Chapter 13
Virtual Matters:
Exploring the Communicative Accomplishment of Virtual Work and Virtual Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Recent research highlights the complexity of virtual work and calls on researchers to examine virtual work as more than simply doing a job, but as negotiating a state of being virtual (Leonardi, Jackson, & Marsh, 2004; Long, 2010). A similar call has been made by virtual ethnographers to move away from cataloguing the differences between virtual ethnographic practices and co-located ethnographic practices and instead reflexively reconsider how and why to conduct a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2005). This chapter responds to both calls by exploring how virtual workers communicatively construct distance not as geographical absence, but as presence (Leonardi, et al., 2004; Broadfoot, Munshi, & Nelson-Marsh, 2010). Based on this knowledge, the chapter then develops a heuristic methodological framework that embraces reflexivity as a starting point and privileges communication as the mode through which virtual work is constituted and through which academics arrive at a deeper understanding of both virtual work and virtual ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars interested in organizing claim that virtual work "fundamentally redefines" the nature of organization (Donaldson & Weiss, 1998, p. 25). Those who aim to understand this fundamental redefinition often begin with the assumption that virtual work is different from co-located work re-sulting in studies that catalogue the characteristics that make virtual work, and virtual organizing, unique (Warner & Witzel, 2004). Scholars interested in methods used to research virtual work also often begin from a position of difference by characterizing the benefits and limitations of using conventional methods as compared with the innovation of new methods for the unique conditions of virtual work (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

Recent scholarship demonstrates the complexity of virtual work (Long, 2010; Leonardi, Treem, & Jackson, 2010; Nelson Marsh, 2006) and calls upon scholars to reflexively reconsider not only the position of difference, but also what we know of virtual work (Long, 2010) and how we research virtual work (Hine, 2000; Hine 2005).

This chapter takes up this call and provides a different starting position that examines the mode through which all organizing (virtual or co-located) and all research (conventional or innovative) occurs: communication. Focusing on communication as a generative mechanism that constitutes virtual work and virtual methods moves away from examining the differences between virtual and co-located work and research practices, to examining what these practices mean and why these practices matter in the context of virtual organizing.

This chapter explores virtual ethnography in particular because, as Hine (2005) notes, "our knowledge of the Internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography. The method and the phenomenon define one another in a relationship of mutual dependence" (p. 8). This chapter argues our knowledge of virtual work as a cultural context is also intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography. In order to reconsider the mutually defining relationship of virtuality and ethnography, Hine proposes the "Sociology of Cyber-Social-Scientific Knowledge" (SCSSK). Hine (2005) notes that SCSSK is "not a catchy term, but worth practicing" for

SCSSK offers the opportunity to seize upon the power of reflexivity to examine methods afresh and to open up possibilities for new designs and approaches…It also prompts us to be wary of the risks of over-asserting difference between virtual methods and their traditional counterparts (p. 9-10).

What Hine conceptualizes, this chapter extends by engaging current controversies in ethnographic

research of virtual work and providing a different kind of methodological framework for the ethnographic study of virtual work.

In order to develop this framework, the chapter emerges in two parts. The chapter will first discuss how recent scholarship that challenges what virtual work means and our knowledge of virtual work based on the experiences of virtual workers (Leonardi, Jackson, & Marsh, 2004). In particular, the chapter discusses how virtual workers construct *distance* to mean *presence* (Broadfoot, Munshi, & Nelson-Marsh, 2010; Hine, 2000; Leonardi, Jackson, & Marsh, 2004). Based on these understandings of virtual work, the chapter then provides a heuristic methodological framework comprised of three constructs that guide researchers in reflexively reconsidering, designing, and conducting virtual ethnographies. These three constructs also emerge as communicative modes of research and include: Identification, Presentation, and Representation. Each mode has two dimensions: a conceptual dimension as a construct and a practical dimension as the construct emerges in various ethnographic practices (both established practices and innovative practices).

In essence, this chapter takes the position that virtuality is a social accomplishment (Miller & Slater, 2000). This chapter extends this idea by focusing on communication as a generative mechanism that enables scholars to produce interesting knowledge about virtual work emphasizing what virtual work and virtual ethnography mean and why virtual work and virtual ethnography matter.

BACKGROUND: VIRTUAL WORK MATTERS

Asking the question "what is different about virtual work" leads researchers down a path of cataloguing characteristics that aid in recognizing virtual work in contrast to more traditional work. However, as Long (2010) emphasizes

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