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Critical Junctures and Ethical Choices in Internet Ethnography

The importance of text in the construction and representation of culture

"On the net," social and Internet critic Alan Sondheim writes, "one *begins* with the text of the other, which is directly coupled *only* to text and exchange of texts-and out of this, one *constructs* a real, constructs a world which is projected onto the other" (1996, p. 9). Text is a crucial discussion point in consideration of ethics in research of Internet culture:

- Text as presentation of identity,
- Text as the actual building blocks of culture,
- Text as the interrelationship of researcher, participant, and readers of research.

When we conduct ethnographic explorations of Internet-mediated cultural contexts, we immerse ourselves in texts. Although not all Internet contexts are constituted solely through the exchange of text messages, texts remain the foundation of culture, fieldwork, and knowledge production. John Van Maanen (1988) notes that

in a sense, [ethnographies] sit between two worlds or systems of meaning-the world of the ethnography (and readers) and the world of cultural members. . . . [C]ulture is not strictly speaking a scientific object, but is created, as is the reader's view of it, by the active construction of a text (pp. 4, 7).

Under the conceptual umbrella of text, I want to talk about some of the decisions we make as researchers representing ourselves and representing others throughout the research project and in our research reports. Each decision point is in fact, permeated with ethical dilemmas. As a caveat for the nature, scope, and limits of my remarks, I am working within the frameworks of so-

cial construction, symbolic interaction, and interpretive ethnographic approaches. I am focusing here on qualitative research practices as these are used to study cultural phenomena mediated through Internet-related technologies for communication.

When I read or listen to the ongoing struggle to find ethical guidelines for Internet Research (AOIR 2002), I cannot help but think that the struggle will not end, because solutions cannot be standardized and disciplined. When students or colleagues ask me "What would the correct ethical procedure be?" I cannot help but respond, "It depends." Rather than creating or adopting formulae, an ethical researcher is one who is mindful from start to finish. By mindful, I mean present, prepared, honest, reflexive, and adaptable.

Whether one is using text-based online environments as an interviewing tool or studying virtual cultures constructed and sustained solely through online media, knowledge claims about the Other are essentially mediated by the other's presentation of self through any medium, the interaction between the self (researcher) and other (participant) during the data collection process, and the researcher's production and presentation of the words of the other in the interpretation and writing phases of the research project. Indeed, when we drill down to the basic epistemological assumptions undergirding any study of discursive practices in culture (physical or virtual), consideration of how the interaction among participants and researchers reflects and shapes identities, relationships, and social structures constitutes a useful, reflexive, and ethically essential practice.

At several junctures during the research project we have the opportunity and responsibility to reflexively interrogate our roles, methods and interpretations.

- To what extent is the researcher a part of that which is researched?
- What can we say we know about the Other when self, other, and the places where these entities reside are constructed solely through the exchange of texts?
- In spaces that are derived from discursive interaction, is it possible to simply observe? Is it desirable?
- How does my participation in this medium affect the identity of the participant and the shape of the culture?
- How can one balance the traditional scientific impulse to uncover the "real" while engaging in "virtual" interactions with people who may or may not have any correspondence to their physical counterparts?

Questions like these flow as constant undercurrents to the ethnographic inquiry of virtual cultures. Addressing these questions is difficult and requires rigorous self reflection at the epistemological and ontological level. But it is vital that the mindful researcher disrupt the seemingly placid surface of inquiry to ask these questions. Doing so constitutes an honest presence in the research process and reflexive engagement in inquiry.

I've selected three arbitrary moments in the research process when questions like these might arise to prompt ethically grounded reflections and choices:

1. Identifying the field of inquiry,
2. Analyzing the subject as text or as embodiment, and
3. (Re)Presenting the space, the other, and the self in the research report.

These junctures are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive. They are moments I'm lifting from the research process to use as examples to help us think through some of the decisions researchers must make. The particular questions that you may find yourself asking during your own research will vary along with your world-views and methodological approaches.

Drawing boundaries around the research context, or "identifying the field" involves a series of decisions that both presuppose and reveal the researcher's underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions. Obviously, reflecting on our own biases is not just useful but ethically necessary, even if our academic training does not require such reflection.

From the traditional ethnographer's perspective the issue of locating the field is not an exceedingly problematic issue. The field is predetermined, so the only logistical challenge is gaining access and gaining rapport with informants. For the Internet ethnographer, however, "going in the field" hardly begins to describe the process of locating cyberspaces. As we shift from geographic to computer-mediated spaces we are shifting focus from place to interaction.....from location to locomotion. So even at one of the earliest research design stages, typically framed as a logistics phase, the ethical researcher will stop and ask vital questions such as the following:

- What criteria do we use to create the boundary around the field?
- Should we participate in this social structure or simply observe? Is "observation" even the most appropriate concept for what we're actually doing?
- What assumptions help distinguish meaningful from non essential data?

Answers to these questions are not simple and the choices we make have significant practical and ethical consequences. Working through some of the questions and possible options can reveal some difficulties.

Decision-making junctures in the research process

Boundaries of the field?

Communities and culture are not neatly mapped before entering the field, but instead are created as part of the ethnographic process. The ethnographer must read the texts and interactions of interest, much like trail signs, and make defensible decisions about which paths to follow, which paths to disregard, and

thereby which boundaries to draw (Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998). If one's decisions remain sensitive to the context, the boundaries will be derived from the culture rather than the other way around-from a priori guides and criteria.

Participate or simply observe?

This quandary deserves closer discussion here, as it directly influences our knowledge of and representation of the context and particularly the participants. The decision is driven by one's epistemological assumptions, and it directly influences the way we represent the context and the participants. Most crucially, the decision can have a significant impact on our academic conversations of and knowledge about computer mediated communication.

Talking with anyone formally or informally marks a significant shift from observer to participant, or more forcefully, accomplice. Online, once we participate in the context, we begin to co-construct the spaces we study (Markham, 1998). This is not a minor point. Our interaction with participants are not simple events in these online spaces, they are organizing elements of these spaces. In other words, we participate in constructing the very phenomena we label later as the object of analysis. Furthermore, we participate in constructing the Other with whom we are interacting. The social reality of online culture is an ongoing, negotiated accomplishment of conversation. In a place where the boundaries of self and other are created and sustained solely through the exchange of information, we begin to exist as a persona when others respond to us; being, as many theorists note, is relational and dialectic (e.g., Buber, 1958; Bakhtin, 1981; Blumer, 1969; Gergen, 1991; Laing, 1969).

Participation is the fundamental and necessary means through which existence is possible. As MacKinnon keenly notes in 1995, once we shift from physical to computer-mediated contexts, the common phrase "I think, therefore I am" is woefully inadequate. Even "I speak, therefore I am" is not enough. The more appropriate phrase in cyberspace is "I am perceived, therefore I am" (p. 119). Every time a researcher responds to another in a computer mediated context, the researcher contributes directly and actively to the development of the other's identity. By extension, our participation in this dialogue creates the field in which the study occurs.

Addressing this seemingly simple question of "should I participate or observe" then, gives rise to an entirely more complicated set of issues that shape not only the research design but will shape our future concepts of how these media function as or in culture. It is, as I said earlier, not a small matter. Ethnography that ignores this issue remains at the surface and more importantly, remains stuck in the modern notion that researcher observes but does not interfere with or influence that which s/he studies.

Separate data from non data?

The question of how we separate data from non-data is an extensive and complex question. Rather than play out various scenarios to illuminate the choices and consequences, I will simply mention one key consideration: Academic disciplines provide many of the boundaries for us: Our research choices are never free from the constraints of academic traditions. Our training gives us particular lenses and templates. In response to this, the emerging discipline of Internet Studies should allow us to critically examine these traditional lenses and should allow us to creatively reconceptualize ways of knowing and representing research. I use the word "should" here as an injunction. It is vital to sustain non-centralized, non-canonized, and non-standardized approaches to new communication technologies.

Seemingly tangential, this point may lie at the very heart of an ethical stance toward inquiry in new cultural phenomena. Disciplines guide research practices and define acceptable from unacceptable. Disciplines bind ethical decisions tightly with methods decisions, but often invisibly, because method choices are famed as strict procedures and rules of conduct. As the discussion continues here, you may see that an ethically sensitive stance—that is, one that is mindful, adaptable, reflexive, and innovative—may be difficult if one's methodology is inflexible.

One can see from this set of examples that negotiating the space in which the study occurs is not such a simple matter of logistics, but a series of decision points that warrant careful thought. Moving to the second critical juncture in the research project, the mindful researcher will again stop and ask important questions when making sense of data. This stage involves critical decisions about what to include, ignore or dismiss. In both the social sciences and humanities, this phase of research consists of making sense of what certain practices mean, so that we can teach it to others—namely, our academic colleagues.

Although not all researchers will conduct close text analysis of discourse, the following example is nonetheless useful to aid in reflections about some of the premises underlying the analysis and interpretation process. It also illustrates clearly good reasons to interrogate one's own data analysis practices—practices which are typically taken for granted.

Obviously, we cannot pay attention to everything—our analytical lens is limited by what we are drawn to, what we are trained to attend to, and what we want to find. Our understanding is determined as much by our own frames of reference as the frames supplied by the context (Rommetveit, 1980). Does this matter? The short answer is a vehement "Yes!" Reflexive attention to what we are looking at, looking for, or looking through can help us make more ethical and sensible choices. It can also help us honestly express our limitations in fully describing or explaining the phenomena under study (see for e.g., Bromseth, 2002; Eichhorn, 2001).

Practical and ethical concerns in analysis of interviews

Let me use a brief example to illustrate the complexity of analyzing a simple interview text. This example comes from previous research (Markham 1998) interviewing heavy users of the Internet. Sheol (a pseudonym) is a self described "heavy user" of the Internet and a "budding hacker." I interviewed Sheol in an anonymous text-based synchronous chat room. Sheol used a lot of emoticons and punctuation, such as "LOL," !!!!, and smiley faces :). The following excerpt is typical of interaction with Sheol:

<Sheol> *LOL* This is way cool!! I have never been asked for an interview before:)
 <Sheol> I am intrested in talking to:) Could you be more spesific about what questions you will ask? Just let me know when you want to talk, and I will try to accomidate! :)
 <Sheol> On the net you can be who or what ever you want to be. That is the trap! when you want your cyberlife to be your real life. That's what hapened to me.
 <Sheol> I became a very popular (I know that sounds conseeded) figuar on the line I called home. I am ruled by the right side of my brain so I liked the diea of being that personality.
 <Sheol> My cyberfriends and I liked to roleplay ... we went on fantastic adventurs over the net. The only limit was our imagineations. Not anything like in the real world!! I am shy by nature...I am also a big fan of Shahspear langue. I can use that style of speaking, and not be shy about on the net:)

Questions that arise for the researcher analyzing this interview text might include:

- How much of a person's identity is wrapped up in the information I receive from them?
- Asked slightly differently, how much do our texts represent us? How much would we like to be bound by what we wrote at any particular time?
- How might the findings shift if I focus on form versus content? What should I focus on?
- How much do my own preconceptions and stereotypes are influencing how I make sense of this data?

An initial problem that impedes the interpretation of this interview is that I do not know Sheol *in culture*. I am interviewing from the outside. It is difficult to assess the meaning in any accurate sense because these interactions are abstracted from the typical context of Sheol's online existence. More directly, Sheol is not participating in online culture, Sheol is participating in an online interview.

The researcher has many choices in terms of interpretive direction. Speaking directly to the issue of ethics, the researcher has many more choices than Sheol does, in terms of creating cultural knowledge about how people in-

teract in cyberspace. Reflection on these choices and the premises driving the decisions is crucial if the researcher is to preserve Sheol's dignity as a human being and his autonomy as a human subject in the research project.

In this case, the researcher would hopefully and wisely realize that the interpretation will be more clear if a) the interaction were taking place in the cultural context, or b) the interactions took place over a longer period of time than the four hours actually spent in conversation, or even c) if the researcher asked for Sheol's opinion about the interpretations being made.

The text expresses Sheol's thoughts and ideas, but also presents the sole means through which Sheol can be studied as a human subject. As well, the text is a performance of identity and an encapsulation of being. Although the researcher must pay close attention to how the person's identity is being performed and negotiated in text, the participant may not be at all cognizant of this process. In this case, for example, Sheol appeared unconcerned with how the writing appeared and unaware of how the construction of text might mediate identity for others. Although Sheol mentioned spelling once, Sheol never tried to change it or correct errors. Sheol did not seem to link identity to the text, but to the interactions allowed by the medium.

I, on the other hand, could not ignore Sheol's presentation of self through the text, both content and form. The number of social labels I attached to Sheol during our interviews came close to the number of spelling errors, which were considerable. This is not a tangential point. It might illustrate a common tendency to generalize and stereotype, which is a significant part of the issue. The interpretive lens is not separable from our own history or the context, but we are often encouraged by our disciplines to disconnect ourselves from the sense making processes, as if the measuring tools can accomplish the sense making rather than those humans using these tools. Reviewing my own interpretive moves during the course of the original study, here are some possible analytical outcomes:

- For two hours of the interview, Sheol is a female (stereotypical gendered language style was very evident in tags, qualifiers, expressions of emotion, and heavy use of graphic accents).
- Sheol is young (spelling was phonetic, attention to language misuse was not at all evident).
- Sheol was perhaps not very intelligent (multiple spelling errors, unreadable messages, apparent lack of ability to be a real hacker).
- Sheol is white (default characteristic because of mainstream cultural assumptions about use of the Internet as well as the tendency to make the online other look more like the self).
- Sheol is heterosexual (nothing in the discourse points to this categorization, but as with the previous, this category is the common default).

Assumptions such as these guide the researcher's interactions with the participants in any study. These assumptions also influence the interpretation of a participant's discursive presentation of self. Whether these labels are accurate or not is less relevant to this discussion than the fact that these labels are derived from fairly limited information in the text. Several of these labels are associated with embodiment, yet Sheol is presenting himself as a textual entity. These labels are not negotiated or discussed; they are either presumed or concluded based on the researcher's perceptions of what the texts mean.

Vital questions, therefore, continue to flow under the analysis process. To what extent does or should the researcher include spelling or typing ability as meaningful information in the understanding of identity or culture? How much of the identity of the participant is based on the tendencies, inclinations, and cultural filters of the researcher, rather than on what the participant desires, intends or says?

Choices and consequences

These issues cannot be dismissed as unimportant to the social scientist, even as much as we understand our role to interpret and create knowledge. We know from many writers (e.g., Clifford and Marcus, 1986) that the role of the ethnographer is not simply to reflect or transmit culture, but to write culture. To do so, we must make interpretive choices. However, when the existence of the person we're studying is for all intents and purposes located solely in the pixels on a computer screen, the choices we make to attend to, ignore, or edit these pixels has real consequences for the persons whose manifestations are being altered beyond and outside their control. Hence, if someone types solely in lowercase and uses peculiar spelling, the researcher's correction of grammar may inappropriately ignore and thus misrepresent a participant's deliberate presentation of self. If someone spells atrociously or uniQueLY, and the researcher corrects it in the research report to make it more readable, a person's desired identity may be the price of smooth reading.

On the other hand, a participant's exclusive use of lowercase may be simply a time saving device. A new keyboard, carpal tunnel syndrome, or a project due tomorrow for the boss may prompt typographic errors in a person otherwise (at other times) fully capable of rendering accurate and precise words and sentences. Our interpretation or dismissal of data as meaningful or meaningless may be well founded or absolutely unwarranted depending on any number of things, only some of which are comprehensible. The methodological dilemma is to be sensitive to the context, determine the most suitable interpretive path, and remain consistent.

This process, of course, is much easier said than done. As with research design and setup, the most ethically sensitive approach to analysis is complicated by-and probably impeded by-our methodologies. To mention just a few examples, consider: Most social science approaches distill the complexity of human experience into discrete variables that are easily measured. Surveys are easier to conduct than focus groups. The pressure to complete and publish research quickly means that longitudinal studies are rarely undertaken, even as a researcher might admit this method would yield a better outcome. As mentioned earlier, method choices are wrapped up with disciplinary rules. Bound inextricably and unavoidably into this web are one's ethical decisions.

Questions of authenticity, embodiment, and location of 'true' knowledge

A related and significant impairment we suffer as researchers (perhaps even as a consequence of these pressures) is that we continually privilege the researcher's body as the site of experience, the reliant gauge of authenticity, and the residence of knowledge.

How much of our information about the members of online communities should include the embodied presence of the participants? Why do we need the body? To make certain our respondents are expressively consistent? To find the *authentic* as opposed to the merely *apparent*?

The impulse to discover the real meaning of behaviors or to find universal principles that will apply across all situations is deeply rooted in modernist epistemologies. *Real*, in this sense, is equated with *authentic*. Authentic knowledge is mostly considered embodied knowledge.

We know from both popular press and scholarly studies that many people seek interaction and community on the Internet because it provides the perceived means to escape the confines of embodied social markers to engage in what we might refer to as a meeting of the minds (Benedikt, 1991; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1996). Whether or not this is truly possible, a user's desire to present and be perceived as a confluence of texts without body might best be read by researchers as a request for us to acknowledge text as ample and sufficient evidence of being and study it as such.

Yet social scientists persist in seeking the authentic by privileging the concept of the body. The desire to add validity to findings often results in research design that holds up the textual representation of the participants next to their physical persona. Often, the goal is to see the extent to which the images match. Researchers deciding to interview participants both online and f2f (face to face) may claim that their efforts will add authenticity to their inter-

pretation-by adding paralinguistic or nonverbal cues to the words people speak-and thereby add more credibility to their findings. For many researchers, this is an ingrained, if unconscious, part of sensemaking. Naturalist Diane Ackerman puts it, we "live on the lease of our senses" (1991, p. 5). We naturally trust our traditional senses of sight, smell, and touch, taste and hearing to provide verification of concrete reality. In essentially disembodied relationships and cultures, however, this desire bleeds integrity from the project of knowing the other in context.

This might seem a tangent to the point regarding how we privilege the researcher body as the site of knowledge. But irony abounds when we juxtapose the desire to know the subject's embodied being with the marked absence of the researcher's own embodiment in the research project. There is very little reflection in Internet studies on how the researcher's being (embodied or not) is or is not perceived and responded to by the participants. Whether this is simply overlooked or perceived as inconsequential is uncertain. Yet, considerable privilege is given to the researcher to make his or her own embodiment a choice or even a non-issue while simultaneously questioning the authenticity of the participants' choices regarding their own embodiment.

Privileging the researcher's gaze in writing culture

Ethically as well as epistemologically, it is vital to reflect carefully on the extent to which the research design privileges the researcher at the expense of both understanding the other and operating with a keen awareness of the context. Analysis of the data is closely linked with presentation of the findings in any interpretive or qualitative research design. The issues already presented must be attended to as the researcher writes and publishes. A third juncture in the research project, therefore, relates to the choices made in writing the research report. The distinction of representation from analysis is heuristic only; they are both actually part of the same process. In fact, for many contemporary scholars, writing is a vital part of the inquiry process (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Richardson, 1998). As we write up our findings for publication, the representation of self and other becomes a reflexive juncture.

The process of studying culture is one of comprehension, encapsulation and control. To say otherwise is to deny our impulses and roles as scholars and scientists. At a very basic level, we go there to learn something about Other and, when we think we have something figured out, we strive to find a good way to tell others what we think we know. To accomplish this goal, we must stop for a moment the flood of experience, extract a sample of it for inspection, and re-present it in academic terms with no small degree of abstraction.

The researcher is afforded a tremendous degree of control in representing the realities of the people and contexts under study. Consider the way our research reports present, frame, and embody the people we study. We literally reconfigure these people when we edit their voices.

This does not apply only to the study of virtual environments, but any study of human behavior, of course. But computer-mediated environments seem to highlight this dilemma of research reporting because it's so clear that text is the means of producing self, other, body, and culture. As we create texts for publication we do not question the practice of editing. What happens when we transform the participant's utterances from disjunctive sentence fragments to smooth paragraphs? How are we presenting the social reality of these spaces when we correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation? How might we be changing their identities when we transform the appearance of their fonts to meet the acceptable standards for various publishing venues?

Whether we do it for interpretive clarity or improved readability, our choices have consequences. Some general examples may usefully introduce how this happens: Transforming an online conversation from its original disjunctive form into an artificial linearity may not alter the meaning of the utterances, interaction or identity of the textual being embodied through these utterances. On the other hand, if a participant splits his or her utterances into fragments with the intention of conveying a sense of fragmented identity, our editing for smoothness may devalue and negate a fundamental aspect of this persona.

Rewriting disjunctive asynchronous text conversations in the form of spoken dialogue may be disingenuous and inaccurate, depending on one's research purpose. This strategy can present a version of reality wherein we talk and think in hyper-organized ways.

Organizing interactions into retrospective linearity may be a natural way of making sense of what happened, but it may prohibit us from viewing and investigating the way discourse functions in an internet based society. We cannot know this yet, but it is perhaps only by examining, displaying, and reading about discourses in a fragmented non-chronologically smooth context that we build our knowledge base of how Internet-based communication technologies work or how fragmented and disorganized interactions construct identities and relationships.

As soon as an interaction occurs, the study of it becomes an abstraction. This is a fact of research. Even so, simplification or dismissal of the challenge of representation is not warranted. It is far too easy to rely on standard conventions in editing and presenting the participant's voices or to simply leave their texts-in-context out of the final report. Finding the processes and means for giving voice to participants is a difficult challenge worth pursuing; one

that requires creative reconsideration of traditional writing conventions. How one accomplishes this might vary by discipline, but the ethically sensitive task remains to allow human subjects to retain their autonomy and identity—whether or not their uniqueness is intentional or unintentional.

Context sensitivity and reflexive adaptation

Our sensemaking practices, whether honed in the hypothetico-deductive, interpretive, or postmodern traditions, compel us in certain interpretive directions. Our understanding comes in moments, fragments, glimpses. We may shift our interpretation based on any number of things that happen outside the context we study or long after we have collected our data-conversations that spark new ideas, scents on the wind that provoke particular memories, dreams. The fields we live in as we interpret and write our research overlap with the field of inquiry in meaningful ways, a fact that we should neither ignore nor deny.

Although your own research projects may not be ethnographic or fit into the examples I discussed, all of us doing empirical research must make decisions about how to draw boundaries around groups, what to leave in as meaningful data and what to dismiss as unimportant, and how to explain what we think we know to our audiences. These research design decisions, often dismissed as simple logistics, and not often mentioned in ethics discussions will a) influence how people are represented, b) highlight particular findings while dismissing others, c) create ideologically loaded bases of knowledge and eventually c) impact legislation and policy making.

We make choices, consciously or unconsciously, throughout the research process. Simply stated, these choices matter. If we do not grapple with natural and necessary change in research practices our research will not reflect the complexities we strive to understand. Concrete answers are few, but as researchers we must continue to raise the questions.

Practically speaking, this means that the research question and method of collection and analysis must be a good fit; the research methods should reflect a considerable sensitivity to the specifics of the context. Rigor in qualitative interpretation relies on the researcher's ability to be reflexive about choices and, concurrently, flexible in practices.

The challenge for ethical scholarship is to develop research sensibilities that enact reflexive adaptation to the context. To accomplish this, a researcher must constantly ask the most difficult questions about why certain choices are made, how certain choices will impact the outcome, and whether our decisions are honorable to the people we seek to understand and represent to curious others.

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