TECH3022-17 Advanced Social Media Production

Lecture Twenty-Two: Revision – Netnography

1   Exam Structure & Format

Section A: Compulsory
- Netnography
- Data Collection
- Ethical Research
- Data Analysis

Section B: Four from Eight
- Collective Intelligence
- Crowdsourcing
- Web 2.0
- Spreadability
- Media Engagement
- Meaningful Participation
- Participatory Democracy
- Literacies

Each Question is fifteen points (15). Answering eight questions out of a total one hundred and twenty points (120). This will then be averaged from 100%.

2   Reading
Boellstorf, T. (et al) (2012) Ethnography and Virtual Worlds – A Handbook of Method, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
Delwiche, A. & Henderson J.J. (eds.) (2013) The Participatory Cultures Handbook, Routledge, London.
Jenkins, H. (et al) (2013) Spreadable Media – Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture, New York University Press, New York.
Kozinets, R. V. (2010). Netnography - Doing Ethnographic Research Online. London: Sage.

[Look for the **[E]** on the lecture notes section on the TECH3022 DMU Commons Wiki Page]

3   Past Papers
http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Resources/ExamNet/ [Search for TECH3022]

4   Question Styles
- The questions ask you to 'state' or 'identify.'
- The questions relate to what is discussed or described in each of the chapter sections that are identified in the weekly reading suggestions.
- The questions do not call for you to 'speculate', 'explain' or 'discuss' the relative merits of these issues.
- The questions do not call for you to give your own personal opinion or to relate these issues to your own personal experience.

5   Answer Styles

- Answers can be written as bullet-points.
- Answers should state clearly and precisely the main points or issues that are described in the suggested chapters – no more and no less.
- Answers should not be discursive, i.e. they do not have to attempt to debate the relative merits of an issue, unless this is undertaken in the chapter on which the question is based.
- Answers can provide impersonal examples that are founded in verifiable reported observation, i.e. in the mainstream media, but they should not be speculative or subjective, i.e. based on your own opinions or made-up stories.
- Answers should make an objective and specific point, and should not relate to an overtly general view or your personal experience.
- Think of your answers as if you are writing a Wikipedia entry and stick to the facts.

6   Section A
(This section is compulsory, answer all questions)

6.1   Netnography: Kozinets - Chapter 4

Robert Kozinets describes Netnography as a rigorous form of online investigation.

- What are the main characteristics of Netnography?

Robert Kozinets states that "netnography examines the individual interactions resulting from Internet connections or through computer-mediated communications as a focal source of data" (Kozinets, 2010). In line with general ethnographic research principles, the techniques used for understanding online social phenomena have to be attended to in such a way that they capture a "detailed and nuanced understanding" of social life online.

This means using data collection techniques that convey the cultural qualities of social interactions in which agents attempt to make meaning of their lived experience as they share that experience, the structures of the groups and networks that they participate in, and the functional principles that they make reference to.

According to John Creswell, "online communities are widespread phenomena," (Creswell, 1998, p. 37), and as such it is possible to anticipate and describe how the norms and rituals that shape the social practices of online communities, and the groups of people that are using them. The practices of cyberculture, therefore, are an observable social phenomenon that can be interpreted and understood in the same way that other social phenomenon can be understood.

Hine suggests that: "The Internet as a cultural context is established… through applications of ethnographic methods to online settings. That the internet is also a cultural artefact is apparent from the extent to which it is manifested as a varying and variably used set of technologies that have different meanings for different groups of people. In this sense, using the Internet is a culturally located experience" (Hine, 2005, p. 9).

Cultural expression and communication consists, as Robert Kozinets suggests, in the "exchange of meaningful symbols," which means that as people interact online, they do so in a way that "all manner of human symbol systems are being digitised and shared through information networks"

(Kozinets, 2010, p. 8). The role of the netnographer, therefore, is to account for these interactions and to describe how people who produce them, respond to them, or even disregard them, making sense of the meanings that are constructed and exchanged.

As Robert Kozinets asks "is the ethnographer studying some phenomenon directly related to online communities and online culture? Or is the ethnographer interested in studying a general social phenomenon that has some related Internet group aspect? How important, or not, is the physical component that is always attached to human social behaviour?" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 63).

As Kozinets' points out, the method of data collection used by ethnologists aims to provide a "sense of the lived experience of culture members, as well as a grounded analysis of the structures of their group, how it functions, and how it compares to other groups. Social practices are carefully attended to and systems of meaning delicately unpacked" (Kozinets, 2010).

According to Kozinets "netnography differs from other qualitative Internet research techniques in that it offers, under the rubric of a single term, a rigorous set of guidelines for the conduct of computer-mediated ethnography and also, importantly, its integration with other forms of cultural research" (Kozinets, 2010). As Netnography is an offspring of general ethnography, the principles of data collection attend to the same principles.

Firstly ethnography is a "naturalistic technique", or as Robert Prus specifies, it is an 'interpretative technique'. This means that the researcher is primarily concerned with observation and makes efforts to minimise interventions that 'test' a hypothesis among the subjects and volunteers.

Secondly, netnography makes use of information that is 'found' on publicly available online forums. This means that the researcher has to be attentive to the day-to-day interactions of the area of study, and has to make efforts to align themselves with the participants in an empathetic and responsible manner. This means engaging in some form of participation because the aim is to share the feelings and motivations of the agents being studied.

The researcher, therefore, has to attend to the following issues when making choices about field-sites:
- How and in what way they will arrange personal introductions?
- How and in what way they will travel to and from the sites being studied?
- How and in what way the interactions with participants will be recorded?
- How and in what way will interviews and handwritten field note data be written and collated?
- How and in what way will multimedia data be recorded and collated?

It is suggested that the principal of netnography is "far less time consuming and resource intensive" (Kozinets, 2010) than physical forms of observation, however, this does not mean that there is a lower sense of expectation about the rigour of the data collection techniques that can be used. It should be remembered, however, that the value of participation is what drives much of this form of ethnographic enquiry, and so by "removing the participative role of ethnographer from netnography [we] also remove[…] the opportunity to experience embedded cultural understanding. Without this profound knowledge and experience of the cultural context, the interpretation is impaired" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 75).

6.2   Data Collection: Boellstorff - Chapter 5

Boellstorff (et al) point out that "ethnographic research is fundamentally a holistic project," in which researchers "seek to understand shared practices, meanings, and social contexts, and the interrelations among them."

- Identify the main attributes of the ethnographic research technique.

According to Boellstorf (et al) "one method above all others is fundamental to ethnographic research" (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 65). This method is participant observation, which is embodied as the "emplacement" of the researcher in the fieldsite as a "consequential social actor" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65).

According to Boellstorff (et al) "we participate in everyday life and become well-known to our informants." If researchers adopt different techniques of observation, but not participant observation, according to Boellstorff (et al), then what they are undertaking will not be ethnographic in its nature. This is because "through participant observation, ethnographers step into the social frame in which activity takes place" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 65).

The pragmatic principles of ethnographic research and participant observation, according to Boellstorff (et al) are useful for a number of reasons:

- One does not need to be a practitioner of the culture being studied.
- Participant observation grounds experience as a central practice of study.
- It becomes possible to share experiences and practices, and gain entry to the world of experience of the participants of any study.
- Pragmatic considerations mean that expertise and specialism is not required to engage in ethnographic study.
- There is no need to create mathematical or instrumental models to account for observed phenomena.

As Boellstorff (et al) point out, "participant observation is not unreflective engagement; it is a refined craft that entails a particular kind of joining in and a particular way of looking at things that depends on the research question, fieldsite, and practical constraints" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 66).

As a primary concern of ethnographic research, we are attempting to understand the "subject position" of different actors in the research field site, and are therefore unlikely to adopt an 'objective' viewpoint, Instead, according to Boellstorff (et al) the researcher seeks to incorporate the view that the researcher holds themselves. The aim is to get close to the people who are participating in a study, in order share a "sincere interest" with the "variety of informants whose viewpoints and insights can be analysed and represented" in the study (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 66).

According to Boellstorff (et al) "making sense of the subject positions of others is a complex task that can be at least partially informed by one's own position" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 66). This means that the practical knowledge within a social group, and the way that different social groups realise their practical knowledge through their lived experience gives focus to a wide range of types of study.

Boellstorff (et al) suggest that "practical knowledge, such as how to behave appropriately within a particular social group or culture, or realisation of some of the challenges faced by a culture or group, may arise from membership" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 66). Therefore, forms of specialist

knowledge that groups and communities exhibit, such as language skills or familiarity with a tradition, are "leveraged more effectively in a field setting" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 66).

Overall, Boellstorff (et al) point out that "ethnographic research is fundamentally a holistic project," in which researchers "seek to understand shared practices, meanings, and social contexts, and the interrelations among them" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 67).

6.3   Ethical Research: Boellstorff (et al) – Chapter 10)

Ethical Research: According to Boellstorff (et al) "researchers have an obligation to take good care of the information that they are gathering."

- What safeguards should be used in an online ethnographic study?

If an ethnographic study is going to report on the lived experience and expressions of accomplishment of people living in a particular community, then it will rely on the voices and interpretations of a wide set of different informants, so the researcher, as John Creswell notes, "needs to report faithfully these realities" (Creswell, 1994, p. 6). This is because any ethnographic study, according to Boellstorff et al "hinges on engaging others in ethical conversation," that requires the researcher to prepare "careful, accurate accounts that do not compromise informants" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 150).

Not only should the researcher use language that is dispassionate and professional when accounting for and framing the study, but it should also be based on "accepted words such as relationship, comparison and within-group" terms. These are "concepts and variables are well defined from accepted definitions" (Creswell, 1994, p. 6), such as the principle of care which suggests that the "asymmetrical power relations and imbalance of benefit between investigator and investigated" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 129) needs to be managed carefully.

In ethnographic research, for example, "identifying a person potentially identifies their social network" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 141), so steps have to be taken to design forms of interaction with participants that "allows for participants' privacy and reduces impression management concerns" (Johnson, 2005, p. 29), and doesn't imply a trade-off between the way that we "gain insights in some areas as we lose them in others" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 132). Care, or the mitigation of harm, is therefore at the core of any ethical test for all forms of research.

As Boellstorff et al attest: "Care is a core value to be internalised and acted on through the vigilance and commitment of the researcher. Any sets of research ethics guidelines and dicta will be ineffective if researchers do not have embedded into their practice strong values establishing ethical behaviour built on the principle of care" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 129).

Thus, in undertaking the role of an ethnographic researcher, we have the privilege of being able to move on from any particular project, so it is important to remember that the participants who are not readily able to move on themselves, will "recall our gifts of listening," and the "deep interest displayed in small details of their lives, and the way we took care to discern and follow the complexities and enigmas of their everyday pursuits and dreams" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 150).

This puts a responsibility onto researchers to ensure that they take good care of the information that they are using, and to ensure that, and to the "greatest extent possible, that informants gain some reward from participating in research" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 129). It isn't possible to know in

advance, however, if harm will occur, because the "determination of harm is 'an empirical question'" and the level of "acceptability is also 'unknown,'" and so the extent of what constitutes harm is generally unknown.

Therefore, researchers have to be aware of how informed consent can be truly "informed when the nature of the potential harm is not assessed until after the fact" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 132). Typically ethnography results in neither psychological or physical distress, so it carries a greater sense of "'informational risk'" by which "private information could be made public" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 133).

In these circumstances we are impelled to use our best judgements by "operating from the core principle of care," and to consider "not only what is public versus private from an etic perspective, but also what the people we study empirically perceive as public or private" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 135).

These kind of ideas vary from culture to culture and community to community, so a singular and predetermined approach may prove difficult to impose in advance. The best guide that we can rely on is that by allowing for the privileged position that is taken up by the researcher, the information that is given to us will not contribute to any conflict if it is made known, unless, and as Boellstorff et al suggests, "we are certain it will cause no harm" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 137).

This was a personal and professional commitment that we should be happy to explore when working in the field, because it meant that we can commit ourselves to whatever it took to "experience the activities where the data [I] require[d was] generated" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 150). However, as Boellstorff et al remind us:

"Ethnographers strive to avoid negative outcomes by playing special attention to the potential consequences and risks of what we see and hear, and remembering that not everything is grist for the data mill, no matter how interesting it may be" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 137).

A further significant issue for ethical practice in research, then, is when confidentiality and anonymity are the main and appropriate responses which give respondents having greater confidence to share their stories, particularly because they may be socially marginal, on the edge of social acceptability, or otherwise detrimental to the social wellbeing of the individuals and their families, neighbours or other community members who are associated with them. There are many unintended consequences that arise from being able to recognise or surmise the identity of a participant in a study, so as researchers we have to "promote reflectivity on our part when deciding what is important to include in the written work" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 138).

In some cases, for example with the use of social media, the public life and the private life of the individuals may be reasonably separate, but this in-itself can also cause problems if the informants are using these forms of communication deceptively. So, while the participants in the study may exhibit behavioural patterns of deception and contradiction, the researcher must never attempt to deceive the informants that they are working with.

As Boellstorff (et al) state, "deceiving informants remains firmly outside the bounds of ethical ethnographic research," (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 142) either because the data that is gathered through the process of ethnography would be "compromised, if not destroyed, through deception" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 143), or because it is a general principle of social and professional accountability that researchers "never, under any circumstances, engage in identity deception" (Kozinets, 2010).

Likewise, it is a foundational principle of ethnography that we maintain a clear sense of "honesty between the researcher and [...] community members" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 147). This means clearly identifying ourselves as researchers working with specific institutions. It is worth keeping in mind that under some circumstances this might have "unexpected implications for individuals and institutions," so must be "considered carefully in the process of deciding how or if to gain informed consent" (Sanders, 2005, p. 78).

Therefore, taking reasonable steps to identify oneself and avoid any deception or confusion on the part of the participants. Ensuring that the descriptions and the accounts of the research that I was undertaking were accurate and gave this description in clear language that suited the general flavour of the participant group. Then doing what is possible to provide an accurate and relevant description of the work that I was undertaking. Robert Kozinets notes that:

"It is highly recommended that the [researchers] set up a research web-page providing positive identification as well as a more detailed explanation of the research and its purpose, and perhaps should eventually share the initial, interim, and final research findings with online community members" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 148).

Additionally, researchers have an obligation to take good care of the information that they are gathering, and to ensure that it is held securely and safely where it cannot be accessed or manipulated by anyone other than the researcher. At any point the respondents may decide that they wish to leave the research project and withdraw the information that has been given, which the researcher must respect and comply with this wish.

6.4   Data Analysis: Kozinets – Chapter 7

According to Robert Kozinets, "netnographic data analysis… consists of contextualising the meaning of the exchange and interaction in ever-widening circles of social significance."

- How you would analyse data from an online ethnographic study.

Robert Kozinets points out that "netnography involves an inductive approach to the analysis of qualitative data." In this approach "analysis means the detailed examination of a whole by breaking it into its consistent parts and comparing them in different ways" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 118).

The process of inductive reasoning, according to Kozinets, is one in which "individual observations are built up in order to make more general statements about a phenomenon." This is a process that allows researchers to analyse their collected information and manipulate that information into sets of themes and sequences.

According to Robert Kozinets there are a number of factors associated with the analysis of data that an ethnographer has to take into account, including:

- Coding: affixing codes or categories to data drawn from field notes, interviews, documents or other cultural material.

- Noting: reflecting on data in the 'margins' by noting 'annotations' to the collected information.

- Abstracting & Comparing: sorting and sifting material to identify similar phrases, shared experiences, relationships, and distinct differences, and thereby building codes and categories as a set of conceptual constructs, patterns or processes.

- Checking & Refinement: going back to the field site and checking the data, or anticipating further data input in order to isolate, check, and refine the understanding of the patterns, processes, commonalities and differences.

- Generalising: elaborating on a small set of generalisations in order to explain the consistency of the information recorded.

- Theorising: challenging and unpicking the information found by assessing it with a formalised frame of knowledge that uses specific theories or ideas to construct a new theory (Kozinets, 2010, p. 119).

Ethnography relies reflection of the data gathered in a holistic and meaningful process, in which a coherent narrative is constructed and shared. This is often written in a form that uses "allusions, metaphors, similes, and analogies," that will allow the reader of the study to make sense of the "social and historical contexts of the data for its explanations, providing a subtle, specific, nuanced cultural interpretation" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 120).

As netnography emerges from general ethnographic principles, it is possible to map the general aims of an ethnographic study in the following way, according to Kozinetts:

- Consider the online environment a social world.
- Assume that online environments have social and language games, with attendant rules, fields, winners, and losers.
- Treat online data as a social act.
- Seek to understand the meanings of these acts in the context of their appropriate social world.
- When appropriate, broaden the particular online social world to interact with other online social worlds as well as other social worlds that are not exclusively online, or not online at all.

Ultimately, according to Kozinets, "netnographic data analysis… consists of contextualising the meaning of the exchange and interaction in ever-widening circles of social significance." In doing this it is hoped that because we are able to "understand how members interact with the general culture," we will be able to understand the "complex lived experience of communal interaction" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 133).

The aim is to learn about how community life is experienced and accomplished as people exchange ideas, act to get things done, and embed themselves within the routines and the patterns of community life. By interacting in the practices and accomplishments of community life, it is argued, the ethnographic investigator will be able to draw upon a sense of intimate familiarity with the communities that are being examined "in sustained, participant-informed detail, the (enacted) social essences of the human group" (Prus, 1999, p. xiv).

7   Section B
(You must answer Four questions from this section)

7.1   Collective Intelligence: Delwiche & Henderson – Chapter 11 (Levy)

Collective Intelligence: According to Pierre Levy, knowledge producers are required to understand and manage their activities in the digital environment in ways that cope with the varied and abundant flows of knowledge that are around us.

- What is Levy's concept of collective intelligence.

7.2   Crowdsourcing: Delwiche & Henderson – Chapter 13 (Brabham)

Crowdsourcing: According to Darren Brabham crowdsourcing could be used to improve public participation in the crafting of government policies, injecting more of the voice of the people in democratic processes.

- What is involved in crowdsourcing?

7.3   Web 2.0 Participation: Jenkins, Ford & Green – Chapter 1

Web 2.0: According to Jenkins, Ford & Green, we need to rethink the concept of value generation associated with online media.

- What is involved in the Web 2.0 model of participation?

7.4   Spreadability: Jenkins, Ford & Green – Chapter 5

Spreadability: Jenkins, Ford & Green argue that the culture of spreadability is built on technical affordances that encourages collaboration on projects by a 'hive' community.

- What are the main characteristics of the spreadability model?

7.5   Media Engagement: Jenkins, Ford & Green – Chapter 3

Media Engagement: The way that we access and consume television has been changing, according to Jenkins, Ford & Green. We have witnessed a "shift from an appointment-based model of television viewing toward an engagement-based paradigm."

- What is different about engagement-based models of media?

7.6   Meaningful Participation: Jenkins, Ford & Green – Chapter 4

Meaningful Participation: Jenkins, Ford & Green argue that participatory culture is a "vital step toward the realisation of a century-long struggle for grassroots communities to gain greater control over the means of cultural production and circulation."

- What are the main attributes of participative media?

7.7   Participatory Democracy: Delwiche & Henderson – Chapter 17 (Fuchs)

Participatory Democracy: Dieter Fuchs argues that "citizen's participation in political decisions is an essential feature of democracy."

- What are the characteristics of online participative democracy?

7.8   Literacies: Delwiche & Henderson – Chapter 22 (Rheingold)

Literacies: Howard Rheingold argues that "online social networks can be powerful amplifiers of collective action precisely because they augment and extend the power of ever-complexifying human society."

- What does the incorporation of sociability models of media entail?

8   References

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantative Approaches*. London: Sage.

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