Comments on Birgit Braeuchler's statement for the E-Seminar
Researching the Internet

by Christine Hine

I'm delighted to be acting as discussant for this e-seminar on Researching the Internet. Well, I should be honest, I was delighted at first, but then became rather daunted when I first received Birgit's statement, and found how much her thesis extract focused around comments on Virtual Ethnography. I'm sure you'd all find a session of "you said that" "no I didn't" "yes you did" pretty dull to watch, so I'll do my best not to do that. Instead, I'll respond to Birgit's statement with some thoughts that reflect where I'm at right now with my own research and that connect with the two topics she asks us to consider: how far anthropological methods transfer into cyberspace; and how to relate online and offline research. I'll try to take those thoughts in the direction of thinking about what makes research approaches adequate for the tasks we set them. First, though, a bit of a disclaimer. I'm not an anthropologist, and whilst I use ethnographic methods extensively, I don't use them to contribute to mainstream anthropological issues (however you might define them), so that gives me what for some of you might seem a quirky, irreverent or downright mistaken take on ethnography. When it comes to talking about the adequacy of research methods the anthropological take on ethnography is quite distinctive, and while I'm very interested to be in dialogue with anthropology on these issues, but I can only speak really for the ethnographic approaches deployed in my home fields of sociology and STS (science and technology studies).

The starting point of science and technology studies does inflect my methodological approach to the Internet, since the basic principle from STS that technologies should not be assumed to determine particular social outcomes seemed to me from the outset to imply that there would not be one methodological approach to the Internet. Approaches would have to be situated and negotiated. Whether or not methodological approaches transfer from online to offline couldn't be settled once and for all, since we couldn't assume that we knew in advance, or would ever know in a singular way, what the Internet did to social interaction. In many ways, then, it's not a straightforward case of transferring methods from offline to online, but of finding ways to make methods recognisably continuous between settings. Making research methods "transfer" is an active achievement on the part of the researcher, including making their writings suitably ethnographic and recognisably grounded in disciplinary/methodological heritage.

Birgit talks about her concerns that ethnographies of online phenomena shouldn't be confined to online settings alone, and I'd very much agree with many of her conclusions here. I'm interested in research methods that help us to explore the varied textures of contemporary lived experience. That means that I'm worried by approaches that limit themselves, as an a priori decision, to online spheres as much as I'm worried by approaches that focus on face-to-face interactions and exclude, from the outset, the myriad other mediated connections that comprise contemporary social life. It's a question, for me, of exploring meaning making structures and practices as we find them, without assuming that we know in advance what form they will take. This having been

said, there are also practical limits to be drawn. Such is the degree of connection in everyday life, across multiple forms of media and diverse geographic locations, that the individual researcher is increasingly drawn to a sense of their own limitations. If the values that drive our research define the field as, in principle, unbounded, then it becomes clear that it is our own practices that will have to do the bounding for us. This, for me, means that research projects often become tentative and exploratory, and involve crafting a field site as I go along. I learned a lot on this issue from the collection Vered Amit edited on Constructing the Field. This kind of approach also places an interesting focus on defining the audience for the research and on specifying the set of problems in which the research intervenes, and crafting the field site to suit.

This is a long winded way of saying that no, I don't think that online research settings are always adequate in themselves, but I can envisage circumstances in which the set of research problems in which I want to intervene might mean that an online setting was a useful focus, for reasons both pragmatic and principled. The pragmatic point would be where moving offline, in a context of limited resources, might simply not be a priority in order to address a particular set of research issues (maybe this is one of the points that makes my ethnography very definitely not an anthropological one). The principled reason for not going offline would be to highlight that, if for this particular piece of research you are interested in gaining a deep ethnographic understanding of online life and the people that you're dealing with don't meet face-to-face, I think you have to take the possibility of symmetry seriously, by at least trying out how it feels only to have online interactions to work with.

I don't think that researchers should automatically shift to offline interactions to "verify" what people say online. That approach inappropriately celebrates face-to-face interactions as a site of veracity, and threatens the researcher's experiential understanding of how life is for the people we seek to understand. I would take research offline to explore a set of issues that might be important for some research projects, including the ones Birgit identifies about exploring socio-cultural contexts. But the key point I was trying to make in Virtual Ethnography was that doing so involves loss as well as gain. Adding another medium of interaction with informants doesn't automatically increase our understanding or gives us better insight. On these issues I'd thoroughly recommend Shani Orgad's work (Storytelling Online, Peter Lang, 2005) on moving research between online and offline settings, for some really thoughtful reflection on why both are useful but neither location is a bottom line source of authentic insights. I'd bring many of these issues back to the question of negotiating the adequacy of research approaches: in the end much depends on what it is that you wish to understand, and whom you wish to convince with your findings. I'm very persuaded by a situated approach to the adequacy of research methods: it's not a question of "can you do online ethnography", but much more for whom might you want to do it, and for what purpose.

In the recent research that I've been doing I've been exploring how scientists, in particular biologists working on classification and evolutionary relationships, have been using the Internet in their work. I've moved much more between online and offline in this work.. I would argue that if we want to gain a deep and multi-faceted understanding of

the culture of this discipline as it is now you can't leave either aspect out. That's the hunch that I started out with, and which was reinforced as I explored online and offline landscapes and the ways that they were interconnected. By observing and participating in online discussions and by using the Internet to locate people and contacting them online I found out a lot about the ways that this medium was routinely used within the discipline. I explored the emergent online landscape as an interesting phenomenon in its own right. But for this research, this time, I spent a lot more time exploring the ways that online phenomena were interwoven with the material culture of the discipline, its institutional landscapes, the career projects and aspirations of individuals and the political concerns and policy influences that suffused disciplinary life. Again, this doesn't fit in with many definitions of what anthropology aims to achieve with ethnographic approaches, but it's the approach I ended up with to do the job that I wanted to do, to explore how use of the Internet both illuminates and is made meaningful within the life of a contemporary scientific discipline.

I've gone on too long. Sorry. I hope there are some points here that people can pick up on, whether to agree with, to argue with or to illuminate. I think one of the upshots of methodological pluralism and situated adequacy is that it becomes very important for people to share approaches. So, one thing I'd very much like to ask Birgit is to talk more about her own research. I'd really like to know more about the approaches you used, the problems you encountered and the kinds of field that opened up to you through the Internet. I'm really intrigued by your research focus, and would love to hear more about how you negotiated online contacts, what you found when you took them offline, and what kinds of reception you've had for your work.. I'd also like to open up for wider contributions the issue of online research and audience and add some questions to Birgit's: have people encountered audiences who don't accept the possibility of online ethnography? Is there anyone for whom it has been particularly challenging to gain acceptance for online research? Have there been audiences who are particularly welcoming or enthusiastic about online research approaches? Are the sticking points that many people have reportedly encountered in gaining ethical clearance still an issue?

I'd like to thank Birgit for giving me a nudge into thinking about the issues around online and offline research again, and I'll now hand over both to Birgit to respond, and to wider contributions.

Best wishes,

Christine