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Methods, Methodology and New Media: A Review Essay
Alison Powell, Oxford Internet Institute

Grant Kien,

Global Technography: Ethnography in the Age of Mobility

Intersections in Communications and Culture: Global Approaches and Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Peter Lang, 2009. 208 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4331-0293-6 \$31.95 (pbk)

Nalita James and Hugh Busher

Online Interviewing

Sage, 2009. 176 pp. ISBN: 9781412945325 £22.99 (pbk)

New media pose challenges and offer opportunities for methodological practice. Two new books investigate these opportunities as well as their philosophical implications. In *Global Technography: Ethnography in the Age of Mobility* Grant Kien, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University, East Bay and a former student of Norman Denzin, proposes a new methodology to investigate wireless mobility. This methodology extends the ethnographic field to encompass the experience of mobility, using actor-network theory and employing Heideggerian phenomenology to express how technology plays a role in expanding this field. In *Online Interviewing* Nalita James and Hugh Busher of the University of Leicester propose a practical guide to conducting online qualitative research that also reflects on the philosophical implications of shifting research practices into increasingly mediated contexts. Drawing on a long collaboration that included studies of young researchers' entry into academia, the book introduces core practices for social researchers working online, accompanied by illustrations and reflections from the authors' own experiences.

Taken together, the books highlight the continuing distinction between *methodology* and *method*, where the former stresses the theoretical and philosophical principles underlying a method, and the latter the application of those principles. While each work proposes means of understanding mediated social life, Kien's work is more clearly methodology, concentrated on developing a system of thought useful for understanding mediated mobility whereas James and Busher's concentrates on method, outlining the ethical and philosophical aspects of various online interview techniques while also providing a guide to their application. Both works contribute to philosophical reflections on the nature of social relations as they are mediated by contemporary technologies. They differ in their epistemological claims, with Kien taking a more radical position about the transformation of knowledge occurring in and through technologically mediated relationship.

Technography: A Radical New Methodology

Global Technography promises to outline and test a new methodology for understanding human experience in a highly mediated context. To do this, it intersperses the development of his philosophical argument with auto-ethnographic reflection, alternating several paragraphs of theoretical framing with vignettes of the same length. These passages recount episodes of Kien's life in which mobile or networked technology plays a role. They are set in Seoul, Rome, Toronto, Champaign-Urbana, Chiapas and Beijing, and from them a picture emerges of a proud Canadian expat in continual reflection about technology in his everyday life. The vignettes are carefully written such that laptops and cell phones are main characters, along with graduate student Kien and his friends and colleagues.

They are clearly intended not only to accompany the theoretical development of technography as a global-scaled ethnographic methodology but to act as examples of how this methodology might be conceived and developed. Eight chapters use this alternating structure to describe the methodology and then to explore power as exercised in “global” situations as well as the relationships between culture, technology and ontology. The middle section of the book is concerned with ontology and “belonging,” in the context of global culture and post-global citizenship – in this section, even the auto-ethnographic vignettes are imbued with a sense of philosophical urgency as Kien, ill in bed, struggles to come to terms with Heidegger while his computer is in the shop. The final chapters explore “home” and “love” - again through the relationship between Kien and the technology in his life. An appendix rehearses the contribution of the methodology to concepts of Heideggerian freedom. Finally, a glossary of actor-network theory terms – not all of which are actually used in the book - rounds out the slim volume.

The aims of the book are grand and the reliance on auto-ethnography is a brave move. Kien explains at several points how his own experience as “vagabond” or “tourist” supported by mobile technology has motivated this form of exploration: “Although I have “taken up residence” (Carey, 1989) in many different locations, it is only in the stabilization of certain daily rituals with the help of mobile devices that I have begun to feel that my sense of identity is better able to withstand such radical uprooting” (p. 119). At times the auto-ethnographic approach is compelling: the narrative of Kien's fevered reflection on and final understanding of Heidegger's paradoxical notion of freedom through knowledge of enframing is compelling, and his discussion of this epiphany (which amounts to: live every moment as if it mattered) with his yoga teacher over a bowl of noodles in a Toronto cafe is charming. At other times, it seems Kien's grand – even global – intentions aren't matched by his execution. The snippets of conceptual development (with the exception of the discussion of enframing and enlightenment) are often too short to be coherent, with different conceptual perspectives explored in each one. The result through much of the book, is similar to reading a literature review in alternation with a travelogue.

Validity of “Technography”

A reading of auto-ethnography as travelogue is a conventional critique of the approach, as is the related critique that Kien's mobile, connected life of graduate study in the United States, English instruction in Korea and volunteer work with the Zapatistas in Mexico is too privileged and unusual to provide enough insight into “technography” as a means of understanding culture, mobility and technology. To a certain extent these critiques are valid: despite reflexivity about his own Canadian-ness, Kien travels with both the privilege and the practices that his comfortable mobility provides. His national identity, solidified by watching Canadian television and reading Canadian newspapers online is a protective cocoon from which he observes “other technological practices.” It is tempting to respond to Kien's vignettes with my own: we were graduate school colleagues and my own professional career has involved a similar level of mobility, connectivity and mediation in similarly exotic and privileged global spaces. I too feel some security when my mobile phone has a signal, or in the morning's ritual of e-mail and online news. And I too feel that travel offers the opportunity for a transcendental look at the mundane beauties of everyday life. In the best travel writing philosophy can be close to the surface as the reflexive traveller finds out more about himself the further away he tries to get. Yet the combination of these elements through self-reflexivity is not convincing as a methodology. Too much depends on the assumption that such mobility and connectivity creates a fundamental discontinuity in culture and experience. Rhetorically, and methodologically, does it matter that I typed these words while on the inter-city bus between Oxford and London?

Kien's personal and methodological journey is provocative, but there is little in it of others' voices. The Heideggerian revelations are individual; and the search for wireless connectivity (which illustrates the role of technology in configuring mobility) a picture of the “networked individual” (Wellman, 2001).

Certainly, many voices appear in the conceptual sections, but aside from Heidegger, Kien is hardly in conversation with them. Furthermore, there is little sense of what kinds of collective social mobilizations a global mobility might promise, despite several vignettes from a stint of volunteer work in Chiapas. This individual focus overlooks the extent to which mobile individuals are also part of publics as Sheller (2004) points out. These may be more contingent and fluid than the Canadian nationalism that Kien describes as his anchor. For example, Kien visits Montreal and experiences a sense of disconnection and loneliness, illustrated by his inability to locate a wireless hotspot that would permit him to enact his customary media habits, and by his difficulty in speaking French. Considering that a volunteer, collaborative project created Wi-Fi access points across Montreal (see Powell, 2008) Kien's isolation is unfortunate – but perhaps connected to the fact that the community Wi-Fi project initially developed in French-speaking parts of the city. In focusing on the mediating functions of both media technologies and individual identity, the complexity of collective engagement promised by projects like community wireless is obscured. These projects can be much less about getting online and much more about expressing a shared identity and improving a local place. The unmoored, individual global “technographer” may be blinded to such complexity. Merely being mobile and networked does not imply that one's connections are unmoored from places and the multiple, complex identities they can solicit. Even in an age of mobile connectivity, we can and do belong in places, and use our technologies to express that belonging.

Online Interviewing: Social continuity

James and Busher also acknowledge how networked technologies shift experiences of time and space, and the way that they can reorder individual and collective experience. In comparison to Kien they are more interested in assessing how online methods are in continuity with other social research methods – and by extension, how social relations are also in continuity. In *Online Interviewing* nine chapters explore how the affordances of online interactions create specific challenges for social researchers. Throughout, boxes summarize the features of online communication and online research design that are most important for researchers to understand, and vignettes present research project excerpts and descriptions. The chapters close with “practical tips for researchers.” Although the authors note in the introduction that the work is not intended as a “how-to” book, its structure and content liken it to a manual. The first chapter discusses how knowledge is constructed within qualitative research, and in particular how it is constructed “in this disembodied, anonymous and textual environment, and how that environment affects research relationships when the visual and verbal clues present in face-to-face conversations are absent” (p. 17). A detailed chart compares factors impacting the construction of knowledge through online versus face to face interviews. Various pragmatic considerations including cost, access, nature and speed of response, as well as quality of data are examined. The second and third chapters focus on the philosophical aspects of practical research choices like engaging with research participants online and developing research strategies. Particular emphasis is placed on engaging with 'virtual communities' and navigating the ethical consequences of choices including participation in these communities.

Like Kien, James and Busher analyze the influence of socio-technical transformations for gathering and generating information about people's experiences within their social worlds. They describe how the online, networked social space facilitates the creation of communities of practice and allows researchers to explore “co-temporal and co-spatial relationships as well as relationships between people in different times and places” (p. 105). In particular, Chapter 4 discusses the impact of shifts in space and time on conducting ethnographies and interviews – especially by e-mail. The authors discuss the impact of the absence of the social signals that are an expected part of interviewing face to face, even noting that these absences may mean that researchers can't be sure if an e-mailed interview response is

written by the interviewee: “the absence of visible clues makes it difficult to know who is talking in an online conversation” (p. 53). In this section, James and Busher echo Zhao in arguing that online communication has allowed for a construction of a “then and now” that parallels the “here and now.”

The second half of the book shifts the focus from research design to issues of ethics, power, and representation. Chapter 5 investigates the affordances of online public and private spaces for researchers as well as research participants. The affordances of these spaces – web forums, chat rooms, or virtual learning environments - create unique ethical dilemmas for researchers, but also protect research participants by allowing them more agency in reflecting on and constructing their responses. Chapters Six and Seven discuss credibility, authenticity, power and influence while Chapter Eight concentrates on the nature of online communities.

Ethics, Power and Representation

The strength of the book lies in its combination of practical advice about conducting research and its philosophical discussion of the constraints and possibilities of conducting research online. The bibliography ranges across classic social research references and the state of the art in internet social research. James and Busher are sensitive to the cultures of research as well as to the cultures of participants in online interviews or ethnographies. However, there is a distinct textual bias in this work: the authors pay great attention to the possibilities for interaction in MUDs, chat rooms, and virtual learning environments, but primarily in terms of the textual. They describe online language as “a hybrid of both spoken and written language” (p. 107) and note that it is “close to talk” while obviously still being text. The authors' concern about the contours of power relations online is also expressed in terms of language and to a lesser extent, text: “people's ability to use language skilfully is an essential element in their power to engage in online discussions . . . moreover, online communication in research is predominantly carried out in English at present . . . such circumstances may lead to participants withdrawing from research projects or reverting to text discussions in their native language” (89). This focus on text could result from the longer history of text-based versus multi-media interactions online, or from the authors' interest in investigating the social relations of groups of people including the educators and doctoral students that the authors worked with in their own research projects.

The multi-media nature of much contemporary online life may mean that this textual bias becomes less important. As James and Busher acknowledge in the conclusion to their volume, cheaper and more readily available web cameras along with VOIP services such as Skype may make online interviewing more similar to telephone or even face-to-face interviewing, although bandwidth constraints may still mean that these interviews have an asynchronous quality. More profoundly, anonymous video experiments like ChatRoulette sever the link between temporal, visual presence and de-anonymization. As mediated social interactions are increasingly experienced synchronously (within the constraints of time zones and waking hours) the features that *Online Interviewing* analyze as part of online social experience may shift. So too may the expectation that online interviewing be textual: As Crabtree and Rodden (2008) point out, online or mediated research can now include naturalistic observation, voice interviews, chat log data or even location-based data gathered from mobile devices.

The textual bias may also reflect the fact that many qualitative researchers analyze their research results as texts, transcribing interviews and archiving field notes. Given the many different aspects and detailed contours of mediated, networked life, the linear text may not best represent contemporary social experience. The main weakness of this book is that it does not consider how networked mediation might provide other opportunities for expression, interaction and social transformation besides exchanges of text.

Continuity and Discontinuity

In their different approaches to conducting research and in the importance they accord to the relationship between technology and social relationships, these works align on two sides of a longstanding debate about whether contemporary life, with its increasing mediation through ubiquitous networks of communication, is fundamentally in continuity or discontinuity with the social life of the past. As Boczkowski and Lievrouw (2008) discuss, theorizations of new media tend to align on a spectrum from continuity to discontinuity. Arguments for continuity tend to focus on the ways that networked communication facilitates or reinforces aspects of social life, whereas discontinuity perspectives enumerate the ways in which the particular type, level and intensity of mediation distinguish contemporary experience from that which has come before. The continuity perspective has become predominant since the 1990s, accompanied by a critique of the “transcendence” often promised by new technologies. More recently, studies at the intersection of science and technology studies and communication studies “have adopted a view of social change that encompasses both the continuous and the discontinuous, the evolutionary and the revolutionary qualities and characteristics of media and information technologies and their effects” (p. 965).

Online Interviewing and *Global Technography* both exhibit this balanced perspective, in the main. However, they take different stances on the nature of social inquiry in contexts of mediated communication. While the authors of *Online Interviewing* concentrate on the issues and practices that are specifically related to interviewing online as opposed to face-to face, they see the social space established online as being in continuity with other such spaces, albeit with its own particular ethical contours. “The online” is thus a platform upon which aspects of life take place, and notwithstanding ethical challenges, the process of knowledge construction remains essentially the same. In contrast, *Global Technography* proceeds from the assumption that human social relations are but one part of a network in which technology is itself an actor: “global technography helps us show that technology is a dramatic and dynamic participant in the practice of everyday life.” Kien thus proposes that a new “technography” is essential in demonstrating the nature of the resulting transformation. This participation and the network of relations that it restructures society – thus the need for a new methodology. The bounded “ethnographic field” is not representative of the global-scaled, mobile lives that are now part of everyday experience for many. By acknowledging how much this global, mobile experience is part of banal experience, Kien does acknowledge the continuity of human experience, but his insistence on the necessity for a new methodology suggests that he views contemporary social relations, and indeed the human experience of relating and belonging to groups or nations, as fundamentally influenced by technological mediation. This perspective offers possibilities, but taken to its logical extreme, implies a shrinking field for human agency and collective engagement.

The challenge posed by the increasing mediation of everyday life is what makes both of these books important. The affordances of online or networked spaces are shifting, and it is the task of researchers to do our best at describing them. Whether one accepts the radical proposal that a new methodology such as technography is needed or considers that existing methods should be applied to online social spaces, the fact remains that social research is about understanding the contexts and contours of social life. To the extent that these books provide tools and ways of thinking about how to meet these challenges, they both contribute to advancing contemporary social research.

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