provided the field for many internet-based studies, from earlier research on mailing lists and internet relay chats (IRCs) in the 1990s to more recent ethnographies of virtual worlds.[47] But what about online groups that do not constitute virtual communities? Most of the blogs that I observed in my study, for example, albeit self-contained, did not appear to meet the criterion of sustained membership posited for these kinds of communities. And what about more ephemeral interactions taking place on social networking platforms such as Twitter, comment sections, or messaging apps? In these scenarios, the fieldwork site becomes a virtual assemblage of text, images, videos, and other forms of communication that are both connected to each other and facilitate connections between those who use them. With the rise of social media in the internet landscape and the advent of 'Web 2.0', these sorts of dispersed interactions now arguably constitute a significant portion of online life.[48] So, is it still possible to conduct ethnographic research when data emerges out of more ephemeral interactions and/or it is not found in a unitary online 'location'?

Some researchers argue that rather than trying to find the equivalent of bounded ethnographic communities online, it should simply be acknowledged that the nature of online interactions complicates traditional ethnographic notions of 'field'.[49] This does not mean that conducting

[42] H. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Finding Connection in a Computerized World* (1993) 5.

[43] F. Weinreich, 'Establishing a Point of View towards Virtual Communities' (1997) 4 *Computer-Mediated Communication*, at <https://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/feb/wein.html>.

[44] R. B. Driskell and L. Lyon, 'Are Virtual Communities True Communities? Examining the Environments and Elements of Community' (2002) 1 *City & Community* 373, at 373.

[45] A. Feenberg and M. Bakardjieva, 'Virtual Community: No "Killer Implication"' (2004) 6 *New Media & Society* 37, at 37.

[46] Weinreich, op. cit., n. 43.

[47] See for example T. Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2015).

[48] A. Caliandro, 'Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments' (2018) 47 *J. of Contemporary Ethnography* 551.

[49] C. Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) 43.

ethnographic research across more dispersed and unstable fields is an impossibility. Referring specifically to ethnographic studies of activism on social media, John Postill and Sarah Pink talk about a 'messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and offline worlds and is connected and constituted through the ethnographer's narrative'.[50] They suggest using Pink's concept of 'ethnographic place' to emphasize the discontinuities between online and offline spaces, arguing that such spaces are relational and emergent, rather than crystallized as bounded territories or communities.[51]

These different ways of regarding internet-ethnographic fields as enclosed virtual communities or more fluid networks have given rise to different approaches to internet-mediated ethnography. Some of these tend to favour a style that combines both online and offline fieldwork;[52] others have emphasized the importance of considering online life as a context to be researched in its own terms.[53]

While both kinds of approaches are considered valid in contemporary mediated research and accepted as 'ethnographic', it is undeniable that the idea of 'networked fieldsites' assembled by the ethnographer is quite distant from traditional conceptions of 'field' as previously adopted in anthropological or sociological disciplinary contexts. Arguably, this approach is 'disruptive', in the sense that it undermines the idea of an achievable 'ethnographic holism' for the (internet) ethnographer.[54] At the same time, it has to be remembered that challenges to ideals of holism are not something new or specific to internet ethnography. The influence of cultural studies on the social sciences had already stimulated the development of new models of ethnographic enquiry. A relevant example here would be George Marcus' idea of 'multi-sited ethnography'.[55] Marcus contended that ethnographers should move beyond the 'single sites … of conventional ethnographic research design' and identify their objects of study through novel techniques.[56]

Nevertheless, as Gabriele de Seta notes, the concept of fields as networks is not completely unproblematic, as it may obfuscate how fields are 'unavoidably built on disconnection as much as connection'.[57] While offline fieldwork also presents ethnographers with difficult decisions regarding which threads and connections to follow, these 'networks within networks'[58] become much thicker, more complex, and more diverse when they are extended to include online life. Put differently, in internet-mediated ethnography, field sites can include an extremely diverse ensemble of different geographical locations, people, and online communications, in a way that scarcely resembles traditional ethnographic fieldwork. In this sense, I argue, internet-mediated

[50] J. Postill and S. Pink, 'Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web' (2012) 145 *Media International Australia* 123, at 126.

[51] S. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009).

[52] For examples of approaches advocating the combination of online and offline research, see C. Hine, 'Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances' in *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*, eds N. G. Fielding et al. (2017) 401.

[53] A prominent example of online-based methodology is netnography: see for example R. V. Kozinets, 'Netnography' in *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*, eds P. H. Ang and R. Mansell (2015) 1.

[54] Hine, op. cit., n. 49, p. 48.

[55] G. E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography' (1995) 24 *Annual Rev. of Anthropology* 95.

[56] Id., p. 96.

[57] De Seta, op. cit., n. 27, p. 84.

[58] M. Strathern, 'Cutting the Network' (1996) 2 *The J. of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 517, at 523.

ethnography is a reworking of – rather than a direct, unmediated application of – traditional ethnography for digital spaces.

An added layer of complexity for internet-mediated studies is that in at least some cases, the research question might actually involve empirically investigating and theorizing the nature of online fields. These cases arguably require paying heightened attention to online contexts, as one cannot assume that, for example, a certain blog, a Wikipedia thread, or a Facebook group will constitute a 'community'. Indeed, as Alessandro Caliandro has argued, 'within a fluid and dynamic context such as that of social media, the definition of an online social formation cannot be considered an a priori task but rather an a posteriori one'.[59] In my own research experience, I found that what I was expecting to see online – a 'virtual community' – was rather different from the more fragmented social realities that I ended up observing in practice. Realizing that I could not take for granted the kinds of 'online social formations' that I was dealing with required me to engage with the field theoretically, effectively interrogating this as an essential part of my research question.

This does not mean that 'community' has suddenly ceased being a useful category in the study of online interactions. However, as Caliandro has argued, it may be more fruitful for researchers to adopt a grounded, 'a posteriori' approach towards online fields. An internet-ethnographic study may still involve a bounded community – but it does not have to. My argument here is that the potential problematization of the nature of one's fieldwork makes internet-mediated ethnography distinct from traditional ethnography while maintaining a 'family resemblance' with the latter. In other words, traditional ethnography and internet-mediated ethnography cannot be reduced to an ideal shared essence, such as a particular notion of 'field' or 'fieldwork experience', but rather present 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing'.[60] A family relation in this sense may also be glimpsed with respect to the online inflection of another ethnographic staple, participant observation, as discussed in the following section.

5 | PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION, PSEUDO-PRESENCE, AND THE LURKING ETHNOGRAPHER

The methods and techniques used in ethnographic research may vary, sometimes considerably, based on the particular features of a project – including the nature of the chosen field site. Online field sites, specifically, require the re-imagining and adaptation of traditional methods to the needs of internet-mediated research. As Alecea Standlee notes, '[d]igital ethnography brings together the elements of interview, observation, interaction, and participant observation that are common methodologies to study traditional offline communication and adapts them to digital mediums of communication'.[61] Ethnographic interviews online can, for instance, take the form of epistolary interviews via email,[62] or be conducted via video conferencing[63] or chat services.[64] Online

[59] Caliandro, op. cit., n. 48, p. 560.

[60] Wittgenstein, op. cit., n. 4, §66.

[61] A. Standlee, 'Digital Ethnography and Youth Culture: Methodological Techniques and Ethical Dilemmas' in *Researching Children and Youth: Methodological Issues, Strategies, and Innovations*, eds I. E. Castro et al. (2017) 325, at 329.

[62] M. Debenham, 'Computer Mediated Communication and Disability Support: Addressing Barriers to Study for Undergraduate Distance Learners with Long-Term Health Problems' (2001) PhD thesis, Open University.

[63] N. Brown, 'Video-Conference Interviews: Ethical and Methodological Concerns in the Context of Health Research' in *SAGE Research Methods Cases Part 2* (2018), at <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10038359/>.

[64] A. Maddox et al., 'Constructive Activism in the Dark Web: Cryptomarkets and Illicit Drugs in the Digital "Demimonde"' (2016) 19 *Information, Communication & Society* 111.

ethnographers may also use novel techniques involving video and/or audio data, such as video diaries recorded by research participants and uploaded to research vlogs, which can offer invaluable insights into the lived experiences of study participants.[65]

But what about the central research technique of ethnography, participant observation? How can an ethnographer 'participate' in an online setting? Standlee suggests that online participant observation can indeed take place 'in social networking sites, blogs, listservs and interest sites, other online communities, MMO [massively multiplayer online] gamespaces, and many others'.[66] These are vastly different online contexts, each with its own particular technical features and user experiences; therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the exact nature of participant observation online will vary depending on the specifics of the particular internet setting selected by the researcher. Matthew Williams has suggested that despite the lack of physical presence, internet users interacting with each other may originate a sort of 'pseudo-presence' through the use of individualized writing and expressive styles in textual interaction, along with the creation of personal avatars in graphic virtual worlds.[67] Internet ethnographers can exploit this 'pseudo-presence', as enabled by the technological affordances of their chosen field sites, to make themselves seen and to participate online. Participation may involve, for instance, long-term interactions with participants through internet messaging services, engaging in discussions in chatrooms, or creating personal profiles and regularly posting comments on a particular forum, a Facebook group, or a subreddit.

It may be argued that these forms of internet-mediated participant observation fit in with established conceptions of ethnographic fieldwork, such as the one encapsulated in Charlotte Aull Davies' view of ethnography as a 'research process based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques but including *engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time*'.[68] However, the nature of the internet also creates new opportunities for researchers to observe unobtrusively by simply going online and watching what people are doing and saying without being seen in return. In other words, on the internet ethnographers can become 'lurkers'. Lurking is distinguished from covert participation (which would still involve interaction with participants, albeit without disclosing one's identity as a researcher), but, depending on the context, it may nevertheless count as covert research. This kind of research always raises ethical questions and requires special consideration in terms of its potential implications for the research participants.[69] But does lurking constitute a valid form of ethnographic participant observation?

The answer to this question depends in part on the researcher's theoretical orientation. For a positivist researcher aiming to produce an account of social life that is as much as possible a neutral and objective mirror of reality, the ability to observe without being seen or interfering in the participants' actions may indeed be viewed as advantageous. However, many ethnographers espouse non-positivist theoretical viewpoints in which active involvement in the participants'

[65] Murthy, op. cit., n. 35, p. 837.

[66] Standlee, op. cit., n. 61, p. 329.

[67] M. Williams, 'Avatar Watching: Participant Observation in Graphical Online Environments' (2007) 7 *Qualitative Research* 5.

[68] C. A. Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (1999) 4–5, emphasis added.

[69] While a detailed discussion of online research ethics is beyond the scope of this article, a good point of entry to these issues may be found in the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers: see A. Markham and E. Buchanan, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Version 2.0. Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee* (2012), at <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>.

social realities is seen as a fundamental pillar of ethnographic research. For example, Erving Goffman has described participant observation as a process that involves

> subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever.[70]

According to Goffman, the ethnographer should be immersed in the social worlds of those whom she is observing; only by subjecting herself to the same circumstances as her participants and, as he puts it, 'taking the same crap they've been taking' will she be able to develop the empathy needed to produce reliable ethnographic knowledge.[71] Fully 'immersive' approaches to ethnography have been embraced by some researchers, such as Loïc Waquant, who has talked about 'observant participation' and 'enactive ethnography' in relation to his study on boxing, for which he actually spent time training as a boxer.[72] Of course, the actual extent and nature of a researcher's involvement in the field varies in practice. However, it may be argued that some level of engagement with the research participants is generally expected in ethnographic research. For Päivi Eriksson and Anne Kovalainen, participation is equally important in online settings: '[v]irtual ethnography rests on the argument that the ethnographer should experience the social life of the research subjects regardless of how those experiences are mediated'.[73]

However, there are cases in which lurking has been chosen and justified by researchers as the best option for their internet-based projects. For example, boyd has defended her choice of remaining an unobtrusive observer online by reference to the nature of her study. This involved teenage participants whom, she noted, it would have been inappropriate to contact directly on social media without their parents' prior knowledge and permission.[74] Online-only netnographic studies embracing 'purely observational' approaches have also been conducted.[75] It could be argued that researchers who choose to remain hidden do in a way 'experience the social life' of (at least some of) the research participants. As many people lurk on websites and forums, a researcher could be viewed as sharing these users' online experience. Moreover, ethnographers remaining as unobtrusive as possible is a stance that has a long history in anthropological fieldwork, sometimes represented with the well-known image of the researcher as 'fly on the wall'.

De Seta has suggested that we are moving beyond a simple dichotomy between participating and lurking, and that the very idea of the lurker 'is increasingly diffracted into a wide variety of modes of participation that users likely move through across time and space'.[76] He adds:

[70] E. Goffman, 'On Fieldwork' (1989) 18 *J. of Contemporary Ethnography* 123, at 125.

[71] Id., p. 126.

[72] L. Wacquant, 'For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood' (2015) 38 *Qualitative Sociology* 1.

[73] P. Eriksson and A. Kovalainen, *Introducing Qualitative Methods: Qualitative Methods in Business Research* (2015) 139.

[74] d. boyd, *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics* (2008).

[75] See for example S. Alang and M. Fotomar, 'Postpartum Depression in an Online Community of Lesbian Mothers: Implications for Clinical Practice' (2015) 19 *J. of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 21; S. Okun and G. Nimrod, 'Online Ultra-Orthodox Religious Communities as a Third Space: A Netnographic Study' (2017) 11 *International J. of Communication* 2825. For more examples, see Costello et al., op. cit., n. 31.

[76] De Seta, op. cit., n. 27, p. 86.

> Lurking becomes just a possibility alongside practices such as ignoring, reading, liking, commenting, sharing, editing, and linking, which are all modes of participation that can be adopted situationally across different platforms and identities, and that ethnographers are asked to understand and incorporate in their own work.[77]

As is the case when translating the ethnographic notion of 'field' into online fieldwork, then, participant observation too may blossom into a spectrum of possibilities when adapted to a mediated context. Some of these possibilities will seem quite foreign to ethnographers used to participant observation in offline contexts, while others may be more intuitively understood as traditional participant observation. Regardless of individual researchers' choices, the fact that internet ethnographers have to contend with these different modes of participation arguably creates a further methodological divergence with offline ethnography.

Despite these points of divergence, however, I would suggest that one could still identify an overall boundary – albeit a fluid and loose one – linking these different forms of ethnography as a 'family' whose members' similarities 'crop up and disappear' and 'overlap and criss-cross'.[78] If, following Ortner, ethnography is understood as a methodology ultimately about thick description, presenting 'traces of both exhaustiveness and holism', then the cultural context shaping an ethnographic project needs to be rich or 'whole' enough to allow the researcher to produce a thickly descriptive account of her participants' social world.

While, as we have seen, the question of how 'whole' ethnographic contexts should be remains largely open,[79] it may be suggested that to achieve a sufficiently high level of detail and exhaustiveness a lurking observational approach will in many instances need to be complemented with interviews (either on- or offline), as in boyd's 2008 research project,[80] and/or contextualized through offline fieldwork, as in the blended and connective ethnographic approaches described by Christine Hine.[81] Otherwise, a lurking approach might arguably work in the case of tight-knit, bounded virtual communities such as those that tend to be the subject of netnographic studies, to the extent that these are seen as contexts in their own rights. These kinds of studies, however, seem to exist at the margins of what can be legitimately considered ethnographic, and their inclusion in the ethnography family has not gone unchallenged.[82] It should also be pointed out that certain online platforms have been revealed to present particular problems of reliability. For example, Twitter is known to have been used for organized disinformation campaigns.[83] Using multiple methods may be helpful in such contexts to put to test the genuineness of online data. While the boundaries of ethnography may have become more blurred since the advent of mediated approaches, then, they have not completely dissolved.

[77] Id.

[78] Wittgenstein, op. cit., n. 4, §§66–67.

[79] Ortner, op. cit., n. 13.

[80] boyd, op. cit., n. 74.

[81] Hine, op. cit., n. 52.

[82] See Costello et al., op. cit., n. 31.

[83] D. L. Linvill and P. L. Warren, 'Troll Factories: Manufacturing Specialized Disinformation on Twitter' (2020) 37 *Political Communication* 447.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I have looked into the nature of internet-mediated ethnography and its divergence from both alternative qualitative research approaches and 'real-life' ethnography. Focusing particularly on how the notions of 'field' and 'participant observation' have materialized in online research settings, I have examined how traditional ethnographic techniques have evolved to encompass a new spectrum of possibilities, with different inflections and combinations giving rise to distinct methodological paths aimed at providing thickly descriptive accounts of internet-mediated phenomena. As large swathes of social life are increasingly moving onto and becoming entangled with mediated contexts, I would encourage socio-legal scholars to engage with internet-mediated ethnography when dealing with online phenomena, despite its blurry boundaries and methodological complexities. This would allow for a refinement of our methods to critically approach the fluid landscape of internet-mediated life and the variety of roles played by law in information societies.

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