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The Internet, especially its social media component, has played a significant yet unheralded role in ethnographic research. The reorientation of human networks that has occurred through the web has rendered both ethnographic data and human informants accessible in manners that would have been inconceivable three decades ago. The proliferation of websites, weblogs (blogs), chat rooms, user groups, message boards, and other formats of virtual community has profoundly changed methodologies and general practices of ethnography. However, various online research methods remain unheralded in many academic corners due to latent stigmas of pedestrianism and unprofessionalism associated with sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and similar platforms. This entry examines how the Internet has affected ethnographic research; the history of Internet research; how online ethnographic research has changed as new platforms, including mobile platforms, have emerged; and the ethics of Internet research.

Facilitating Access

The two major contributions that the Internet has made to ethnographic research have both involved increasing and speeding up access for researchers. The first is the expansion of access to informants. The second has been an expansion in publically accessible, extant ethnographic data. Both of these contributions have fundamentally altered the dynamics of ethnographic research, yet both recall traditional ontological and epistemological theses that have existed for centuries. Similar in ways through which the Internet disrupted extant models of music circulation and consumption, the Internet has disrupted traditional patterns of human-subject interaction and research. Understandably, the vast majority of seminal literature on ethnographic research was published prior to the proliferation of the Internet, and so any researcher's ontological and methodological foundations would be heavily informed by classic, pre-Internet models. Ironically, academic researchers generally gather a majority of this ethnographic literature from all eras using online conduits like Academic Search Premiere, Google Scholar, and university library networks. Even with a 21st-century ontological foundation, ethnographic research cannot exist outside the web's superstructure.

This is why social scientists over the past 20 years have engaged with the inevitable role of the Internet in ethnographic research. Even research that focuses on spaces and places without Internet access (vanishing as they are) is still mediated through Internet conduits. For example, the initial gatekeepers in university-sanctioned human subject research, institutional review boards, have predominantly restructured as all-digital interfaces to reduce clutter and enhance approval processes. Even a researcher whose data collection relies entirely on handwritten notes in a hypothetical remote community with no electricity or indoor plumbing would need to file his or her credentials using digital means. Similarly, university depositories for completed theses and dissertations have adopted digital portals; many libraries are no longer even printing hard copies of these documents.

The Beginnings of Internet Research in Academia

The first academic work on Internet-mediated communication, at least within the humanities, appeared in the early 1990s. By the middle of that decade, email had already grown into the chief form of asynchronous communication. Some qualitative and analytical work appeared on the technology's ascent and subsequent mutation into a multipurpose platform. Traditional physical formats of correspondence, still widely in use by older members of the academy, became derided as "snail mail" within popular culture (no doubt abetted by Microsoft's public relations division). Though this was not the first appearance of the term *snail mail*, it was the first time that using the postal service was categorically less efficient than the digital alternative.

As a medium through which to conduct ethnographic research, email presented multiple advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantages, perhaps most evidently at first, were the lower expense, both monetarily and resource-wise. Email required the payment of a monthly connection fee, though individual University email accounts were included in the cost of tuition fees for students and facilities fees for faculty. For private researchers, websites like Hotmail, Yahoo, and Lycos standardized the availability of free email accounts. Once registered, the researcher could email any other account in the world for no additional fee. From an economic standpoint, this eliminated long-distance phone bills as well as postage costs. Email also made possible near-instantaneous delivery of messages, unimaginable to those who began conducting their research using the post.

The disadvantages of email-mediated ethnographic research, however, were inherent in the mechanics. Though it was unquestionably faster and cheaper than using the postal service or telephone for interview correspondence (especially internationally), it could not avoid the latent "clunkiness" of Internet-mediated communication. This presented a viable gambit for qualitative research, as the investigator's inability to "be there" in person or in voice over the phone made it impossible to discern nonrepresentational data (e.g., expressions, pauses) from the informant. Additionally, like mail correspondence, email gave the informants time and opportunities to amend their answers, fundamentally shifting them from the dynamics found in personal interviews. This generated a new set of ethical questions in the collection and reportage of ethnographic data.

Smartphones, Social Media, and Access in Ethnographic Research

Another disruption in the proliferation of ethnographic data and access to ethnographic sources has been the surging popularity of handheld computing devices (smartphones). In the 2000s, companies like Blackberry recognized the potential for transitioning mobile phones into handheld devices that could access email, take photographs, and transfer files in addition to placing calls and sending SMS. Companies like Apple and Sam-

sung have engaged in a digital and mechanical arms race with products like the iPhone and Galaxy, respectively. Ethnographic researchers, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds in developed countries, carry these with them at most times. When America Online and other public search engines launched in the 1990s, mobile phones were becoming smaller, more inexpensive, and increasingly ubiquitous.

By the early 2000s, a majority of those engaged in civic life in the developed world were in possession of cell phones, which made people more instantly accessible devoid of attachment to place. However, to contact an informant, one still needed to know their phone number and rely on access to individuals who could provide contact information. This dynamic was similar to email in the early Internet era, as there was no accessible database of private phone numbers or email addresses. Smartphones, in tandem with Internet conduits, have made individuals virtually accessible at all times through a multiplicity of means. If a researcher has wireless Internet access, he or she can contact any informant through his or her social media account anywhere in the world. Many chain restaurants like McDonald's provide Wi-Fi for free without purchase, and an increasing number of public meeting spaces have Wi-Fi available to paying customers. Little research has been done on the role of consumption as a means to an end in ethnographic research, whether engaging informants through laptops, smartphones, or buying food and drink for an informant in a personal interview situation.

Considering the relatively recent prevalence of the Internet, social science is still charting its impacts on music, media, and the general cultural pale. Many have called attention to how Internet access is still at a premium for most in the developing world, which has exacerbated inequalities of development. Though Internet connection speeds have made the exchange of audio files and video files almost instantaneous in developed countries, much of the global South is still lagging behind. The same could be said for all questions of technological access, especially smartphones.

The exponentially widening pool of accessible ethnographic data must be understood epistemologically. For every new conduit or forum through which the researcher can gather data, he or she must consider the limitations and specific dynamics of each. Social activities always occur in a place, so when place in the classic Euclidian sense is compromised, so must the researcher's positionality. Though it may not have been their directive on founding the site in 2004, Facebook has unwittingly created a user-generated public archive of cultural ethnography. Individual users' private accounts notwithstanding, users still frequently contribute anecdotes and opinions (of debatable veracity or congruity) onto Facebook-linked news sites and comment sections. Within Facebook itself, many topics worthy of academic research like music scene histories are categorically archived through inclusive user groups where people can upload old images, show flyers, and share reflections on contextual places and events.

Internet Video and Ethnography

Perhaps the most profound impact the Internet has had regarding the accessibility of more-than-representational/nonrepresentational ethnography has been via video sharing. These include both user-to-user communication interfaces like Skype and Oovoo as well as public streaming-video interfaces like YouTube, Vimeo, and mechanisms offered through Facebook and Twitter. Skype and other video-chatting services have widened the accessible pool of ethnographic data while decreasing the distance necessary to travel in order to conduct synchronous ethnographic interviews. Most obviously, video communication enables the ethnographer to note facial expressions, bodily comportments, and other nuances of the personal interview process, which evade capture via written or audio communication. Although Skype interactions still pale in terms of their sensory connection compared with in-person interviews (especially in frequent cases of imperfect Internet connectivity), they offer many benefits for ethnographic research. Most notably, video interviewing vastly decreases the potential costs of in-person interviews internationally, making these interactions more accessible for researchers who lack the funding or the time to visit their informants in person yet still desire face-to-face connections. Though they all have purchasable and subscription options, video services like Skype normally offer their programs for free download as well as audio-only option, which can substitute for expensive international long-distance phone calls.

Regarding the public (and private) cache of streaming videos accessible for ethnographers, YouTube, Vimeo, and DailyMotion all launched in the later 2000s, and social scientists were quick to approach their “meanings” for the humanities. Geographers like Robyn Longhurst posed bigger questions about how humans’ methods for communicating place-experience were changing with mass-publishing audiovisual media, and what this may mean for ethnography. As YouTube and Vimeo both expanded their respective storage capacities and allowed video lengths, the gates opened for a vast expansion of easily and instantaneously accessible footage of cultural events and materials. These included, but were not limited to, full live musical performances, feature-length films both independently produced and pirated off of copyright holders, and expansive raw footage from events that had been unreleased in its preproduction form. These all offer wide arrays of ethnographic representations for researchers who could not “be there,” whether because they lacked funding, access, or were not born when the events depicted took place. In this way, streaming video archives have been a boon to historically oriented researchers. However, as YouTube expands within the control of Google and associated corporate interests, the “public” nature or ownership of these videos can be compromised. The ownership of specific videos and audio records germane to ethnographic research has evaded the control of the original producers, as streaming videos are easy to download, reedit, and reupload with a contrary or censored message. These services all have too many users to individually monitor all uploaded videos for quality, copyright, or content. Community guidelines, which are sporadically enforced, can also prevent access to ethnographic

data for legitimate researchers focusing on controversial topics like hate groups or pornography.

Ethics in Online Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic social media research has presented debatable ethical quandaries. By entering their opinions, thoughts, and memories into the public record, Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter have made millions of users into unwitting informants for ethnographers. However, depending on the subject matter and adherence of the commenters to the specific network through which the researcher is searching, these informants may never become aware of their contributions. Such is the fluidity of the public record and malleable data on social media. Debates still rage on what constitutes “public” versus “private” on the Internet, and the researcher and their informants may not agree on what is exactly fair game. Whether to anonymize these informants is a decision for the researcher; the institutional review board cannot easily mitigate these situations, as online ethnographic research is not in person. Considering how the investigator did not elicit these data personally, culpability for any unfortunate consequences of their words being published cannot rest completely on one actor’s shoulders.

Ultimately, the Internet’s role in ethnographic research will only become more pervasive as the Internet itself becomes more omnipresent in the life and daily interactions of researchers and their informants. The rate at which the Internet is spreading to incorporate more facets of daily life in more places around the globe is much faster than the rate at which technologies have affected the dynamics of ethnographic research in the past. Therefore, social scientists have a prescient and growing responsibility to remain knowledgeable and vigilant about challenges that these changes present.

See also Blogs; Facebook; Social Media; Twitter; YouTube

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