



New Avenues for Sociological Inquiry: Evolving Forms of Ethnographic Practice

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ABSTRACT

This work examines evolving forms of ethnographic practice generated in response to advances in mediated communication. It chronicles phases in the transformation of offline ethnography, beginning with pioneering virtual ethnographies concerned with identity work and deception. Subsequently, analysis illuminates cyberethnographic redefinitions of traditional methodological concerns including fieldwork, participant observation, and text as data. It concludes with an examination of current cyberethnographic practice. The work closes with the argument that the methodological adaptations made by ethnographers indicate the increasing salience of mediated communication in the social world. The research sheds light not only on issues connected to methodology but invites larger methodological and ethical questions that will grow ever more pressing as the information revolution continues to unfold. We suggest that just as ethnographic practice continues to benefit from its encounter with mediated communication, so will other forms of sociological practice be enriched from engagement with new media.

KEY WORDS

ethnography / internet / new media

Qualitative sociology has been well served by traditions of ethnographic fieldwork over the last century. Over time, ethnographers have redefined and reworked their methodological toolkits to examine a variety of fieldsites in the physical world. With the advent of computer-mediated communication

(CMC), however, ethnographers are pushing the boundaries of fieldwork even further. In this work, we examine the contributions made by the cyberethnographers who have met the challenges of studying emergent mediated fieldsites. In covering this territory, we probe the analytical frameworks deployed by successive waves of cyberethnographers and the associated methodological implications. Our goal is not to present cyberethnographic inquiry as a static achievement, but as ongoing reflective methodological advances keeping pace with rapidly changing CMC.

We find that since its emergence in the mid 1990s, the ethnographic study of online communication and virtual communities has constituted its object of study and its methods in different ways as the internet itself has been continually reshaped by different user populations, fieldsites, and interactive possibilities. More specifically, we detail different phases in the growth of cyberethnographic inquiry organized under approaches that we identify as *pioneering*, *legitimizing*, and *multi-modal*.

Regarding pioneering ethnographies, initial forays into the brave new virtually constituted world were largely marked by cyberethnographers who represented online interaction and identity performances as qualitatively different from those taking place in the offline world. Based on early adopter user populations and a narrow range of interactional venues, these first studies conceptualized new media as offering a space of identity play and deception. Drawn to social environments where individuals interacted through textually mediated identity performances, these ethnographers seized on the possibilities that MUD (multi-user domain) platforms offered for the construction of experimental identities specific to the online world. Focusing on online environments where individuals created highly revisable kinds of identities, these ethnographers often concentrated their efforts on the schism between online and offline realities.

However, this emphasis on identity experimentation soon shifted into efforts to legitimize offline fieldwork into new media spaces to keep pace with the rapid growth and transformation of both internet user populations and the evolution of cyberfieldsites. In contrast to those before them, legitimizing cyberethnographers underscored the unity and cohesiveness between online and offline interaction and identity projects. This wave of cyberethnographers was concerned with translating offline methodology to online practice. Highlighting the elements that online and offline ethnographies have in common with one another, these ethnographers insisted on the continuity between the techniques and analytical frameworks of traditional ethnography and ethnography of social life in online environments. Endorsing a vision of the cyberfield as part of a flow between online and offline realities, these cyberethnographers equipped themselves with analytically and methodologically sophisticated tools that were well adapted to the unique structural properties of the virtual world. In so doing, they crafted the central underpinnings of much of virtual ethnography we know today.

The article closes with an analysis of current cyberethnographic practice with an eye to the rapidly changing nature of mediated interaction. Cyberethnography's continuous evolution is examined to shed light on how ethnographers in the field

are tackling the latest waves of multi-modal mediated communication. We chart ongoing debates in the field in light of emergent technological modalities. We conclude the analysis by considering the implications of emergent technologies for ethnographic methods and ethics. Charting cyberethnography's constant evolution, the article closes with an evaluation of internet fieldwork, highlighting the necessity of increased sociological engagement in an era of accelerating mediated communication.

Pioneering Cyberethnographies

In the early 1990s, the idea of virtual disembodied fieldwork without physical co-presence presented a radical challenge to traditional notions of ethnography. We begin with a discussion of pioneering cyberethnographies from the early and mid 1990s that relied on the concept of decentred identities and textual interaction in the absence of physical co-presence. This initial wave of cyberethnographic research was largely marked by two key characteristics of the internet in its early stages of development: technophile user populations and gaming fieldsites. In the mid 1990s, internet user populations were far less diverse than they are today. Comprised largely of white, technically sophisticated, highly educated, males, early adopters of the world wide web were reflective of an economically privileged technical elite (Kendall, 1996). Pioneering cyberethnographers conducted fieldwork amongst this particular techno-centric population, whose main online activities surrounded gaming and role-playing.

Many of the first cyberethnographers examined these fieldsites among respondents who invested considerable time and energy creating alternate lives for themselves in these virtual social environments. Reflecting the state of the internet through the late 1990s, pioneering ethnographic work examined early internet activities revolving around role-playing games in MUDs. Fascinated by the emergent forms of social interaction that engendered a complex relationship between users' real-life identities and their online 'personas', early cyberethnographers largely examined MUDers who treated their forays into the online environment not as extensions of their real-world lives, but as liberating alternatives and substitutes for the aspects of their identities (Baym, 1998).

The first wave of literature surrounding these new forms of communication by and large presented CMC as a form of identity play in which a narrowly defined population engaged. Due to the prevalence of cyberfieldsites centred on gaming and fantasy identity production, many of the first cyberethnographers focused on users predisposed to treat their online identities and interactions as a kind of 'play' or 'game'. Early cyberethnographers conducted their work amidst utopian discourses, declaring that online individuals could create multiphrenic personas, enjoy experiences that eluded them in the physical world, or experiment with deviant identities and modes of behaviour that would exact prohibitive social or economic costs in the offline world (Wertheim, 1999). While Turkle's respondents largely framed the offline world as a constricting

space that lacked many of the 'selfing' possibilities available in the online world (1995), Rheingold emphasized the ways users pretended to be 'somebody else' or even 'several different people at the same time' (1993: 151).

The prominence of identity discontinuity in ludic virtual spaces had important implications in defining the analytic object of cyberethnographic inquiry. Classifying virtual communication as synonymous with role-playing activities centring on 'identity play', pioneering cyberethnographers cast online environments as special interactional loci that appealed to users experimenting with identity-creating possibilities afforded by new media (Stone, 1995). Equipped with this master framing, early cyberethnographers foregrounded the elective affinity between online environments and ludic kinds of identities and relationships based on dissolved social and identity boundaries.

Like the individuals they studied, early cyberethnographers conceptualized the analytic object of ethnography in terms of online environments as an alternate 'reality' (Turkle, 1995: 204) where individuals could reinvent themselves in whatever manner they pleased. Exploring intentional identities created by individuals using MUDs and other online platforms, they argued that in virtual spaces 'magic is real and identity is fluid' (Rheingold, 1993: 149). Highlighting the success with which many MUD users deceived other users as to 'real-life' identities, early cyberethnographers focused on identity swapping and mixing in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Their work emphasized the theme of identity deception on unwary users, the analysis of how MUD participants enjoyed misrepresenting their offline identities, and even the impersonation of other participants or fictitious characters (Stone, 1995).

In keeping with the prevalent kinds of social interaction and available field-sites, in the case of cyberethnography's constitution of its analytic object, the initial wave of studies took an exoticizing perspective on this novel interactional realm. This angle of vision was further compounded by the primacy of text, which was yet another factor bolstering the perceived disjuncture between online and offline identities and realities. Early websites were designed to process primarily textual inputs and outputs such that the majority of virtual interactions were without other visual or aural cuing systems. Pioneering cyberethnographers argued that participants, limited to a purely textual mode of self-presentation, were free from the constraints imposed by their physical embodiment (Donath, 1999). In keeping with this conceptual goal, prominent early researchers generally took methodological approaches that celebrated the multi-phrenic virtual self and underscored its divorce from the offline self as the object of ethnographic inquiry. Relying on accounts from informants, fieldwork was defined as an 'experiment with an alternative to quasi-anthropological storytelling' (Stone, 1995: 189).

For this reason, many foundational works relied on constant comparison between offline and online identities. Turkle and Correll used what we term a *verificationist* approach to differentiate between identities online and offline by conducting fieldwork in both worlds. Assuming that online and offline selfing were qualitatively different ways of being and interacting, verification of 'real' identities in the offline world was essential. Turkle interviewed informants face-to-face

in order to verify their offline identities (1995). Correll conducted participant observation in an online 'bar' for self-identified lesbians that she complemented with face-to-face interviews. Examining how online space, sequestered from the wider society, could be experienced as liberating spaces for expression of 'true' selves, Correll illuminated online and offline identity schisms for those who could not disclose 'true' identities in the offline world, but rather felt compelled to produce intentional identities for offline public consumption to avoid stigmatization (Correll, 1995: 287).

Legitimizing Cyberethnographies

By the late 1990s the internet user base became more representative of larger offline populations, *and* normative cyberactivities expanded far beyond sites centred on identity play and gaming. In response to these shifts, cyberethnographers shifted their focus away from the primacy of identity deception; increasingly they focused on emergent populations and fieldsites in which online identities were extensions of the offline self (Robinson, 2007). This wave of forward-looking cyberethnographers presupposed that there was an essential continuity between off- and online identities, which we call the *integrationist* perspective. They argued that this analytic perspective was the inspiration for translating offline methods to conduct fieldwork in online spaces. The body of their work made methodological advances which form the cornerstone of much of what we know today as cyberethnography.

Markham's pivotal ethnography *Life Online* (1998) was conducted entirely in cyberspace with informants espousing an integrationist rather than a segmentalist perspective across online and offline domains of interaction. Seeing them as essentially coterminous and continuous realms of social interaction and identity performance, her respondents enacted a single transrealm identity; refusing to identify with their online personas as separate identities, they incorporated offline proclivities and tendencies in online identity performances. Significantly, Markham's key informants framed text-based CMC as an instrument to be used alongside other modes of communication and information conveyance in parallel manner across online and offline realms.

This shift towards integrationism or the interpenetration of offline and online identities and relationships was also central to Kendall's (2002) classic BlueSky ethnography. Kendall's respondents sought to align their self-presentations in the two realms by bringing their offline selves to their online interactions, sharing details of their offline lives with other users and expecting the same disclosures in return (2002). Significantly, although BlueSky was patronized mainly by white-collar professional men in their late twenties and early thirties, role playing and identity games were discouraged and sanctioned by members of the online community who policed members' conduct. Of note, while Kendall's study examined users similar to classic early adopter populations, her respondents' construction of coterminous online and offline identities pointed to a

significant shift in conceptualizations of the cyberethnographic project. The fact that these individuals were eager to extend their relationships with fellow BlueSky members into the offline world (2002: 165) indicates the enormous shift effacing a dividing line between online and offline experience.

This integrationist perspective was also critical to Carter's ethnography of the transnational virtual community, *Cybertown* (2004), in which a majority of informants treated the online and offline realms as continuous and interrelated rather than self-contained and autonomous. Just as many of Carter's respondents sustained relationships that spanned the divide between the online and offline realms, they also crafted high-fidelity online identities that matched their offline identities. Even more important, Carter explicitly counterposed her findings to the findings of pioneering cyberethnographers and rejected their vision of the online world as a domain in which interactants created identities and relationships wholly unlike the identities and relationships prevailing in the offline world of embodied and geographically located social actors.

This second wave of legitimizing cyberethnographers began transforming offline methods to explore these new interactive spaces. Repudiating pioneering ethnographers' vision of cyberfieldsites as alternate realities, legitimizing cyberethnographers validated virtual fieldwork by connecting it to larger ethnographic practices. They forged these linkages by redefining central concepts including 'fieldsite', 'participant observation', and 'interaction'. Emphasizing ethnography's need to keep pace with evolving social practices, they argued that offline methods had to be 'aggressively and imaginatively reinterpreted to meet the needs of the present' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1998: 40).

Reconceptualizing the cyberfieldsite, legitimizers declared that going to the virtual field was based on experiential rather than physical displacement (Hine, 2000). Taking inspiration from definitions of fieldsites as 'where it takes place' or observing behaviour as it 'naturally occurs' (Emerson, 1983: 1), they made the case for cyberspace as a legitimate fieldsite. Legitimizers argued that the central linchpin of cyberethnography was the method of conducting fieldwork through participant observation rather than the arena in which the fieldwork was conducted (Gutpa and Ferguson, 1998). Cyberethnographers repeatedly defined participation observation in virtual fieldsites as the ethnographer's engagement via firsthand observation. They reasoned that both on- and offline, participant observation's central goal is engagement with informants resulting in understanding members' perceptions (Miller and Slater, 2000). Cyberethnographers posited that participant observation in virtual fieldsites allowed them to acquire expertise about the rules governing behaviour, regulations, and sociality within a fieldsite (Markham, 1998), including communities' norms, shared social practices, value systems, and commitment that create a shared sense of identity.

In order to make these linkages between on- and offline participant observation, cyberethnographers described being socialized into the ongoing world of their informants in order to understand how participants appropriated virtual communities' rules of interaction, netiquette, language, ritual, and punishment (Baym, 1998). Recognizing differences between offline world understandings

of cyberspace and members' perceptions, cyberethnographers bolstered their reconceptualization of virtual participant observation by relying on members' definitions of fieldsites as 'real' communities: '... people in the offline world tend to see online communities as virtual, but ... participants in the online communities see them as quite real' (Watson, 1997: 126). Repeatedly, cyberethnographers cited ethnography's emphasis on members' meanings as validation of a 'real' fieldsite in which to conduct participant observation: '... if we log on, form relationships in cyberspace... it is real for us' (Fernback, 1999).

Further, cyberethnographers coupled their defence of virtual fieldsites and participant observation with a final argument defining text as interaction. In offline participant observation, the ethnographer witnesses a host of cues via what Goffman termed 'face engagement' in which individuals provide interaction partners with a rich array of verbal and bodily cues signalling meanings, intentions, and social identities (1959). With the advent of text-mediated online systems designed to facilitate many-to-many contact via text, and the consequent inaccessibility of many face engagement cues parallel to those in the offline world, cyberethnographers had to substantiate that participant observation of face engagement and shared social practices could occur via text. They asserted that virtual text is both the data and medium through which participant observation is conducted (Cavanagh, 1999). By reframing text as observable interaction, cyberethnography was predicated on a process by which members and informants took on part of the ethnographer's task by translating their own experiences into textual form. Cyberethnographers claimed that where in the offline world the ethnographer must translate the fieldsite into fieldnotes or text, online members took on the ethnographer's task by translating the offline range of interactive cuing mechanisms into textual format.

Significantly, they argued that cyberethnographic practice produces one fewer lens of distortion because the text is the interaction that is recorded verbatim as data (Hine, 2000). Drawing on the larger historical trajectory of ethnography, they reasoned that rather than creating additional distance between subject and researcher, cyberethnography's reliance on text written by informants actually moved the cyberethnographic project closer to foundational ethnographic practices. They referenced Chicago School ethnographers' gathering of texts written by members in their own words, which allowed respondents to directly convey their own meanings and experiences (Emerson, 1983). For cyberethnographers, these offline methodological conceits set an important precedent for using text written by members to understand their own meanings without the intervening lens of the researcher.

Multi-modal Ethnographies

We now turn to current practice in which non-textual interaction is challenging cyberethnographic analysis of new kinds of visual and aural data. Known as Web 2.0, today's internet relies on multi-modal fieldsites where cyberethnographers

are grappling with the methodological tools necessary to examine visual, aural, and other non-text outputs. Emergent virtual environments are increasingly marked by user-driven content and creative production via image, video, and sound, as well as by convergence of multiple communication technologies. Today's cyberethnographers are training their analytic gaze on visual and aural data on sites such as Second Life, in which users build their own environments (Boellstorff, 2008), and YouTube, in which participants can post videos and rate others' creative production as shown by Baumer's study of how youth engage in YouTube as a form of political engagement to critique the Iraq War (2007).

Thus, just as legitimizing cyberethnographers recognized the necessity of constituting the object of their analysis in a variety of ways, today's cyberethnographers acknowledge that the internet's constant evolution necessitates continual reassessment of fieldwork methods. Significantly, many such cyberethnographers engage in participant observation as active content producers. For them, learning how to produce aural and visual data is necessary to understand participants' experiences. Lange's ethnography of YouTube examined how video creators negotiate public and private space via video, text, and live meet-ups (2007) for which she created and posted her own videos. While earlier cyberethnographies (Hakken, 1999) discussed the need to study up to engage in participant observation, ethnographers like Lange are literally learning a body of technical expertise to participate in creative production as participant observation.

In addition, some might expect the dissemination of cyberethnographic findings to follow seminal ethnographies of art (Becker, 1982; Halle, 1993), in which a selection of visual data is reproduced with text in traditional publication format. However, those engaged in rich multi-modal fieldsites are questioning the viability of traditional modes of dissemination of both results and primary data. Many advocate the use of multi-media platforms such as websites and DVDs to deliver content-rich ethnographic analyses (Pink, 2007). Lange's fieldwork and dissemination of findings push these boundaries further. She has created her own video blogging research site, *anthrovlog.com*, where she provides open fieldnotes to the public and invites them to comment on her work as a means to disseminate ethnographic knowledge.

Moreover, cyberethnographers are paying increasing attention to how online interaction generates physical co-presence or activities in the offline world. Humphreys examines the Dodgeball site, which allows individuals to organize offline meet-ups in the physical world for social events (2007). Others have examined virtual economic communities such as eBay that facilitate the offline exchange of goods as the outcome of mediated interaction (Robinson, 2006). Increasingly, cyberethnographers argue that it is often inappropriate to examine online communication in isolation because face-to-face and mediated interaction do not take place in dichotomous realms that obey totally different logics. In point of fact, physical face-to-face interactions and virtual interactions are but two possibilities among other forms of mediated communication including, but not limited to, cell phones, texting, and video conferencing, as well as the traditional landline telephone or snail mail (Horst and Miller, 2006). In her

work on technology convergence and interaction, Pascoe (2007) explored how youth 'do' identity and emotional work through mediated technology, including cell phones, texting, and instant messaging, often alongside face-to-face interaction. Schoneboom analysed multiple modes of communication used by anonymous workbloggers who write about their offline workplace experiences; she finds that the personal blogger typically foregrounds his or her 'real life' as the context and main theme of his or her online diary (2007).

Evolving Ethical Concerns

A final note concerns ethical issues in online fieldwork. While legitimizing cyberethnographers recognized that gathering data from new media venues had important ethical implications, their concerns continue to be compounded by multi-modal Web 2.0. Both on- and offline ethnographers face a host of ethical decisions regarding the conditions and frequency with which they disclose their status as researchers. However, online 'lurking' often allows ethnographers in many virtual spaces to remain 'invisible' without clear codes on how to signal to participants that they are under observation. Definitions of 'lurking' and 'lurkers' are context-dependent such that cyberethnographers must be aware of subjects' definitions of public and private space to make these decisions (Cavanagh, 1999).

Further they must be sensitive to issues of bandwidth and browser reproductions. Although cyberethnographers may announce their status, differences between website platforms mean that such announcements will vary in visibility. If the cyberethnographer uses a video post to announce her presence, those with slower connection speeds may not download her announcement. Even with text, if postings occur in real time and the interactional thread moves quickly enough, the cyberethnographer's announcement can rapidly fall off the active page and be inaccessible to entering participants. Given such constraints, in addition to announcing initial arrival, cyberethnographers must also remind newcomers of their presence in case they miss the original message signalling entry. Although there are no clear answers to these questions online or offline, the Association of Internet Researchers began to address these concerns and published recommendations on its website (Ess and AoIR, 2002).

Equally important, because of the replicability of online data, ethical concerns acquire even more weight when published as ethnographic evidence. Unlike spoken data that most often has no publicly accessible permanent record in the offline world, certain online venues house all interactions in perpetuity. Although concerns centred on text were originally introduced by legitimizing ethnographers, many of these issues are increasingly valid with video and images (Mackay, 2005). If an ethnographer harvests textual data from such a fieldsite and quotes respondents verbatim, it is theoretically possible for any reader to find the real identity of the person quoted thanks to sophisticated search engine technologies (Hine, 2000). Equally important, for ethnographers using web images or video data, there are very real ethical concerns in reproducing multi-media formats that

potentially disclose personal identities. This concern is especially grave for youth engaging in new media production or at-risk populations that may not realize the consequences of making personal information publicly available on the web. Thus, when recording and publishing data, the researcher is obliged to find out if the archives are preserved online or updated periodically, leaving no record accessible to the public, in order to resolve these issues on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, Web 2.0 introduces another ethical twist. The arguments above often assume that the researcher is in a position of power vis-a-vis subjects. However, Lange's work indicates how multi-modal Web 2.0 produces fieldwork in which the researcher may now be subject to respondents who reproduce the fieldworker's personal identity: 'Although many human subjects protocols are set up with the assumption that the researcher alone records and analyses materials, in fact in the video blogging community the power of recording and distribution may exceed that of any individual researcher' (2007: 5). In the course of her fieldwork on video bloggers, Lange's picture was taken without her knowledge and posted to Flickr, an online photo site, without her consent:

... they have the power to capture events I attend and put the images on the Internet. They can identify me, disclose personal information, and manipulate my image without my even knowing it ... 'data' was collected on me, as my interactions were documented in photographs (and possibly also video) and distributed globally ... (2007: 4)

Lange was put in a position of comparative powerlessness when respondents were able to record and reproduce her image and identity at will because of new media technologies. As she explains, 'Ironically, the more I sought to control my image, the less control I actually had' (2007: 4). As this indicates, ethical concerns must be re-examined in light of new technologies for both subjects and researchers alike.

Discussion: The Salience of Mediated Communication

This article chronicles the history of cyberethnography from its pioneering examination of early user populations to today's Web 2.0, showing how cyberethnographers are continually adapting to new mediated fieldsites. Pioneering ethnography's goal was not to make linkages between online and offline ethnographic practice, but to uncover the centrality of identity play and deception that separated online and offline realities. Given this analytic object, early cyberethnographers focused on uncovering the types of interaction visible in MUDs and other text-based platforms where individuals could indulge their desire to experiment with identities via text. Collectively, their work grappled with new media's promises of liberation from the physical body, assuming the anonymity of the MUD environment and the cue-poverty of purely textual self-presentations.

However, as user populations evolved and the breadth of online activities increased, subsequent cyberethnographers rejected postmodern framings of the internet as engendering alternate realities. Rather, succeeding cyberethnographers

struggled against theoretical presuppositions that framed online interaction and selves as fundamentally different from interaction in the offline world. These legitimizing ethnographers sought to transform offline methodological practice to online venues. Grappling with the challenges posed by text-based fieldsites, they emphasized emergent definitions of the field, participant observation, and text as interaction. In so doing, their work adapted offline ethnographic practice to the constraints and possibilities afforded by digital fieldsites, forming the cornerstone of much of what we know as cyberethnographic practice.

Current multi-modal cyberethnographic practice is tackling a new set of questions and issues as the user-driven wave of Web 2.0 pushes the evolution of the internet forward. Today cyberethnographers' efforts are directed towards sites relying on the convergence of multiple communication technologies and the surge of image, video, and sound modalities. In addition, as phenomena originating in the online world increasingly spill into the offline world, cyberethnographers are addressing multi-modal interactive flows generated by the increased complexity of interactive communications. Finally, cyberethnographers continue to confront ethical issues as they experiment with new modes of knowledge dissemination. Yet even the novelty of these propositions will likely fade as each subsequent surge of information technology becomes another taken-for-granted part of everyday life.

While digital inequality remains a significant concern, today's fieldsites host increasingly diverse populations in terms of race, class, and gender (Robinson, 2009). So although mediated communication may still seem exotic to some, in point of fact it is an increasingly quotidian phenomenon that must not be ignored by the sociological community. In many developed countries, by 2007 a majority of households had access to the internet: UK (66.4%), Australia (75.9%), and the US (71.7%) (Internet World Statistics, 2007). Significant proportions of such populations engage in mediated communication on a weekly or even daily basis (Horrigan, 2007). The penetration of the internet to a critical mass of these populations has occurred far faster than any previous form of mass communication including the telegraph, radio, telephone, and television (UCLA Internet Report, 2004).

As our analysis indicates, in fewer than 15 years, the growth of the internet has prompted ethnographers to adapt their analytic objects and methods. In this relatively short span of time, the field of cyberethnographic inquiry has undergone phases of methodological evolution and reformulation. From pioneering ethnographers taking on the challenges of disembodied identity work, to legitimizing ethnographers illuminating the semantic possibilities of textual interaction, today's cyberethnographers are tackling another set of challenges accompanying multi-modal Web 2.0. Looking forward, it is likely that each wave of technological change will precipitate fresh analytical frameworks and methodological adaptation.

In reviewing the rapid evolution within a single methodological tradition, we have shed light on the vital importance of sociological inquiry in this domain. While advocating the particular strengths of cyberethnography with its reliance on participant observation suited to teasing apart interactional norms

regarding online and offline practices, we also believe that practitioners of all sociological methodologies must take on similar challenges. In examining the future of our field collectively, sociologists must recognize the continually evolving character of mediated communication in the internet age. We must acknowledge the importance of methodological and analytical innovations in helping researchers come to terms with the rapidly changing nature of communication in our time. Far from creating an alternate reality as envisioned by pioneering cyberethnographers, today new media have very real consequences in producing the intersubjective reality that we jointly inhabit with one another. In both positive and negative ways, new media are increasingly and undeniably central to the way we communicate as individuals and collectivities, whether in response to the mundane or in reaction to the extraordinary.

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