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CULTURES AND COMMUNITIES ONLINE

ABSTRACT

Our social worlds are going digital, with perhaps hundreds of millions of people interacting through various online communities and their associated cybercultures. To stay current, our research methods must follow. This book provides a set of methodological guidelines for the conduct of netnography, a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the Internet's influence on contemporary social worlds.

Key Words: community, culture, cyberculture, ethnography, Internet research, netnography, online community, research methods

INTRODUCTION

Our social worlds are going digital. As a consequence, social scientists around the world are finding that to understand society they must follow people's social activities and encounters onto the Internet and through other technologically-mediated communications. This book is a guide for this new generation of researchers. Its topic is netnography – a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today's social worlds.

In the field of consumer and marketing research, netnographies have become a widely accepted form of research. They have been used to tackle a wide variety of topics, from applied questions of online advertising to more general investigations of identity, social relations, learning, and creativity. Netnography revealed and analysed the self-presentation strategies that people use to construct a 'digital self'

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(Schau and Gilly 2003). A netnography showed how videogamers respond to product placements and brand advertising (Nelson et al. 2004). Another netnography illustrated the coping strategies used by brides to manage cross-cultural ambivalence (Nelson and Otnes 2005). Netnographies have also been used to study global ethics and perceptions of illegal peer-to-peer file-sharing (Cohn and Vaccaro 2006), to investigate consumer activism (Kozinets and Handelman 1998), and to show how knowledge creation and learning occur through a reflective ‘virtual re-experiencing’ discourse among the members of innovative online communities (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt 2006).

Many netnographies on a wide variety of topics have been conducted over the last decade by researchers from around the world. Given the changes in our social world, this is of little surprise. In 1996, there were approximately 250,000 sites offering published content to the online world of approximately 45 million global users, who were mainly located in North America and Western Europe. In 2009, there are over 1.5 billion users of the Internet around the world accounting for 22 per cent of the world’s population. Moreover, these users are not passively consuming published content as many were in 1996 – they are actively communicating with one another. They are reaching out to form, express, and deepen their social alliances and affiliation.

Depending upon how we define our terms, there are at least 100 million, and perhaps as many as a billion people around the world who participate in online communities as a regular, ongoing part of their social experience.¹ These people are all around us. The farmer in Iowa who belongs to a soybean-growers co-operative, and actively posts to the group’s bulletin board between meetings. The sociology student in Turkey who regularly uses her social networking site and posts on the fan sites of her favourite musicians. The young man with cancer who regularly turns to his online group for advice and support. The respected industry executive who dons virtual leathers and leads a secret second life in the back alleys of virtual worlds.

Netnography has been developed to help us understand their world.

Netnography has been developed in the area of marketing and consumer research, an applied, interdisciplinary field that is open to the rapid development and adoption of new techniques. Marketing and consumer research incorporate insights from a range of fields, such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, selectively applying their basic theories and methods in a way analogous to the way pharmaceutical researchers might apply basic chemistry.

With some notable exceptions, anthropologists on the whole, it seems, have been rather slow and reluctant to follow social groups online (Beaulieu 2004; Garcia et al. 2009; Hakken 1999; Miller and Slater 2001). However, because information and communications technologies have permeated so many areas of contemporary social life and to such an extent, we have reached the point of no return. Social scientists are increasingly reaching the conclusion that they can no longer adequately understand many of the most important facets of social and cultural life without incorporating the Internet and computer-mediated communications into their studies. Is there a useful distinction between online social life and the social worlds of ‘real life’? Increasingly, it seems like the answer is no. The two have blended into one world: the world of real life, as people live it. It is a world that includes the use of technology to communicate, to commune, to socialize, to express, and to understand.

Consider an ethnography of the work life of a professional group such as doctors or lawyers. Could we truly provide a meaningful portrayal without referencing and analysing the content of online forums, e-mails, instant messages, and corporate websites? Could we provide an ethnographic understanding of the social world of tweens and teenagers without mentioning and studying mobile phone ownership and conversations, SMS text messaging, e-mails, and social networking sites? When we come to particular topics such as the world of contemporary music, television, celebrity or motion picture fan communities, game-playing communities, amateur artists or authors, or software creators, our cultural portrayals would be extremely limited without detailed reference to the online data and computer-mediated communications that increasingly make these social collectives possible.

A decade ago, Lyman and Wakeford (1999, p. 359) wrote that ‘the study of digital and networked technologies is one of the fastest growing fields of research in the social sciences’, a statement that is even more apt now than it was then. There is no doubt that new research on the use of Internet and other information and communications technologies (or ICT) is adding significantly to the literature of cultural studies, sociology, economics, law, information science, business and management fields, communication studies, human geography, nursing and healthcare, and anthropology. These disciplines have generally formed their understandings in isolation from related work by scholars working in other fields and theoretical silos.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book aims to provide a set of methodological guidelines, a disciplined approach to the culturally-oriented study of that technologically-mediated social interaction that occurs through the Internet and related information and communications technologies (or ‘ICT’). The methods that these various fields have used to investigate to investigate these topics are still somewhat uncertain and in flux. This book will attempt to systematize these methods, recommending an approach under one umbrella term.

This book is therefore intended specifically to reward the reader who is interested in researching online communities and cultures, and other forms of online social behaviour. This reader could be a professor, an academic researcher, an undergraduate or graduate student, a marketing researcher or another type of professional researcher or consultant. The book’s topics range through the varieties of online cultural experience. The netnographic approach is adapted to help the researcher study not only forums, chat, and newsgroups but also blogs, audiovisual, photographic, and podcasting communities, virtual worlds, networked game players, mobile communities, and social networking sites.

The basic principles are described and explained in this book with numerous examples. As with any type of methodological handbook, the more you engage with this text and use the examples, the greater will be your learning experience. As you read

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through the book, try to use the descriptions and examples for a small, rudimentary netnography project of your own. Doing netnography, you will find, is dramatically easier to begin than doing ethnography. As we are discussing research topics, focus and form your own questions. As we discuss search engines to locate appropriate online communities, start your search for them. Collect data as we discuss data collection. Analyse your data as we discuss data analysis. Read through the verbatims and examples and engage with them – if you are curious, use your search engine to go deeper. If you engage with the book in this way, you will leave it with a wealth of hands-on knowledge. The goal of this book is to enable the researcher to approach an ethnographic project focused on any type of online community and culture fully informed about what they will need to do. The more you apply the book and its examples, the more attainable you will find this goal.

After working through a few historical details, some necessary definitions, some potentially useful theory, and some methodological comparison and contrast, the book proceeds into a detailed description of the approach of netnography. The book also includes a glossary that readers may find helpful. The glossary summarizes terms and concepts used in the book and in the field of online community studies, as well as the occasional unavoidable acronym. This chapter will now provide some further elaboration upon the need for the separate ethnographic approach termed netnography.

WHY WE NEED NETNOGRAPHY

A recent set of postings on my blog debated the necessity of a separate term for ethnography conducted online. The debate benefited from the insights of a number of commenters, especially those of Jerry Lombardi, an applied anthropologist with considerable marketing research experience. Although Jerry initially questioned the need for yet another neologism, eventually he wrote about the utility of the term netnography in eloquent and historically-grounded terms.

I recall that our dear, sacred word ‘ethnography’ is itself a NEOLOGISM coined in the early 19th century – which might make it an oldologism by now – to define a practice that had not previously existed in quite the form or with quite the goals that the word’s coiners were trying to convey. If we were having this discussion in 1835 at the Royal Society, I might be questioning why we need that new-fangled term, ‘ethnography’, when, say, ‘comparative moral philosophy’ or ‘manners and customs of the savages’ still work perfectly well. (Let us try those on our business clients!) The worlds of research and intellectual innovation are strewn with neologisms that might’ve sounded odd or wrong when brand-new: cybernetics, psycholinguistics, software. So yes, new mappings of reality sometimes call for new names, and sometimes the names take a while to settle in.

There are a few key considerations we can think about when asking whether we need a special new designation. The first and foremost is whether we are talking about something that is actually, significantly, different. Did anthropologists over a

century ago, struggling to create, legitimate, and define their new field, need the new term ethnography, or would 'manners and customs of the savages' have served their purposes equally as well? In this particular case, we need to ask of the conduct of cultural research in the contemporary world of the Internet and other ICT: is it really different?

This book suggests that it is. Chapter 4 explains in greater detail these differences, but the key assertion here is that the online social experiences are significantly different from face-to-face social experiences, and the experience of ethnographically studying them is meaningfully different. As later chapters will also explain, there are at least three differences in ethnographic approach.

First, entering the online culture or community is distinct. It diverges from face-to-face entrée in terms of accessibility, approach, and the span of potential inclusion. 'Participation' can mean something different in person than online. So does the term 'observation'. Secondly, gathering cultural data and analysing it has particular challenges as well as opportunities that are new. The idea of 'inscription' of 'fieldnotes' is radically altered. The amounts of data can be different. The ability to apply particular analytic tools and techniques changes when the data is already in digital form. The way the data need to be treated can be different. Finally, there are few, if any, ethical procedures for in-person fieldwork that translate easily to the online medium. The abstract guidelines of informed consent are open to wide degrees of interpretation.

If we can agree that these are significant differences, then we should also agree that it may be useful to provide ethnography with a different designation. That name certainly does not have to be netnography. The term 'ethnography' has been applied to online communities and culture for well over a decade. Over this time, different researchers have used different terms to describe what it was they were doing. Shelley Correll (1995) simply called her study of a bulletin board system an ethnography, perhaps signalling that the method remained unchanged whether you used it to study Trobriand Islanders or lesbians interacting through an online bulletin board. Annette Markham (1998) and Nancy Baym (1999) also used the term – although Markham and Baym (2008) appear to have opted for the more general term 'qualitative research'. The implication, perhaps, is that ethnography is already known as a flexible and adaptable approach. Ethnography is ethnography, prefixing it with digital, online, network, Internet, or web is entirely optional.

In her important and influential book, Christine Hine (2000) called her online community study a virtual ethnography, with the virtual intended to signal an effort that is necessarily partial and inauthentic because it only focuses on the online aspect of the social experience, rather than the entire experience. In recent years, I have seen many new names given to the method of online ethnography, including webnography, digital ethnography, and cyberanthropology. More neologisms can and no doubt will be invented. However, despite the many names that researchers have given their methods, *there are very few, if any, specific, procedural guidelines to take a researcher through the specific steps necessary to conduct an ethnography of an online community or culture and to present their work.* Although certain procedures need to be decided on a contingent basis, and extreme detail in some matters is beyond its scope, this book is specifically aimed at filling that gap.

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Coming from a field where netnography is the preferred term, I have seen a number of benefits from the use of a single, distinguishing name for a technique. It is also important to note that qualitative research is blessed with an ever-growing range of techniques all related to one another and thus to ethnography. These include but are certainly not limited to such innovations as the extended case method, discourse analysis, structural ethnography, holistic ethnography, auto-ethnography, ethnomethodology, reflective phenomenology, and participatory action research (see Miles and Huberman 1994; Tesch 1990). When an approach is, arguably, significantly different from existing approaches, it gains a new name and becomes, in effect, a discipline, field, or school in and of itself. In my view, the pragmatic and applied approach to ethnography followed by corporate anthropologists is significantly different from the approach of academic anthropologists and thus merits its own guidelines and perhaps the coining of its own distinct name (see Sunderland and Denny 2007).

We need not coin these names. But we have already been doing so. Scholars producing ethnographies of online cultures and communities are rapidly minting their own names for their idiosyncratic methods. Yet, when we read a 'webnography', 'network ethnography', or a 'digital ethnography', for example, what do we know about its preferred approach or its standards of evaluation? What do we know about the way it combines online data with in-person data? Should these papers be judged in the same way or differently from other works that label themselves as 'online ethnographies' or 'virtual ethnographies'? How many different terms do we need?

In consumer and marketing research, we have generally adopted the use of the single term netnography to refer to the approach of ethnography applied to the study of online cultures and communities. Most of this type of work written after the term was coined (in 1996) uses the guidelines and techniques that have been published about the netnographic approach. Different scholars have suggested adaptations, for instance, of netnography's ethical standards. Some other scholars have opted to use those adaptations, and cited the adaptive work. Others have not.

On the whole, the system has worked quite well. This successful development of procedures and standards has led to a situation where the top-tier journals are all receptive to netnographic submissions. They know which reviewers to send it to, what citations to look for, how to evaluate it. If the method is reputable, then the reviewers and editors can concentrate on the utility and novelty of the theoretical findings. That is the role played by methodological standards in the conduct of normal science. Standards and procedures are set and, as terms regarding them fall into common usage, these standards make evaluation and understanding clearer. Social scientists build an approach that, while maintaining the inherent flexibility and adaptability of ethnography, also has a similar sense of procedural tradition and standards of quality.

For the new field of online community and culture studies, having a set of common standards will confer stability, consistency, and legitimacy. Rather than confusing those who are interested in the topic with a fallen Tower of Babel of a dozen or more different names for a perhaps-similar approach, following one technique, one sets of guidelines – or explaining how one is deviating from it, improving upon it, and where this contributes to our methodological understanding – will provide

much-needed clarity and consistency. If we wanted to compare different studies, we would know that, if they used closely related methods, their findings are probably comparable. The differences in them would not be due to different forms of approach. It can also help an emerging, growing field of scholarship to have a unifying stance and language. Having common terms, approaches, and a common citation base – just as I have attempted to draw on many different disciplines in my citations in this book – may also encourage the sharing of knowledge between disparate academic fields. Consistency in this area will provide much-needed clarity, less heedless replication, better theory-construction, and, in the end, greater recognition for all scholars working in this area.

DEFINITION OF NECESSARY TERMS: ONLINE COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Netnographers grant great significance to the fact that people turn to computer networks to partake in sources of culture and to gain a sense of community. Therefore, this book must necessarily deal with two of the most complex and contestable terms in the English language: culture and community. This section of the introductory chapter is devoted to ensuring that these terms, and their application and use in netnography, are clearly defined.

Despite the prevalence of the term community to describe the sharing of various sorts of online communications, there has been considerable academic debate regarding the term's appropriateness. Early on in its development, during the period that has sometimes been called 'Web 1.0', the online experience was often more like the reading of a book than the sharing of a conversation. Originally, it was assumed that the members of online groups almost never physically met. In the original formations in which online communities manifested, participants invariably were assumed to vigilantly maintain their anonymity. Many of the interactions that members partook in seemed, at least on the surface, to be rather fleeting and often informational or functional in nature.

Yet the notion that online gatherings were somehow a form of community was present from the beginning and has persisted. Community and culture can inhere in many of the familiar forums and 'places' of the Internet. An e-mail group posting through a listserv can carry culture, and be a community, as can a forum, a blog or microblog, a wiki, or a site devoted to photo or video enthusiasts, as can podcasts and vlogs (video blogs). Social networking sites and virtual worlds carry the complex markers of many cultures and both manifest and forge new connections and communities. Newsgroups and bulletin boards, as well as chat-rooms, although 'old-style' communities, may never go out of style completely. Not only has it become socially acceptable for people to reach out and connect through this panoply of computer-mediated connectivity, but these 'places' and related activities have become commonplace. Originally heralded as the Internet's 'killer app', e-mail, it turns out, is just the tip of the communally connective iceberg.

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The useful term ‘virtual community’ was developed by Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold (1993, p. 5), who defined virtual communities as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’. As Rheingold (1993), notes, people in online communities

exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. (1993, p. 3)

We must, however, note that Starr Roxanne Hiltz (1984) studied the phenomenon, and coined the term ‘online community’ almost a full decade earlier, situating these communities in the realm of work, rather than leisure (for more pioneering scholarship, see also Hiltz and Turoff 1978).

BOX 1.1 DEFINING ONLINE COMMUNITY: THE FOUNDING FATHER’S WORDS

We may usefully examine Howard Rheingold’s (1993, p. 3) definition of virtual communities as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’. There are several aspects of this definition that we can develop for greater insight into netnography.

- ‘Social aggregations’: The use of this term makes clear that netnography is not an individualistic approach examining the personal posting of messages on the Internet, or their aggregate. Netnography’s focal topic is collective. Netnography examines groupings, gatherings, or collections of people. Its level of analysis is thus what sociologists would call the ‘meso’ level: not the micro of individuals, nor the macro of entire social systems, but the smaller group level in between.
- ‘Emerge from the net’: As its name implies, netnography examines the individual interactions resulting from Internet connections or through computer-mediated communications as a focal source of data.
- ‘Discussions’ or communications: The element of communication is necessary to netnography. Increasingly, however, we are also seeing communities composed of people who communicate using audio information (iTunes playlists perhaps, or most certainly podcasts), visual information (Flickr), or audiovisual information (YouTube). Communication is the exchange of meaningful symbols, and all manner of human symbol systems are being digitized and shared through information networks. Each of these comprises useful data for netnography.
- ‘Enough people’: This implies a certain minimum number of people must be involved in order for an online group to feel like a community. We might presume

this to be about 20 people at the bottom end. There may also be a maximum number for efficiency of communication, as proposed in anthropologist Robin Dunbar's number, often held to be between 150 and 200 persons. Some online communities are, of course, much larger than this. However, we often find the larger communities splitting in order to maintain the close atmosphere of a community.

- 'Public discussions': This implies that accessibility is important to online community formation and to the conduct of netnography. Most netnographic discussions are not closed off, but open.
- 'Long enough': The concern with length of time implies that netnography examines online communities as ongoing, continuous relationships. These are not one-off meetings, but continued and repeated interactive contacts. The suggestion is that there is a minimum numbers of interactions and exposure over time that is necessary for a sense of community to become established.
- 'Sufficient human feeling': This concern relates to the subjective sense of authentic contact with others present in online communities. It would include such emotional matters as disclosure, honesty, reciprocal support, trust, expressions of affiliation, and expressions of intent to be social with one another.
- 'To form webs of personal relationships': This characteristic suggests that there is a social entanglement between individual members of the group, as well as the creation of a sense of the group as a discrete collection of these relationships. These relationships can, and very often do, extend beyond the online context into other aspects of people's social lives.

This foundational definition contains many key elements we find in our study of online communities and cultures, and outlines the patterns of authentic communal participation that this book will closely follow as it explains the conduct of netnography

Complicating the description and definition, Komito (1998) carefully unpacked the various, complex notions of community, seeing virtual communities as similar to types of 'foraging society' groups of people (these were the days when people were seen to be foraging for information, see Komito 1998, p. 104), as well as bearing similarities to communities who share norms of behaviour or certain defining practices, who actively enforce certain moral standards, who intentionally attempt to found a community, or who simply coexist in close proximity to one another. Komito (1998, p. 105) concluded by emphasizing the variety and dynamism of the construct:

a community is not fixed in form or function, it is a mixed bag of possible options whose meanings and concreteness are always being negotiated by individuals, in the context of changing external constraints. This is true whether group members interact electronically, via face-to-face communication, or both.

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While sharing computer-oriented cyberculture and consumption-oriented cultures of consumption, a number of these groupings demonstrate more than the mere transmission of information, but, as Carey (1989, p. 18) romantically puts it, 'the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality'. Given these definitions and appellations, the term community appears appropriate if it is used in its most fundamental sense to refer to a group of people who share social interaction, social ties, and a common interactional format, location or 'space' – albeit, in this case, a computer-mediated or virtual 'cyberspace'.

We can also locate in the term 'community' a suggestion of some sense of permanence or repeat contact. There is some sustained social interaction and, beyond this, a sense of familiarity between the members of a community. This leads to the recognition of individuals' identities and the subjective sense that 'I "belong" to this particular group'. We would likely not say that Susan was a member of an online community devoted to breeding goldfish if she only visited that particular forum once or twice, or even if she 'lurked' on it for a half dozen occasions or so over the course of a few months. However, consider a triathlon forum in which Susan occasionally posted comments, where she was familiar with some of the main contributors, and where her preferences and interests were known by others in that group. That group would likely have more of a communal feel to Susan and it would probably be much more appropriate to suggest that Susan is a member of that triathlon online community. Clearly, a continuum of participation exists in determining what can and cannot be considered 'community membership'. Its boundaries are somewhat indistinct, but must be understood in terms of self-identification as a member, repeat contact, reciprocal familiarity, shared knowledge of some rituals and customs, some sense of obligation, and participation.

ONLINE CULTURE AND CYBERCULTURE

So what is it, exactly, that is being shared among the members of these online communities? This brings us to the equally sticky and contentious topic of culture. As Raymond Williams (1976, p. 87) wrote in *Keywords*:

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines ...

As Williams's erudition suggests, for there to be culture, something needs to be cultured, cultivated, or grown; the concept is intertwined with implications of civilization, socialization, and acculturation. Over time, culture tended to be viewed by anthropologists as more material and practical, concerned with continuity of behaviours and values, and by cultural studies scholars as pertaining more to languages and symbol systems, although these currently are somewhat forced distinctions.

Anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1949) suggested various meanings of the term culture, including: a people's total lifeways; a social legacy; a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; a storehouse of learning; a set of orientations to problems or learned behaviours; mechanisms for the regulation of people's behaviours; techniques for adjusting to the external environment; behavioural maps; and others. John Bodley (1994) uses the term to refer to a society in its total way of life or to refer to human culture as a whole, providing a generally accepted definition of culture as socially-patterned human thought and action. He also notes that there are diverse definitions of culture that can fit into categories that are topical, historical, behavioural, normative, functional, mental, structural, or symbolic.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) suggested that culture is best understood from the viewpoint of semiotics, or the meanings of signs and symbols.

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973, pp. 4–5).

Culture is a public matter, Geertz suggests, because 'meaning is' – the systems of meaning through which we live are by their very nature the collective property of a group. When we look at what members of another culture are doing or saying and we cannot understand them, what we are acknowledging is our own 'lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs' and have significance (Geertz 1973, pp. 12–13).

What, then, might we mean by the term 'cyberculture'? Although it can be dangerous, or at least artificial, to make such overriding demarcations, the term cyberculture gains its utility from the idea that there are somewhat unique 'cultural constructions and reconstructions on which new technologies are based in which they, conversely, contribute to shaping' (Escobar 1994, p. 211). The complex social practices and formations that constitute online behaviours originate at least in part in the distinct traditions, constraints and trajectories of computer culture. As Laurel (1990, p. 93) noted, all online communities exist as 'villages of activity within the larger cultures of computing'. Throughout human society, computer technology and its related bank of practices and traditions are increasingly fusing with existing and new systems of meaning. This mingling can produce surprising and unique cultural formations; these new cultural fusions, specifically, would be cyberculture.

Anthropologist David Hakken (1999, p. 2) put it this way, 'the new computer-based ways of processing information seem to come with a new social formation; or, in traditional anthropological parlance, cyberspace is a distinct type of culture'. Canadian media scholar Pierre Lévy's (2001, p. xvi) definition of cyberculture as 'the set of technologies (material and intellectual), practices, attitudes, modes of thought, and values that developed along with the growth of cyberspace' is similarly comprehensive.

Jakub Macek (2005) usefully typologizes the various concepts of cyberculture into four categories: utopian; informational; anthropological; and epistemological.

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The term cyberculture can be defined through a futuristic and technologically utopian perspective, as a symbolic code of the new information society, as a set of cultural practices and lifestyles related to the rise of networked computing technology, or as a term to reflect on the social changes brought about by access to the new media, respectively. These various definitions and demarcations of cyberculture, from technologically utopian variants, as well as dystopian and celebratory postmodern strains, are closely related to four core American ideologies of technology: the technologically utopian ‘Techtopian’; the dystopian ‘Green Luddite’; the pragmatic ‘Work Machine’; and the celebratory ‘Techspressive’ (see Kozinets 2008).

The way that the term cyberculture will be used in this book – and it will be used rarely – is as follows. If we accept as a baseline definition that culture is learned and consists of systems of meaning, symbol systems of which language is primary, then we can ask about the particular features carried in specific technological contexts, such as in online communities or through computer-mediated communications. Are there symbol systems, rituals and norms, ways of behaving, identities, roles and, in particular languages, that help particular online social formations to organize and manage themselves? Are these linguistic systems, norms, actions, and identities distinctive to online groups, and online communications? Are they taught? Are they common to some groups and not to others? Are they common to some media and not to others?

If these meaning systems do exist in particular contexts that are either exclusively or mainly manifested and negotiated online (think emoticons or ‘smiley faces’ such as ;-) or :- (, acronyms like LOL or OMG, terms such as ‘friending’ or ‘flaming’), then it seems sensible to use the term cyberculture to refer to them. My perspective is that, from a comparative perspective, there is not a lot that is particularly unique about much of what goes on in the online environment. Culture exists, and always has, in a continuous state of flux whose transformations have been driven by our inventions, which we simultaneously shape and drive. If we accept that *Homo sapiens* and *Homo habilis* are, by their nature, tool-makers and innovators, then perhaps it makes no more sense for us to talk about cyberculture as distinct from other forms of human culture as it does to talk about ‘alphabet culture’, ‘wheel culture’, or ‘electricity culture’.²

Yet, because culture is unquestionably based within and founded on communication (Carey 1989), online communication media possess a certain ontological status for their participants. These communications act as media of cultural transaction – the exchange not only of information, but of systems of meaning. Online communities form or manifest cultures, the ‘learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to order, guide, and direct the behaviour of a particular society or group’ (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p. 485 f.2). To avoid the essentializing as well as the hyperbolization that runs rampant in so much Internet-related discourse, I prefer to talk about particular online cultures in their specific manifestations. Thus it may well make sense, depending upon our research focus, to talk about virtual world culture, the culture of the blogosphere, mobile phone culture, or online Bollywood fan culture. I tend to prefer the specificity of these latter terms over the generality of the term cyberculture, and would reserve the use of that term to references and discussions about distinctive shared characteristics of these online or computer-mediated social formations.

Whether one chooses to adopt terminology of cybercultural uniqueness, and whatever one chooses to call these social collectives, at least one thing seems assured. With global Internet access continuing to grow, and time online continuing to expand, we are going to see prodigious growth in the quantity, interests, and influence of these communities and their attendant cultures.

THE NATURE AND NUMBERS OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND CULTURES

Online connections and alignments are increasingly affecting our social behaviour as citizens, as consumers, as friends and family, and as social beings. In this section we will overview some important facts about online communities and cultures, in order to demonstrate their impact on the social world, and, consequently, on the conduct of relevant contemporary social research. As mentioned above, at least 100 million people around the globe regularly participate in online communities. In fact, both Facebook and MySpace social networking sites have over 100 million subscribers. It is likely that a significant majority of the 1.5 billion global Internet users ‘participate’ in one form or another in some form of online gathering and communication, even if that participation is merely reading messages, tagging, or offering the occasional short message.

Although studies of this new and dynamic reality are scarce, surveys point to the influence and pervasiveness of the online communal experience. In a research report in 2001, Pew’s surveys explored the world online and concluded, even at that relatively early stage, that the online world constituted a vibrant social universe. Many Internet users enjoyed serious and satisfying contact with online communities (Pew Internet Report 2001). In that same survey, they reported that 84 per cent of all Internet users were reporting some sort of contact or activity with an online community, both new communities that they discovered online, or long-standing traditional groups such as professional or trade associations. The survey reported that people were using the Internet to become more involved with groups to which they already belonged, to deepen their ties to local communities, as well as to find new communities to join and partake in and to spur connections with ‘strangers’ and people whose racial, ethnic, generational or economic backgrounds were different from their own. In the 2001 survey, the people most interested in online community interaction were members of belief groups, ethnic groups, and particularly lifestyle-oriented groups.

It was already becoming apparent that online communities were becoming a part of people’s daily experiences online. Further, the types of online communities covered a large range of human social and cultural interests, including: trade associations; professional groups; political groups and political discussion groups; hobby groups; fan groups of sports, music, television shows, and celebrities; community groups; lifestyle-oriented groups; medical support groups; personal or psychological issue groups; religious or spiritual organizations, or belief-oriented groups; labour unions; and ethnic or cultural groups. Examining this listing it is certainly difficult to think of very many communities or interests that were *not* the subject of online involvement.

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More data on the prevalence and characteristics of online communities is provided by the Annenberg Digital Future Project at the University of Southern California. This research offers one of the most extensive recent surveys to date of Americans' life online. In their 2008 research results, they find that, of all Internet users surveyed, a full 15 per cent consider themselves to be members of an online community.³ The survey results announced that the number of people claiming to be a member of an online community had nearly tripled, from 6 per cent in their 2005 survey to 15 per cent in 2007. The average longevity of membership sat at three years. These numbers kept increasing over the years, indicating that members of online communities were staying with their communities. Similar to the earlier Pew report, the most common online communities in which people reported membership were those related to the somewhat ambiguous category of 'hobbies'. Large percentages also reported that their online community involved their social lives, their professional lives, were religious, spiritual, political or relationship-oriented.

Being in contact with an online community is increasingly a regular part of people's everyday social lives. A majority of online community members check in with their community at least once a day, 29 per cent of them several times a day – and, again recall that the survey *excluded* social networking sites from these figures. The Annenberg numbers harmonize quite well with The Pew Internet Report's (2001) finding that 79 per cent of those who were surveyed stayed in regular contact with at least one online community.

But are these online communities important to the people who participate in them? Resoundingly, the answer is yes. An almost-unanimous 98 per cent of the online community members responding to the Digital Futures Survey said that they considered their communities to be important to them. Over a third considered them 'extremely important', while more than a third considered them 'very important'. Similarly, 92 per cent of online community members said that they found benefit in their communities.

In this book, we will explore the popular dichotomy between 'online' and 'face-to-face' or 'real life' interactions and communities. Crumlish (2004, p. 7) talks about the way that Usenet groups traditionally scheduled in-person 'burgermunches' and the pioneering online service, the WELL, learned the value of parties where people got a chance to spend 'face time' with one another.

Without embodied action, without face-to-face interaction, and without people meeting up together in place in time, the Internet might as well be a dream world. As the interconnectedness of the web reaches into the mundane details of ordinary reality and causes actual bodies to share space, real conversations to take place using lips and tongues, heard by ears and processed by auditory apparatus in brains – that's when the magic starts to happen. (Crumlish 2004, p. 7)

Once we are aware of the interconnectedness of social worlds, it becomes less surprising that a majority of people who belong to online communities meet other online community members face-to-face. Fifty-six per cent of online community members in the Annenberg study said that they met other members of their online community in person. This number is up from a figure of 52 per cent of online community members who met other members in 2006.

Again according to the Digital Future Report 2008, there is the keen relationship between participation in online communities and participation in social causes. A full 75 per cent of online community members said they used the Internet to participate in online communities that were related to social causes. A rather remarkable 94 per cent of online community members said that the Internet helped them to become more informed about social causes. Eighty-seven per cent of online community members who participated in social causes said that they got involved in causes that were new to them since they began participating in an online community. A full 31 per cent of online community members reported that they participated more in socially activist causes since they started participating as members of their online communities.

The most telling question in the 2008 Digital Future Project report may be the one in which online community members expressed how strong are their sentiments towards their online communities. A consequential majority, 55 per cent, said that they felt as strongly about their online communities as they did about their real-world communities, a significant increase from the year before. Consider that real-world communities would include affiliations to such groups as families, religions, neighbourhoods, nation states, or work or professional groups. The fact that online gatherings can rank alongside these core communities in people's hearts and minds speaks volumes about the meaningfulness of their connection.

These reports support the idea that what is happening in our society is not simply a quantitative change in the way that the Internet is used, but a qualitative shift. As more people use the Internet, they use it as a highly sophisticated communications device that enables and empowers the formation of communities. These communities, like the Internet itself, are being found by many to be indispensable. They are becoming 'places' of belonging, information, and emotional support that people cannot do without. Chatting and checking with one's fellow online community members before a purchase, a doctor's visit, a parenting decision, a political rally, or a television show is becoming second nature.

Online communities are not virtual. The people that we meet online are not virtual. They are real communities populated with real people, which is why so many end up meeting in the flesh. The topics that we talk about in online communities are important topics, which is why we often learn about and continue to care about the social and political causes that we hear about through our online communities. Online communities *are* communities; there is no room for debate about this topic anymore. They teach us about real languages, real meanings, real causes, real cultures. 'These social groups have a 'real' existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour' (Kozinets 1998, p. 366).

GLOBAL PATTERNS

As of the writing of this book, there are over 1.5 billion users of the Internet around the world accounting for 22 per cent of the world's population (see Table 1.1 for a regional breakdown). Conversely, this means that about 78 per cent of the world's

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TABLE 1.1 GLOBAL INTERNET USAGE*

Global Region	2008 Population (estimated)	Internet users, latest data (June 30 2008)	Internet penetration (% of population)	Internet use as percentage of total global use	Growth in Internet usage, 2000–2008(%)
Africa	955,206,348	51,065,630	5.3	3.5	1,031.2
Asia	3,776,181,949	578,538,257	15.3	39.5	406.1
Europe	800,401,065	384,633,765	48.1	26.3	266.0
Middle East	197,090,443	41,939,200	21.3	2.9	1,176.8
North America	337,167,248	248,241,969	73.6	17.0	129.6
Latin America/ Caribbean	576,091,673	139,009,209	24.1	9.5	669.3
Oceania/ Australia/NZ	33,981,562	20,204,331	59.5	1.4	165.1
GLOBAL TOTAL	6,676,120,288	1,463,632,361	21.9	100.0	305.5

Note: *Information from www.internetworldstats.com/; Internet usage information comes from data published by Nielsen/NetRatings, by the International Telecommunications Union, by local NIC, and other sources.

population, a vast majority, still have no Internet access. Penetration rates in some gigantic countries are still dismally small, such as India's rate in May 2007 of only three per cent. We still know very little about the qualitative differences in type of Internet use between countries, far less than we do about the easier-to-measure quantitative difference in Internet penetration rates.

Asian Internet users are well known for being more active and participative (Li and Bernoff 2008). In the Asian Pacific region, South Korea not only has the highest rate of Internet usage with over 65 per cent of its population using Internet, but it has a very advanced and sophisticated user base. They are an active online population using the Internet significantly more than other Asian populations, viewing far more of the 100 million websites available to global users. A generation of South Koreans has grown up shopping online and playing networked online games such as Lineage.

In South America, Internet penetration and usage rates have lagged behind many other continents. However, Brazil has over 50 million Internet users, more than twice as many as Mexico, the country with the second highest number of users. Brazilians are also sophisticated network users with experience in the application of ICT. Chile has the highest Internet penetration rates in the region (45 per cent of the population, as compared to Cuba's 2 per cent, or Nicaragua's 3 per cent). Chilean Internet use patterns appear to echo those of Western European countries in many respects.

Similarly, Western Europe exhibits considerable variety in the ways that online communities are manifested and articulated. Germany, Norway, and Austria are among some of the heaviest Internet users, as well as having some of the highest penetration rates, while countries like Spain, Italy, and Greece lag behind in both of these characteristics. Western European countries – in particular, Finland – and some Asian countries, like Japan, are excellent places to investigate online communities accessed using mobile devices such as mobile phones. North Americans and Japanese are advanced users of virtual worlds.

In all of these examples, we can see how certain countries, as well as certain regions within those countries, and particular demographic or cultural groups within the regions within those countries, could act as 'benchmarks' for us to study leading-edge online community, ICT, and Internet usage practices. If we want to study, for example, mobile online community use, or video blogging, it might make sense to go to the countries and the people within the countries who are in some senses demonstrating the most advanced or sophisticated uses of technology.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Netnography: Researching Cultures and Communities Online is a methodological primer on a cultural approach to online research. The book seeks to thoroughly introduce, explain, and illustrate a particular approach to the conduct of ethnographies of online communities and cultures. 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.

Because this book deals with a relatively new approach in a relatively new area, some overview material provided at the beginning of the book may be found useful. The introductory chapters to this book thus provide an overview of the field of Internet-based cultural and communal research, containing a number of summaries of noteworthy ethnographies of online cultures and communities in general, and discussing, organizing, and introducing some potentially useful theory. This overview covers a range of different types of research in the hope that it may inform those who are new to the field, refresh and perhaps broaden the knowledge of those who are familiar with it, and potentially trigger new ideas for exciting and innovative research in this area.

Much of the material in this book synthesizes existing methods, theories, approaches, and ideas, and attempts to place them together in a way that will be useful to both the interested student and the active researcher. The book helps researchers to consider the various options they have for investigating the cultural worlds of the Internet. The core of this book is procedural description. This also includes a considerable amount of introduction to methodological debates and decisions that need to be made in the course of conducting ethnographies of online cultures or communities. Much of the content of the book is therefore in the nature of a review or overview of related debates, concerns, procedures and approaches. What this book seeks to add to our extant knowledge is a coherent overview of the material, a framework for the conduct of cultural research on the Internet, discussions of issues and roadblocks to this sort of research, an updating of past approaches for current technological settings, and, particularly, an advocacy in favour of particular decisions.

This book is therefore structured as follows. It starts in Chapter 1 with a justification of the topic. *What*, exactly, are online culture and communities, and why are they

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an important topic for social scientists? *Why* should we study these phenomena? This chapter has sought to answer these questions, in the process explaining the significance, and defining the terminology surrounding online culture and community. The chapter first demonstrated the pervasiveness of online communities and cyber-culture in people's daily lives and asserted that social scientists need good tools to study these phenomena and their implications. The chapter then discussed the usefulness of general standards and having a distinct name for netnography, *debating* the community and culture terminology as it applies to netnography, and offering a global perspective on online cultures and online community behaviours.

The book's second chapter, 'Understanding Culture Online', seeks to provide a general overview of extant research on online cultures and communities, giving a brief slice of some of the most important and influential research from the fields of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, consumer research, and other fields. *What* do we know about online cultures and communities? This chapter will examine some of the research undertaken to understand and classify online cultures and communities, to describe the content of their communications and interactions, and to overview their cultural and ritual processes. Given the methodological focus of this book, this chapter will often emphasize not only what we know about the rich cultural worlds that this research has revealed, but will also foreshadow how these cultural understandings were achieved.

Chapter 3, 'Researching Online: Methods' will provide a more specific overview of the various methodologies that have been used in order to perform research on online communities. Moving into the domain of *how* we do our research, it will review some of the most popular ways that online culture and communities have been and can be studied: interviews (group and individual), surveys, social network analysis, observation, and ethnography. The chapter compares different online methodologies that use qualitative data to research online communities and offers some suggestions for their coordination with netnography. The chapter provides some guidelines for methodological adoption, offering determinations of research conditions under which particular methodologies may be preferable to others as well as a sense of where they can be effectively combined and hybridized.

With introductory matters covered, Chapter 4 proceeds with an introduction and more detailed explication of the method of netnography. It overviews the history and nature of the method, defines its terms, and offers an overview of how the method has already been used and adapted in particular contexts through a citation of various research studies that have used the method. Netnography adapts common participant-observation ethnographic procedures – such as making cultural entrée, gathering data, carefully analysing and interpreting that data, writing a research report, and conducting ethical research – to the contingencies of online community manifesting through computer-mediated communications. Each of these elements is developed in turn over the next four chapters.

Chapter 5 begins the more detailed exploration of the netnographic approach by looking at planning, focus and entrée. The chapter offers specific guidelines to teach the online cultural researcher *how* to plan, focus, and begin a netnographic study. It discusses the steps that need to be followed preceding entrée into the fieldsite and offers guidelines for a strategic entry into online fieldwork. The types of research

questions and topics that are amenable to study with the method are discussed. The next decision concerns *where* and *how* to collect data. Given the wide range of choices of online communal forms, including newsgroups, boards, blogs, lists, wikis, playspaces, social networking sites, and virtual worlds, where should researchers spend their time? A logical research design process is outlined. Additionally, some protocols for deploying the resources of online search engines are provided, as well as suggestions about how to prepare for the formal data collection of a netnography.

Chapter 6, on data collection, discusses and illustrates particular approaches to the capture of online community and cultural data. This chapter emphasizes the cultural nature of this data. Because netnography is participant-observational research, netnographic data can take three or more forms: (a) data that the researcher directly copies from the computer-mediated communications of online community members; (b) data that is generated through capture and recording of online community events and interactions; and (c) data that the researcher inscribes. Each of these will be discussed and particular guidelines offered to enable the researcher to collect the appropriate type of netnographic data required for particular research projects.

This is followed by the chapter on data analysis and interpretation. Grounded theory and inductive coding procedures are overviewed, as well as the more interpretive and holistic 'hermeneutic circle' types of theory generation. Several software solutions will be overviewed. Some specific strategies will be discussed and illustrated to help researchers to understand the particularities of netnographic data analysis.

Research ethics may be one of the most important differences between traditional ethnography and netnography. Chapter 8 covers this issue in some detail. It offers moral, legal, and ethical stances to support guidelines and procedures that can be used to plan and undertake research and also to submit applications to overseeing bodies such as Institutional Review Boards and Human Subjects Research Ethics Committees. Ethical concerns over netnography turn on contentious concerns about whether online forums are to be considered a private or a public site, what constitutes informed consent, and what level of disclosure of research participants is appropriate. These issues and stances will be discussed in turn, and specific research procedures recommended.

Chapter 9 covers some of the big picture issues of research representation and the evaluation of netnographic research. In it, I discuss the representational choices facing the netnographic researcher. The nature of the online medium offers researchers more choices for reaching broad and diverse audiences than ever before and this chapter follows the discussion of representation with an elaborated set of evaluative standards.

The final chapter is devoted to a discussion of the changes and advances in the netnographic approach. It discusses the latest developments in the online environment of online community and culture, including blogging, microblogging ('Tweeting'), social networking sites, and virtual worlds. Extrapolating from the alterations of the method described throughout the book, this chapter will also provide some general guidelines for the adaptation of netnography to the particularities of these sites of online interaction and community. The book concludes with a look at the potential growth of online communities and the possibilities for the ongoing growth and adaptation of netnography by a new generation of scholars.

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SUMMARY

Online communities and other Internet or ICT cultures are an increasingly important part of our contemporary social world. Researchers may benefit by adapting the approach of netnography, a form of ethnographic research adapted to the unique contingencies of various types of computer-mediated social interaction. Using a common understanding and a common set of standards for such studies will confer stability, consistency, and legitimacy. This first chapter has defined online communities and culture, and explained why they are a significant topic for social scientists today. This is a necessary step before exploring current theory about these topics in Chapter 2, and then explaining and demonstrating the method of netnography that studies these communities and cultures in the remainder of the book.

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