Digital Ethnography

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Introduction

Ethnography is a research methodology to explore and observe cultural and social phenomena in an environment. Ethnographers are "storytellers" [3] who come back from a "field trip" and tell different stories from different point of views to better understand social life. Digital ethnography is an approach how to research ethnography with digital technologies and tools to capture insights in an always changing digital environment. Technologies can include the internet, but also digital tools or digital media such as digital cameras and smartphones. With these technologies new possibilities of research emerged. It is now possible to take sharper images, videos or comprehensive surveys [3] that would not have been possible before or that would have cost too much money. The digital ethnographers are now on "invisible field trips" as they read and observe chat rooms, blogs or forums [3].

Ethnography originates from anthropology with the recognition *"that what people say and what they do can vary significantly"* [1] around the 1980s. With the insight that surveys, focus groups or telephone interviews not always provide a reliable and sufficient result to understand people. The increased use of the internet and new communication technologies has made it increasingly difficult to study people, their relationship to technologies and how they use them for communication and interaction. A result of this change is, that digital ethnography branched off of the ethnography methodology.

Digital Ethnography is placed in the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm and uses mostly quality data collection methods or a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods [2]. In the centre is the interpretive understanding of human experience with the focus on the subjects view of the environment.

Use

Digital ethnography is most useful at the beginning of a research project to get a deeper understanding of a problem in a relevant environment. The methodology is often used to unobtrusively observe or interact with people and gather different types of data, like picture, video, audio or text information. Furthermore, it can also be used to evaluate existing designs or identify problem areas, which will then be evaluated in more detail later.

The research can be started by looking at various blog or forum posts on a particular topic. There you can see what problems exist or what the community is most concerned about at the moment. Furthermore, you can also search for already existing products or projects and evaluate their problems or goals. On social networks various insights can be gained too, about how people behave. Specific topics that are not as easily accessible in the real world, for example, as the launch of a rocket could

be accurately analysed by existing videos. Digital ethnography does not necessarily have to happen online, as photos or videos with digital cameras or smartphones can be taken in the real world.

There a different kind of data that can be obtained. On the one hand there are qualitative features which can be obtained, for example, from videos or images. They can not be measured numerically and must be individually interpreted. On the other hand there are quantitative data which can be evaluated, such as log datas or text analyses.

Advantages and Disadvantages

An advantage of digital ethnography is to get access to many people who are also distributed globally. Therefore, it is easier to get a representative group or gain access to specific insider groups. Another advantage is to get fast, cheap access to a large quantity of data. With the combination of different types of data it is further possible to observe people in their shared environment without intervening and changing their behaviour.

Anonymous data can be an advantage, but could also cause problems, as, for example, the person is not available for additional questioning. Furthermore, could the digital search be traced back which may be problematic if sensitive material is addressed. In this context, ethical considerations should also be taken into account regarding what information is used. Another disadvantage is the border between private and public spaces where it can be difficult to get access and information.

Example

In the paper *Cooking Together: A Digital Ethnography* [4] the authors uses digital ethnography to study how people cook together and enhance their relationship during the preparations. The goal was to get deeper insight how the space is used and based on the results develop technologies that helps user to use the environment better and bring them closer.

Instead of building a setup kitchen and evaluate the settings they studied the activity of shared cooking through watching *YouTube* videos. They focused on the people's interaction and how they use their available space. The authors chose digital ethnography instead of observations because they didn't want to interrupt the flow and behaviour of the people. The data set were the relevant results from a *YouTube* search about "cooking together". With a qualitative content analysis the videos were then classify into different categories. Furthermore, was a content map created to show different relationships between the cooking videos. A representative video of each type was then used for detailed analysis where different patterns of interaction and artefacts in the kitchen were precisely identified.

References

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