

Chapter 2

Shadowing Virtual Work Practices: Describing Subjects and Objects as Action Nets

Craig Lee Engstrom
Elmhurst College, USA

ABSTRACT

Without modification, traditional ethnological approaches cannot fully attend to the translocation of practices into and out of virtual spaces. The ethnographer can observe the dislocation of a particular work practice from a specific place when he or she observes a research subject “log on,” but accounting for the translocation of others’ practices into the shared virtual space, which is necessary to conduct hermeneutical (or constitutive) research in virtual environments, remains an elusive methodological practice. In this chapter, interpretive shadowing, as it has recently been described (e.g., Czarniawska, 2007), is offered as one way to address some of the limitations of virtual ethnography. By describing (virtual) action nets vis-à-vis the “hybrid character of actions,” researchers are able to follow subjects and objects as they move through various spaces/places and describe how these actants constitute fields of practices. Drawing upon examples from two years of shadowing research within the field of private investigations, this chapter describes how shadowers can observe both immediate and virtual practices. Specifically, descriptions of how to account for institutional practices that transcend space, place, and time are provided. Though interpretive research is theoretically sound, examples of specific methodological techniques are provided to address some of the technical limitations of the method when using it to study virtual practices.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative inquiry has come of age in human studies research. It is especially fashionable in the fields of communication, sociology, and organization studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lindlof

& Taylor, 2011; Prasad & Prasad, 2002). In *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods*, Christine Hine (2008) notes, “Ethnography has become embedded in academic culture as an appropriate way to explore how people make sense of the possibilities that the Internet offers them” (p. 260). I therefore assume that readers are already

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familiar with the intricacies of conducting qualitative research and writing descriptive, ethnographic accounts. For readers who desire a more thorough introduction to ethnography, there is a healthy amount of scholarship and guides on the subject of conducting and writing qualitative research in and of organizational and virtual environments (see, among other references, Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Loftland, 2007; Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008; Hammersley & Atkins, 1983; Harper, 2000; Hine, 1994; Kozinets, 2009; Markham & Baym, 2008; Neyland, 2007; Prasad, 2005; Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009). Instead of describing how to write ethnographies of virtual work, my goal in this chapter is to describe how to account for virtual work practices that are constitutive of action nets.

Interpretive shadowing, the method described in this chapter, is an amalgam of traditional ethnography, in which “the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 2), and “virtual ethnography” which, according to Hine (2008), “transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the Internet” (p. 257). Other than the fact that shadowing involves following a single person or object for a period of time, rather than studying the practices of a culture, the methods used to collect information and write up interpretations are largely consistent with other forms of qualitative research. The *a priori* assumptions, the types of observations collected, and the analysis of data, however, distinguish *interpretive shadowing of action nets* from other forms of qualitative inquiry.

My contribution to qualitative scholarship on virtual work, and the central purpose of this chapter, is to further legitimize *interpretive shadowing of action nets*, as described by Barbara Czarniawska (2004, 2007, 2008), as an approach to studying work practices that occur, often simultaneously,

in virtual and non-virtual contexts. Drawing upon fieldwork observations of private investigators collected over a two year period (2008-2010) as examples, I demonstrate how neither traditional nor virtual ethnological research can account for, by itself, the *a priori* conditions that make possible professional work and business transactions. In this sense, I argue that interpretive shadowing of action nets—which is characterized more by a particular attitude toward epistemology and ontology than a distinctive methodology—brings together features of traditional and virtual qualitative research in such a way that it overcomes one of the central problems in observational qualitative studies of work in organizational and professional contexts—accounting for the unobserved practices that make up virtual work.

In order to achieve the objective of this chapter, I first explain the limitations of virtual and traditional ethnographies in conducting interpretive research on professionals’ (virtual) work. Second, I provide an account from the field and, by way of analogy, demonstrate why it is important to account for the often “unobserved but noticed” relationships among actants¹ engaged in virtual work. Third, I describe interpretive shadowing and by drawing upon the initial field account, along with other examples, demonstrate how interpretive shadowing of action nets overcomes these methodological shortcomings. In the conclusion, I discuss some of the challenges of this methodology.

A NEED TO BE CREATIVE: LIMITS OF VIRTUAL AND TRADITIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIES OF PROFESSIONALS’ WORK

Virtual ethnography, also frequently referred to as “cyberethnography,” “network ethnography,” or “netnography” (Kozinets, 2009; Wilson, 2002), is a confusing term that has been defined in conflicting and unclear terms (Driscoll & Gregg,

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