

Rethinking Research Ethics for Mediated Settings

Anne Beaulieu¹, Adolfo Estalella²

¹ The Virtual Knowledge Studio for the Humanities and Social Sciences - VKS
Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
Cruquiusweg 31
1019 AT Amsterdam
The Netherlands

anne.beaulieu@vks.knaw.nl

² Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3)
Parc Mediterrani de la Tecnologia
Av. Canal Olímpic s/n, Edifici B3
08860 Castelldefels (Barcelona)
Spain

jestalellaf@uoc.edu

Abstract. An important feature of e-research is the increased mediation of research practices, which changes not only the objects and tools of research, but also the relation between researcher and object, between researchers, and between researchers and their constituencies and stakeholders. This article focuses on the ethical aspects of mediated ethnography by analyzing the implications of these changing relationships. It makes a specific contribution to the discussions about research ethics that are currently pursued and that tend to be catalyzed by IRBs. Our aim is to link ethical discussions with the actual practices and conditions of qualitative ethnographic work. To do so, we review how researchers have used principles and ethical guides of traditional disciplines in ethnography, and show that several of concepts and categories on which these guidelines rely (personhood, privacy, harm, alienation, power) are otherwise enacted in mediated settings. We also analyze ethical issues that have arisen in our own research. On the basis of these discussions, we specify two of the underlying dynamics of research in mediated settings, *contiguity* and *traceability*, in order to understand why traditional research ethics are challenged by these settings. The article therefore specifies how mediated contexts can shape ethical issues; it provide a concise yet illustrative elaboration of a number of these issues; and proposes a vocabulary to further discuss this aspect of ethnographic work. Together, these elements amount to a contribution for the elaboration of new ethical research practices for mediated settings.

Introduction

E-science has often been characterized in terms of the infrastructures that are deployed to support the computation of large amounts of data (Wouters and Beaulieu, 2006). Increasingly, this definition is broadening (Halfpenny, Procter, Lin and Voss, 2008) and collaboration and communication are considered as important constituents of e-science (Spencer and Jirotko, 2008). E-research has been defined from the start as multi-layered endeavour, including critical reflection on changing research practices as well as new methodologies and new infrastructures (Wouters, 2006). This definition and the body of work it has inspired constitute the frame of reference for this paper. An important feature of collaboration and communication in e-science and especially in e-research is the increased re-mediation (Bolters and Grusin, 2002) of these research practices. This feature means that not only the objects and tools of research change, but that the relation between researcher and object, between researchers, and between researchers and their constituencies and stakeholders are also transformed through being highly mediated. This paper focuses on the ethical aspects of e-research by analyzing the implications of these changing relationships in mediated settings.

This article is meant as a specific contribution to the discussions about research ethics that are currently pursued--at times in very intense and urgent tones--by researchers involved in ethnographic work and other kinds of social research. These discussions follow a number of lines. From a US, UK and Canadian context, they tend to be catalyzed by the development of institutional review board (IRB) procedures and other formal regulation of research on human subjects. The issue in these discussions often comes down to the autonomy of the researcher in the face of bureaucratic requirements--requirements that may furthermore be maladapted to the practices of the humanities and interpretive social sciences (van den Hoonaard 2001; Dingwall 2006; Richardson and McMullan 2007; Hedgecoe 2008). Another dominant line of discussion we have encountered seems to divide researchers whose empirical terrains are internet-based (more often than not, web-based), and revolves around the issue of whether activities and exchanges fall unilaterally within the public domain, or whether the picture might be more subtle than that, with different understandings of privacy and consent (Jacobson 1999; Stern 2009). In this latter case, the dominant issue is the extent to which researchers should consider certain interactions to be private though they are conducted on the internet (which for some is public, by definition). These are important discussions, in which we have ourselves participated.

Our present contribution, however, is somewhat orthogonal to these issues, and aims to link ethical discussions with methodological concerns in ethnography. We wish to analyze a number of questions that have arisen in our fieldwork and, on the basis of this analysis, to make explicit further ethical issues in doing fieldwork. Like Carusi (2008) and Markham (2004), we seek to broaden the discussion of ethics beyond IRBs, privacy and anonymity. The feeling that consent forms are not quite covering all ethical issues in fieldwork, and that other ways of 'doing ethics' are needed is probably quite widespread among ethnographers. Yet, we find little articulation of these issues and of ways of dealing with them in the published literature. The context of 'new media' and 'new modes of research' in which we are working make these issues all the more urgent because, as we will show, they challenge some of the existing conventions of ethnography that served to address these dilemmas of fieldwork. The result is a climate in which a seeming ethical gap threatens to be filled by some of the more instrumental approaches to research ethics—sometimes for good reasons, but, at times also for the sake of expediency. Furthermore, as we will demonstrate, certain assumptions embedded in ethics guidelines do not address some of the conditions that are particular to mediated ethnography. This makes the articulation of such ethical issues all the more pressing. This article therefore pursues an ethical discussion that is oriented to practice,

in two senses. First, we show how ethical issues become visible in the course of our ethnographic practices. Second, we document how we perform practical judgments (in the sense of *phronesis*) to determine which frameworks to apply to the situations encountered, drawing on (and at times challenging) ethnographic traditions and conventions

By opening up this discussion, we wish to signal the variety of ethical issues, beyond privacy, and ways of addressing them that exist in ethnography. We hope here to specify some of the important ways in which mediated contexts can shape ethical issues, to provide a concise yet illustrative elaboration of a number of these, and to suggest a vocabulary for discussing this aspect of research. Ideally, this material will be useful to intervene in discussions about appropriate ways to regulate and support ethical considerations in ethnographic work.

Codes and Conventions

This article does not aim to critique IRB procedures and ethical guidelines. We do set out to show that ethical issues arise beyond what formal framework can legislate, and to demonstrate how ethical issues are part of unfolding ethnographic relationships, beyond the orchestration of moments of ‘informed consent’. Insofar as IRB approval does very often function as a gate-keeping mechanism to research, we do deplore the way it tends to focus attention to that particular instantiation of ethics. In the words of one researcher: “...I wish I had spent more time reflecting on how to show respect for the people I wanted to study, and less time coveting the stamp of approval an IRB might bestow on my project” (Stern, 2009: 95).

We therefore seek to show that ethical issues are present not only at particular moments when we approach informants, but also in the course of making decisions about how to approach them, in our developing relationships, in the kinds of presence we establish in the field, and in the course of developing insights and disseminating these. Across these activities, other elements besides IRB guidelines inform the decisions we make. These too, whether they be traditions, methodological precepts, values, professional norms, etc, are also deserving of attention as valuable ways of ensuring that research proceeds ethically.

Conventions of fieldwork and of academic research are important elements in shaping the way we deal with the ethical dimensions of these activities. As Bruckman notes, a lot of the time, we rely on what “seems reasonable”. When doing fieldwork in highly mediated settings, such common sense can be challenged: “We don’t have intuitions for what is ethical in this new medium *per se*, so we instead compare it to other media and settings that are better understood. Which metaphors and analogies we choose greatly influence the conclusions we reach” (Bruckman, 2002).

Seeing the web as a ‘forum’, or as a ‘diary’, will affect how we conceive of the ethical valence of what we encounter in doing fieldwork on the web. Another resource we have to deal with ethical questions is the set of values or “virtues” we get taught in methodological seminars (ideally) and to which we are meant to aspire as scholars and professionals. The ways particular ‘virtues’ are upheld in ethnographic fieldwork has been discussed by Fine (1993), and he classified these as classic virtues (sympathy, openness, honor); technical skills (precise, observant and passive); and those regarding the ethnographic self, which are tied to discursive practices and to presenting oneself (candid, chaste, fair, literary ethnographer). Such tropes of ethnography are always actualized in particular ways, and common sense also leaves room for exceptions and deviations. But reflecting on why these tropes and rules of thumb exist, and on how different kinds of ethnography challenge or reinforce them is a useful exercise, since they probably have a greater reach than most IRB prescriptions. In what follows, we point out how such conventions and values shape our approach to fieldwork, and

reflect on how pursuing mediated ethnography challenges or problematizes some of these conventions and their ethical import. In other words, rather than seek ethical guidance solely in the formalizing and procedural logic of IRB procedures, we propose to examine where anxieties about ethical issues come from, and to consider how ethnographic practices and sensibilities might also serve as mechanisms to address these ethical dilemmas.

Mediated ethnography

In the settings in which we have done fieldwork most recently, the majority of social and cultural phenomena of interest and our participant-observation activities were mediated-- although other kinds of interactions were also part of our fields and of how we approached them. While we do not wish to posit mediated ethnography in opposition to so-called traditional, face-to-face ethnography--in many cases, there is some mix of modes of interaction-- doing fieldwork in settings where digital and networked technologies are part of social interactions does raise particular issues when practices of fieldwork are rearranged around different expectations. We use the concept 'mediated ethnography' as a short hand for ethnographic fieldwork in which ethnographers, to a great extent, articulate their presence and interactions in the field through technology: taking photos, recording videos, writing a blog, chatting, etc.¹

Internet ethnographers in particular have felt prompted to reflect on the diverse implications of engaging with technologies in their fieldwork practice, highlighting some of the implications in the articulation of their experiences and recognizing that technology is not a mere tool (Dicks and Mason, 1998). Incorporating technology in fieldwork involves changes in the modes of presence of the ethnographers, in the way they construct their identities and the mode they establish and maintain their relations in the field. Anne Beaulieu has discussed how technology allows the articulation of modes of non-physical co-presence with research subjects (Beaulieu, 2008), and how technology is used to objectify the field, while Christine Hine has analyzed the role of technology in Internet ethnographies as a source of knowledge of the collectives under study (Hine, 2000; 2006; 2008).

Because the various platforms enabled by the internet shape our presence and access to the social worlds we are researching, they are not simply used to have access to a phenomenon that is out there. As we engage with technology, we not only act but are acted upon and our fieldwork experience is shaped by our engagement with technology. It is therefore not a question of 'accessing' an existing object through potentially better or more powerful tools. While we detail some of the innovative aspect of our fieldwork below, we aim to avoid cyberbole (Woolgar, 2002) and remain aware that reflections on the meaning of technology in constituting the field are furthermore not exclusive to ethnographers of the Internet. Visual ethnographers have extensively discussed the implications of the camera in their fieldwork, for instance. Sarah Pink has detailed how her camera was a key element for constructing her identity in the field when she was studying the bullfight culture in Spain. Using the camera in public settings allowed her to be accepted as another fan of bullfighting (Pink, 2001). She also illustrates how the meaning of technology is very context-sensitive in

¹ Our epistemological approach to ethnography is a constructivist one. Departing from naturalist or positivist epistemologies that put forth the possibility of unequivocal distinction between the researcher and the research subject, we assume that the ethnographer is part of the social world she is researching. It is through shared experience that the researcher can access the shared meanings of the collectives under studies (Hasstrup, 1999). From this perspective, the ethnographer is conceived as an instrument for producing ethnographic knowledge and fieldwork is not a process for gathering data but the instance in which the anthropological knowledge is produced (Guber, 2004). How the researcher articulates her relation to the field is then of paramount importance in the production of knowledge.

doing fieldwork (2000; 2001). Comparing different roles and practices of photography in her fieldwork in Spain and Guinea Bissau, the camera (and the photos) represented at times a banal, mundane tool or an exotic and expensive instrument, respectively. Technology alone is therefore not the single determinant factor in the new aspects of fieldwork we wish to address here. Mediation is a socio-technical process that modifies experiences in the field and different key elements of our ethnographic work.

The networked and digital aspects of the field we construct in mediated ethnography are especially prominent in this dynamic. In what follows, we specify two of the underlying dynamics of research in mediated settings, in order to understand why traditional research ethics are challenged by these settings. First, we show how, when doing research in a mediated setting, the contiguity of settings challenges distinctions between the field (where research takes place), the place of other scholarly activity (where analysis takes place) and the place of dissemination and communication (publication, etc) with consequences for ethical practice, such as anonymization.

Traceability is a second related but distinct dynamic that arises when dealing with field data from mediated field sites. We mean by traceability the property of inscriptions to be located on the Internet using search engines but also through other mechanisms enabled by digital platforms (log files, user profiles, etc). Traceability makes particular issues such as exposure, ownership and authorship especially prominent. We then reflect on the core ethical values that need to be sustained and on the practices and procedures available to researchers to sustain them.

Our recent fieldwork informs our discussion. We have both studied social and cultural forms in which mediated communication is a main aspect of the activities in the field site and of our research topics. Estalella's recent fieldwork consisted of following blogs, writing his own blog, and posting nearly every day. Most of his informants were people strongly involved in the construction of blogger identity in Spain, the main topic of the research. Besides blogging, fieldwork involved maintaining other types of interactions through email, chat and phone. Moreover, in the course of fieldwork, he attends more than two dozen bloggers' meetings. Estalella decided to use a field blog to experience technology, to be present in the field and to make people in the field aware of his presence as a researcher. In that sense, the decision to blog was not only a way of achieving presence in the field, but it was also meant to perform an ethical function.

For Beaulieu, fieldwork experiences have spanned very different settings: first, in the course of a laboratory study, focusing on the use of visual evidence in neuro-imaging in two settings in London and Montreal. More recently, fieldwork consisted of participating in the activities of a group of academic researchers based in an Arts faculty in a university in the Netherlands. The main research topic was novel practices around information and communication technology by this group of researchers. The fieldwork involved following and participating in mailing lists, websites, wikis, seminars, lectures, PhD examinations, inaugural lectures, book launches and some classroom instruction. Fieldwork also involved interviews and meetings, face to face, by email or telephone. These experiences inform our awareness of the dynamics of field relations and our sense that ethnographic relationships and our relation to our work also change over time.

Presence and Accountability in the Field: a vignette

For the sake of conciseness, we take one particular episode of Estalella's fieldwork as the focus for our discussion. Concentrating on a significant episode, we draw out the particular conventions (and lack thereof) which shape expectations and relationships, and reflect on the ethical dimensions of these. For Estalella, blogging was a methodological

strategy and part of his research design. It was aimed at experiencing the technology under study, constructing rapport with bloggers and, importantly for this discussion, it also aimed to alleviate an ethical concern for Estalella: making visible and explicit his intentions and the scope of the research. However, the way the blog served these multiple functions also meant that this approach to blogging activities rendered various aspects of research contiguous, as we will see.

Because of his concern to become and remain visible, Estalella put much effort at the beginning of his fieldwork to introduce himself to potential research subjects. A webpage detailing his affiliation and project might have been enough to counter accusations that he was doing covert research. But Estalella wanted to be more accountable than this and made a conscious effort to become highly visible in the 'Blogosphere', while being aware that reaching everyone was not a feasible goal.

In terms of the desire to be visible to the field and avoid doing (or being perceived to be doing) covert fieldwork, the blog served as a way of presenting the research and researcher. As such, it was a successful strategy to be in the field in an enduring and visible way, something that is notoriously difficult to achieve in mediated settings.² So far, this is not so different from ethnographers being called 'doctor' or 'nurse' (depending on their gender) in the course of fieldwork on a hospital ward in face to face ethnography.³ However, some elements of Estalella's strategy to configure the presence of the researcher had important consequences. Instead of writing an email to bloggers to introduce himself (Hine, 2000: 74; Fay 2007), Estalella decided to use a different strategy, one which, while indirect, was very close to bloggers' own practices. To make certain bloggers aware that the ethnographer was interested in them, he linked his blog to theirs, and occasionally left comments on their blogs. He also engaged in debates with certain bloggers via his blog, at times tailoring his posts to topics that were of interest to the bloggers he was following. The 'ping-backs', comments, traffic and blogrolls where Estalella's blog appeared testified to the success of this strategy for making his research visible. On the one hand, these elements were evidence of his desire for openness about his research, while also further increasing its visibility because of the way blogging platforms use these kinds of traces in the presentation and ordering of information. In terms of the ethical concerns for which it was set up, this strategy to be visibly present and to be reachable for informants was working. On the other hand, however, as a consequence of this blogging strategy, much more happened than solely making the researcher's presence visible to his informants. Many others, besides the 'bloggers of interest' also found their way to Estalella's blog: researchers Estalella had already met read his blog during his fieldwork (including colleagues at his University department), they commented on it and discussed his articles. As a result, he was faced with the criticisms of some of these researchers on his own blog. The fieldwork setting and academic discussions about this fieldwork therefore converged on the blog. Estalella experienced that it was at times quite difficult to properly put in context those discussions, and felt that both his blogger/fieldworker identity in the field and his research identity could have been damaged through this high visibility.

Besides increasing the visibility of a range of his activities, the blog and the setting of fieldwork also had consequences for his relations to his informants. Sometimes, some bloggers used Estalella's surname as a tag to mark contents (photos, articles, bookmarks, etc.). At other times, they linked his blog, or uploaded photos of him in online databases. As Estalella became highly visible in the field, so did the informants and bloggers in his field;

² For example, in spite of regular messages sent to a mailing list to inform about the current ethnography they were undertaking, Barbara F. Sharf (1999) described how many subscribers were however not aware of their presence as researchers.

³ Measures have also been taken in face to face settings to clarify identities of researchers, such as flashy t-shirts (Balca and Kahnemouli, 2004).

making the ethnographer visible meant exposing informants. The comments they exchanged in public sites, the conversations they maintained and the identity of their informants were all traceable.

Two kinds of tensions arose, and each of these has an ethical dimension. First, there is a tension between ethnographic practices: that of informing research subjects about the presence of the ethnographer and the research that is undertaken, and that of protecting informants by anonymizing their contributions. Second, the way the field was articulated meant that the boundaries between kinds of scholarly activities were blurred, creating tension between fieldwork and analysis, and between discussions with informants and discussions with academic colleagues. These tensions can be characterized using the terms *contiguity* and *traceability*. We further discuss these below, with reference to this particular vignette.

Ethnography at home, mixing, mingling

Contiguity of settings, as we just illustrated, seems to challenge many assumptions about boundaries and distinct places in the ethnographic tradition. In the nineties, the idea of skipping travel to do fieldwork was a much discussed feature of doing fieldwork on the Internet—accessing the field from one's office. Close to home, an ethnography of the Internet is neither necessarily nor usually an 'ethnography at home' (Hess, 2001), though mediated ethnographers have to face similar issues to those encountered by researchers doing 'anthropology at home' (Jackson, 1987; Norman, 2000). Ethnographic work in which mediated interaction plays an important role shows signs of an even messier process, in which various aspects of research may be in closer relation to each other. But 'closer' than what? What are the conventions that seem challenged by this approach to doing fieldwork?

A reasonably fixed chronology and geography has typically marked ethnographic research: travel to the field, return, analysis and writing up, and publication. In this framework field and home are distinguished on the basis of place. The first is the place where fieldwork is carried out and the empirical data is produced, often a far away location. Home is the place where analysis, writing and dissemination take place, at a later time. The dissolution of the geographical distinction between field and home complicates the situation for the ethnographer: drawing clear boundaries between personal and professional spaces and identities become more difficult (Burrell, 2009). Leaving the field cannot be understood anymore as a trip 'back home' but as a process of breaking with the routines and practices of fieldwork. While 'anthropology at home' challenges certain distinctions between field and home, there is still a sharp distinction between the field (be it at home or away) as the locus and time for producing data, and academia as the locus and time for producing and disseminating knowledge. Geographical and temporal distinctions between these two contexts blur to a greater extent when doing networked mediated ethnographies.

Home and field get intermingle as research practices become contiguous with other settings. Interviewees 'look up your site' and gather information about your professional and even non-professional identity; friends and family are aware of what you are doing and can jump at any time into your field (leaving a comment in your blog, for instance); informants can be found at any moment in the everyday life of the researcher. These moves increasingly seem banal, necessary steps to getting the work done, yet they are not insignificant. Situating mediated fieldwork in this broader discussion, we argue that constituting fields using networked technologies adds a new layer of complexity to the relation of the ethnographer to the field/home dichotomy, because of the resulting contiguity of settings. Ease of access so praised in the nineties in mediated ethnographies turns out to be a potential challenge as well as a bonus!

Dealing with contiguity

Our point is that the usual conventions for separating these kinds of activities are challenged by contiguity. Of course, researchers are not without recourse: Hine's account of her first online fieldwork (2000) contains remarks about being aware that informants would check her webpage, and taking that audience into account when composing her webpage. Others have noted that different email addresses, with or without institutional affiliation were also part of their resources for modulating their online identity.

But we insist here that new conventions must be developed, articulated and debated by ethnographers. Persistent ccontiguity in time and space meant that analysis and data production get intermingled, so that it is difficult to demarcate clearly the end of the fieldwork or the place of various conversations and evaluation of activities pursued. Such contiguity is relative, but does push many of the conventions about separating various activities in the course of fieldwork to breaking point.

Contiguity of settings even turns some conventions on their head, making them ethical liabilities rather than protective measures. In the vignette above, dynamics of greater visibility in an unclearly defined context felt at times like a resource, and at times like a constraint for the ethnographer, with the ethnographer risking the always fragile identity of a fieldworker. Another effect we experienced was that the presence of multiple accounts in our work made doing research a particular heavy burden. While fieldwork is never easy, we felt at times exposed, surveilled and even, on occasion, that actors in the field or colleagues from 'home' were foreclosing on our research. Being labelled a virus, a spy or a proponent of such and such can also happen while doing fieldwork in non-mediated settings. But, again, the contiguity of these exchanges with our other work makes it more difficult to take distance from such pronouncements and to proceed with the next steps in our research.⁴ For us, this raises the issue of the kind of freedom and space that is needed in order to explore, to try things out, to learn. What is at stake in having your hand forced? If one doesn't want to engage in theoretical discussions in the middle of fieldwork and in full view of the field, does one risk losing face with academic colleagues? On the other hand, interpretations and views change over the course of fieldwork, and being pinned down early on may not be the most thoughtful way to proceed with ethnographic analysis. Such exchanges might also enrich one's fieldwork, by making clear to others in the field what is at stake in the project. When academic home and field are contiguous, we may feel at a loss as to how to articulate these distinct roles and voices.

These issues raise ethical dilemmas about what it means to learn to do research, to operate in different modes in different settings, and to be aware that different aspects of research involve different kinds of accountability. We propose as a label and description of this issue, the term 'contiguity'. Contiguity points to the reconsideration of the nature and context of the epistemic practice of the ethnographer: where is the ethnographer producing knowledge? If the field is so visible, so accessible, so contiguous, should we maintain the same norms of identity protection? Is the field not only the place for producing data but also the site for producing knowledge? Those issues push us to rethink the differences between these activities, and the value placed on each. It is also an opportunity to question the distinctions between fieldwork/analysis/dissemination that were constructed by relying on geographical distance between the field site and the ivory tower, or on the social and cultural distance between the life world of the fieldworker and that of the academic. Other ways of

⁴ This is a theme that refers to skills of 'meta-alternation' for the ethnographer (Beaulieu 2008). Meta alternation is arguably easier to perform when following conventions of travel, of immersion and leaving the field. This is more difficult to achieve when the field is always, potentially, 'there', in another tab of your browser. Such conventions still need to evolve for mediated ethnographies.

distinguishing and constructing differences between the ways of knowing of participants, and those of ethnographers, are probably arising. An articulation of these new conventions is beyond the scope of this paper, but we do document here the context for this need and underline its urgency.

Traceability

Traceability is a second key concern when dealing with data from mediated field sites. We mean by traceability the property of digital data to be located (traced) on the Internet using search engines or any other mechanisms enabled by digital platforms (log files, user profiles, etc). Being traceable, digital data pose the possibility of locating and identifying participants, sites, social interactions and the ethnographer herself, and makes particular issues such as anonymity, visibility, exposure, ownership and authorship especially prominent. In this section, we reflect on the core ethical values that are challenged by traceability and on the mechanisms and procedures available to researchers to sustain them.

Debates on the properties of traces and data from mediated settings have been focused for two decades on their public or private nature of this data. Early on, social researchers studying the Internet found that guidelines for dealing with ‘data’ or with subject protection did not provide enough orientation for many questions they had to face (Ess, 2009). Internet researchers have found that some of the principles and categories used in the ethical guides of traditional disciplines are of limited usefulness, especially insofar as one of the main axes used to organize ethical decisions in ethnographies is the dualism between the private and public (Estalella and Ardévol, 2007). In spite of the analytical and historical importance of these categories, their limits and inadequacies has been repeatedly pointed out by empirical studies and has given way to more subtle approaches. The idea that accessibility of a mediated spaces equates to publicness of interactions (Frankel and Siang, 1999), for instance, is repeatedly refused by the conceptions of the participants in these spaces who claim their right to be informed and be asked for consent if anybody tries to use this information. Departing from this idea some authors have started to made more elaborated arguments, proposing concepts that try to overcome the limits of these categories, like contextual integrity and ‘privacy in public’ (Nissembaum, 1998), for instance, or ‘dialogical ethics’ that take into account expectations of privacy (Cavanagh, 1999) or perceived privacy (King, 1996) of individuals.

While these debates have helped articulate more subtle views of the internet as a space of modulated private and public character, we put forth that traceability is the key issue—one that urgently needs attention and that better describes the core of the fundamental ethical issues around mediated ethnography. In doing this, we follow the path pointed out by Bakardjieva, Feenberg and Goldi, who have signalled that bigger questions may be underlying discussions of privacy/publicness (2003). We propose here that the mediated aspects of ethnographic work on the web, and traceability in particular, may have even deeper implications, since the act of writing is closely bound up with a core epistemic practice of ethnography. As such, the ethical issues raised go beyond the rights of individuals and reach into questions about the value of knowledge and the accountability of researchers.

The practice of the ethnographer has been described as one of writing, or put in a different way, making inscriptions in which they try to convey the intersubjective flow of their field experience. These inscriptions (field notes, photos, documents, recordings and transcriptions, etc.) will later be included in the ethnographer accounts: quoting informants, publishing their photos, etc. One of the main ethical issues the ethnographer usually faces when writing up their material is avoiding any possible link from her accounts that allows one to identify the people, institutions or places of her field. A common mechanism for achieving

that is using pseudonyms for participants and places, and removing identifying details. The ethnographer is then 'free' to quote anything or anybody. The 'ethical' move for the ethnographer is therefore to establish a break between her accounts and her field.

However, there are remarkable differences between the inscriptions produced by the ethnographer in the transcription of a face to face conversation, for instance, and the inscriptions produced when quoting a text from a blog or a website. While the first are more ephemeral and endure mainly because of the ethnographer recorded or wrote them down, a blog article or a text from a website are more persistent documents on the Web. They are often public and they are traceable. If the ethnographer quotes material from the web, it can be traced back to its source, using a search engine, examining log files, looking in indices, etc. When the ethnographer's accounts include inscriptions from a mediated field, things get complicated because of the traceability of field data. In this case, it is not enough to conceal names of people, places and institutions to protect their identity. The very practice of using or referring to mediated material pose particular problems: first in relation to the protection of privacy of participants in the research; and second in relation to the exposure of the ethnographer's fieldwork.

Traceability not only makes more difficult to protect subjects' identity, but the very fieldwork practice of the ethnographer is exposed as a consequence of the visibility and traceability of mediated interactions. Recall that Estalella had set up links to the blogs of interest, as a way of signalling that he was paying attention to them. Through this practice, these elements of the field become eminently traceable. Not only subjects' interactions on the web are visible and traceable, but so are the ethnographer's.

The issue the ethnographer faces in mediated field sites is therefore slightly different from that posed by more conventional field sites. It is not when or under what circumstances it is possible to produce or circulate inscriptions (and whether to do this anonymously). Nor is it whether one can take a photo, or record a conversation, etc. If traceability is a feature of fieldwork, it beholds us to examine the ethical implications of this traceability, beyond discussing privacy and publicness of certain inscriptions. While the ethical values that one chooses to uphold may be similar, the questions that the ethnographer faces are shaped by the properties and attributions of the inscriptions produced in mediated interactions. In the case at hand, it is nearly impossible to create a break between the fieldwork material and the ethnographic writing of Estalella. Bloggers may welcome this traceability (Walker 2006) and experience greater visibility of their writing and of their presence on the web as an enhancement of their authorship--an extension of their "power of inscription" (Bakardjieva, Feenberg and Goldi, 2003). While they may not experience traceability and its effects as a burden, other groups may not feel the same. Traceability is, in and of itself, neither a positive nor negative dynamic. It does, however, characterise a new way in which ethical concerns arise. One of the fundamental implications of traceability, however, is that decisions about ethical practices such as anonymization may not be in the hands of ethnographers, with the result that they who may no longer be in a key position to offer any subject protection, as conventionally understood. This is especially evident when mediated settings are highly embedded in infrastructures (such as Facebook or Flickr) and much beyond the control of the fieldworker.

A further point has to do with how third parties can be affected by the traceability of data. When researching network mediated collectives it is very difficult to completely excluded subjects that refuse to participate (Hudson and Bruckman 2004). Because mediation is not in the hands of researchers, any link, any comment, etc. can lead to them. The very act of interacting to solicit permission could compromise people, no matter how many precautionary measures the ethnographer takes later. Her presence in the field and the persistence of traces of interactions will be very often visible and traceable for other people.

We therefore see traceability as challenging assumptions about the importance of anonymization and as destabilizing the centrality of the researcher in linking research outcomes and ‘the field’. Whereas we wanted to be accountable by presenting ourselves in continuity with our usual academic identities, it would seem that we now have too much visibility in relation to our fieldwork. This results in reducing our room for maneuver, and makes it difficult to even imagine it might be possible to anonymize our sources. Of course, the identity of the researcher, and the way she is perceived have never been entirely in the hands of the researcher, but mediation of field interaction certainly changes the options open to the researcher.

In the spirit of informing our research subjects, we constructed our fieldsites using our academic identities. This means that our email accounts, our websites, and our blogs used in doing fieldwork were not disconnected from our other manifestations as researchers. For us, this approach was in line with our desire to establish relations with our informants that did not try to evade the fact that we were pursuing research. At times, our academic identities also functioned as a resource in doing this. Because of traceability, however, this means that covering our traces and providing anonymity to our informants are not achievable aims. If one looks up the authors, she will find the field, the exchanges, and the respondents. One possible way to deal with this might be to publish under pseudonyms. This would perhaps further the likelihood of maintaining anonymity, by making it more difficult to trace the researcher and the work, but at a rather high cost to us as researchers with the greater part of our academic careers ahead of us. Furthermore, many other aspects of fieldwork besides our names can lead to the field—quotations, nicknames, names of servers, etc are all so many traces that figure in articles and that can be easily be plugged into Google. And the possibility would always remain that participants would ‘out’ the researcher, by commenting or linking the publications back to the field.

Traceability therefore fundamentally challenges the very possibility of anonymization—let alone the ethnographer’s prerogative in deciding on this. This is especially problematic in the face of the insistence on anonymization as key ethical mechanism, and one that tends to be systematically required by IRBs. In our vignette, we saw how the visibility of the researcher also led to the exposure of our research subjects. It would be nearly impossible to disconnect the field material from our interactions with informants and from our activities in the field—what was effectively achieved by anonymization, in non-mediated settings.

Conclusion

Our aim is not to be critical of IRBs, but to show how many aspects of research have an ethical dimension, and to stress that these can potentially be modulated by institutional conventions or by disciplinary expectations. We have furthermore shown how particular kinds of ethnographic practice as a form of e-research might raise ethical issues for which conventions and self-regulation mechanisms are not yet well-developed. It has not been our argument that the web or digital media as settings lead to the impossibility of formulating and fulfilling ethical obligations. On the contrary, these new problems may be just the occasion to raise important questions about things like accountability, and to revisit the answers to questions like: what do the participants get out of the research (Bakardjieva, Feenberg and Goldi 2003).

Our discussion leads us to posit that the most urgent ethical issues faced by ethnographers are neither about categorizing particular kinds of interactions as public or private, nor about obtaining informed consent from informants. Rather, there is much to be gained in rethinking the ways in which conventions of fieldwork have supported ethical ways

of doing research, and considering how these conventions and practices might need to be adapted or reformulated. We have illustrated and reflected on the possibilities and impossibilities of providing anonymity in the course of the fieldwork we pursued as a consequence of traceability of field data. Being traceable, however, is not simply a loss of anonymity as a potential 'protection' for our subjects. Being traceable could actually mean greater, and more diverse accountability. Informants, colleagues, funders can all find traces of our activities online. This potential for publicness of our activities may also provide some protection for subjects. In our view, it would be valuable to weight these possibilities, rather than deplore (or demand) that anonymity always be a gold standard of proper research ethics. Such a shift may be difficult to operate for IRBs functioning in a straightjacket. But it remains our conviction that the kind of social research that needs to be pursued to understand meaningful activities in mediated settings will demand a more subtle and modulated approach to human subject protection. Our contribution to such an approach has been to provide a vocabulary to discuss the challenges of such settings, by characterizing contiguity and traceability as important aspects of mediated ethnography.

We therefore seek to open up an ethical discussion about what it means to negotiate different kinds of accountability simultaneously, when different settings in which we work become contiguous. Should we expect colleagues to stay out of the field? Should we embrace their visits to the field, as opportunities to further share aspects of our work with informants? Do we need new models of authorship that leave more room and more credit for the work of informants? How are we to deal with the blurring of personal and professional life? Do we embrace it or on the contrary, find ways to reestablish boundaries? Should we give further thought to the strategy of anonymizing the researcher? Could covert research, if it is to reduce the traceability of the field and of informants, actually be an ethical form of fieldwork?

Contiguity and traceability of the field also means that our 'empirical material' becomes more easily available to others. This opens up issues about the ethics of fieldwork in relation not only to the 'present' of fieldwork, but also to an unforeseeable future as well. Given a relative persistence of traces, what are the responsibilities of the ethnographer, in relation to future implications of field material? This may also be the opportunity to rethink the future of digital material and the responsibilities for archiving of this material.

Such questions derive from reflecting on our experiences, in relation to the conventions about fieldwork that still predominate in methodological and ethical discussions. We hope to have shown that these questions point to the many ethically important issues raised by mediated ethnography, besides those explicitly regulated by IRB procedures.

Finally, we would like to say a few words on what increasing mediation and contiguity of settings may mean for ethnography, in terms of the ethical aspects of such an epistemology. Mediation of fieldwork raises the issue of instrumentalization of research. Whereas the mediation of field sites and field relations may seem to reify the ethnographic relationship and its object—it becomes a trace, a discrete unit that we can point to, that we can store and call up—this may not be the only effect of mediation. As a number of passages in this text have signaled, the connections that can be made between the ethnographic work and other sites and concerns are also derived from this very process of mediation. This may lead to more iterative kinds of research, where conversations are ongoing, and objects of knowledge can more easily come across as dynamic. As we learn to configure these, we must also pay attention to the ethical valence of research, and construct new conventions and new 'virtues' for ethnographers.

To end this paper, we would like to take up the relevance of this discussion for other methodological approaches in e-research. We have focused on ethnography in order to make a solid, historically-grounded and empirical case about the changing ethical terrain when doing research in mediated settings. To what extent does this analysis apply to other areas of e-research? Insofar as other forms of e-research seek to make links, to connect kinds of data,

and to foster new representations of information, it is likely that traceability and contiguity will also be important dynamics. In most e-research approaches, the investigator is not so present as a 'personae' as in ethnography. But the researcher is still eminently embedded in infrastructural practices and cannot easily cut her or his links to this context when discussing findings—therefore raising the issue of traceability. With regards to contiguity, many e-research projects seek to pull together diverse kinds of data, making datasets contiguous that were previously studied separately. The precise shape of these dynamics, and of other novel ones, remains to be investigated for these other approaches in e-research. It is also urgent to pose the question whether traditional ethical guidelines that prescribe anonymisation through stripping information of 'identifying characteristics' will be sufficient to ensure ethical research, or whether new ethical practices will be needed. Such future investigations could draw on our approach as an exemplar, and by remaining close to the disciplinary traditions of research approaches, make concrete and grounded contributions to ethical debates.

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