

Web Site Development in Action Research

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INTRODUCTION: IN AND OUT OF THE FIELD

Ethnography has traditionally involved the sustained presence of an anthropologist in a physically fixed field setting, intensively engaged with the everyday life of the inhabitants of a given site, typically, a village or other small community. Conventional notions of the field, especially in anthropology which has been the premiere field-based discipline (see Amit, 2000; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, 1992), involved basic assumptions of *boundedness* (the field was a strictly delimited physical place); *distance* (the field was “away,” and often very far away as well); *temporality* (one entered the field, stayed for a time, and then left); and *otherness* (a strict categorical and relational distinction between the outsider/ethnographer and the insider/native informant). The key mode of ethnographic engagement in the field was, and is, that of *participant observation*. When the Internet enters into ethnography, and when ethnography acquires an online dimension either in the research process or in the production of the documentary outputs of research, we end up facing a situation that leads us to reconsider relationships between the researchers and those who are researched. This is especially true of collaborative, action research projects that involve researchers and activists producing materials for the Web.

The first reason for reassessing research relationships in projects that result in creating online information resources, with feedback then resulting from information placed online, and where research is conducted exclusively online, stems from the fact that with research products being made visible and publicly accessible (e.g., an Internet-based ethnographic report), the researcher suddenly faces new questions of accountability, in light of feedback from members of the general public and possibly from the members of one’s own host community. Ethnographic accounts, in such a case, are no longer sequestered in specialized library collections, and instead form part of a sometimes vivacious public arena that may be riven with contestation. Second, where ethnographers collaborate with informants, as partners, acting as advocates, and thus coproducing materials for the Web, then once again we are led to reconsider conventional research relationships. Third, where the online extensions of offline fieldwork and collaboration become established features

of the Internet domain, these online platforms may attract new constituencies of interest and debate, spawn new networks, and generate almost unceasing peer review that help to foster an alternate, online, dimension of research that, to use a colloquial phrase, “takes on a life of its own.”

New information technologies have helped to alter expert–novice relations (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 459). The transformations of ethnographic practice that may result from collaborative Web-based and Web-oriented ethnographic research can be summarized as a series of moves from participant observation to *creative observation*, from field entry to *field creation*, and from research with informants to research with *correspondents* and *partners*. Conventional notions surrounding the gathering of data, the production of knowledge, and the social relationships that both mediate research and are the outcome of research, thus undergo enough transformation that it is no longer absolutely clear where knowledge production begins and ends, who the producers are, or when consumers of information begin to act as coproducers of meaning. With these multiple transformations of ethnographic work, ethics, the normative logic governing research relationships, necessarily provoke new concern.

Thus far, little or no attention has been paid to the process of Web site development as a research method with its own specificities, whether in the literature on (traditional or virtual) ethnography, Internet research, or even *action research*. Even though there is increased recognition of the use of information and communication technology as a potentially powerful adjunct to action research processes, there is a vacuum of published studies on the use of action research methods in such projects (O’Brien, 1998). It is not surprising, therefore, that a subdivision of that area of interest—Web site development—would receive even less attention than the area of *online* action research as a whole.

MAKING A QUALITATIVE DIFFERENCE

Anthropologists are still in the process of determining whether or not ethnographies of Internet users raise *new* ethical questions for researcher conduct, with little attention paid to the subject to date. As some have observed,

“the American Anthropological Association offers no ethical protocols or standards specific to online interactions in its Code of Ethics” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 461). What Wilson and Peterson (2002, pp. 461, 456) argue is that the online world is embedded in the offline world from which it emerged and is subject to its rules and norms, including codes of ethics developed in standard research settings. The primary ethical concerns laid out in the AAA’s Code of Ethics (1998) essentially reduce to norms that can be summarized as no harm, anonymity (unless waived), and consent. This constitutes what may be called a conservative approach to the question of relationships pertaining to online research.

However, different perspectives have been articulated, emphasizing the qualitative differences of Internet research. The Internet raises an array of concerns that traditional *fieldwork* did not. For example, undertaking research in cyberspace poses, “a greater risk to the privacy and confidentiality of human subjects than does conducting research in other contexts” (Young, 2001, p. A52). Jacobson (1999, p. 127) concurs: “questions about the identifiability of human subjects, the conceptualization of privacy, the need for and means of obtaining informed consent, and the applicability of copyright law to computer-mediated communication (CMC) pose special problems for doing research in cyberspace.” We might refer to these perspectives as those of moderate dissent, focusing on the unique and substantive challenges of online research, and raising new ethical questions.

A third approach, differing from the two above, does not directly refute, but instead stresses collaborative patterns of research that bridge offline and online areas of activity in ways that render some established ways of posing ethical questions as less than adequate. Ethnographic research that is applied and collaborative in nature becomes action research, where researchers and their partners are now engaged in a deliberate *co-construction* of the public expressions of research. The methodology and its attendant relationships are significantly different from the traditional fieldwork model of the scientific taker and the native giver of information. While conventional vertical research relationships are diminished in favor of more lateral ones, issues raised by the moderate dissenters concerning identifiability, risk, and privacy are also substantially transformed and left open to ongoing negotiation. Questions of anonymity, as just one example, might prove redundant within the context of a particular culture, or given the quest for visibility and recognition that is likely to surface for ethnographers working as advocates with communities engaged in public campaigns.

The bulk of prevailing discussions of Internet research ethics are concerned with synchronous modes of

communication (typically chat), or more dynamic forms of asynchronous communication (such as e-mail), with much less attention paid to Web site development and research using Web pages. The focus here then will be on the co-construction of Web-based research expressions, based on a published case study of an anthropologist working with indigenous communities in the Caribbean in both offline and online field settings (see Forte, 2003, 2002).

FIELD CREATION AND CO-CONSTRUCTION

Field creation involves the construction of a Web-based information resource that fosters a community of interacting interests. This resource then becomes a site of research in its own right. The process of field creation in many ways inverts conventional offline anthropological fieldwork, a type of fieldwork to which the concept of field creation implicitly refers. In the process of field creation, the researcher also becomes an informant to his or constituency of “users,” fielding questions from a wide public audience; the “site” is created by the researcher; and “informants” might now more accurately serve as “contacts” and “correspondents,” while those whom we used to call informants may also be acting as researchers in their own right. Trust and rapport are also transformed by these changed research relationships, not necessarily developing into “friendship,” but certainly entailing a form of collegiality in most cases. Indeed, where the field that has been created involves a number of partners (e.g., scholars and activists), negotiating and planning new online documentary products, in constant dialogue with a clientele of engaged and personally interested “visitors,” it is not difficult to appreciate how field creation can result in the making of what some term “invisible colleges” (Garton et al., 1997). Participant observation is still a pertinent concept, except that in having helped to produce a site that generates community-like ties, the participant observer stands in relation to his or her work as a creative observer, now part of the foreground and out of the background.

Co-construction is a relatively straightforward concept as it is used here, readily applicable to any research process that involves advocacy or action research, resulting in an information resource that is the result of collaborative work between the researcher and the researched. Informants *qua* partners are no longer the objects of study whose constructions are simply analyzed and dissected by academic analysts. In co-construction, both those once termed informants and those classed as researchers work on research together and jointly produce a community’s self-representations. The

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