

RECONSIDERING THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING
OFF-LINE: 'REAL WORLD' TRAJECTORIES IN
VIRTUAL GROUPS' LIFE

by

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Over the last three decades hard distinctions have been made between on-line and off-line virtual groups features by computer mediated communication researchers, although activities occurring off the Internet have been largely neglected. The aim of my work is to describe methodological changes during virtual groups on-line towards off-line translations ethnography, to catch a third way between being on-line & off-line. This third way is near to Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' idea, in which the person is part human and in part machine. From this point of view the ethnographic practices seem to be always in part on-line and in part off-line, even when the research focus is just on physical settings or 'virtual' ones.

INTRODUCTION [1]

The growth of the Internet is one of the most emphasized phenomena of our time, involving almost all areas of our life. Some sophisticated researchers involved in late-modernity and/or post-modernity could automatically refer to the anti-essentialist 'soul' of the web: a 'world in which everything is elusive' and identities are 'the most acute, the most deeply felt and the most troublesome incarnations of ambivalence' (Bauman 2004: 32). In my view all these 'messy' places and events, with a (sometimes) disappearing physical support but highly 'connections' oriented at the same time (Latour 2006) seem to be generated by the 'collapse into each other of technical, organic, mythic, textual, and political they are constituted by articulations of critical differences

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within and without each [constituent]' (Haraway 1992: 329). In a word they seem to be 'cyber' or 'cyborg' following Donna Haraway's definition. The recent work on 'Virtual society?' project by Steve Woolgar et al. (2002) seems to follow the same purposes. In his 'five rules of virtuality' he underlines a new way of thinking about social dimensions of electronic technologies: virtual technologies, he states, supplement rather than substitute for real activities and, in a sort of motto, 'the more virtual the more real'.

My point is about this continuous strain studying (supposed to be) virtual groups. My research questions are: how can we manage this enduring 'sliding doors' affair? How can we link data from in-presence observation with on-line? And what about interviewing? What are the main issues about talking with people on-line, in an asynchronous way for example, just receiving and sending email texts, and with the sustain of a screen and a keyboard only, and finishing to do that face to face? And what about written words becoming faces, spoken words, bodies, harms, hands, gestures and after a week coming back again into a 'screen status'? Where is the social I was looking for? Where is the culture itself?

My main research community is the discursive psychology approach to computer mediated communication (Stanley 2001; Antaki et al. 2005; Benwell, Stokoe 2006), so the aim of my work is to describe methodological changes during virtual groups on-line towards off-line translations ethnography, to catch a third discursive way between being on-line & off-line.

My paper will be organised as follows: a first part in which I describe traditional virtual-ethnographer toolkit; in the second one I introduce 'the bridges' between on-line and off-line; in the closing part I discuss some possible merging between virtual and face-to-face data collection and analysis, trying to catch a cyber perspective studying virtual group's interactions. To sustain my argumentations I use my PhD thesis work field data, coming from a virtual work group cyber-ethnography. This group is a European computer mediated-based work group organizing main activities of a European association on entrepreneurship development.

THE ONLINE VIRTUAL-ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOLKIT [2]

In the next part I'm going to show you a brief list of tools to collect data in online settings. This is just a proposal and it is not comprehensive of every

tool available to collect online data. The main tool to collect these data is email messages gathering. It is the easier way to collect asynchronous communication within group members. Forum systems and electronic mail client servers lead us to store and organize messages through different indexing methods (by author, by date, by topic, etc). Another one, file-log recordings are records of synchronous interactions, about chat sessions mainly. A log file reproduces textual interactions saving their original sequence created by participants.

Another tool for online researchers is conducting unobtrusive observation. This method gives an idea about the interaction happening inside a peculiar context. Sometimes there is the illusion to be 'invisible' in some ways, to create some reactions in participants activities. Because, at the end, the researcher is just sitting there 'watching' people doing something. It looks like a 'fly on the wall'. Not always although:

Extract 1 from IN### email exchange, Wednesday, June 21, 2006 10:36 AM, Subject: Cocktail party

- 1 D. Dear IN###,
- 2 I am trying to organise our cocktail party.
- 3 I am not sure who should be invited and how many
people do we want to invite.
- 4 I have sent you a list with names of potential participants.
- 5 Please indicate who should attend the cocktail party.
- 6 I thought that all participants of our 3 symposia should
become the possibility
- 7 to attend our post symposia meeting. Thus, I would like
to ask you to see the
- 8 list below and to add or cross the names. I am sorry if I
have forgotten about
- 9 someone.
- 10 A., should we invite Francesko Pisano?
- 11 K., please add all names of the participants of our poster
symposium if we
- 12 agree to invite them.
- 13 A., does P. come with?
- 14 U., what about our colleagues?

This is an extract that was collected and transcribed from my email client from the cyber-group messages archive, reported following the usual online discursive analysis schema (Benwell, Stokoe 2006). It is just one turn not the whole conversation. As you can see one of the participants, D., is asking to A., my main 'gatekeeper' inside the group if they are going to invite me for next main conference party they are going to attend. At that time there were no signs of my 'influence' in their communication. At the end I was not the classical cultural anthropology oriented 'fly on the wall'. I was, obviously, in the ethnographer 'double bind', as observer and object of my observation at the same time.

Another way to collect data is on-line discussion with group members. It is something like focus group usual activities, with a moderator and people reflecting about different issues. A different tool is represented by asynchronous structured interviews that it can be possible to craft with a pre-prepared list of questions following the research aims. One more tool, quite structured than on-line interviewing is the asynchronous interviewing, by sending a structured list of question to participants via e-mail. Like the previous technique this one seems to be quite problematic, because the participant's motivation to respond. The answers could be like this one:

Extract from structured e-interviews submitted by email attachment.

Question nr 3. Could you describe the relationships between IN### and other outward actors during your working activity?

Answer by A.: we have a very good relationship with our senior member and the other psychologists interested in Entrepreneurship.

As you can see two lines answer-based could not be so useful in our gathering data process. A-synchronous structured interview has an high degree of risk in this path, due to the respondent's motivation mainly.

Another strategy to collect data is studying how novices behave inside the group. A typical group behaviour is characterized also by entering and coming out processes strictly related to identity issues. So it could be useful to study these dynamics, mostly because they seem to be highly discursive oriented (Antaki, Widdicombe 1998). Studying for example how newcomers behave inside the group or from the other side how group manages formal out-grouping process:

Extract 2 from IN### email exchange, Wednesday, July 26, 2006 09:01 AM, Subject: RE: questions

- 1 A. Hi everybody,
2 I think we should leave F. out of our network. I think she
is a
3 really nice person, but she is involved with our group. In
my opinion, her
4 participation has been very low and also she has missed
two IN### meetings.
5 Best regards,
6 J. A. M.
7 E. Hello
8 you have all been very busy
9 i am not sure about F. i think we should talk with her and
10 confront her with our issues. possibly one of us should
talk with her
11 first so that she does not feel like she is being mobbed. we
could give
12 her a chance to stay involved and if she does not meet it,
then we will
13 have no choice.
14 M. Concerning F., my opinion would be somewhere between
A.
15 and E.. I would suggest to offer F. to stay as a member of
16 IN###, however not member of the council with the
voting right, because I
17 feel that having a right to vote, one should participate
more actively in
18 our tasks. If F. starts to participate more actively in the
future
19 we might welcome her back to the council.

This extract has been transcribed with a brief series of turns. As you can see this transcription helps us to follow the sequence, sometimes un-linear, of interactions. It is the case of an out grouping decision. They have to decide if F. is going to remain a formal member of the group or, due to his low engagement, she has to become a peripheral one.

Last but not least the use of field notes, one of ethnographer's main tools, a technique with a well established tradition in cultural anthropology field. When we look at significant group meetings or when we observe the first web-connection of participants or when the participant have to take some important decisions, field notes are an important tool to identify relevant phenomena guiding data analysis (Hine 2005). These note are often useful to explain events happening online.

Note # 123

Date March the 3rd 2006

Setting: negotiation about common document written off-line to introduce a shared model in the next conference attending.

AD explained today his disagreement about collective report management. In her opinion there are few people engaged in vigorous participation and innovative ideas production. For the rest there are easy consensus, immediate positive answers and less critical opinion about the collective document. In her opinion this behaviour could lead towards a decreasing of group motivation and scarce productivity looking at future engagements with all together defending collective theoretical model. [...]

It is thanks to field notes researcher could take a better sense of daily web-based data flowing on his personal computer screen. This one is an interesting feature of my study because writing a paper is a reproduction of field notes logic itself with more reflexive material. Mostly when we analyse particular interactions in group life, when new task based interactions become concrete and new practical matters increase their presence in facing new problems. Field note is useful to stop the interaction time and to describe some important passages of group work. But it has the main function to explain psychological and social field boundaries of group activity also. Knowing the dynamics of field boundaries is an important issue for on-line

researcher activity: the main issue is to discover the functioning of boundaries development to orient ourselves inside the complexity of group activity.

**HAVING A LOOK AT THE 'REAL'
PART OF THE STORY MEANS TO HAVE A CYBER-
SENSITIVITY IN DOING OUR WEB-BASED RESEARCH [3]**

After this brief trip through the 'virtual' side of the story I want to conclude my argumentation with some suggestions to join the 'cyber-bases' side, considering it as the whole story. Taking into account a part of recent literature about virtual ethnography it is quite easy to find how the main part of web-based researcher has stressed out the importance of on-line methods (as I have wrote down before) forgetting the importance of the off-line role in the story. The reason it is not only ontological and/or epistemological, related to the quintessence of the field and/or the research approach we decide to follow. The reason is mainly related to practical basis, it is related to research costs also. Trying to have this wide approach to the online research means to have more working loads to be done. It means to move physically from one location to another to follow these trajectories assuming that although our engagements a big part of the story could remain hidden, out of our 'screen'.

It is time to go from virtual to cyber ethnography: virtual ethnographers need to travel again to follow and reassembling messy trajectories to catch what is happening over their screen. Physical displacement is not a requirement, as Van Maanen (1988) stated in the early times of the Internet, but becomes a part of the process, a part of the map. The need of moving to is not just a virtual multi-site ethnography, but it is a 360° inquiry, adding traditional tools like (in my experience): face to face in-depth interviewing and in-presence participant observation. Face to face in-depth interviewing lead us to discover other issues related to group's different networks that are in the background in the on-line mode:

Extract 3 from A. face to face interview , Wednesday, July 23, 2006
15:00 AM, Athens

1 F. So, (.) what do you think about this:: experience is going to (.)
finish?

1 A. About our meeting in Athens (0.3) (um) I was a little

disappointed because I had
2 the impression that (0.2) we didn't ↑↑ really made the
progress in (0.2) our research
3 project. I had the (um) *impress-* that we have some ↑↑
problems when we need to (um)
4 close (0.3) to put an idea in ↑↑ concrete form. So (0.3) I didn't
lik- my perception that
5 U. is arrived to say us what (0.2) we ↑↑ need to do!
6 We (0.3) talked °a lot about research model°, our project
ideas, our different
7 interests in research and (0.2), when we need to ↑↑ realize, we
need (um) external person that ↑↑ illuminate our:: °*ro-*°?

If we try to compare these data with the electronic ones, coming from email exchanges, we can find a lot of ambiguous matters. In this case, transcribed using the Jefferson transcription system (Jefferson 2004), the member A is trying to describe her feelings about the experience and the conversation focus immediately drifts towards the new incoming member. She does not like him and she describes very intensely her feelings with peculiar verbal intonations, particular speech pauses and amplifications and so on. A very rich source of data that it is impossible to gather with an easy copy and paste by our digital screen. This is the important issue about off-line interactions. From the other side, in-presence participant observation lead us to see the same people involved in another context, very different than usual, giving us further information about group processes. Picture your self for a while inside the 'real' field. It is not the whole field as I stated before but it is a precious source of information. Think about real time images in a fast-motion beside you. Think about sounds and voices. Think about your role inside this representation. Think about people very close physically. A very rich source of data that you can have just being there, off-line. Take an imaginary look at people interacting in 'real' place and try to imagine a possible way of integration between these data and the online ones.

Note # 250

Date July the 19th 2006

Setting: the conference hotel roof in Athens,

members are negotiating the incoming presence of newcomers inside the group

[...] A. Starts to say something about the newcomer (he's not here at the moment but he's joining the conference as well). She's talking about pros and cons to have a new one inside the group. It seems to be a good thing from one side 'cause to new energy insertion, new competencies, new motivation. 'But', she says, 'we must to think about it very well' and also 'we have not so much opportunities and energies to waste'. 'We have to take our time to think about it, and then decide'.

As we can see all the puzzle seems to be more comprehensible. All the events seem to have a new look regarding to our research design. The amount of information we have is useful to build a new analytical approach in which both online and offline issues are comprised. That is the 'cyber' issues covering a huge part of our field. Not all the field, but useful parts of it. In this way it is possible to draw up a new representation of our computer mediated research. It is a strange representation because it does not consider just the online social features but even the multiple 'rhizomes' (Deleuze, Guattari 1987) created by member interactions, in which every situation of our life, even group situations, have always a mediated and un-mediated sides completely linked.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION [5]

In his 'Virtual Society?' chapter Steve Woolgar (2002) talks about 'cyberbole', that is the particular and human phenomenon of amplifying every thing which is related to technology. Because after all technology seems to be always good and facilitating all the matters of our life. My aim with this paper is to move that kind of amplification towards less technology based influenced realms and trying to transpose this shift inside the computer mediated research. There were a lot of frustrations in doing it and today negative vibes still remain in my web-based research activity. It is very unsatisfying to perceive something outside your screen that you can not achieve. It is equally unsatisfying to discover that online world is not a

finished one, with clear borders and barriers to the offline. It is a blunder, a typical scientist's blunder. As Donna Haraway first and Woolgar with his recent work have pointed out, our link (as humans) with technology is so heavy that it is impossible to avoid it. Virtual and real could be different traits of the same concern. There is an unfinished game within them. 'The more virtual the more real' (Woolgar 2002: 17). From this point of view the role of the web-based researcher must be characterized by an enduring motivation in following traces and signs that lead him sometimes inside and sometimes outside is usual realm. He needs to move and to leave for a while his computer screen based location looking for cyber research-intents.

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