


Book Review: Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/04/09/book-review-ethnography-for-the-internet-embedded-embodied-and-everyday/

09/04/2015

Ethnographers of contemporary Internet-infused societies consequently find themselves facing serious methodological dilemmas: where should they go, what should they do there and how can they acquire robust knowledge about what people do in, through and with the internet? Casey Brienza thinks Ethnography for the Internet is both a challenging and magisterial book by a scholar working at the fullest extent of her powers.

Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday.
Christine Hine. Bloomsbury Academic. 2015.

I often tell my students that when I was an undergraduate, Google was just another Internet search engine. While I distinctly remember the point at which I realised Google's search algorithm appeared to be producing better and more comprehensive results than my prior favorite AltaVista, who could have guessed that back then that it would become one of the richest multinational corporations and one of the world's most recognizable brands? No university could have trained me for a lucrative job at Google because those jobs did not exist yet, and my students' futures are similarly unknowable to me. To train them for the digital present is to see them left behind before they've even reached the starting line. The best I can do as their tutor is to prepare them to face a world that is to come, even though I cannot fully imagine it myself.

The everyday pedagogical dilemmas I face are inevitable outcomes of the speed with which the Internet has become embedded, often unnoticed, into virtually every aspect of everyday life in modern societies. The Internet has changed the ways in which we comprehend our own places within them. Indeed, it would be reasonably uncontroversial to argue that all contemporary sociological phenomena are, in some manner or another, associated with the Internet and its technologies, and that it therefore provides a rich new terrain and resources with which to conduct research. And indeed, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* starts from this very premise about the new centrality of the Internet in meaning-making and practice.

Author Christine Hine is Reader in Sociology at the University of Surrey and one of the most widely-recognized scholars of science and technology studies currently active in the field. She has published widely on allied research methodology, including books such as *Virtual Ethnography* (Sage, 2000) and *The Internet: Understanding Qualitative Research* (OUP, 2012). *Ethnography for the Internet*, released by Bloomsbury just this year, is her latest methodological contribution to the scholarly literature, drawing upon her decades of experience as an ethnographer of the Internet.

As Hine herself readily acknowledges, this book is about "ethnography *for* the Internet, rather than ethnography *of* the Internet, because the Internet cannot be grasped as a complete entity one could study in its entirety. One cannot do an ethnography of the Internet as a meaningful research object in itself, although many potential research objects can be made from it, and are either contained within it or connected to it in some way".

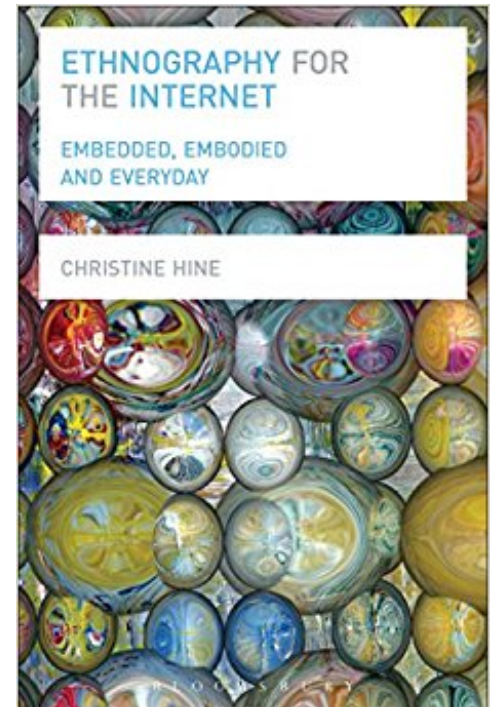




Photo Credit:

[Kristina Alexanderson](#). CC-BY-NC-SA.

Instead, she argues (and as the subtitle of the book anticipates), the Internet has become “embedded” in non-virtual activities, “embodied” in how we go about acting and living in the world, and “everyday”—mundane to the point of near-invisibility.

The book’s subject, therefore, is this “E³ Internet” (E³ = embedded, embodied, and everyday) and the methodological opportunities, challenges, and risks faced by ethnographers who wish to incorporate it into their research. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on this subject, as well as her theoretical framework, and Chapter 3 explores some strategies, often inspired by methodological debates in from pre-virtual ethnographic study, for dealing with difficulty. The following three chapters focus on various strands of ethnographic research on which Hine has elsewhere conducted, respectively, the Freecycle/Freegle communities; biologists working in the field of biological systematics, or taxonomy; and audiences of *Antique Roadshow*, a BBC show featuring antiques appraisers traveling around the UK and evaluating items brought in by locals that has run since 1979. For each, she explicates the various research methods she deployed to make sense of these subjects and the ways in which Internet ethnography and other digital research methods could be used to build up new and robust forms of knowledge.

The depth, rigor, and complexity that Hine is mustered throughout is hugely impressive and belies the modest and (small “c”) conservative view she advances throughout that the contemporary Internet is never fully knowable and that ethnography as a research method is always contingent and limited. Chapters 2 and 3 in particular are standout; if Hine has not literally had the last word in her review of the scholarly literature on her subject, well, it would be hard to imagine anyone topping her anytime soon. This expansive, clear-eyed, yet nuanced vision of a subject is precisely what one should expect of a senior academic, and boy does she deliver in spades.

Unfortunately, although bulleted “Points for Reflection” conclude each of the three substantive chapters, seeming to invite use of this book as a textbook, I would be hesitant to recommend it to anyone less experienced than a postgraduate student (and even then probably under careful advisement only). This book does not bother to condescend, and the material, as well as prose style, is challenging and quite complex. I could all too easily imagine students and possibly even some advanced colleagues unfamiliar with ethnography and/or digital culture struggling to make real—let alone pragmatically applicable—sense of what Hine recommends.

Nevertheless, and in spite of my reservations about using it as a learning tool per se, *Ethnography for the Internet* is both a challenging and magisterial book by a scholar working at the fullest extent of her powers. I certainly anticipate returning to it in the weeks, months, and years to come, and many colleagues will undoubtedly be doing

the same. This book is highly recommended.

Casey Brienza is a sociologist and Lecturer in Publishing and Digital Media at City University London's Department of Culture and Creative Industries. To date, she has written over fifteen articles and chapters about transnational cultural production and consumption and the political economy of the global culture industries, specifically as these relate to publishing and emerging digital technologies. Her works on Japanese manga and the open access movement are particularly widely cited, and her first monograph, *Manga in America: Transnational Book Publishing and the Domestication of Japanese Comics* (Bloomsbury), is expected in 2015. An edited collection, *Global Manga: 'Japanese' Comics without Japan?* (Ashgate), is also expected later this year. She may be reached on Twitter @CaseyBrienza or through [her website](#).

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books