

Course Proposal 2004-2005
Claudia A. Engel
Fall Quarter 04
Level: Introductory, 4h
Audience: 1st/2nd year students, cross-disciplinary

Title:

“Virtual Communities: Online Technologies and Ethnographic Practice”

Description:

How can an ethnographic project that involves new online technologies be approached, theoretically as well as practically? Focusing on the phenomenon of virtual communities this course will review some of the methodological implications of online ethnographic research, for example the role of the researcher, the notion of identities, human subject issues, distributed collaboration, and alternative re-presentations. It will also consider the conceptual implications, including the interpretation of online technologies as virtual environments for human interaction versus a cultural artifact, the dual nature of the Internet as both, a new setting and a new technology for doing ethnography, and theoretical approaches that may help to understand phenomena of virtual communities.

Rationale:

For the last decade online technologies such as email, newsgroups, blogs, or chatrooms, have attracted the interest of anthropologists and sociologists and have become the object and/or the means of ethnographic research (Turkle 1995, Hine 2000, Miller and Slater 2000, Wilson and Peterson 2002, Constable 2003). It is generally assumed that online technologies have introduced a new form of human social life called "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993) -- groups of people linked by their participation in computer networks. Virtual communities are thought of as sharing many of the characteristics of people in ordinary communities, yet they have no face-to-face contact, are not bound by the constraints of time or place, and use computers to communicate with one another (Jones 1998, Smith and Kollock 1999, Renninger and Shumar 2002).

However, at a closer look, a lot of the “hype” around new technologies is due to a largely uninterrogated adoption of technological attributes and unquestioned underlying assumptions. As a hybrid area, which involves designers, anthropologists, sociologists, technologists, psychologists, architects, and others it draws its strength from an interdisciplinary field, but definitions of key terms can be ambiguous and incoherent. For example, it is still not very well understood what the intersection and interactions are between virtual/real, online/offline, remote/face-to-face and if these commonly used dimensions are adequate (eg. Elmer 2002, Woolgar 2002). It is also unclear to what extent existing theories can contribute to help us understand these phenomena and where new frameworks towards a critical theory of information technologies need to be developed (Bell 2001, Levy 2001, Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003, May 2003, Burnett and Marshall 2003, Hakken 2003).

This proposal builds upon the experience and encouraging student feedback from CASA151/251 ("Introduction to Cultural Studies") in Fall 2003, which included online environments, virtual spaces, and the experimentation with alternative ethnographies, and which I co-taught with Prof. Paulla Ebron. I am not aware of such a course currently being taught at Stanford. Related courses taught at Stanford are: CS377D ("User Research Methods Practicum") which focused on one specific technology (blogging) that was analyzed with traditional ethnographic methods (Nardi et al, under rev.), and PWR 3-25 ("dorm.net: Residential Rhetorics"), designed around a phenomenological study of the role of language and how Stanford students use online technologies to build communities (<http://www.stanford.edu/class/pwr3-25/>).

Bibliography (small sample of indicative readings):

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- Gumbrecht, H. U. and M. Murrin (2003). Mapping Benjamin : the work of art in the digital age. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.
- Hakken, D. (2003). The knowledge landscapes of cyberspace. New York, Routledge.
- Hine, C. (2000). Virtual ethnography. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage.
- Jones, S. (1998). CyberSociety 2.0 : revisiting computer-mediated communication and community. Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage Publications.
- May, C. (2003). Key Thinkers for the Information Society. New York, Taylor & Francis, 2003.
- Miller, D. and D. Slater (2000). The Internet : an ethnographic approach. Oxford ; New York, Berg.
- Nardi, B., D Schiano, M. Gumbrecht, L. Swartz (CACM - Accepted, Under Revision). "I'm Blogging This": A Closer Look at Why People Blog.
<http://home.comcast.net/~diane.schiano/Blog.draft.pdf>
- Renninger, K. A., W. Shumar, et al. (2002). Building virtual communities learning and change in cyberspace. New York, Cambridge University Press.
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- Turkle, S. (1995). Life on the screen : identity in the age of the Internet. New York, Simon & Schuster.
- Wilson, S. M. and L. C. Peterson (2002). " The Anthropology Of Online Communities." Annual Review of Anthropology 31(1): 449-467.
- Woolgar, S. (2002). Virtual society? : technology, cyberbole, reality. Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press.