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The idea of reading a decade old book about the internet seems counter-intuitive and perhaps humorously nostalgic at best. In the context of research methods however, the quality of valid approaches can remain undiminished overtime. The purpose of this book review then is to take a critical look at An Ethnography of the Internet, specifically regarding its value today for researchers of all things internet. As we shall see, though the reflective lens of time has been harsh on some aspects of the book, other fundamentals remain applicable and I will argue necessary for a complete understanding the “virtual” today.

As the title of the book suggests, it is an ethnography. The authors explicitly point this out and are very clear on what this means to their approach to not only the research itself but also to the resultant findings. Ethnography for them means a long term, immersive and multifaceted approach. So despite the admittedly short five week research period (in Trinidad) for this particular project, it is supported by a robust base of a decade of experience in Trinidad as well as experience studying online chatting communities like IRC. As the previous sentence should highlight, the book itself is actually an ethnography based in Trinidad of the internet. This the authors claim provides a valid departure point from which others can create further ethnography for comparison. The location of the study is important to their conclusions.

The starting point of the project was not things online themselves. But rather understanding how a community of people form “alignments” and “elective affinities” with the medium of the internet. Whereas other work at the time focused on the internet as a monolithic entity with defined characteristics, Miller and Slater reject this preconceived falsehood outright and start from a different place all together, the people. This is based on an idea that is supported throughout the research and that is the existing assumption of an inherent separation between the online and the offline is not tenable. The book points out a variety of examples why this is indeed the case and in fact appropriate. One cited early on is of a family with three children, of whom one believes that friendships on the internet are without meaning, while the other two consider them just as valid if not more so than “traditional” friendships. The key principle they successfully support is that, there is no consensus on what “virtual” truly is. {Even referencing Anderson (1986) who cleverly posited that modern nations themselves are virtual and dependent on newspapers to unify and inherently divided group.} Going back to the idea of Ethnographic research, the team spent time not only online in chat rooms or playing games of Quake but also hung around internet cafes, school computer rooms, offices, ISPs and Government offices. This should be understood to be fundamental for research of anything online, and that is it inevitably has a place and it is physically grounded somewhere. We cannot separate the online from the offline as they are both inextricably woven together.

This idea may actually be more contentious than ever. When the book was written, the main form for example of online
gaming was MUDs or Quake. Now with World of Warcraft (WoW) or Second Life, it might be quite tempting to consider that the undisputed virtual world now exists. Arguably an academic can argue Ironforge or any WoW city is virtual, because it doesn't exist however the fact of the matter is actually completely unimportant. From the perspective of media researcher the key concern should be what do those people who interact with believe, or how does it impact them. Miller and Slater point to the (now defunct) internet habit of having a webpage and surfing the web signing guest books and compare it succinctly to the anthropologically classic practice of the Kula ring. Such practices to the outsider may appear purposeless and a waste of resources but it is an internal system of “fame” or “prestige” of extreme value to those who participate. Their understanding of webpage trends from a decade ago still works in modern games like WoW, where being a level 70 Elf Priest may be make you the most famous player in the land. But understanding this, without understanding the person who dedicates 10 hours a day for 7 months to achieving this goal is meaningless.

Overall the authors do a compelling job in highlighting the use of the medium of the internet as a negotiation between individual users and their goals. For me, the best examples were delivered in the final chapter (titled Religion) in which different religious leaders and lay people are interviewed regarding the role of the internet for their beliefs. One of such examples was that two Christian priests came to some radically different conclusions regarding the shared practice of confession. For one the anonymity of the internet provided a perfect parallel for the privacy of the confessional and thus was a medium worth pursuing for this purpose. For the other the hint of confessing without being present with a priest in the church was tantamount to blasphemy. Such examples and the rest of the content of the book provide support for one of the key findings of the book, and that is that people choose how to apply the internet to not only their current situation, but what they would like their future to be. This negotiation of purpose and meaning (which the authors describe using four different perspectives for understanding) is the main take away from this book and remains a valid framework for analysis of the virtual even today.

In all fairness, to balance what may seem like endless praise, I feel obligated to quickly point out some aspects of the book which have faded to obsolescence over time. The first one is the illustrations. What the back cover of the book describes as “An innovative tie-in with the book’s own website provides copious illustrations” can really be read to mean “404 Site not Found” or rather “I'm sorry, there are no illustrations, that website has been offline since 2007.” The internet savvy researcher however can access resources like the Internet Archive, to overcome this problem but the result is far from flawless. Also the three-stage model of ecommerce proposed in this book remains relevant, however the focus on the webpage as the key vehicle for business on the internet, doesn't quite hold anymore and may slightly annoy the current reader.

In the end, though we have moved from MUDs to WoW, from IRC to Twitter, some frameworks of understanding the internet have not changed. An understanding of the online/offline as connected and undividable remains as valid as ever. The oft stated (and just as often ignored) anthropological understanding, that even basic assumptions may not hold across cultures is more important now than ever as online users are just as likely to be in Trinidad as Iceland. The internet like any
other media is a negotiation between individuals which incorporates their unique history and circumstance with their particular ideals and goals. This point and many others that are relevant today can all be found in the still readable and still worth the time volume entitled The Internet and Ethnographic Approach.