A Response to Christine Hine

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As an undergraduate, I once (foolishly) asked my professor how long the assigned paper had to be. "Long enough to touch the ground" was what he told me. Needless to say, this response did not satisfy my desire to know the "correct" answer that would confirm that I was being a "good" student. Yet, his answer altered my worldview. I began to appreciate that the boundaries of an essay should be determined by the point being made, not by the page count. (It took me many more years to learn that brevity is an art.)

In a graduate school qualitative methods course, I asked my advisor how I would know when I was finished collecting data. He offered the same Dumbledore smile as the previous professor before responding, "When you stop learning new things without expanding the scope of your question." Once again, I asked a question of the wise and received a koan in response. While I have not reached methodological enlightenment, I have begun to appreciate the brilliance of these answers.

Having grown up with the internet, I've always had a paradoxical relationship to it. Rather than seeing the internet simply as either a "cultural artifact" *or* as a place "where culture is formed and reformed" (Hine, 2000, p. 9), I've always accepted both naturally. The internet is increasingly entwined in people's lives; it is both an imagined space and an architected place. Things happen on it, through it, because of it. While all cultures change over time, what makes the internet so confounding for research is that the fundamental architecture (Lessig, 1999) also changes rapidly. Innovations have always radically altered the world—could you imagine society without light or gas? While

tangible innovations have restructured society immensely, the pace of innovation and dissemination today is unparalleled. This, of course, complicates internet research.

Networked technologies have completely disrupted any simple construction of a field site. Traditionally, ethnographers sought out a physical site and focused on the culture, peoples, practices, and artifacts present in a geographically bounded context. This approach made sense because early anthropologists studied populations with limited mobility. Furthermore, there was a collective understanding that culture and people were contained by place. Mobility complicated matters (resulting in excellent ethnographies of diaspora populations), but mediated technologies changed the rules entirely. In a networked society, we cannot take for granted the idea that culture is about collocated peoples. It is not a question of mobility but of access to a hypertextual world. Geography can no longer be the defining framework of culture; people are part of many cultures including those defined by tastes, worldview, language, religion, social networks, practices, etc. Of course, as Hine rightfully points out, we should not simply reject what anthropologists learned by studying places, but instead recognize that what they learned is not the complete story.

When ethnography first went digital, early internet researchers tended to focus on the place-driven metaphors that framed the internet. This was logical, considering the emphasis on "rooms" invoked in early social software like chat rooms and MUDs/MOOs. Architectural features appeared to provide meaningful boundaries but, as Hine notes, "one should not accept taken-for-granted sets of boundaries" (p. 4). Sure enough, when Deja News appeared in 1995, the walls that separated Usenet groups collapsed, scripts devastated the boundaries of MUDs and MOOs, and search has continued to collapse all place-driven web contexts ever since.

Early internet culture focused heavily on social groups gathering around topic or activity. More recent social technologies like blogs and social network sites have altered that dynamic. In these more recent technologies, "community" is an egocentric notion where individuals construct their social world through links and attention. Rather than relying on interests or structure-based boundaries, current social groups are defined through relationships. Each participant's view is framed by her or his connections to others and the behaviors of those people. The difficulty with this egocentric network view is that there's no overarching set of norms or practices; instead, each node reveals an entirely different set of assumptions. This issue is quite noticeable

when researchers (including myself) have foolishly tried to discuss the blogosphere or MySpace as a continuous cultural environment only to be challenged by other blind researchers looking at the elephant's trunk or ear.

To try to balance the view, I've approached my latest project on MySpace from numerous disconnected angles. Every day, I look at random MySpace profiles (it is possible to do this because profiles are numerically generated). I interview teens from different cultural backgrounds. I talk with parents, the site's creators, and adults who use the site. I read commentary about MySpace on blogs and in the news; I listen to people talking about MySpace on the bus and at malls throughout the United States. Through my blog, others know that I'm researching MySpace; strangers send me data on a daily basis. In this way, I've begun this project in the widest way I could possibly imagine. All the same, I've found that there are behaviors or groups that I can track more easily, and so I've chosen to narrow my focus so that I can concentrate more deeply on understanding the dynamics between smaller, connected groups. In contemporary networked life, culture is socially proximate not geographically defined; creating boundaries by medium or genre only confuses matters. Thus, it makes far more sense to find a sample population and try to flush out who they know and the culture that forms among them. During the course of my study, for a selection of people, I try to spiral out to understand their worldview and compare it to other worldviews that I see within the broader system.

Given that networked technologies complicate research, what does it mean to do ethnographic internet research? How do we work through boundary issues? Hine's essay provides critical insight into how ethnography is "an adaptive methodological approach (p. 18). By discussing different ethnographic projects, she reveals the diversity of approaches that researchers take in undergoing an ethnographic study. Furthermore, she highlights the disciplinary roots and reflexive considerations that ethnographers must consider. In constructing her essay, Hine highlights the most critical feature of ethnography as a method: It is not prescriptive. There is no genie that will come and grant boundaries for a researcher. Learning to do ethnography is a lifelong process and we are all learning as we go. While I cannot offer a box of solutions, I can draw from my own work as well as a rich history of ethnographic practice to offer some guidelines that have helped me.

1. *Read ethnographies.* Read to make sense of what it is that ethnographers do and how they do it; do not focus on deconstruction. Read voraciously and then re-read what you've read. Get inside the heads of

other ethnographers—hear their struggles, understand their choices, make sense of their reflexive considerations, try to see what they are doing from their points of view. Read theoretical literature to properly situate research in prior work, but do not forget to read other ethnographies. *The voices of other ethnographers have helped me understand how to approach questions, how to think about the practice. Keeping those voices in mind when I'm in the field allows me to better "see."*

2. *Begin by focusing on a culture.* What defines that culture? Its practices? Its identity? Who are the relevant social groups? What are the relevant social dynamics? What boundaries are applicable? Unlike other methodologies, ethnographers do not begin with rigid, narrow questions; they begin with cultures. Questions are important because they provide guidelines for observation, but researchers must be prepared for observations and data to reveal new questions. Be bound by culture, not by questions. *When I started studying Friendster, I decided to focus on the early adopters—self-identified geeks, freaks, and queers. I wanted to see how these groups overlapped and complicated each other's participation even though the site's popularity had spread far beyond that.*

3. *Get into the field, hang out, observe, document, question, analyze.* Ethnography is about participant observation or deep hanging out; to observe a culture, you must build rapport, be present, and participate. Everything that is observed should be documented; thick description (drawing on Geertz, 1973) is key. Observations provoke hypotheses, and early analysis provokes new questions. Document everything. Ethnography is "writing culture" and it is important to try to document and make sense of everything available. Thus, it's critical to hang out across numerous spaces to see the relevant culture from different angles. *This is why I spend time in schools, at malls, in people's homes, online, and in a variety of public spaces. By hanging out in different mediated and unmediated contexts, I can see practices from different angles.*

4. *Never get too comfortable.* Always work to make the familiar strange; do not fetishize anything. When you start seeing patterns, try looking at what you're observing from a new angle. Try to make sense of practices in terms of the practitioner and the observer. Be reflexive of your own biases, and question any and all biases that you have. Question your own questioning. Try not to get too recursive, although ethnography really is turtles all the way down (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). *For me, the best part about having a background in computer science is knowing how the systems that I study work; they are never magic to me. It is trickier to not love the populations who adopt them so whenever I start sharing an affinity*

with a particular group, I try to find and make sense of others whose motivations initially bother me. For example, I spent a month tracking down neo-Nazis and cocaine distributors on Friendster just to understand how they viewed the network differently from other participants.

5. *Understand that boundary construction is a social process.* The reflexivity and questioning inherent in ethnography are antithetical to boundary construction. As Hine aptly notes, "The focus has to be on working across the immediately apparent boundaries, exploring connections, making tentative forays which are then turned into defensible decisions, and retrofitting research questions to emergent field sites" (p. 6). In other words, the boundaries of a project emerge when the ethnographer decides which questions to focus on based on patterns in data and observations. By placing observations and interpretations into an "intelligible frame" (Geertz, 1973, p. 26), the scope of a project often emerges. While there are always an infinite number of paths to follow, one will learn to recognize when data, theory, and questions come into a collective focus.

6. *Understand that making meaning is an interpretive process.* Never lose touch of the goal of ethnography: to make meaning of culture. Interpretations should be situated and they must be questioned. Ethnographers should always be reflexive about their interpretations, biases, and limitations.

These rules of thumb are not unique to internet ethnographies, but they are just as critical to internet ethnographies as to those that take place in unmediated contexts. What makes studying digital cultures distinctive is not the mindset, but how the architecture affects our practice. There are four key architectural properties of mediated sociality to keep in mind: persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences (boyd, 2007). When people speak online, their words are not ephemeral. Search engines make text, media, and people findable at the flick of a few keys. Hearsay is one thing, but online, you often can't distinguish the original from the duplicate; likewise, it's difficult to tell if the author is *really* the author. Finally, aside from the people who sneak around your back and hide behind trees whenever you turn around, most people have a sense of who can hear or see them when they navigate everyday life; online, no one knows when a dog might be looking. These properties collapse social contexts and change the rules about how people can and do behave.

My research centers on these properties precisely because they reveal how critical context is to human behavior. At the same time, these properties alter the context in which we are doing research, and thus, it

is just as critical for researchers to learn how to operate with them in mind as it is for teens who are trying to find a space of their own on social network sites. For example, just because people's expressions on the internet are *public* in the sense that they can be viewed by anyone does not mean that people are behaving as though their audience consists of billions of people across all space and all time. How we act in a park with our children is different from how we act in a pub with our friends; just because these are both public places does not mean that there is a uniform context. When we look to understand people's practices online, we must understand the context within which the individuals think they are operating. This imagined context provides one mechanism for bounding our research. For example, in my own research, I'm only interested in the online spaces that teens perceive to be meant for them to congregate with their friends and peers.

In studying new media, internet researchers may inaccurately bound their view by idealizing the possibilities of the internet rather than recognizing and working within the actualities of practice. Just because people can theoretically use the internet to broadcast their expressions, reach out to diverse populations across the world, or free themselves of their offline identity does not mean that this is what people do or see themselves as doing. People's worldviews—and their neuroses—leak from the offline to the online. To fulfill their goals and desires, people envision structure within the wide-open spaces available online. Internet ethnography is not about the technology—it is about the people, their practices, and the cultures they form. In an unstable technological environment, it is essential to be continuously reflexive about our own views and values concerning emerging technologies.

The internet provides fascinating fodder for observing people and their practices, but ethnographies of internet life must work to acknowledge and then let go of the underlying technology. Discovering the boundaries of such work has nothing to do with the technology and everything to do with the cultures being considered.

❖ RECOMMENDED READING

Clifford Geertz's (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures* is what helped me understand ethnography as a method and a state of mind. Whenever I feel lost in what I am doing, I return to this text. Two books have given me valuable insight into thinking about how to do ethnography in mediated spaces: Christine Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography* and Daniel Miller and Don Slater's (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach.*

Fundamentally, I believe that learning ethnography requires reading ethnographies. Since ethnography is about "writing culture," it's extremely valuable to read how others have written culture. Several ethnographies are listed in the reference list. Each of these different ethnographies draws on different traditions and exhibits a unique style and voice. While these are some of my favorite ethnographies, other ethnographers will have their own lists. Reading a diversity of ethnographies, even if the topic is not particularly relevant, will give one a sense of how ethnographers explain culture.

To help ground the conduct of ethnography of internet culture, it is important to read texts that help explain different aspects of it. For example, Lawrence Lessig's (1999) *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* helps elucidate how code is a form of architecture; understanding this, one can see how different relevant players have tried to influence the internet's development. Judith Donath's (1999) essay, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," reflects how people's signaling practices must change because of different limitations online, whereas Jenny Sundén's (2003) *Material Virtualities* looks at shifts in embodiment as people "type themselves into being." These are only a few examples of a wide array of literature studying internet culture; familiarizing oneself with this literature will help one recognize different practices that emerge.