New Media and Participant Observation_____

Many qualitative researchers, we believe, would agree that fieldwork isn't what it used to be. That is, while human communication has *always* been mediated (Chesebro & Bertelsen, 1996), and media systems have long been a focus of communication research, contemporary sites are awash in "new" technologies. "Web 2.0" artifacts such as the iPhone, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have modified and replaced original Internet media such as telephone modems, text-based chat, and static webpages (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 247–278). While fundamental elements of that earlier technology endure (e.g., hypertextuality), its current forms are marked by continuous increases in the richness of multimedia content, the immediacy of user interactivity and collaboration, the transmission capacity and speed of broadband and wireless networks, and the interoperability of devices and programs across converging media platforms. The consequences of these developments for human communication are a source of ongoing debate, but we are narrowly concerned here with two sets of implications for conducting fieldwork.

The first involves the *growing use of multimedia devices for recording fieldwork activities*. Here we emphasize that this usage is not novel: early ethnographers did not limit themselves to writing and also used photography, mapping, and drawing to record significant figures, artifacts, and events. During the twentieth century, the growing portability and fidelity of first analog, and then digital, recording technology led fieldworkers to employ related devices in data "collection." As a whole, these audio, video, and computing technologies have held various forms of appeal: they offer evocative alternatives to the rational formats of writing and print; they appear to objectively document cultural practices; they facilitate the storage, organization, and retrieval of data; and they allow fieldworkers to record

their immediate impressions of events outside of participant awareness (Gravlee, Zenk, Woods, Rowe, & Schulz, 2006; Makagon & Neumann, 2009; Patton, 1990, pp. 248–249). While qualitative researchers still debate the value of these affordances, they have also continued to cultivate the use of technology to ensure that their methods match the complexity of the communication they encounter (Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2005).

Practical decisions about using these kinds of recording devices follow logically from decisions about conceptualizing research fields and their related sites and scenes. Communication occurring in these contexts is increasingly distributed, networked, fluid, and multimodal (Murthy, 2008, p. 849). As qualitative researchers, we use new media to follow our chosen group members as they conduct their personal and professional lives in and across these contexts. In this process, we must choose which media channels, contexts of use, genres of content, and forms of practice are most relevant for our research purposes. In making these selections, the traditional conception of "scenes" as clearly bounded spaces to be sampled must be revised to accommodate the simultaneity of mediated and virtual contexts. Again, it is better here to focus on developing a reasonable case for your choices, rather than presuming that a single right choice exists. No one can record all of the communication occurring in all the scenes at a site (however it is mediated) or in all the sites that compose a field. As a result, you should focus on the questions of how to commit your limited resources to increase your chances of a successful study and how you can justify these choices to those they will affect.

As we choose which contexts to engage, we must also consider how the use of audio, video, and computing technology *constructs the event that it appears to record*. That is, we reject here the positivist image of data "collection," as if communication phenomena were fixed objects lying around, waiting to be discovered and harvested. Instead, every choice we make about selecting and using a recording device reflects our (culturally influenced) orientation to its particular media codes (e.g., camera angle and lighting) and shapes the status of its product as a representation (but not a mirror) of social action. Here are some questions that lead to those choices: What do I believe are the significant communicative modalities of this event (e.g., gesture, voice, color), such that the use of this device seems appropriate for recording its occurrence (Dicks et al., 2005)? Where in the scene will the device and the participants be located? Where will the device's sensors be directed? How will the scene's participants orient to this use of the device and to each other as co-performers in the meta-event of recording the event? What empirical features of the event will be preserved and emphasized in this mode of recording? Which will be minimized or obscured? How will these "missing" features (as well as the event's felt significance for its

participants) be recorded by other means? How will this form of recording enable and constrain its subsequent analysis as "data"?

Regarding this last question, we are particularly struck by arguments that, as data, audio and video recordings are an entirely different animal than are written accounts (Dicks et al., 2005, p. 123). Despite our earlier claim that fieldnotes *can* assume the aura of events they record, these notes are not presumed to *directly* capture those events (technically, argue poststructuralists, they symbolize its absence). Instead, fieldnotes are continuously subject to rewriting (e.g., as exemplars) and are typically subordinated within final research publications (e.g., as offset quotes of dialogue) to other "superior" forms of analytic writing. The format of audio and video recordings, alternately, places greater constraints on their use in analysis and representation. These records *are* presumed to directly record the actuality of events, and while their basic units (e.g., video frames) can be combined in various ways (e.g., through editing), they cannot easily be disassembled or recoded (and unacknowledged manipulation of audio and video data poses obvious ethical problems). Finally, these recordings create an ethical challenge for researchers: their realistic qualities require additional work to preserve the anonymity of their depicted participants. For all these reasons, we should use recording devices in fieldwork only with careful planning and continuous reflection.

The second set of implications involves *the conduct of participant observation in online settings*. In the previous edition of this volume, we noted four distinctive characteristics of fieldwork in initial Internet contexts. The first was their convenient objectification (e.g., in website discussion threads) of the very communication performances that researchers hoped to document. Even better, researchers could record these displayed exchanges with relative ease (e.g., as session transcripts) by using logging programs. A second condition involved the relative disembodiment, anonymity, and accessibility of communication in public websites. These qualities offered fieldworkers the opportunity to practice covert observation through "lurking" (with all of the related dilemmas discussed earlier in this chapter). Third, Internet researchers faced a unique responsibility to reflectively conceptualize the relationship between "online" and "offline" communication as a guide to their study. The question was not which one was more "real," but how the significance of communication occurring in one type of context was associated by participants with communication occurring in the other. Consider, for example, how high school students who fail to answer text messages sent by leaders of their cliques may experience derision and shunning in subsequent face-to-face interaction among their members. Finally, we noted practical and ethical problems associated with researchers conducting Internet research through the proxy

identity form of "avatars"—most notably, the verification of participants' authenticity. The implication here was that, for better and worse, Internet users could only manage their mutual impressions through the forms and codes available within a particular "new" medium. As a result, researchers were advised to constantly reflect on their naturalized beliefs about what communication is and how it is accomplished (Markham, 2004, p. 114).   •

In the intervening years, these issues have been refined as qualitative researchers have developed further wisdom and best practices and have reacted to the rapid evolution of media and technology (Beaulieu, 2004; Broad & Joos, 2004; Garcia et al., 2009; Markham & Baym, 2009). Here, we can identify three claims that are particularly useful for fieldworkers. The first is that, because online and offline activities have only become more simultaneous and interdependent, it is no longer useful to view them as occurring in separate, distinct spheres. Instead, we should conceptualize our research sites as dynamic ecologies of mediated communication, focusing on their holistic, multimodal, and multisited properties (Hine, 2009). While we may desire to punctuate in advance the spatial and temporal boundaries of these "rowdy hybrids" (Bakardjieva, 2009, p. 58), it is important to view those boundaries *inductively*, as the ongoing, practical accomplishments of their participants (Kendall, 2009). The question thus becomes this: how should we conceptualize the relationship between online and offline communication in order to achieve the goals of our study (Orgad, 2009)?

The second claim implicates the limitation of communication researchers familiar only with verbal and written discourse. Increasingly, the development of a credible, online role requires us to first master the unique, *non*discursive codes of multimedia data characterizing our chosen sites and the distinctive practices by which their participants produce, circulate, and interpret related texts (e.g., mash-up videos).

Third, in this process, traditional fieldnotes become something else: an opportunity for researchers to leverage the benefits of written expression to supplement, expand, and interpret automatically generated records of interaction (e.g., by providing reflective and experiential accounts of participation) (Markham, 2009). The electronic and digital capacities of new media allow this writing to be associated with "captured" data in a variety of ways (e.g., integrated as a single, multimedia text; hyperlinked as a separate text). And, as we saw earlier in discussing Keri Miller's fieldnote, new media practices such as blogging permit researchers to archive and display their recorded data online. These researchers will no doubt vary, however, in their limitation of public access to—and interaction with— these records.