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# THE METHODS, POLITICS, AND ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION IN ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

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*in cyberspace, one dwells in language. and through language.  
i exist as myself in language online . . . it feels more like being me  
than i sometimes feel offline. . . i think myself in language is more  
communicative of who i am. and because i'm a good writer, elo-  
quence makes me beautiful . . .*

—Sherie, online interview participant

*Here, I can edit what I think before I say it. This makes communi-  
cation easier between my friends and I. There are fewer errors in  
meaning when our thoughts have been written clearly.*

—Robin, online interview participant

*My ambiguity makes you nervous. I can be many things at once  
here. Are they all 'me'? Who am I? 'He' . . . 'Her' . . . 'Per' . . .  
'It' . . . 'We' . . . ? Can't you tell? Why do you want to know???*

—DominOH!, online interview participant

**W**hether one studies the Internet as a social structure or utilizes Internet-based technologies as tools for research, Internet-based technologies change the research scenario. Computer mediation has a significant

influence on many aspects of communication practice and theory. The internet has similarities to many earlier media for communication, such as letter writing, telephone, telegraph, Post-It Notes, and so forth. At the same time, the capacities and uses of Internet communication are unique in configuration and shape a user's (and thus the researcher's) perceptions and interactions. These influences extend beyond the interpersonal; outcomes of these communication processes have the potential to shift sensemaking practices at the cultural level. We are, as Gergen (1991) notes, saturated in technologies. The Internet and associated communication media permeate and alter interactions and the possible outcomes of these interactions at the dyadic, group, and cultural level.<sup>1</sup> Equally, Internet technologies have the potential to shift the ways in which qualitative researchers collect, make sense of, and represent data.

In technologically mediated environments, self, other, and social structures are constituted through interaction, negotiated in concert with others. The extent to which information and communication technology (ICT) can mediate one's identity and social relations should call us to epistemological attention. Whether or not we do research of physical or online cultures, new communication technologies highlight the dialogic features of social reality, compelling scholars to reexamine traditional assumptions and previously taken-for-granted rubrics of social research.

In the early 1990s, as the capacities of the Internet became more publicly known and accessed, the use of the Internet for the development of personal relationships and social structures grew, as did the study of computer-mediated subjectivity and community. Through a phone line, access to the Internet, and specialized software, people could meet and develop relationships with others from the privacy of their homes. People could do this anonymously if they chose, creating personae that were similar to or highly distinctive from what they perceived their physical personae to be. They could create or join communities based on like-mindedness rather than physical proximity.

During these early years when Internet and virtual reality technologies caught public and scholarly interest, the study of computer-mediated communication (CMC) worked from theoretical extremes: On the one hand, computer-mediated communication was lauded as a means of transcending the limits associated with human embodiment. By erasing sociocultural markers such as race and gender or escaping the body altogether, virtual communication would lead to a utopian society whereby democratic participation in public discourse was unhindered by physicality and corresponding stereotypes. At the other extreme, skeptics critiqued CMC because it removed essential socioemotional or nonverbal cues and would result in impoverished, low-trust relationships at best and social withdrawal, at worst. Citizens would resemble hackers: pale, reclusive, and prone to eating pizza and Chinese take-out. As time passed, use grew, novelty diminished, and more measured accounts emerged based less on theoretical speculation and more on study of actual contexts.<sup>2</sup> It became clear that meaningful and significant relationships and social structures could thrive in text-only online environments. This capacity is now taken for granted. The past decade of communication has included forms

new to many of us: email, mailing lists, Multi User Dimensions (MUDs or MOOs), real time chatrooms, instant messaging, Web sites, blogs, and so forth. We are now familiar with the concepts of cybersex, online marriages, Friendster, and other creative uses of technology to enact identity and relationships through computer-mediation. Many of us can probably name close colleagues and friends whom we would not recognize in person.

The computer-mediated construction of self, other, and social structure constitutes a unique phenomenon for study. In online environments, the construction of identity is a process that must be initiated more deliberately or consciously. Offline, the body can simply walk around and be responded to by others, providing the looking glass with which one comes to know the self. Online, the first step toward existence is the production of discourse, whether in the form of words, graphic images, or sounds. But as many scholars have taught us (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Blumer, 1969; Buber, 1958; Laing, 1969), we understand our Self only in concert with Other, a continual dialogic process of negotiation and a great deal of faith in shared meaning (Rommetveit, 1980).

In most computer-mediated environments, this process requires a more deliberate exchange of information because people are not co-present in the same physical space and the nonverbal aspects of the process are, for the most part, missing. The process is obfuscated because a person typically takes knowledge of self for granted with little reflection on the social, interactive process by which the self is negotiated with others in context. Mostly overlooked by users, the production of the message is only the first part of the process: Whether by receiving a reply message or by tracking a virtual footprint of a visitor to one's Web site, one can only know if one has been acknowledged through some sort of response. MacKinnon's insights in this matter (1995) warrant repeating here. He notes that the common phrase "I think, therefore I am" is woefully inadequate in cyberspace. Even "I speak, therefore I am" is not enough. In cyberspace, the more appropriate phrase is "I am perceived, therefore I am." (p. 119). Implied in this last phrase is the fact that online, perception of another's attention is only known by overt response. So we can usefully note this by adding the phrase "I am responded to, therefore I am" (Markham, 2003a).

The participant statements (from my previous research of Internet users) at the beginning of this chapter represent well the importance of text to a person's construction and negotiation of identity in online text-based environments. Sherie expresses a desire to be known solely as text (not through, but *as* text). For Sherie, computer-mediated communication is a way of being. Robin always uses correct punctuation and strives to make the meaning as clear as possible. Text is perceived as a powerful means of controlling, through editing and backspacing, the way the self is presented to others. DominOH!, unlike the other two, does not pay much attention to the textual, linguistic aspects of the medium. Rather, DominOH! uses the technology as an interaction space which protects anonymity and allows the social self to be less firmly attached to the body. Yet the text is vital to the researcher's understanding of DominOH!'s persona online.

For all three personae interviewed, text remains the means through which each performs and negotiates the self. None of these textual entities exists in isolation. Their existence is made possible by direct or perceived interaction with others. They are communicative through and through; their social being is initiated through a process of creating and sending a message and negotiated through a process of interaction.

Although we recognize that reality is socially negotiated through discursive practice, the dialogic nature of identity and culture is thrown into high relief in computer-mediated environments. This gives rise to many possibilities and paradoxes in social research. For any researcher studying life online, the traditional challenge of understanding other-in-context is complicated by the blatant interference of the researcher into the frame of the field and by the power of the researcher in representing the culture. Researchers have always interfered with the context in some way while conducting research. In the past three or more decades, scholars have problematized this feature of research, as well as highlighted the blurring of boundaries between researcher and researched. Still, these issues become startlingly apparent—and challenging—in the context of CMC environments.

These issues call not only for adjustment of traditional methods to online environments or the creation of new methods, but also for across-the-board reassessment and interrogation of the premises of qualitative inquiry in general. Interestingly, the specific logistic and analytic problems associated with the interpretive study of computer-mediated personae reveal many weaknesses in qualitative methods and epistemologies, generally. In the years I have spent trying to figure out how to make sense of participants whose gender, name, body type, age, ethnicity, class, and location remain inexplicable, I have been compelled to seriously examine certain practices of Othering which, despite efforts to be reflexive, hide in everyday, embodied ways of knowing. Put more positively, studying computer-mediated interactions allows and encourages exploration of what is happening in “the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others” (Fine, 1994, p. 70).

New communication technologies privilege and highlight certain features of interaction while obscuring others, confounding traditional methods of capturing and examining the formative elements of relationships, organizations, communities and cultures. Additionally, a person’s conceptual framework of any new communication technology will predetermine, to a certain extent, that person’s understanding of, response to, and interaction with the technology. This complicates the researcher’s ability to assume commonalities among participants’ communicative practices via CMC, or to presume that participants understand and use the technology in the same way the researcher does. The challenge for the qualitative researcher in the computer-mediated environment is to attend to the details of how one is going about the process of getting to know something about the context and the persons being studied.

At the same time, examining one’s own influence in the shape of the outcome is a vital practice. Grappling with both the practical and the epistemological implications

of this influence can help researchers make more socially responsible decisions. In a very real sense, every method decision is an ethics decision, in that these decisions have consequences for not just research design but also the identity of the participants, the outcomes of our studies, and the character of knowledge which inevitably grows from our work in the field.

In this chapter, I describe some of the tensions and complications that can arise in the qualitative study of Internet-mediated contexts when decisions must be made about (a) defining the boundaries of the field, (b) determining what constitutes data, (c) interpreting the other as text, (d) using embodied sensibilities to interpret textuality, and (e) representing the other ethically in research reports. My overall object in this discussion is to illustrate some of the challenges of doing research in computer-mediated environments and to display the significance of the researcher's choices on the field's structure, on the other's embodied or reported Being, and ultimately, on the social knowledge derived from the research project. The discussion is intended to help researchers generate questions which can be used to interrogate their own epistemological and axiological assumptions throughout the design and enactment of the inquiry. In addition to this primary train of thought, I talk briefly about how the Internet is conceptualized, review some of the main shifts in thinking about qualitative Internet research, and discuss some of the major ethical considerations which are entwined with this type of inquiry.

To clarify what this chapter does and does not do: First, this chapter focuses on textuality. The examples throughout this chapter draw primarily on text-based computer-mediated discourse and interactions among participants or between participant and researcher. Although technologies facilitate visual and audio simulations and representations and the capacities of the traditional PC are moving to mobile or convenience devices, text remains a primary unit of analysis for the qualitative researcher. Put differently, the issues raised here apply equally to multi-media and mobile aspects of CMC because these are, for the most part, analyzed as texts, broadly speaking.

Second, even though this chapter focuses on computer-mediated contexts, the spirit of these arguments applies to other forms of interaction, both online and offline. The intriguing thing about CMC is that it calls attention to the ways we literally see and make sense of the world and points out many of the biases inherent in our traditional ways of seeing and knowing. Therefore, one should not dismiss the challenges discussed herein even if doing radically different types of qualitative research.

Third, this chapter does not seek to provide an overview of how qualitative research is conducted on or via the Internet, but rather, addresses key epistemological and methodological questions facing ethnographers researching in social spaces constituted in part or wholly through new communication technologies. Many sources exist to aid the researcher with specific procedures and methods for qualitative studies (this volume) and qualitative Internet studies (e.g., Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2003; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

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Finally, this chapter focuses more on problems and challenges than opportunities and potential of CMC-related research environments. This imbalance is not indicative of my own or a general attitude toward qualitative Internet research. Here, however, I want to build a case for cautious, reflexive, and prepared research which, while celebrating those aspects of new communication technologies that make them well suited for qualitative inquiry, remains attentive to the consequences of one's research choices.

## ■ SHIFTING LENSES

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The study of CMC spans virtually every academic discipline and methodological approach. Research objects and lenses have shifted rapidly in the past decade or so, commensurate with the rapid development and dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICT). Qualitative study of ICT in the past decade has tended to shift in two ways. First, though not a universal trend, research has tended to shift from strongly polarized depictions and predictions in the early 1990s, to more descriptive accounts in the mid-late 1990s and, in the new century, to more theoretically grounded, comparative, or theory-building studies.

Accounts of CMC, identity, and culture throughout the early 1990s were heavily influenced by pop culture descriptions of and personal experience with novel and exciting forms of interaction. Gibson's term *Cyberspace*, coined in his science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, offered the elusive but intriguing definition of online experience as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. . . . A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding" (1984). About virtual reality, Rheingold (1991) told readers "*we have to decide fairly soon what it is we as humans ought to become, because we're on the brink of having the power of creating any experience we desire*" (p. 386, emphasis in original). Wright (1994) told us simply that it would "deeply change politics, culture, and the fabric of society—if not, indeed, the very metaphysics of human existence" (p. 101). Barlow offered a vision of Cyberspace as the Wild West, a final frontier to be claimed: "Cyberspace . . . is presently inhabited almost exclusively by mountain men, desperadoes and vigilantes, kind of a rough bunch. . . . And as long as that's the case, it's gonna be the Law of the Wild in there" (cited in Woolley, 1992, pp. 122–123). Keeps (1993) suggested that virtuality through computer-mediated communication "announces the end of the body, the apocalypse of corporeal subjectivity" (p. 4).

These ideas caught the imagination of scholars and influenced significantly the tone of research. This is not surprising: With the invention or new use of every communication technology in the past century, claims regarding media effects tend to be

overestimated and exaggerated as long as the technology remained novel. Although this period was not without empirically based and theoretically grounded research, there was a feeling of utopianism in descriptions of how technology might (or should) free us from the constraints of worldwide shackles like hierarchy, traditional social stereotypes, embodiment, and even death. Rheingold's *Virtual Community* (1993) and Benedikt's edited collection *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991) represent this trend well. To give these authors credit, their ideas sparked the interest of many scholars whose work followed.

Simultaneously, research was influenced by news coverage, movies, and pop culture accounts that predicted negative, even dire consequences of this new Internet era. *Time Magazine* offered a cover story on "Cyberporn," wherein readers learned that the Internet threatened our children's safety (from adult sexual predators) and innocence (from easy access to pornography). Vastly exaggerated claims incited sound criticism; the magazine editors had relied exclusively on evidence supplied by an undergraduate student's non-peer-reviewed study. Critiqued or not, this issue of *Time* was quoted by legislators, parents, and scholars. "Internet Addiction Disorder" entered the medical lexicon in 1996. Popular films spelled out the dangers of identity theft, hackers, and spending too much time in front of one's computer. Pundits predicted that face-to-face interactions would become impoverished as people forgot the intricacies and delicacies of human interaction in physical environments.

These swings have evened out in the last few years, resulting in published accounts which exhibit many of the more traditional characteristics of social research. Scholars are explaining their approach and methods more carefully, grounding their work in previous research more thoroughly, and attending more closely to the history of communication technologies as well as the history of qualitative inquiry. The targets of research continue to follow shifts in technological development. Herring (2004) aptly notes that researchers have tended to follow novelty; researchers quickly flock to each new technology. Research in the 1980s tended to focus on the use and impact of computers, email, and networking in the workplace (overviewed well by Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). In the 1990s, research waves moved progressively through various forms of CMC, such as Email, Usenet, MUDs and MOOs, the World Wide Web, IM (Instant Messaging), SMS (Short Messaging Service via mobile telephone), and Blogs.

Various social interaction practices and social structures received empirical attention over the past decade: Flaming and other forms of emotionally charged or violent acts (e.g., Dery, 1994; Dibbell, 1996; MacKinnon, 1998); the use of emoticons to compensate for the absence of nonverbals (Witmer & Katzman, 1998); the social construction of virtual communities via mailing lists (e.g., Baym, 2000; Bromseth, 2002; Rheingold, 1993; Sveningsson, 2001), MUDs or MOOs (e.g., Kendall, 1998; Reid, 1995) or Web sites (Johnson, 2003); the intersection of technology and identity (e.g., Lupton, 1995; Markham, 1998; Senft & Horn, 1996; Sondheim, 1996; Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995); sexuality (e.g., Keisler, 1997; Waskul, Douglass, & Edgley, 2000); gender

and participation in CMC (e.g., Herring, 1993); and race (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000). Ethnographically informed studies have focused on online groups (e.g., Baym, 2000; Eichhorn, 2001; Kendall, 1998; Orgad, 2002; Reid, 1995); use of Internet in traditional, physically based cultures (e.g., Miller & Slater, 2000); cultural formation around particular topics (e.g., Hine, 2000); and sensemaking in specialized environments such as virtual work teams (e.g., Shane, 2001).

Multiple anthologies offered accounts of cyberculture (e.g., *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier* [Ludlow, 1996]; *the Cybercultures Reader* [Bell & Kennedy, 2000]). Utilizing both pop culture and academic accounts, these texts provide a useful overview of the 1990s viewpoints about computer-mediated communication and cultural practice. Few resources existed during the 1990s to specifically guide qualitative researchers. Although researchers offered context-specific discussions of research methods (represented well in *Internet Research*, edited by Jones, 1999), a comprehensive treatment did not appear until 2000, when Mann and Stewart's volume provided principles and practices for conducting qualitative inquiry using Internet communication as a tool of research.

As research in this evolving field grows more refined, the conceptualization of computer-mediated communication has shifted from sweeping universalized encapsulations to more specific, context-based definitions. As well, some have noted a move from exaggerated to mundane accounts. A recent article (Herring, 2004) entitled "Slouching Toward the Ordinary" notes the trend to minimize the impact of new communication technologies on identity, subjectivity, and social practices and structures. In this same vein, ethnographic inquiry appears to be shifting from the study of online-only environments and virtual identity to the intersection of computer-mediated communication with everyday life. Scholars are now calling for increased attention to the multiple uses and definitions of "Internet" in context, as well as increased attention to how the online and offline intersect (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2002; Orgad, 2002).

Overtly political analyses of computer-mediated communication are diverse in scope and range. I mention just two areas: research in developing countries and research interrogating the role of the researcher. Work exploring the use of Internet technologies in developing countries is important and increasing. Kolko conducted in-depth interviews in Uzbekistan as a means of grounding her NSF-funded study of how ICT affects life in central Asia (personal communication, October 15, 2002). Miller and Slater have conducted the most widely known ethnography of a developing country to date, exploring the ways in which the Internet is perceived and used in Trinidad (2000). Theresa Senft's recent work in Ghana illustrates a politically motivated effort to use interpretive participatory action research to help the cause of women and the poor in that region of the world (personal communication, October 2004).

Research exploring the researcher's role in Internet studies is also expanding: My own work was acknowledged as an explicitly reflexive discussion of the researcher's role in Internet ethnography (1998). Later works also discuss directly the ethical and



political stance of the researcher and the relationship between researcher and participants (e.g., Ryan, 2002). Bromseth (2002, 2003) discusses in depth the ethical dilemmas of collecting data in groups where people are reluctant to be studied. Gajjala (2002) explores her own study of a group wherein the members were overtly and actively resistant to her intent as a researcher. Along different lines, Eichhorn's study of a virtual group (2001) astutely addresses the paradox of using offline interviews to understand online subjectivities. Orgad's work (2002) illustrates the opposite paradox: using only online interviews with women in a virtual support group to understand how these women make sense of their illness. In both cases, these researchers recognized during the course of their research that giving voice to the participants meant selecting the medium based on what was most appropriate for the participants, not the researcher.

A final note about the shifting trends in qualitative research over the past decade of Internet studies. Many studies have been labeled "ethnography" when the more appropriate term would be interview study, case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative analysis, biography or life history, and so forth. "Ethnography" seems to be a term that is applied by scholars who do not know what else to call their work or, in my case (1998), by scholars whose study of new forms of ethnography broadens the umbrella of what can be considered "ethnography." Closely related, the quality of work in Internet studies from an ethnographer's or qualitative methodologist's perspective has varied widely; some scholars come to the field of inquiry having been trained in qualitative methods, while others have topic- or technology-specific expertise or interest but no familiarity or training in the diversity of qualitative approaches (Mann, 2002, 2003).

## ■ CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCESS

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The idea of studying the Internet or using Internet technologies to facilitate qualitative research is beguiling: A researcher's reach is potentially global, data collection is economical, and transcribing is no more difficult than cutting and pasting. But in the virtual field, as one interacts with anonymous participants, tracks disjointed, non-linear, multiple participant conversations, and analyzes hundreds of screens worth of cultural texts, one can begin to feel like the Internet might cause more headaches than it cures. Deceptive in its apparent simplicity, qualitative inquiry in this environment requires careful attention to the traditional means by which social life is interpreted and the adjustments that must be made to give value to the online experience and internal consistency to one's methods. The absence of visual information about the participant functions more paradoxically than one might realize. Socioeconomic markers such as body type, gender, race, and class are used consciously or unconsciously by researchers to make sense of participants in physical settings. Online, these frames are still used but without visual information, they function invisibly. This

warrants close examination, both to consider how this happens and to explore how the researcher's default premises and unconscious choices can influence the shape of the participant and the reality of the outcome.

This complexity of knowing anything certain about the other is paradoxical, yet to acknowledge the uncertainty or even impossibility of knowing Other is to risk paralysis in the research process, loss of authority in the presentation of research, and diminishment of one's academic role as observer/interpreter/archivist of social life. How, then, does one proceed? "With caution" is a trite yet reasonable response which calls for sensitivity to the context, interrogation of one's own presumptions, and flexible adaptation to a new era in social research, one in which we recognize the limitations bred by our traditional five senses and take the risks necessary to reconsider how and why we seek and create knowledge. Proceeding thus is a political move. It does not retreat from understanding Other on the grounds that the researcher cannot know anything except his or her own experiences. It also does not rest on the laurels of traditional methods, trying to shore up ways of knowing that are crumbling before our eyes as digital and convergent media saturate cultural practices and forms. It faces the complexity and interrogates the way we analyze people for purposes of academic inquiry. If one examines deeply the way new communication technologies influence the research project, one is likely to stumble into issues which question the fundamental reasons for doing research in the first place. Allowing oneself to explore those issues can vitally contribute to the creation of reflexive and socially responsible research practice.

At several junctures during the research project, we have the opportunity and responsibility to reflexively interrogate our roles, methods, ethical stances, and interpretations. When studying computer-mediated environments, this need is intensified because the traditional frames of reference we use to guide our premises and procedures are entrenched in physical foundations and modernist ontologies. Questions one might address include the following:

- What can we say we know about the Other when self, other, and the context may be constructed solely through the exchange of messages?
- In social situations derived from discursive interaction, is it possible to simply observe? Is it desirable?
- How does the researcher's participation in the medium affect the identity of the participant and the shape of the culture?
- How can one balance the traditional scientific impulse to uncover the "real" while interacting with people who may or may not have any correspondence to their physical counterparts?
- In what ways do one's research traditions delimit and limit the possibilities for sense-making in environments which are not overtly physical, visual, and aural?

Whether or not the researcher pays attention to them, the issues raised by these questions operate throughout any ethnographically based project. They identify

logistic challenges but also display problematic working assumptions that must be addressed. Reflexive research practice requires a constant disruption of the seemingly placid surface of inquiry. Stopping to identify critical decision junctures and reflect on the consequences of specific actions constitutes an honest presence in the research process and active engagement in the ethical grounding of one's inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

- Defining the boundaries of the field.
- Determining what constitutes data.
- Interpreting the other as text.
- Using embodied sensibilities to interpret textuality.
- Representing others ethically in research reports.

Each of these categories identifies a critical decision juncture within the research project. Neither exhaustive nor separate, these categories can be used as examples to help one think through some of the decisions made during the course of a study which have meaningful consequences for the identity of the participants, the representation of self and other in research reporting, and the shape of the body of scientific knowledge built on multiple ethnographically informed studies. The actual questions one might ask are particular to the researcher and the project, as variable as one's worldviews and methodological approaches.

### Defining the Boundaries of the Field

Drawing boundaries around the research context, or "identifying the field" involves a series of decisions that both presuppose and reveal the researcher's underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions. Obviously, reflecting on our own biases is not just useful but ethically necessary, even if our academic training did not identify the necessity for such reflection. When studying physically based cultures, the location of the field is typically predetermined, so the logistical challenges lie in gaining access and building rapport with informants. For the Internet ethnographer, the process of locating and defining sensible boundaries of the field can be convoluted and elusive.

Because the Internet is geographically dispersed, the researcher has the option to disregard location and distance to communicate instantaneously and inexpensively with people. Logistically, the distance-collapsing capacity of the Internet allows the researcher to connect to participants around the globe. The researcher can include people previously unavailable for study. This not only increases the pool of participants but also provides the potential for cross-cultural comparisons that were not readily available previously for practical and financial reasons. In a world where potential participants are only a keyboard click and fibre optic or wireless connection away, distance become almost meaningless as a pragmatic consideration in research

design; the Internet serves as an extension of the researcher's and participant's bodies. Research can be designed around questions of interaction and social behavior unbound from the restrictions of proximity or geography. Participants can be selected on the basis of their appropriate fit within the research questions rather than their physical location or convenience to the researcher.

*From Geographic to Discursive Boundaries*

As we shift from geographic to computer-mediated spaces, we are shifting focus from place to interaction, from location to locomotion (Markham, 2003a). Consequently, communities and culture are not neatly mapped before entering the field, but instead are created as part of the ethnographic process. Christine Hine (2000) argues that the ethnographer's notion of cultural boundary must be reconsidered given this capacity of the Internet. Rather than relying on traditional, geographically based means of encapsulating the culture under study, such as national boundaries or town limits, ethnographers might find more accuracy in using discourse patterns to find boundaries. "The ethnographer must read the texts and interactions of interest, much like trail signs, and make defensible decisions about which paths to follow, which paths to disregard, and thereby which boundaries to draw" (Markham, 2003b).

Seemingly mundane decisions become crucial criteria that are used, consciously or not, to create boundaries around the field of inquiry. Boundary markers are underwritten by the researcher's choice about how to find data sites, which search engine to use to sample, whom to interact with, what to say in interaction with participants, what language to speak, when to seek and conduct interviews (including both time of day and considering time zones), and so forth. Computer-mediated cultural contexts are shifting contexts. Their discursive construction occurs in global as well as local patterns. Membership can be transient. This becomes more meaningful when one realizes the boundary-forming work that is being accomplished when one contributes messages to a group, defines the boundaries of a cultural phenomenon through one's own surfing choices, and sifts or funnels the data set by using a particular search engine or set of databases. Each action taken by the researcher in this vast information sphere contributes directly to the construction of the structures that eventually get labeled "field" or "data."

Indeed, the global potential of this medium is often conflated with global reach, an achievement that relies on global access (Markham, 2004b). Arguably, people in industrialized countries tend to overestimate the degree to which the world has access to computers and electronic communication technologies. Access is not universal and those populations being studied via the Internet represent a very privileged and small portion of the world's population. In many ways, then, the boundaries may be flexible, seemingly arbitrary, and discursively constructed, but nonetheless remain within larger political and economic structures that are not universally experienced.

*Participation in the Discursive Construction of the Field*

As I have noted previously (Markham 1998), interacting with anyone formally or informally marks a significant shift from observer to participant, from archivist to accomplice. Online, as one participates in the context, one co-constructs the spaces under investigation. Interactions with participants are not simple events in these online spaces, they are organizing elements of these spaces.

By the very nature of their actions and interactions, researchers in any cultural environment are involved in the construction of what becomes the object of analysis. This is highlighted in technologically mediated environments because both the production and consumption of communication can be global, non-sequential, fragmented, disembodied, and decentered. In contexts where the boundaries of self, other, and social world are created and sustained solely through the exchange of information, being is therefore relational and dialectic. Social constructions are less connected to their physical properties. Boundaries are not so much determined by “location” as they are by “interaction.”

The boundaries of the field become more a matter of choice than in physically located spaces. Researchers are more obviously participative. Addressing a seemingly simple question of “should I participate or observe” then, gives rise to an entirely more complicated set of issues that shape the research design and complicate our concepts of how media function socially. The deceptively easy act of choosing a particular community of Web sites creates an audience that previously did not exist and indicates to the larger academic community that this context is meaningful. Thus, choice of field becomes a politically charged process because of the inherent ethicality of one’s decisions.

Ethnography that ignores these issues can remain at the edges of the cultural context and more importantly, can become mired in the now much critiqued notion that the researcher observes but does not interfere with or influence that which is studied. Moreover, the decisions that a researcher makes at this level directly influence the way the researcher later represents the context and the participants, which ultimately impacts our academic conversations of and knowledge about computer-mediated communication environments. These are issues laden with ethical responsibility, yet the questions themselves appear to be so straightforward they are often only addressed as simple logistics problems.

This discussion necessarily takes us forward to later stages of the research process. The effort or unconscious decision to absent oneself from the field will not remove the researcher from the process and product. Thinking ahead to the outcome of inquiry—the research report—one must acknowledge that the interpretation of culture will change depending on the form of the telling. Interpretative focus and the nature of the “findings” shift with the passage of time, the venue for publication, the credibility of the author or notoriety of the subject, and innumerable other factors.

Frankly, whether or not the researcher participates or simply observes, the construction of the research report will present a particular reality of the object of analysis that is influenced by the identity and participation of the researcher. It may be more productive to acknowledge one's participative role early, so that every aspect of the research design can effectively incorporate the researcher's presence in the construction of the field under study. As Internet Studies evolves as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, further research depth and credibility will be gained through realistic and contemporary conceptualizations of the ways in which the researcher, reader, and object of analysis intersect.

### Determining What Constitutes Data

A researcher's representation of others is inextricably bound up with the way data are collected and distinguished as meaningful versus meaningless. Computer-mediated communication contexts complicate the researcher's decisions, not only because the contexts are constructed interactively, comprised of mostly disembodied participants, or because the researcher has little access to typical sensemaking devices used to identify and collect data. The researcher's decisions are further complicated because we are always and constantly struck with stimuli in any research environment, stimuli that must be filtered in and out in order to create sensible categories for interpretation. Interacting in text-only online environments diminishes the most prominent of our senses: vision. CMC separates more obviously the wholeness of a person's being into component parts; that which was previously made sense of as a whole is consequently made sense of at different points of time using different combinations of senses. This feature of technology promotes highly focused and divided attention on the content, the producer, the carrier, and the meaning of discursive activity in context. Even in more overtly visual research environments, where the researcher may have access to photos, Web cams, Web sites, hyperlink behavior, and blogs, the issue is not resolved because traditional research training is designed for physically co-present environments.

Methodologically, one must reflect carefully on what collected information is considered as "data." Just as interaction constructs and reflects the shape of the phenomena being studied, interaction also delineates the being doing the research in the field. Obviously, we cannot pay attention to everything—our analytical lens is limited by what we are drawn to, what we are trained to attend to, and what we want to find. Borrowing from Goffman (1959), our understanding is determined as much by our own frames of reference as the frames supplied by the context. Our selection of data and rejection of non-data presents a critical juncture within which to interrogate the possible consequences of our choices on the representation of others through our research.

An example of online discourse from prior research (Markham, 1998) illustrates the implications of this point. Matthew, as with all the participants in my study, is a self-described "heavy user" of the Internet. The interview occurred in a MOO, an online environment which is designed to facilitate the enactment and appearance of

particular forms of communication. By writing different commands or using particular punctuation, one can speak, exclaim, question, whisper, emote, or think, so that dialogue appears as a verbal statement (Annette says, "Hi." Annette exclaims, "Hi!" Annette asks "Hi?") a cartoon-like thought bubble . o O (Annette wonders if the reader sees that this is a thought bubble), a description of one's nonverbal behaviors or thoughts (Annette scratches her head thoughtfully), and so forth.

Initially archiving Matthew's interview, I included the entire log of the conversation. As I began the analysis process, I removed extraneous, repetitive, or system-specific commands in order to minimize distractions. The following sample is from this latter phase, where the commands are removed. From this log, I conducted the initial analysis of data:

Matthew: "Now madison, that's a nice town."

Markham: "okay here's some official stuff for you Matthew"

Markham: "I guarantee that I will not ever reveal your address/name/location."

Matthew: "Fine about the secrecy stuff."

Markham: "Matthew, I guarantee that I will delete any references that might give a reader clues about where you live, who you are, or where you work."

Markham: "do you mind that I archive this interview?"

Matthew: "Log away, Annette" . . .

Markham: "what do you do mostly when you're online? Where do you go?"

Matthew: "Mostly I'm doing one of two things. Firstly I do research. If I'm looking for academic research in software engineering, my specialty, a lot of it is on the Web . . ."

Matthew: "And a lot of tools to play with are there, too"

Matthew: "Also, I use it for news and information, the way I used to use the radio. (I'm an unrepentent . . ."

Matthew: "real-lifer). For instance, if I'm going to go run (or bike or do something else outside) . . ."

Matthew: "I check the weather on the Web when in years past I would turn on the radio. Ditto for news" . . .

Markham: "how would you compare your sense of self as a person online to your sense of self offline?"

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Matthew: “More confident online, because I’m a better editor than writer/speaker. I do well when I can backspace.”

Matthew: “But I’m the same me in both places. I guess I’ve been me too long to be anybody else without a lot more practice than I have time for.”

Markham: “hmmm . . . How would you describe your self?”

Markham: “i mean, what’s the ‘me’ you’re talking about?”

Matthew: “Kind of androgenous. Plenty of women for friends. But I was never good at dating or any of the romantic/sexual stuff.”

Matthew: “Also, somewhat intellectual.”

Matthew: has a delayed blushing reaction to the androgeny comment.

Matthew: “And a fitness nut.”

Markham: o O ( I wonder why Matthew is blushing . . . )

Markham: “tell me about your most memorable online experience”

Matthew: “OK, it was a couple years ago and I was just getting on the Web and starting to realize all”

After conducting initial coding and analysis, I found that I was struggling with this interview. I returned to the original transcript and realized I had made an error in my delineation of “meaningful” from “nonessential” data. The following excerpt illustrates what I saw when I returned to the original interview (the pieces I had removed are underlined):

Matthew says, “Now madison, that’s a nice town.”

Matthew spills popcorncrumbs into his keyboard :-)

Markham says, “bummer, Matthew.”

Matthew says, “If you see me going away for a while, you know I went to make more popcorn :-)”

Markham says, “okay here’s some official stuff for you Matthew.”

Markham says, “I guarantee that I will not ever reveal your address/name/location.”

Matthew says, “Fine about the secrecy stuff.”

Markham says, “Matthew, I guarantee that I will delete any references that might give a reader clues about where you live, who you are, or where you work.”



Markham asks, "do you mind that I archive this interview?"

Matthew salutes and says "Yes'm

Matthew says, "Log away, Annette"

Markham says, "okay. i have a tendency to ask questions too quickly"

Matthew doesn't answer because he's too busy opening a box of rice cakes. . . .

Markham asks, "what do you do mostly when you're online? Where do you go?"

Matthew says, "Mostly I'm doing one of two things. Firstly I do research. If I'm looking for academic research in software engineering, my specialty, a lot of it is on the Web . . . "

Matthew says, "And a lot of tools to play with are there, too."

Matthew says, "Also, I use it for news and information, the way I used to use the radio. (I'm an unrepentent . . . "

Matthew says, "real-lifer). For instance, if I'm going to go run (or bike or do something else outside) . . . "

Matthew says, "I check the weather on the Web when in years past I would turn on the radio. Ditto for news" . . .

Markham asks, "how would you compare your sense of self as a person online to your sense of self offline?"

Matthew says, "More confident online, because I'm a better editor than writer/speaker. I do well when I can backspace."

Matthew says, "But I'm the same me in both places. I guess I've been me too long to be anybody else without a lot more practice than I have time for."

Markham asks, "hmmm . . . How would you describe your self?"

Markham asks, "i mean, what's the 'me' you're talking about?"

Matthew says, "Kind of androgenous. Plenty of women for friends. But I was never good at dating or any of the romantic/sexual stuff."

Matthew says, "Also, somewhat intellectual."

Matthew says, has a delayed blushing reaction to the androgeny comment.

Matthew says, "And a fitness nut."

Markham . o O ( I wonder why Matthew is blushing . . . )

Matthew does pushups.

Markham stares

Markham . o O ( should I be doing something too? )

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Matthew says, “You should be asking me questions (the interviewee becomes the interviewer)”

Markham sighs and refocuses

Markham says, “tell me about your most memorable online experience”

Matthew gets very jealous of people who have sleep.

Matthew enters state of deep thought.

Matthew goes to raid the nearby refrigerator while composing reply in head

Matthew says, “OK, it was a couple years ago and I was just getting on the Web and starting to realize all”

My interpretation shifted as I realized the extent to which Matthew made certain to include his embodied activities in the conversation. Regardless of the interpretation one elects to make about these underlined enactments (Matthew is hungry, bored, creative, using conventions learned in culture), the fact remains that the “data” are different from one transcript to the next.

One can elect to bracket or set aside the form and focus only on the content. This decision would be guided by the premise that the meaning of one’s utterances is only understood in context and therefore the medium is less important than the content. On the other hand, to ignore the form in this interview could also be seen as a poor choice, given the well-founded premise that nonverbal behaviors function discursively in the presentation of self, negotiation of identity, and eventual symbolic construction of culture. In this case, my analysis would suffer without the inclusion of Matthew’s delineation of his embodied activities. It also raises the question of what constitutes form and what constitutes content.

One’s choice in this situation should be guided by the research questions or the overall goal of research, which in this case was to explore how people experience the Internet and how their identities are presented and negotiated. Yet, this edict is laden with ambiguity when put into practice. Multiple dilemmas present themselves: How much does text represent the reality of the person? Put more personally, how much would I want to be bound by what I wrote at any particular time? To what extent does or should the researcher include spelling or typing ability as meaningful information in the understanding of identity or culture? How much are my own preconceptions and stereotypes influencing how I elect to categorize data from non-data?

One might wonder whether or not I ever asked Matthew to participate in the decision about what constituted “data,” as this would seem a relatively easy way to answer some of the questions asked above. What would Matthew categorize as meaningful data from unessential non-data? On the other hand, why and under what circumstances would I want Matthew to determine what ought to be analyzed and what ought to be ignored?

These questions are important in that they directly shape what is examined by the researcher. This is not an unfamiliar point, as it raises the importance of interrogating the researcher's role in writing culture (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In this case (and any, I would suggest), while the analysis may indeed emerge from the data, *the researcher determines a priori what constitutes data in the first place*, making this decision point a crucial reflection point.

### Interpreting the Other Through Their Text

As one addresses these issues and shifts from data collection to analysis, another critical juncture arises, sponsored by the following question: To what extent is the Other defined by his or her texts? When the participant, researcher, and context are nothing but text and everything beyond mere language, our perceptual filters must be adjusted to accommodate complexities of human expression. Discursive practices are the heart of our enterprise as ethnographic researchers. When the discourse is limited to the exchange of texts, one might think that the methods of analysis are likewise limited to what is seen in the text, but this is not the case. Rather, an array of interpretive tools are used to make sense of these texts and it becomes a worthwhile task to reflect on some of the more hidden or unacknowledged analytical methods being used to interpret the Other.

The following two examples usefully illustrate the extent to which participants can be judged in multiple ways by the form of their texts. The samples of discourse in these examples represent well the writing tendencies of two participants: Sheol and DominOH!

<Sheol> I am intrested in talking to:) Could you be more spesific about what questions you will ask? Just let me know when you want to talk, and I will try to accomidate! :)

<Sheol> I became a very popular (I know that sounds conseeded) figuar on the line I called home. I am ruled by the right side of my brain so I liked the diea of being that personality.

In this interview with Sheol, it was impossible to bracket the spelling, use of graphic accents, tag lines, and so forth. From the beginning, I had been determined to conduct systematic analyses that remained close to the text. I was using a blend of content-oriented analytical tools to code, thematize, and make sense of the interactions with participants. Reflecting on my inability to ignore the form in my analysis of content jarred me out of the false stability granted by method-specific procedures and caused me to identify some of the ways I was putting Sheol into categories without noticing what I was doing.

For example, very early on, I categorized Sheol as female because a gendered language style was very evident in tags, qualifiers, expressions of emotion, and heavy use of graphic

accents (Sheol turned out to be male). Sheol was also: Young (spelling was phonetic, attention to language misuse was not at all evident); Perhaps not very intelligent (multiple spelling errors, unreadable messages, apparent lack of ability to be a real hacker); and, of course, Caucasian (default characteristic because of mainstream cultural assumptions about use of the Internet as well as the tendency to make the online other look more like the self). Additionally and solely based on my own frame of reference, Sheol was heterosexual, middle class, and American.

In a different study, a participant called DominOH! also used phonetic spelling, but in a different way:

<DominOH!> Sumtymz i am lost in my online identiteez . . . well, the aktuel problem? i feel more 'found' in my online selvz . . . kicky, spun out, reeler than real. More atooned to the energee and more atooned to those i'm talking with . . .

<DominOH!> . . . so much fun 2 play . . . YOU, and EVERYONE else, cannot reely no mee. And y do you feeeel that you need 2?! So, online I'm a nerdy college professor with a quirky sense of humor, or I'm a professhunal athlete with a career ending injuree, and sumtymz i'm handsum, or i'm beauteous . . . and if peepole wanna hang with mee, i'm alwaze up for play.

In my conversations with this persona, I found it easier to bracket the misspellings because they appeared obvious and deliberate. DominOH! seemed to revel in the ability to remain elusive during our various interactions. DominOH!'s discourse was marked with aggressive and challenging statements. I was cautious with this participant to not make assumptions about gender but found myself categorizing DominOH! as male, young, well-educated, and Caucasian.

As the researcher, I have numerous choices regarding the interpretation of these interviews. My choices will build cultural knowledge about Sheol and DominOH! as individuals and about how people interact in cyberspace. In interpretive inquiry, the integrity of one's interpretation is tied directly to reflexivity. Frequently, though, reflexivity happens *after* the analysis is in progress or the project is completed. I mentally attached a number of social labels to both these participants during the course of our conversations and long after, as I was interpreting the discourse. Some of the labels I did not recognize until others pointed them out. The importance is not in the accuracy of the labels, but in the type of evidence used to derive the category. Without reflection, I initially gave a negative attribution to Sheol's phonetic spelling (deficient abilities) while giving a positive attribution to DominOH!'s (cleverness). Without reflection, I categorized Sheol as female and DominOH! as male, based solely on their use of accommodating or aggressive language.

This example illustrates that one's interpretation is founded in the text but simultaneously not limited to the text. While systematic procedures of analysis are vital tools for the social scientist, they are not fail safe if followed to the letter. Procedures

can actually blind one to the actual interpretive processes occurring. In Internet-based environments, the existence of the online persona being studied is often encapsulated by their pixels on a computer screen. The choices made to attend to, ignore, or edit these pixels has real consequences for the persons whose manifestations are being altered beyond and outside their control. If a subject types solely in lowercase and uses nonstandard grammatical conventions the readers correction of \*errors\* may inappropriately ignore and thus misrepresent a participant's deliberate presentation of self. ;-) if someone spells atrociously or uniQueLY and the researcher corrects it in the research report for readAbility, alteration of a person's desired online identity may be the price of smooth reading (Markham, 2003a, 2003b).

On the other hand, Sheol may be working with a sticky keyboard, ignoring the errors in the interest of speed, or multi-tasking such that he is not devoted fully to our interaction. DominOH! may be more comfortable with phonetic spelling. Maybe she or he was aggressive in response to something I had said early on. Certainly, to make the interpretive task both easier and more grounded in the participant's experience, one could ask the participants to clarify their own writing tendencies. One could also gather additional demographic information. My point, however, is not to articulate how to make the interpretations more accurate or truthful, but to identify one of many moments in the research project when the researcher faces, consciously or not, certain decisions about what to include as part of the interpretive consideration, only some of which can be identified or controlled.

To make this task more difficult, the most ethically sensitive approach to analysis is complicated—and impeded—by academic conventions and training. Most social science approaches teach the researcher to distill the complexity of human experience into discrete variables that are easily measured. Interpretive methods seek to ease these restrictions but involve ways of knowing that continually strive to simplify rather than complexify human experience. To shift the gaze from the subject of research to the gaze itself is one step in the evolution of human sciences. To stop there, however, is to risk losing sight of the larger goals of inquiry. Rather than seeking to describe or reflect reality, researchers must consider the political act of promoting, activating, or engendering realities.

#### The Search for Authenticity<sup>4</sup>

Particularly notable in disembodied research environments, the researcher's body continues to be privileged as the site of experience, the best measure of authenticity, and the residence of knowledge. This is sensible, literally, because we make sense of our world through our eyes, ears, noses, mouths, and sense of touch. We abstract our embodied knowledge to convey it through logic, language, and print, but as Ackerman (1995) notes, our primary level of understanding remains firmly entwined with our senses. "There is no way in which to understand the world without first detecting it

through the radar-net of our senses. . . . The senses . . . tear reality apart into vibrant morsels and reassemble them into a meaningful pattern. . . . Reasoning we call it, as if it were a mental spice” (pp. xv–xvii).

The implications of this are significant in scientific research; in most traditions, the interpretive act is characterized as an analytical, logical, mental procedure. Separated from the body in theory, the embodied practice of interpretation lingers. Online, this underlying disjuncture is highlighted precisely because the body of the participant is *notably* absent.

### *Searching for the Body Behind the Text*

The question often asked about participants in online contexts is “Who are they, really?” By this, one often means, who are they, as I can see, verify, and know them in a body? From students, reviewers, and publishers, I have heard the suggestion many times: “You should have interviewed the participants offline as well as online. Then, you would have a better idea of who they are.” Shifting one’s perspective slightly, one might ask questions that get at the underlying issues: How much do we rely on our bodies and the bodies of participants to establish presence and know other? Is this reliance warranted or desirable? Will our picture of other, in person, make our understanding of them more whole? More directly: Does the embodiment of a participant gauge their authenticity?

The answers depend not only on the question one is seeking to address but also on the researcher’s underlying epistemological assumptions. If one is simply using the Internet as a tool to expand one’s reach to participants and interviewing them online is merely a convenience, one should consider the extent to which people can and do express themselves well, truly, or fully in text. But if one is studying Internet contexts as cultural formations or social interaction in computer-mediated communication contexts, the inclusion of embodied ways of knowing may be unwarranted and even counterproductive.

In chat rooms, on mobile phones, through personal Web sites, and other media, identity is produced and consumed in a form abstracted from actual presence. Cultural understanding is literally constructed discursively and interactively. We know from both popular press and scholarly studies that many people seek interaction and community on the Internet because it provides the perceived means to escape the confines of embodied social markers to engage in what many refer to as a “meeting of the minds.” Whether or not this is truly possible (and some have argued (e.g., Ess, 2003; Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000) that it is not), a user’s desire to present and be perceived as a confluence of texts without body might best be read by researchers as a request for us to acknowledge text as ample and sufficient evidence of being and to study it as such (Markham, 2003a, 2004a).

Yet social scientists persist in seeking the authentic by privileging the concept of the body. The desire to add validity to findings often results in research design that

holds up the textual representation of the participants next to their physical personae. The goal is to see the extent to which the images match. Researchers deciding to interview participants both online and f2f (face to face) may claim that their efforts will add authenticity to their interpretation—by adding paralinguistic or nonverbal cues to the words people speak—and thereby add more credibility to their findings (Markham, 2003a).

For good biologically based reasons, researchers rely on and trust their traditional senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing to provide verification of concrete reality. We are conditioned to rely particularly on our visual sensibilities: “Seventy percent of the body’s sense receptors cluster in the eyes, and it is mainly through seeing the world that we appraise and understand it” (Ackerman, 1995, p. 230). Ecologist and philosopher David Abram adds that perception is a reciprocity between the body and the entities that surround it. Considering Merleau-Ponty’s idea that perception itself is embodied, Abram notes that “[Perception] is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness” (1997, p. 52). Although “we conceptually mobilize or objectify the phenomenon . . . by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation” (Abram, 1997, p. 56), our understanding of the world is sensual. While it makes sense that researchers use embodied sensibilities, this is not mentioned much, if at all, in methods textbooks. It therefore becomes a critical juncture to address in a very conscious manner.

### *Removing the Researcher’s Body*

In essentially disembodied relationships and cultures, one must wonder if the intrusion of certain embodied sense-making faculties bleeds integrity from the project of knowing the other in context. Yet, as mentioned above, perception always involves embodiment, and this cannot be set aside in the context of studying life online. Hence, a paradox emerges that may not be overcome but should be considered, acknowledged, or accounted for in the research design or research report.

Irony follows, however, when one notes the marked absence of the researcher’s own embodiment in many studies of text-based cultural contexts. Although a researcher may give his or her participants’ bodied forms and make sense of their identities through his or her own body, this sensibility is rarely noted in the published paper. Considerable privilege is given to the researcher to make his or her own embodiment a choice or even a non-issue while simultaneously questioning the authenticity of the participants’ choices regarding their own embodiment. Ethically as well as epistemologically, it is vital to reflect carefully on the extent to which the research design privileges the researcher at the expense of both understanding the other and operating with a keen awareness of the context (Markham, 2003a, p. 152).

The online persona may be much more fluid and changeable than we imagine as we catch them in particular moments or only a fraction of the virtual venues they

populate. Anonymity in text-based environments gives one more choices and control in the presentation of self, whether or not the presentation is perceived as intended. Understanding the potential for flexible, ad hoc negotiation of identity in technologically mediated social spaces may foster another critical juncture at which the researcher can ask an intriguing set of questions about the representation of other: "As researchers and members of various communities and cultures, what do we use to construct a sense of who the Other really is?" "In what ways do our methods of comprehending life as interwoven with new communication technologies ignore, deny, or validate shifting constructions of identity and social world?"

*Interpreting Within  
Socioeconomic Comfort Zones*

It makes sense that researchers visualize their participants even in non-visual text-based media. Yet, it is not only the visual bias that must be critically analyzed by researchers, but also the imagination with which one visualizes the participant. Pioneers on the research frontier of online ethnography continually juxtapose embodiment with other modes of presentation and knowing. When we rely on our embodied sensibilities of knowing, we are not necessarily getting a better or more "accurate" picture of the subjects of our studies; we may be simply reflecting our own comfort zones of research. Critical reflection on the product of our gaze can reveal some of these comfort zones for introspection and interrogation. Researchers should be wary of the tendency to perceive the world in familiar, close-to-home categories. What do the participants look like in the mind's eye? How likely is the researcher to give the participant an ethnic category different from his or her own? What information is used to make judgments about the embodied person behind the screen?

Typing speed, spelling and grammar usage, choice of (nick)name; linear or fragmented progression of ideas: These all influence the way a participant is understood by the researcher. As the researcher visually appraises the discursive practices of the participants, the form wafts through the sense-making like an invisible but compelling scent on the breeze. Whether one notices that the text is idiosyncratic or not, either in its error or uniqueness or blandness or precision, the form influences meaning and helps give a bodied shape to the participant. Form composes new stereotypes that must be acknowledged and interrogated.

As researchers, we carry our own predilections concerning race, gender, and bodied appearance of virtual participants. For no obvious reasons, I identified the participant mentioned above, Sheol, as white, female, heterosexual, young, and average in body weight and height. After about two hours of the interview, Sheol mentioned "girlfriend," and I recognized that I had made an invisible (but obviously in operation) assumption that she was heterosexual. Forced to reconcile the contradiction between my a priori assumption and the use of the word "girlfriend," I began to look for clues



of gender I must have missed earlier. I also began to wonder at my invisible use of sexuality and gender as categories.

I did not reflect on the fact that I was giving Sheol a body in my mind until this disjuncture occurred and I realized the body in my mind no longer fit the body being presented by the participant. To note, Sheol was simply chatting with me, not presenting a body in any deliberate fashion. I had given shape to the person. A few minutes later, when Sheol referred to himself as a male, I realized she was not a lesbian but that 'he' had a 'girlfriend.' I had made yet another blunder. The form of the message had led me to an initial assumption that Sheol was female. The name, if read at a very surface level, hinted that Sheol was female (here, "Sheol" is a double-pseudonym but the original name was similar in that if read quickly, part of the spelling could be mistaken as an obviously female name or marker, like "Susanerd" or "21She132"). I also knew from previous research that women tend to use more tag lines, offer more caveats, and augment their texts with more emoticons and punctuation.

Recent inquiry of race in cyberspace contends that users transform online others into images of themselves but that these images are limited by media representations of identity, so that most visualizations will conform to mass media images of beauty, race, gender, ethnicity, and size (Nakamura, 1995). What impact does this have for qualitative researchers conducting ethnographically informed research in anonymous or virtual environments?

In teaching computer-mediated courses, my assumptions turn my students white and nondescript. If they use an interesting name, I find myself trying to find a body that suits what I perceive the name implies about the appearance of their persona. When I reflect on my visual images, I realize that even though race is supposedly absent from the research lens, it becomes a category which defaults to "white" (Nakamura, 2003). My experience is not atypical. It illustrates how much we rely on and use our own parameters to categorize others into something we can comfortably address. Scholarly discussion of race and the Internet is growing, particularly concerning how the Internet has been created and perceived naively as a raceless space (Kendall, 1998; Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000; Poster, 1998). These discussions will help researchers better reflect on the spaces studied as well as the assumptions made during the collection and interpretation phases of the project.

Again, traditional academic training complicates the issues of embodiment for researchers in that this training seeks to make the researcher invisible. Traditional academic training encourages the researcher to focus on the theory and method as the locus of control in the study. Good research design, in the scientific tradition, eliminates bias, allows the method to strictly guide the findings, and ignores non-scientific measures such as hunches. The researcher's senses should be removed from the analysis of data and the researcher's voice should be removed from the final report. This training creates habits—even among strongly resistant researchers—to ignore or deny the impact of one's conscious or unconscious embodied sensibilities on the research

outcome. It is difficult even in qualitative research to peel back one's own complicated layers of interpretation.

### Considering Methods as Ethics

As mentioned early in this article, any method decision is an ethics decision. The political potential and consequences of our research should not be underestimated. Every choice we make about how to represent the self, participants, and the cultural context under study contributes to how these are understood, framed, and responded to by readers, future students, policy makers, and the like.

The process of studying culture is one of comprehension, encapsulation, and control. To say otherwise is to deny our impulses and roles as scholars and scientists. At a very basic level, we go there to learn something about Other and—when we think we have something figured out, to decide how to tell others what we think we know. To accomplish this goal, we must stop for a moment the flood of experience, extract a sample of it for inspection, and re-present it in academic terms with no small degree of abstraction. The researcher is afforded a tremendous degree of control in representing the realities of the people and contexts under study. This control need not be characterized in a completely negative fashion, as we could also consider the image of a Möbius strip, where seemingly opposing sides are eventually realized as part of the same path. Our capacity to represent cultural knowledge is a great responsibility, with many traps and difficulties. But it is also a gift, well earned through education, well honed through experience, and well intended through ethical reflexivity.

#### *Editing Choices*

Consider the way research reports present, frame, and embody the people being studied: A person's very being has the potential to be literally reconfigured when edited by the researcher and put into a context of a research account rather than left in the context of experience.

This dilemma does not apply only to the study of virtual environments, but any study of human behavior, of course. But computer-mediated environments seem to highlight this dilemma of research reporting because it's so clear that text can be the primary, if not sole means of producing and negotiating self, other, body, and culture. Common practices of editing are rarely questioned. What happens when we transform the participant's utterances from disjunctive sentence fragments to smooth paragraphs? How are we presenting the social reality of these spaces when we correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation? How might we be changing their identities when we transform the appearance of their fonts to meet the acceptable standards for various publishing venues? Study participants can appear to be as smooth as movie characters after the writer has cleaned up everyday talk. Of course, the writer must make

the report readable, but this need must be balanced with what is possibly silenced in this process. Online, this project takes a somewhat different form than in physically based research contexts. Highly disjunctive online conversations get reproduced as tidy exchanges of messages. A conversation developing over the course of six months can appear as a single paragraph in the written report. Deliberate fragmentation of ideas can be spliced into linear logic. Key to the ethical representation of the participant is sensitivity to the context and the individual. Certain editing choices may not alter the meaning of the utterances, interaction, or identity of the textual being embodied through these utterances. Other editing choices can function to devalue, ignore, or silence a fundamental aspect of a persona (Markham, 2003a).

On the other side of the coin, when presenting dialogue with participants, how many writers present a version of reality wherein they themselves talk and think in a hyper-organized fashion? Researchers are not likely to do this deliberately. Rather, the habit is an ingrained part of our training; it goes along with other practices, such as using passive voice and third person in the traditional academic paper. In the search for understanding the discursive construction of reality in computer-mediated environments, overediting may be misleading and limiting. The reader may have difficulty reading non-linear, disjunctive, or seriously misspelled examples of dialogue, but just like the visual elements of a personal Web site, these features of discourse illustrate vividly how it is experienced.

Generally speaking, as soon as an interaction occurs, the study of it becomes an abstraction. This is a fact of research. Even so, simplification or dismissal of the challenge of representation is not warranted. The task is to design research which allows human subjects to retain their autonomy and identity—whether or not their uniqueness is intentional or unintentional.

### *In Whose Interests?*

Shifting from ideas about re-presenting participants to ideas about advocacy, the political aspects of research become more visible. The question of advocacy can be asked in many ways: “Whose interests does the research serve?” “Why am I doing this research anyway?” “What groups need speaking for?” “How can my analysis help someone?” “How can my writing and publishing give voice to those who might remain otherwise silent?”

These are not simply political or ethical questions. These are methods questions that must be embedded in design, in that they impact directly the way information is collected and analyzed and how research findings are written and distributed. Yet questions such as these are not typically included in research methods textbooks as a part of the primary methodological discussion. If included at all, these questions are relegated to a separate unit or chapter entitled “Ethics” or separated from the main text, along with other special, non-typical considerations.

Even if one's research goals do not include serving as an advocate for participants, I suggest that not only will research design be more ethically grounded and reflexive but also the results will have more integrity if these questions are considered throughout the course of the study. They serve as important reminders that researchers often take more than they give, that the researcher's choices are always privileged, and that even when wanting to give voice to participants, the researcher can unintentionally end up as the hidden ventriloquist, speaking for, rather than with, others (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000).

### *Ethics and Institutional Review Boards*

Ethical guidelines for Internet research vary sharply across disciplines and countries, depending on the premises and assumptions used to develop the criteria from which actions are judged as ethical or not. In this section, I've chosen to outline the features of Internet interaction that give rise to ethical controversies and to sketch the major distinctions between the "utilitarian" (predominant in the United States) and the "deontological" or "communitarian" stances (predominant in certain parts of the EU, particularly Nordic countries). This discussion is intended to give researchers alternative ways of thinking about projects, so that decisions are made not just based on what is legally required but also on what constitutes the right course of action in particular research and social contexts.

For Internet researchers, ethical challenges and controversy arise in the following circumstances:

- Some users perceive publicly accessible discourse sites as private.
- Some users have a writing style that is readily identifiable in their online community, so that the researcher's use of a pseudonym does not guarantee anonymity.
- Online discussion sites can be highly transient. Researchers gaining access permission in June may not be studying the same population in July.
- Search engines are often capable of finding statements used in research reports, making anonymity in certain venues almost impossible to guarantee.
- Age is difficult if not impossible to verify in certain online environments.
- Vulnerable persons are difficult to identify in certain online environments.
- Informed consent of the actual participant (the persona corresponding to the driver's license) is difficult to attain in writing if the participant desires anonymity from the researcher.

Some of the above generate general ethical issues; others generate official red flags for institutional research boards, which govern research of human subjects at institutions of higher education.

### *Utilitarian and Communitarian Approaches*

Are Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the United States more interested in protecting the institution than the human subject? Do the regulations really serve the

interest of the human subject? Christians (2000) and Thomas (2003) argue that the system of regulation may be counterproductive, though it was designed to protect the participant, because these regulations are embedded in positivist, capitalist, and utilitarian social structures.

Officially, IRBs require researchers to preserve the autonomy of human subjects (respect for persons), distribute fairly both the benefits and burdens of research (justice), and secure the well-being of subjects by avoiding or minimizing harm (beneficence). Pragmatically, to adhere to the general IRB regulations, a researcher would ask: First, does the research protect the autonomy of the human subject? Second, do the potential benefits of study outweigh the risks posed to the human subject? Operationalized in the United States, if the potential benefit of the proposed research is “good” enough, the risk is acceptable, therefore making the second question a prioritized criterion.

Doing enough “good,” according to Christians (2000), becomes a matter of determining what makes the majority of people happy. Combined with a strong tradition in positivism, which values neutrality and validity through scientifically verifiable measures, determinations of “happiness” are largely restricted to those domains that are extrinsic, observable, and measurable (pp. 138–142). “In its conceptual structure, IRB policy is designed to produce the best ration of benefits to costs. IRBs ostensibly protect the subjects who fall under the protocols they approve. However, given the interlocking utilitarian functions of social science, the academy, and the state . . . , IRBs in reality protect their own institutions rather than subject populations in society at large” (see Vanderpool, 1996, chaps. 2–6). Thomas (2003) adds to this, noting: “Too often, [IRB] decisions seem driven not so much by protecting research subjects, but by following federally mandated bureaucratic procedures that will protect the institution from sanctions in the event of a federal audit” (p. 196). IRBs are designed to provide guidelines where they might otherwise be ignored; in that, the regulations are sensible. But when these guidelines are used as an exclusive means of defining the ethical boundaries of one’s work, the spirit of the regulation has been replaced by unreflexive adherence to the letter of the law.

This stance gets turned upside down (or right side up, depending on how you look at it) when we examine the ethical sphere of other countries. Ess (2003) outlines a European perspective as one that is more deontological. Citizens enjoy a much greater protection of privacy regarding data collection and use. Research stresses the protection of individual rights, “first of all, the right to privacy—even at the cost of thereby losing what might be research that promises to benefit the larger whole” (Ess & AOIR working committee on ethics, 2002, p. 20).

If we take a look at the contrast between U.S. and European approaches to ethics in research, this recommendation takes shape as a viable and proactive stance. The Association of Internet Researchers has addressed the issue of ethics in Internet research in some depth (2002). They offer key questions which can help guide researchers in making ethically grounded decisions regarding the particularities of online environments outlined above. Some of these questions include:

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- What ethical expectations are established by the venue?
- When should one ask for informed consent?
- What medium for informed consent (email, fax, Instant Messaging) would best protect the human subject?
- In studying groups with a high turnover rate, is obtaining permission from the moderator/facilitator/list owner, etc., sufficient?
- What are the initial ethical expectations/assumptions of the authors/subjects being studied? For example: Do participants in this environment assume/believe that their communication is private?
- Will the material be referred to by direct quotation or paraphrased?
- Will the material be attributed to a specified person? Referred to by his/her real name? Pseudonym? “Double-pseudonym?” (i.e., a pseudonym for a frequently used pseudonym?)

Chris Mann (2002), a British sociologist specializing in the study of ethics, distills the issues into a set of three very simple questions:

- Are we seeking to magnify the good?
- Are we acting in ways that do not harm others?
- Do we recognize the autonomy of others and acknowledge that they are of equal worth to ourselves and should be treated so?

These criteria shift the focus away from utility and regulation and place the emphasis squarely on the purpose of the research, a point made clearly by Denzin (1997, 2003) in discussing a feminist communitarian stance. An example illustrating the difference between these stances and possible outcomes is the U.S. researcher asking:

“Am I working with human subjects or public documents?”

This question arises in a study wherein the scholar is using publicly accessed archives of online discourse. Many Internet scholars contend that publicly accessible online discourse does not require human subject approval because the domains in which these texts are produced are public (Walther, 2002). This determination is derived from arguments about the regulatory definitions of what constitutes human subjects research. Walther further notes that while participants might perceive that the space is private and therefore their texts are private, this perception is “extremely misplaced” (p. 3).

Posed to a colleague in Scandinavia, the question was not sensible (Bromseth, personal communication, February 19, 2004). She understood the question, but indicated that her colleagues would not frame the question in the same way. Among other things, Bromseth noted that the question focuses on the researcher’s legalistic dilemma and not the participants in the study. The question polarizes the issue into an “either/or” false dichotomy to be solved by definition-based, legalistic clarification, rather than through the input of and interaction with the human subject(s).

To further clarify the distinction, note that the title of this current section of this chapter highlights ethics alongside their regulatory body for academics, the IRB. My

choice in heading reflects a utilitarian stance. On the contrary, when describing the ethical issues facing Internet researchers, Bromseth (2003) never mentions a regulatory body at all, instead focusing on the respondent. She writes within the communitarian or deontological stance, "Researchers have been forced to rethink basic issues . . . to be able to develop and apply approaches that work for ourselves and our research goals and that would be ethically defensible in relation to our informants" (p. 68).

With deeply rooted standpoints and few universal principles, how should one treat texts and Web sites, which may or may not be vital to the subjectivity of the author; which may or may not be considered private by the author; which may or may not be important to our individual research goals? There are no simple conclusions to be drawn in the arena of ethical Internet research. Institutional research boards will continue to regulate the activities of scholars. National, regional, and cultural principles will undoubtedly remain distinct; ethical guidelines are entrenched in larger socio-political-economic structures of meaning. Internet researchers will continue to argue the issues of publicly accessible documents; anonymity; copyright; presentation of other; and privacy. Excellent overviews of opposing positions can be found in various journals, online reports, and conference/workshop proceedings.<sup>5</sup>

Given the variations in ethical stances as well as the diversity of methodological choices, each researcher must explore and define research within their own integral frameworks. Thomas (2003) recommends a more proactive approach to ethical behavior than simply adhering to rules set out by IRBs. "In this view, we recognize the potential ambiguity of social situations in which most value decisions are made and commit ourselves not to rules, but to broad principles of justice and beneficence" (p. 197). As to how one might determine what these broad principles actually are, Stephen L. Carter (1996) reminds us of what it means to have integrity. It involves not only discerning what is right and what is wrong, but also acting on this discernment, even at personal cost, and publicly acknowledging and defending one's stance and choices. Acting with integrity, Carter adds, "demands that we take the time for genuine reflection to be certain that the [morality] we are pressing is right" (p. 204).

## ■ RETHINKING THE PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

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My ten years of experience as an Internet researcher lead me to believe that it is time to reassess our priorities and processes as researchers. Instead of asking "how we can protect human subjects through various types of research design?" we will frame better questions and find richer answers by shifting our focus toward the participant. Putting the human subject squarely in the center of the research both shifts the ethical considerations and allows for socially responsible research.

All ethnographically informed research, particularly in computer-mediated environments, includes decisions about how to draw boundaries around groups, what to leave in as meaningful data and what to dismiss as unimportant, and how to explain

what we think we know to our audiences. These research design decisions, which are often dismissed as simple logistics and not often mentioned in methods texts or ethics discussions, influence the representation of research participants, highlight particular findings while dismissing others, create ideologically charged bases of knowledge and, ultimately, impact legislation and policy making. This chain of events requires astute, reflexive methodological attention. We make choices, either consciously or unconsciously, throughout the research process. Researchers must grapple with natural and necessary change engendered by vivid awareness of the constructed nature of science, knowledge, and culture.

One way to meet the future is to learn from but not rely on the past. Practically speaking, this involves a return to the fundamental question: Why are we doing research? Politically speaking, this involves taking risks that will productively stretch the academy's understanding of what inquiry intends to produce.

The Internet continues to provide a unique space for the construction of identity in that it offers anonymity in an exclusively discursive environment. The difficulty of observing and interviewing in these contexts is that our expectations remain rooted in embodied ways of collecting, analyzing and interpreting information. Simply put, our methods are still more suitable for research in physically proximal contexts. Moreover, although the technology of the internet has afforded us greater reach to participants and provided a space for researchers to interact with participants in creative ways, our epistemological frameworks have not yet shifted to match this reality. It is necessary not only to accommodate the features of computer-mediated communication into our basic assumptions, but also to interrogate and rework the underlying premises we use to make sense of the world.

Computer mediated communication highlights key paradoxes of social research in that personae being represented are already one step removed from their bodies when encountered by the researcher. Doing research of life online has compelled me to recognize that I have always taken for granted my ability to parse human experience by carefully paying attention to people's activities in context. Engaging in meaningful experiences with anonymous beings and interviewing people I cannot see face to face, I can identify many of the weaknesses of qualitative research processes in general. Interviewing or observing in natural settings, researchers rely on the ability to judge a face, looking for visual signs of authentic emotion and inauthentic pretense. We make immediate categorizing decisions based on first impressions, listening to the tenor of a voice on the phone or looking at body type, ethnic markers, hair style and color, and clothing brands. Even the most astute and cautious researchers unconsciously rely on habitual patterns of sense making in everyday interactions with others.

We must directly engage the fact that the questions driving the research must change to accommodate the enduring partiality of scientific knowing. Political action is a sensible shift, therefore, in that it does not seek to find the truth, but to create the possibilities for people to enjoy a better life.



In whatever ways we utilize the potential of Internet-mediated communication to facilitate our social inquiry, ethically sensitive approaches are complicated, even impeded, by our methodological training. Depending on the academic discipline we find ourselves working within, we will be encouraged in varying degrees to oversimplify the complexity of human experience, transforming the mysteries of interaction into discrete variables that are easily measured. This is done for admirable reason and by no means am I recommending a complete dismissal of traditional means of collecting and analyzing data. At the same time, Internet contexts prompt us to reconsider the foundations of our methods and compel us to assess the extent to which our methods are measuring what we think they are, or getting to the heart of what we have assumed they did. Through the Internet, we have the opportunity to observe how written discourse functions to construct meaning and how textual dialogue can form the basis of cultural understanding. The taken-for-granted methods we use to make sense of participants in our research projects need thorough reexamination in light of our growing comprehension of how intertextuality literally occurs.

Even within a contemporary framework of sociological inquiry—whereby the distinction between the researcher and researched is problematized, the researcher's role is acknowledged, and bias is accepted as a fundamental fact of interpretation—our obligation to the participant remains. We make decisions, conscious or unconscious, about what constitutes the virtual field and subject of study. Often dismissed as logistical, research design decisions, these choices make a great difference in what is studied, how it is studied, and eventually, how society defines and frames computer-mediated communication environments. Because Internet-based technologies for communication are still new and potentially changing the way people live their everyday professional and personal lives in a global society, it is essential to reflect carefully on the ethical frames influencing our studies and the political possibilities of our research.

## ■ NOTES

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1. It is important to note that although this chapter focuses on computer-mediated communication, the capacities and consequences extend well beyond the desktop or laptop. For excellent discussions of the ways in which mobile telephones influence identity and cultural constructions, see Howard Rheingold (2002) or Katz and Aakhus (2002).

2. The trend is exaggerated here to illustrate the extremes. Speculative and exaggerated accounts are important to consider because they influenced research premises throughout the 1990s. This is not to say that empirical research was absent or unimportant. The impact of electronic technologies on individual communication practices and social structure has been explored for decades, most well represented by scholars like Marshall McLuhan (1964), Harold Innis (1964), James Carey (1989), and Neil Postman (1986, 1993). Throughout the 1980s, significant empirical and theoretical research examined the impact of computers and information

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technology on the practices and structures of work. Sociological accounts (e.g., Turkle, 1984) studied important intersections of technology, self, and society. Crucial to the point is that many exciting but exaggerated texts appeared in the early 1990s, both in trade and academic presses, which fueled further speculative research and led to the publication of accounts that had more novel appeal than careful scholarship in an era of exciting new technological developments. As this field of inquiry evolves, it is vital to examine with a critical lens the foundations upon which current theoretical premises may be built.

3. A similar categorization of critical junctures was developed by the author for a keynote address at a Nordic conference on Ethics and Internet research and has been used subsequently in related publications (Markham, 2003a, 2003b).

4. The material in this section is being written concurrently for a chapter in an edited collection (Markham, 2003c).

5. *The Information Society*, for example, hosted a special issue in 1996 on the ethics of Internet research. The Association of Internet Researchers released a comprehensive report of various stances, comparative guidelines, and an extensive list of resources (2002); a conference panel yielded a set of articles which lay out various perspectives in a special issue of *Ethics and Information Technology* (2002); the first Nordic conference and graduate seminar on ethics and Internet research yielded the edited volume *Applied Ethics in Internet Research*, containing keynote addresses and case studies by Scandinavian students (Thorseth, 2003); and an edited volume by Johns, Chen, and Hall, (2003) entitled *Online Social Research* offers various perspectives and cases. Many other sources discuss both general and specific issues related to Internet research and ethics. All of these resources offer both novice and experienced researchers valuable philosophical, practical, and legal information.

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