

## REVIEW ARTICLE



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# Internet Ethnography: The Past, the Present and the Future

At the beginning of the 20th century, an anthropologist travelled to a distant location in a foreign country to observe, study and analyse different cultural behaviours. This was a fairly new type of fieldwork, since previously anthropologists had not travelled themselves, but had read accounts and stories written by missionaries and other travellers from the comfort of their armchairs. Now, however, anthropologists observed in situ and learned a new language or used a translator during the course of their ethnographic fieldwork. They transcribed field notes and interviews by hand, maybe taking some photographs or doing sketches of their surroundings and the people they observed. They used their bodies, eyes and minds to understand why people do what they do. They spent several months, often even years, in a foreign country, only to return home to publish an ethnography about that location and the people living there. Today, the story is a little bit different.

Today, an ethnographer can open her or his portable computer anywhere that a (wireless) internet connection exists and enter a realm known as the internet — even from the comfort of an armchair. Such ethnographers engage in several social networks, observing behaviour, interactions and even various cultures within those digital surroundings. They collect and analyse digitalised data with the aid of different technologies, programs and applications. They can also use devices other than a computer, such as a smartphone — which is also usually connected to the internet — to take pictures, make notes and record audio and video material both online and

offline. They use technology to study the use of technology in a world of networked relationships mediated by the internet.

The above description of an ethnographer's job are of course characterisations, rough sketches of how ethnographic research can be conducted, but they also depict the differences and similarities between ethnographic research then and now. Ethnography is both a research method as well as a written result of the analysis of qualitative and empirical research data. Anthropologists and virtual world researchers Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor describe ethnography as a 'flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emergent phenomena and emergent research questions' (2012, 6), which is used to create an understanding of cultural behaviour.

Since the late 1980s, anthropologists have been increasingly interested in the internet and what it means to create 'thick descriptions' in such a space (Geertz 1973), in other words, they are interested in conducting contextually rich analyses of networked lives and relationships. In this review, I will discuss the history of internet ethnography, how ethnography has been deployed to understand cultures both online and offline, and recent developments in studying both the 'form and content' of the Web (Jensen 2013, 54). In a previous article (Haverinen 2009), I discussed (in Finnish) the challenges faced by anthropological conducting research in Web environments. In contrast, this review takes a look at the developments that have resulted in the method currently used by many social and cultural scientists for the purposes of internet

ethnography. The last six years has resulted in the near ubiquity of smart devices and internet technology (such as several devices with Wi-Fi for everything from saunas to coffee makers), and an increasing number of social applications that mould our ideas about the represent and shape our understanding of our relationships, ourselves and the world around us.

In the next section, I will discuss the different prefixes given to internet ethnography during the past decades, from cyber to digital and so forth, and how they originated from different research paradigms. In the following sections, I will discuss *where* internet ethnography takes place, *how* it is possible to conduct ethnographic research on the Web and the peculiarities of collecting digitalised data. Finally, I will present some of the current developments and discussions in the field.

### **From cyber to digital — the four waves of internet ethnography**

The internet as we know it is a complex mixture of technologies and applications with endless affordances ranging from work to leisure-time activities, from surveillance to anarchy, from imagination to unimaginativeness. As a technology, the internet, also known as the Web, is a network of interlinked computers connecting people (and things) globally. As a means for conducting ethnographies, the internet provides tools, sources and environments for research. In other words, the internet can be studied ethnographically online, offline or with a mixture of both depending on the research questions and the actual topic itself. I will discuss this notion further later in the paper since it also determines the current paradigms in internet ethnography.

During the past fifteen years, several handbooks and articles have been published about internet ethnography as a method and have been involved in shaping the terminology used in research (e.g. Benedikt 1991; Escobar 1994; Denzin 1996; Correll 1996; Markham 1998; Hakken 1999; Hine 2000, 2005, 2015; Kozinets 2010; Boelstorff et al. 2012, to mention just a few). Anthropology as a discipline was responsible for cre-

ating ethnography as a research method, but later ethnography has been deployed widely across numerous social sciences. Anthropologist Tim Ingold has even argued that anthropology and ethnography should not be used synonymously since they refer to different epistemologies and objectives (Ingold 2008). For this reason, in this review I will discuss internet ethnography as a method used across various disciplines. In recent years, internet ethnography has gained influences especially from sociology (Wellman 2004, 2011; Hine 2000, 2005, 2015), and a field currently recognised as digital humanities, which combines humanistic objectives and research questions (often data as well) with computer sciences such as programming (Schreibman et. al 2004).

In the field of anthropology, different prefixes are often used to explain the main research focus, such as medical, linguistic or feminist anthropology (American Anthropological Association 2015). Staying loyal to this prefix practice, internet ethnography has also included several prefixes since the early 1990s, such as cyber, e-, electronic, online, digital and virtual internet ethnography. All of the prefixes derive from different contexts, materials, objectives and research paradigms at specific points in time.

Sociologist Barry Wellman has written about the development of internet studies both in the early 2000s and later, in an updated version of the same article, in the early 2010s. Wellman notes that there have been three recognisable waves of development during the past decades (and, as I would add, we are now entering the fourth wave). As with all histories, the dates are not absolutely fixed; rather, several developments have overlapped with one another and some of them have re-inspired researchers several years after their initial deployment. (Wellman 2011, 20–21.)

According to Wellman, between the late 1980s and early 1990s (roughly 1989–1994) researchers primarily focused on analysing early text based virtual worlds (known as MOOs and MUDs<sup>1</sup>) and collaborative software (i.e. groupware, a software designed to facilitate collective work done by a number of different users). Internet technology was based on text, and more visual applications and browsers were developed in the early years

of the 1990s. During that time period, researchers were especially interested in the formulation of (both cultural and corporate) communities and the distribution of information connected and enabled by this new media form (Beninger 1987; Turkle 1995; Baym 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Curtis 1992; Fulk & Schmitz 1991).

Michael Benedikt edited the volume *Cyberspace: First steps* (1991), which explored in great detail the notion of space, place and spatiality on the internet, how abstract notions become more material in the minds and consciousness of users, and finally, the concept of cyborgs and bodies interconnected throughout the network. The concept of body became a popular theme in particular, since many people criticised the internet at the time for being deceptive, since no one knew who you really are. Sociologist Sherry Turkle based her legendary work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1994) on exactly that premise, since she analysed how 'life on screen' affected notions such as identity, identity play, community and gender. In the same year, anthropologist Arturo Escobar also published his article 'Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture' (1994), which asked several highly important questions — relevant even twenty years later — about the study of cybercultures:

[...] How can these practices and domains be studied ethnographically in various social, regional, and ethnic settings? — What established anthropological concepts and methods would be appropriate to the study of cyberculture? — What established anthropological concepts and methods would be appropriate to the study of cyberculture? How, for instance, will notions of community, fieldwork, the body, nature, vision, the subject, identity, and writing be transformed by the new technologies? (Escobar 1994, 214–215.)

From 1995 until the turn of the millennia in 2000, private use of the internet became increasingly commercialised and popularised. Studies focused on *users* (how and why the internet was being used in various settings?) and tried to *document* the nature of the internet (what is the

internet, really?). (Wellman 2011, 20–21.) The above-mentioned work by David Hakken (1999) provided some of the broadest analysis of the time in terms of how ethnography should and could create an understanding of the increasing use of the internet.

The years 2000 until 2006 were the early years of social media applications and the increasing popularisation of massive multi-user online gaming environments. Wellman notes that research paradigms shifted 'from data documentation to analysis' since 'the web became the utility of the masses' (Wellman 2011, 20). New concerns about internet literacy and 'the digital divide' between generations (ibid. 21) created terminologies such as digital immigrants and digital natives, which referred to either people 'born with the Web' or people who began using the 'information highway' during their adulthood (Prensky 2001). During this time period, researchers also began to refer to internet ethnography as *digital* (Miller & Slater 2000; Horst & Miller 2006; Coleman 2010), with a strictly material and offline focus. About the same time, the term *virtual* ethnography was coined (see, e.g. Hine 2000, 2005), with the emphasis being on researching phenomena and cultures in online environments, and in opposition to 'real' environments, which at the time meant 'what happened online'.

Between the years 2007 and 2015, academic studies have expanded to include emerging new technologies, such as smartphone and tablet technology, which have developed in giant leaps, as well as social media applications and even big data (e.g. Curran 2013). Currently, terms such as *cyber*, *e-* and *electronic* ethnography refer to paradigms from the 1990s, and scholars in this field are now using either online, virtual or digital ethnography to refer to different field sites and theoretical approaches. For instance, the term *virtual* has mostly been deployed in online gaming environments and shared virtual worlds, where the notion of *virtualness* refers to augmented realities, role and identity play, and imagined selves and spaces (Pearce & Artemesia 2008, 2009, 2010; Pearce 2009a; Boellstorff 2010; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2012; Hämäläinen 2012; Raskinen 2014). *Digital ethnography* (e.g.

<b>Online Researcher's Ethical Room Board</b>	
<b>Is the Internet your</b>	<b>in other words is your research</b>
<i>Tool</i>	<i>with the Internet</i>
<i>Source</i>	<i>on the Internet</i>
<i>Research material</i>	<i>about the internet</i>
<p>To an online researcher, the Internet is often a combination of all the abovementioned, in which case the Internet is a <i>research environment</i>, where the researcher must inter alia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider the relationship of research ethics to source criticism</li> <li>• Appropriate the cultural conventions of the particular research environment</li> <li>• Understand the contextualities of how the research material is being created in the environment</li> <li>• Consider the publicity and intimacy of the content</li> <li>• Respect the people being researched and the content they produce</li> <li>• Remember that online environments are not static, but constantly changing, which is why all research ethics are to be considered case-by-case</li> </ul>	

Figure 1. Researcher's ethical room board (Östman & Turtiainen 2013, 64).

Pink et al. 2015), on the other hand, is being used in contexts where researchers analyse how offline phenomena readily affect the use of online phenomena, such as in political movements (e.g. Postill & Pink 2011). The term *online* is being applied in contexts where researchers analyse online environments, such as social media applications, discussion forums, media resources and other online materials with a contextually rich approach and with the objective of analysing what and why something is happening in an online realm (e.g. Laukkanen 2007; Hutchins 2010; Skågeby 2011; Laaksonen et al. 2013; Sumiala & Tikka 2013; Haaverinen 2014; Hine 2015).

### The *where* of internet ethnography

The internet is quite abstract by nature. In the most concrete terms, it is an information network consisting of the devices in our hands, cables, wires, ones and zeros. But what it embeds and mediates are the experiences, emotions, knowledge, visual imagery and text that formulate our world and how we understand it. The sense of place and space it creates is partly cre-

ated in design processes via the technology itself, but it is also very much conveyed through language.

In this section, I will review briefly *where* the internet can be studied ethnographically. Since internet technologies have become increasingly more ubiquitous, the *placeness* of ethnography, the ethnographic *site*, has been the subject of great debate. Some researchers focus on online, offline or a combination of the two views, which is why it really depends on the research questions and settings with respect to how the ethnographies are being composed. The concept of field has been discussed widely, especially since the 1990s, when George E. Marcus (1995) brought the idea of *multi-sited* fieldwork<sup>2</sup> into the general discussion, which had already been circling around the notion of reflexivity<sup>3</sup> and the ethnographic self of the researcher. Marcus argued that in a globalising, transnational and changing world, the ethnographic world should be adjusted to account for the lives of people, which are not in many cases tightly bound by borders (invisible or visible). Multi-sited ethnography was, however, criticised as 'profligate, unfocused and superficial' (Marcus 1999, 9). Marcus counter-argues:

Multi-sited research involves innovative ways of bounding the potentially unbounded, but also of refusing the more usual non-ethnographic bounding of the intensively probed and usually sitespecific ethnographic study. In the way that I have suggested, carefully moving across sites of fieldwork within a multi-sited imaginary gives traditional ethnography a means of extending itself in a disciplined, closely argued way that it never had before when it was operating within the presumed spaces of the traditional archive of culture areas and their thematic tropes that defined and shaped ethnographies within them. (1999, 9–10.)

Later, Marcus deployed the same arguments with respect to information technology and called for new innovative and imaginative ways to both write and conduct ethnographies, instead of focusing on over-analytical theoretical models and the frenzy of ethnographic description (Marcus 2014, 33–34). In other words, he argues that it is no longer important *where* the ethnographic research takes place so much as *pinpointing* or locating the research in a relevant context.<sup>4</sup>

Digital culture researchers Sari Östman and Riikka Turtiainen have developed a simple room board<sup>5</sup> (see Figure 1) for conducting ethical research (2013, 64), but it can also be used to understand *what* is being researched, *how* the research is being conducted and especially *where* it is located in terms of ethnography. In other words, is the internet intended as a) a tool (research is with the internet), b) a source (research is on the internet) or c) research material (research is about the internet)?

The room board can be used on several occasions during the research process, and it can also aid in interdisciplinary projects where researcher's expertise lies in various backgrounds. Understanding the *where* of internet ethnography not only defines the analytical framework but also the characteristics of the fieldwork. Will the researcher attend and observe the discussion boards, the social media applications, the gaming environments? Will the researcher be continuously connected to the Web, even if not working? If the research takes place in a geographically distant location(s), to what extent can the Web serve

as a way of keeping contact with the informants when returning home from the field?

Ethnologist Laura Hirvi conducted her research on Sikhs in Finland and in Northern California, both online and offline, and notes that during the research process, the field was constituted by 'people and their practices, material object and social sites' (2012, 25). She also used Facebook to contact informants via a snowballing method, since the Sikh community in Finland is small and the chances of running into a Sikh were less probable than at her California field site. Hirvi also conducted a few of her interviews via email, since the informants were not always available in person (ibid. 30). In her case, her field was multi-sited both in geographical terms and also in terms of the online-offline setting. After Hirvi returned from California, she kept in contact with her informants, and whether she was traveling in Finland or elsewhere in the world, her field travelled *with* her (ibid. 34).

Internet ethnography provides affordances for combining both the digital and the analogue in a similar manner as users. Anthropologists John Postill and Sarah Pink (2014) discuss the importance of *place making* in ethnographic studies, where the localities of the research, i.e. the offline realm, provide important contextualities in some research cases, where the online and offline are in a constant flux of sharing and providing information. Postill and Pink conducted their local activist research in Barcelona in 2010 in order to gain a local understanding of Catalan and Spanish activist cultures, which were widely embedded in digital media by sharing resources and information as well as organising events and rallies.

Offline ethnography usually takes a more material approach to the internet as a form of technology, in which case use of the internet is studied from the perspective of how the technology enables practices in an offline context. Offline ethnographies are usually then conducted *in situ* and in person with the people being studied. Offline ethnography can also be very useful when trying to understand the affordances people place upon the internet and how it is being discussed, valued, used, anticipated, modified and appropriated in various social and cultural settings.

Just studying the *online* environment, however, has its own particular characteristics, and virtual ethnography has been one way to describe the epistemology of the approach. The term *virtual*, as in something less real, should not be used in contrast to the term *real* (nor *reality*), which according to anthropologists Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2012) is ‘fetishizing pre-digital culture as a site of retained authenticity’.<sup>6</sup> Sociologist Christine Hine has used the term *virtual* in her previous publications (Virtual Ethnography, 2000; Virtual Methods, 2005), but currently she has formulated the idea of ethnography *for* the internet (Hine 2015). Hine argues that ethnography is first and foremost a tool to both analyse and gather data from — what she calls — the three E’s: embedded, embodied and everyday internet. Hine’s approach considers the internet as a whole, as already embedded in our daily lives, cultures, social interactions and economies, to the extent that it should not be considered a curiosity. Anthropologist Philip Budka’s earlier work concurs by declaring the online environment to be a total social phenomenon, one which ‘combines the material, the social and the symbolic in an associative web’ (2011, 4). Personally, I call for contextualisation: what is being studied, where, how, by whom and for what purpose?

### The *how* of internet ethnography

When considering how to carry out ethnographic research on the Web, a researcher must of course consider what are the objectives of the research, what are research questions, where the answers are to be found and whether the research position has an equivalent source in the offline world. Context is the key word in this case. Which contexts are relevant and which are not? How are ethics involved before, during and after the research process? How much participant observation should and could be involved?

The ethnographer can choose from among several applications that collect quantitative rather than qualitative data from the internet. The ethnographic process entails an ongoing analysis of ‘what happens and how it feels’ (Hine 2015, 74),

where field notes play an important role (especially in the case of data and/or field loss, which I will discuss in the next section). For example, a person’s activity on the computer screen can be recorded with different screen video applications, which can then later be observed and analysed, click by click. These applications can be used by the ethnographers themselves or installed on the computers of the informants, which will allow the researcher opportunity to later examine their use of the Web. Another popular data collection measure is taking screenshots (entire or part of the screen), which directly relate to taking photographs in offline contexts.

According to Hine (2015, 74), ‘we cannot see “the social” directly in any recordings we make, and so ethnographic description involves attempting to put words something otherwise silent’. In this case, the researcher must be intimately aware of the several contextualities, the sub-contexts, and especially of the hidden meanings of computer-mediated communication and cultures online. What is significant about participant observation in ethnographic research is its capability to produce insights about the everyday and ordinary, which interviewees sometimes fail to note as being relevant. For an ‘outsider’, the ordinary can actually be extraordinary.

Virtual world and gaming researchers Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi and T.L. Taylor (2012) stress that it is crucial to take part in the culture(s) under study and that without the participatory part, there is no virtual ethnography. Their account is a bit strict, since the cultures and people engaged online are more than three-dimensional gaming characters and since there are more ways to carry out participant observation than just to immerse oneself to a virtual gaming world. For example, troll7 researcher and cultural scientist Whitney Phillips (2015) notes it took an extensive amount of time to understand the nature of the language on the /b/ discussion board.<sup>8</sup> The trolling language, jargon even, was a complex mix of how to communicate efficiently (such as ‘brb’ being short for ‘be right back’) and in a contextually rich way by using references from popular culture and internet memes as well as other references. In order to understand all of

these expressions — literally, socially and culturally — Phillips also involved herself in trolling activity with various troll identities. (ibid. 2015, 38–47.) In other words, she carried out participant observation.

In some cases, it might be relevant to use autoethnography (see, e.g. Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011; Uotinen 2010, 163; Chang 2008) as a way to understand (online) experience. Autoethnography is a deeper analytical tool that researchers can use to position themselves, experiences and thoughts, one which can be used to compare insights from interviews or surveys, especially if the research topic is sensitive. Autoethnography can be used to reflect on and understand aspects of the phenomenon emphatically (Saresma 2007), but also to study ethically complex and difficult topics, such as bereavement (Haverinen 2014), pain and sickness (Tillman-Healy 1996; Ettorre 2006), depression (Gallardo et al. 2009) or physical abuse (Downing 2014; Hurd 2008; Waterson 2005).

However, autoethnography should not be used to cut through problems related to informant privacy, accessing personal details or not being able to have people directly take part in the research process. As a method, it is also deeply personal and requires that the researcher is able to analyse his or her own emotions and experiences as objectively as possible — even if it is unflattering, uncomfortable and embarrassing. Despite this, autoethnography can provide an empirical and emphatic understanding of lived experiences, learning, engagement and emotions, both from the vantage point of the researcher as well as the research subjects (depending on the setting).

Documenting participant observation — or any type of observation — is especially important in digital environments since the speed and richness of content might be difficult to remember afterwards. Personally, I have found screen video capture to be extremely helpful, especially in interviews that I conducted in the Second Life shared virtual world. Screen video capture is an application that records everything happening on the computer screen, and it can be viewed and edited as any video material (e.g. the CamStudio and Screen Recorder applications are free to download and use). I used the CamStudio application when

I was observing memorial chapels and parks in Second Life, since I did not want to stop to make notes in the middle of walking around in the online world. Instead, by viewing the video footage I was able to revisit how I moved, where I moved and how the entire environment was presented in front of my eyes. I could observe the world from a first-person perspective or shift the view so that I could see my avatar moving around.

When conducting interviews, it was an excellent way to record both visual and textual data as well as my own notes, which I sometimes made in another text editing window. I could revisit my interview experience and see myself making notes, which also revealed much about my thought processes. Screen video also worked as a backup for the chat log, which the Second Life viewer program stores in a specific file on my computer as a text file. When my hard drive crashed in 2011, I lost all of the logs, but I could still restore the videos, which I transcribed all over again. Chat log was also an excellent way to analyse the discussions with my interviewees. However, since the video also showed the surroundings of our group interview, the people coming and going, me changing my perspective and — to highlight — the gestures and movements of our avatars, it was priceless in terms of reflective analysis. (Haverinen 2014, 141.)

The ethnographer can also use a public (or semi-public) blog for field notes. It can be viewed with the informants and used to follow the fieldwork and thought processes of the researcher. (Hine 2015, 74; Haverinen 2014, 47–49.) Other applications<sup>9</sup> are available both on desktop computers and mobile technologies where researcher can store offline photographs and notes, online articles, screenshots and other digital material. For more quantitative data, there are applications that can inter alia search and display the use of search words, hashtags, image uploads and visitor counts.

### **‘HTTP Error 404’ — website cannot be found**

One of the issues that makes internet ethnography significantly different from non-internet eth-

nographies is the possibility of field site loss or entire transformations during fieldwork. Websites are vulnerable in the sense that they are subject to available connections: no internet router, no connection. Ethnographers can conduct their research in various offline environments, from coffee shops to libraries to trains and even airplanes, if only there is a connection (i.e. Wi-Fi) available. But the field is not based solely on connectivity; the disappearance of websites and other locations also affects the research process.

During my own fieldwork in Second Life memorial parks, I witnessed the disappearance of the entire memorial park I was investigating. The memorial park, Remembering Our Friends, was maintained by private individuals with micro-donations of a few dollars. However, in the spring of 2013 the area had to be closed due to financial problems, since there were not enough donations to cover the expenses. Fortunately, I had already conducted the bulk of my fieldwork by that time, and I only attempted to visit the site in order to check some of the details in one of the memorial chapels. However, when the Second Life viewer (i.e. the program) denied me access to the area and I found out about the financial issues that led to the closing of the park, I felt devastated. The area had become one of the most meaningful places in which I conducted fieldwork, but I also felt devastated because I realised there were tens, if not even hundreds, of people who could not access the area anymore to mourn and honour their loved ones. I felt like a natural catastrophe had wiped out 'the village of my fieldwork'.

These types of problems are crucial to take into account when conducting online fieldwork. The *placeness* of the field is an abstraction and very much bound to the technology enabling and creating the place. Both of them are fragile, which is why thorough documentation, backups and backups of backups are critical.

### **Ethnography in the future**

Ethnography for the Internet involves developing an acute awareness of the social texture of lived

experience as it moves between media and across situations. (Hine 2015, 51)

Ethnographic research of the internet has changed along with the technology it has studied over the past few decades. The quote above from Hine encapsulates the current approach quite perfectly, since the current focus is on the *social fabric* of the internet. The internet is not only technology, but is designed by people and used by people.

Using ethnography as a methodology to study an online environment provides many affordances, but it also entails problems related to ethics, access, privacy and publicity. Ethnographers must reflect on their presence in the research environment, since it is very easy to hide behind the computer screen and become invisible. Thus, research ethics should be carefully examined on a case-by-case basis and ethnographers must reflect on their choices before, during and after the research process in order to understand the full ethical contextualities of the material. Also, the internet is not unified or the same throughout the world. Many types of cross-cultural comparisons are now possible since the material people provide in online environments is more accessible on a global scale than previously, when the researcher needed to travel to a physical location. However, some themes would benefit from an offline approach, since not all internet cultures can be understood from behind the computer screen. Again, ethnographers must reflect on their choices on a case-by-case basis.

Online ethnography has had its fair share of prefixes since the 1990s, prefixes that have been used to locate the method in a specific context and research themes. However, I believe that constantly inventing new prefixes can also limit the development of the method since the technology changes faster than academic disciplines. The internet today, in the year 2015, is different than it was in 2010. New applications, new technological advancements, new ways of using (and even misuse) it, develop in the blink of an eye, but also disappear just as quickly.

The research paradigm being used today has ripple effects from past decades, but also increas-

ingly from other disciplines, such as computer and data sciences, where computation, large bodies of data and programming are being knitted together with ethnographic practices. Traditionally, ethnographic research has not been about the quantitative, but instead about the rich qualitative. However, since current technology is very much bound up with data — both producing and analysing it — the qualitative nature of it can provide new frontiers for researchers. For example, people can provide their own personal data for researchers to investigate consumer preferences, social interactions, engagement strategies, identity and the self (see, e.g. Margolis 2013; Ford 2014).

Anthropologist Tricia Wang (13 May 2013) points out in her blog post for *Ethnography Matters* that the current hype around big data research also needs *thick data*, referring to Clifford Geertz's (1979) classic notion of ethnographic

description being thick. Thickness refers to contextually rich knowledge, wherein the conclusions are based on thorough empirical observations. Big data provides large bodies of data, but from a qualitative perspective it can remain faceless and anonymous. The ethnographic description, the ethnographic stories, are amiss. As our lives are being increasingly embedded in technologies, it will be imperative for ethnographers to keep up with the developments and continue to analyse both online and offline environments — and if the latter will even exist at all in the future. The internet is not a technological gimmick, but rooted to contemporary society in a very profound way. New prefixes might be a way to ground the research in a specific methodological and theoretical framework, but they should not be used to ground the research permanently as the 'right' way to do ethnography.

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## NOTES

- 1 MOO and MUD refer to text-based virtual systems connecting several users at the same time (Bartle 2003, 11).
- 2 George Marcus and James Clifford were also deeply influential to the development of ethnographic research in the 1980s with their work *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), which debated the different writing styles used in ethnographic research (the roots of the word ethnography go back to the Greek words *ethnos* 'people' and *graphein* 'to write').
- 3 For more on the reflexive turn, see also Rabinow (2007), Ruby (1982) and Behar and Gordon (1996).
- 4 For more about ethnographic and reflexive pinpointing, see Fingerroos (2003).
- 5 The room board also guides people in understanding the internet as a research potential in contextual ways in order to contemplate the ethical questions before, during and after the research process.
- 6 By also referring to how pre-digital life was considered better and more authentic (see, e.g. Turkle 2011).
- 7 'A troll is a person who likes to disrupt stupid conversations on the Internet.' Their sole purpose is to anger and disrupt people because they think it is funny. (Phillips 2015, 1.)
- 8 The discussion board Phillips studied is [www.4chan.org/](http://www.4chan.org/), where the title */b/* refers to a board with random topics, which is especially popular among trolls.
- 9 Such as Evernote, Capture, InSitu Mobile and Ethos-App.

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## KEYWORDS

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