For an ethnography to the internet: changes and new challenges

Por uma etnografia para a internet: transformações e novos desafios

Interview with CHRISTINE HINE*

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CHRISTINE HINE IS full professor at the Department of Sociology of the University of Surrey, Great Britain. Hine was president of the European Association for Studies on Science and Technology from 2004 to 2008. She has publications regarding methodology of internet research, with a particular focus on ethnography, including the books *Virtual ethnography*, *Virtual methods* and, more recently, *Ethnography for the internet.*

In September 2015, professor Hine participated in the *International seminary ethnography and media consumption: new tendencies and methodological challenges,* which took place at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (Fluminense Federal University), where the invitation to an interview for **MATRIZes** was made.

In her observations, Christine Hine updates some of the main discussions presented in her first works, speaks of the new challenges brought on by an internet that permeates the day-to-day life of the contemporary individuals, talks a little about her impressions on internet usage in Brazil and offers valuable advice to those who are beginning their studies in this field.

MATRIZes: When you published the book *Virtual ethnography* (2000) you proposed that there are two ways of viewing the Internet: as culture and as a cultural artefact. Do you think that this clear division is still useful?

Christine Hine: Back in 2000 I made a strategic decision to highlight two interlinked aspects of the Internet that I felt were important to take into

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DOI:http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v9.i2p.167-173

account when developing a methodological approach to understanding the Internet. The first aspect, Internet as culture, emphasised that the Internet was a cultural site where people were taking part in interactions and activities that mattered to them on some level, and should thus also matter to social science. At that time we were just emerging from a widely held perception, both within and outside academia, that online activities were in some way too restricted to count as *real* social activities. It was important to stake the claim for the socio-cultural significance of online events, although without assuming that we could predict what form those activities would take or what exactly their socio-cultural significance would be. The second aspect that I chose to highlight, Internet as cultural artefact, arose from my roots in Science and Technology Studies. Within this field, we are sensitised to the idea that technologies are intrinsically social – STS argues that our experiences and expectations on technologies are shaped by social processes that help these technologies to make sense for specific groups of people. At the time that I was writing, a considerable amount of discussion about the Internet was happening both face-to-face and within the mass media, and it seemed important to stress that this wider circulation of ideas on what the Internet was for was helping to shape what people did with the Internet and what its usage meant to them. This distinction works as a useful heuristic device, to remind us to take into account what happens online, in its own terms, and the wider circulations and re-interpretations of online activities across other cultural domains. These two aspects of the Internet are, however, not to be taken as separable in any clear-cut fashion – each feeds into the other.

Coming forwards in time to look at the contemporary Internet, I think the heuristic separation is still useful to remind us of the complex processes of social shaping that make the Internet what it is. However, the Internet is increasingly becoming not particularly meaningful to people as a cultural artefact that they feel comfortable discussing. The Internet still exists as a cultural artefact in some debates, but more often than they talk about the Internet, people will be talking about specific social networking sites or apps that are topical to them for some reason. We have increasingly lost sight of the Internet as a cultural artefact as it becomes the unspoken infrastructure that facilitates the platforms that we do talk about more often.

MATRIZes: Since the launch of that book (*Virtual ethnography*) fifteen years ago, Internet has changed a lot. One could argue that it became more social and more connected. Did these changes have an impact in the way we do ethnography on the Internet? If so, in which respect?

Hine: I would use the term "embedding" to capture the nature of this shift. No single development drove this change, but factors promoting it include: the tendency for social networking sites to be used to communicate with people that we know through other means; the normalisation of e-commerce as a means to buy just about anything; the increasing reliance of government and institutions on databases and digital transactions, not as an alternative to other ways of conducting business, but as an indispensable component of doing business at all; the advent of widespread access to mobile Internet through smartphones and ubiquitous Wi-Fi.

1. *Embedding*, no original (N. do T.).

All of these inter-linking factors have led us to an Internet which is now, much more than in the 1990s, thoroughly embedded in core aspects of daily life for many (but significantly, of course, not all) of the population. The extent of this embedding offers up a challenge for ethnographic approaches to the Internet. Now, even more than ever, it becomes difficult to justify the *a priori* separation of the Internet as a free-standing online field site. Many research questions that we wish to ask require us to explore cultural dynamics beyond a single online space, to find the other cultural sites within which those online activities are embedded and acquire significance. It was always like this, to some extent – the culture/cultural artefact dynamic that I discussed before meant that we were always making a somewhat artificial cut if we chose to study a single online space as a field site. Now, however, it has become even harder to justify those online-only studies, in many cases.

MATRIZes: In your latest book, *Ethnography for the internet* (2015), you hardly used the epithet *virtual*, as it was the case in some of your previous works, such as *Virtual ethnography* (2000) or *Virtual methods* (2005). Is there a reason for this? Related to this issue, does it make sense to use epithets such as *online* (ethnography), *virtual* (ethnography) or even *net*(nography) as a way of differing from traditional ethnography?

Hine: *Virtual* was an useful shorthand to signal to a wider community of researchers all struggling to find solutions to similar issues revolving around our ability to make sense of the Internet, and to some extent this is still true: the word forms a rallying point to bring together people with similar interests and to capture some connected concerns. However, I do find it increasingly unhelpful in the light of the embedded Internet that we now experience, and the increasing difficulty of separating out studies that involve the Internet from other kinds of ethnography. If using one of the common epithets *online*, *virtual* or *net* implies that this is, in some way, a fundamentally different kind of ethnography, then I would rather avoid it. I see continuity in methodolog-

ical principles between the forms of ethnography that we might apply to the Internet and the forms we would use in any other cultural domain, although some of the techniques might differ. I don't think that using a distinct epithet for ethnography involving the Internet is particularly helpful, if it fosters a separation from the methodological principles of ethnography more generally.

MATRIZes: In *Ethnography for the internet* (2015) you propose that Internet should be understood as an embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon (the E3 Internet). Could you explain what do you mean by that and how to use this approach in the construction of an investigative strategy?

Hine: Although, as I said, I don't wish to strongly demarcate ethnography involving the Internet from other forms of ethnography, it is true to say that applying an ethnographic approach to the Internet does entail some particular kinds of creativity to be able to drill down into the ways in which online activities make sense. Ethnographers are adaptive people who develop their methods in response to the settings that they find themselves in, and each study is thus unique in its approach. It is, though, important to learn from one another, and we can often take some inspiration from approaches that work in other similar settings. The three *Es* identify aspects of the Internet that aligned with particular methodological strategies within some ethnographic studies that I conducted that each in some way connected online and offline, and tried to work out how the Internet made sense. By identifying some very broad characteristics of the Internet as I encountered it, and connecting them with methodological strategies, I hoped to provide other ethnographers with a framework for identifying approaches that might be useful to them.

The embedded Internet acquires its meaning in the contexts within which it is embedded. The multiple and indeterminate connections between online and offline, and the diverse frames of meaning-making that we use to make sense of what happens online, often prompt us to consider mobile, connective and multi-sited notions of the field. They also prompt reflection on the responsibility that the fieldworker takes for crafting their own unique object of study by choosing some aspects of the embedded Internet to study above others.

The embodied Internet emphasises that we use the Internet as socially situated beings, subject to various constraints on our actions, and responding with emotions, as we forge a very individualised perspective on the Internet through the particular links we follow and sites we encounter. This aspect of the Internet encourages reflexive and auto-ethnographic approaches that focus on how it feels to navigate the varied social textures of experience across

different media, and that reflect on the extent to which the ethnographer's experience can give us insight into unspoken aspects of the experience of those whom we study.

The everyday Internet highlights the tendency of the Internet (and individual online platforms) to be treated as an unremarked infrastructure for much of the time, and only rarely topicalized for explicit discussion. It can be very useful for the ethnographer to take a critical perspective on both the unremarked, everyday Internet and the topicalized Internet. What do we take for granted when we cease to notice the Internet in our lives? In what occasions and moments do we discuss the Internet: who is representing the Internet to whom, and to what end?

MATRIZes: Do you think it is possible (or desirable) to mix methods of big data analyses with ethnography? If so, how?

Hine: It is certainly possible to combine methods, and I think it's often desirable too. There are now so many ways to aggregate and visualize online data that it seems almost perverse for ethnographers not to do so. After all, these methods are not alien in the tradition of ethnography, which has often juxtaposed a rich and evocative account with a map or a kinship diagram, to set the account in a context. When ethnography has an online component, much of the data will be born digital, therefore, it will often be possible to explore patterns within that data, either by using a pre-existing tool or by developing a tailored solution for that circumstance. This exploration of patterns may be used to guide the ethnography to particularly interesting aspects of the field site, to generate foreshadowed problems or to situate stories. Big data offers a powerful perspective on the field that can generate ethnographic insights of its own. However, there are reasons to be cautious about whether big data and ethnography are a perfect match, foremost among them that big data is often drawn only from one platform at a time, and the ethnographer will often want to move between platforms and from online to offline. It is important not to be too seduced by the apparent ability of big data to give us the big picture.

MATRIZes: When visiting Brazil this year, you delivered a presentation at the *International Media Ethnography and Consumption Seminar*, held at Universidade Federal Fluminense, and also took part in several academic activities with both graduate students and established researchers. From everything you saw and heard, did you learn anything interesting about media practices common in Brazil that you don't see in the UK?

Hine: I had really stimulating conversations during my trip, and learned many things both about the interesting work in media ethnography going on in Brazil and about the Brazilian media landscape. In some of these conversations, we started to find differences between the media practices familiar in Brazil and those that I recognise from UK. First impressions suggest that Facebook is more dominant in the Brazilian context, while in the UK there is possibly more diversity in the online platforms that people prefer to use, and some people have a preference for anonymous online forums rather than the more open exposure of Facebook. There seemed to be some interesting lines of comparison to pursue on the ways in which people in the two countries manage a sense of social obligation to be active on Facebook, and the ways in which people handle boundaries between work and leisure and between the different social circles that they belong to. I was also struck by a very strong selfie culture in Brazil, more so than I recognise from the UK – but this could be because I was based in Rio and observing tourist behaviour in Copacabana! I wouldn't put too much weight on these first impressions, but there are some intriguing possible differences in the ways our two countries have embraced the various online platforms. These are the kind of comparisons that Daniel Miller's *Global social media impact* study pursues in depth, and I will be very interested to see what their data make of the same comparison.

MATRIZes: What advices could you offer to a researcher who is just starting her or his ethnography on the Internet? What kind of reading would you suggest?

Hine: My advice would be to read widely in academic literature, online and in mass media – but question everything! It's so important not to assume that we know what the Internet is and what people do with it. The wide reading should be an aid to the ethnographic imagination, to help one to see what kinds of rich diversity are possible and to suggest fruitful directions to pursue and techniques to employ. As well as individual monographs our field also now has some really good overviews and handbooks, and these can be mined for useful insights. However, conventional printed texts do have trouble in keeping up with a fast-changing territory. When a field site, or part of it, is online, it can be quite challenging to solve technical difficulties and to develop appropriate ways to store and investigate data and a lot of us do not have the technical skills to develop these from scratch. Much of this information does not make it into textbooks in time to be useful, so it can be very helpful to take part in online discussions among like-minded scholars. The Association of Internet Researchers mailing list, for example, holds a wealth of knowledge and

offers a very useful place for exchange of up-to-date advice. Research blogs and wikis offer another valuable insight into how other researchers do what they do. Richard Rogers' *Digital methods initiative* has some very useful tools to capitalize on born digital data and complement unstructured observations. The Ethnography Matters site hosts particularly useful and interesting insights into developments in the field. All of these forms of reading, skill-sharing and networking are very useful for inspiration – but then it's important to get out there, immerse yourself in the field and open yourself up to having your pre-conceptions challenged.M

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