

Computer-Mediated Femininity: An Ethnographic Approach to a Brazilian Blog

Adriana Braga¹

This paper proposes a theoretical exercise concerning the applicability of ethnography to study the interactions on the Web, and the potential consequences of such application. As an empirical topic for discussion, the communicational dynamics among a group of women and their definitions for the status of femininity and motherhood within the interactional environment of the weblog *Mothern* was analyzed.

Introduction

COMMUNICATION on the Internet and the phenomena that emerge from those processes require specific methodological approaches to analyze them. This article develops a theoretical exercise regarding the applicability of the ethnographic technique to study the interactions on the Web. After a short review on the limits and possibilities of ethnography as applied to Internet interactions, we propose some analytical categories for studying the interactions in virtual environments, and the potential consequences of such applications.

Currently, researchers who investigate social interactions on the Internet usually do not pay much attention to the discussion of the methodological procedures they employ in their analysis. However, to think about the cultural dynamics of the Internet requires a preliminary discussion of its empirical peculiarities.

Ethnography and the Internet

ETHNOGRAPHIC technique, because of its emphasis on the experience of the researcher as a data source, has become a promising theoretical approach to Computer Media Communication (CMC). Such a choice demands theoretical deepening and, possibly, an interdisciplinary dialogue with researchers that use this method in a more traditional way.

Ethnography was conceived and historically applied to the study of groups in face-to-face interaction with the ethnographer, making his/her experience a data source. The particular kind of interaction transpiring on the Internet is sort of a novelty that brings methodological challenges to the application of this traditional research method, and which requires some adjustment of the traditional premises of ethnography.

The neologism “nethnography” (net + ethnography) was originally coined by a group of American researchers (Bishop, Star, Neumann, Ignácio, Sandusky and Schatz, 1995) to describe a methodological challenge: to preserve the rich details of ethnographic fieldwork observations while using the electronic media to “follow the actors.” In methodological terms, ethnography is grounded on the notion of participant observation, taking for granted that it is impossible, in face-to-face interactions, to observe without participating. The interactional environments of CMC, however, are characterized by the physical absence of the participants, and the possibility

¹ Adriana Braga is in the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação Social da PUC, Rio de Janeiro.

to be there “invisibly,” (i.e., “lurking”). Is it possible, therefore, to comprehend the culture of a group without actually participation in it, just by lurking? Rutter and Smith (2002) describe the context as ideal for analysis:

...online ethnography is surely a researcher’s dream. It does not involve leaving the comforts of your office desk; there are no complex access privileges to negotiate; field data can be easily recorded and saved for later analysis; large amounts of information can be collected quickly and inexpensively. (p.3)

Rutter and Smith discuss the notion of “research setting” on online ethnographies, warning about the problematic definition of *where* we are studying as electronic ethnographers, since relationships on the Internet are defined by acts of communication and interaction, considering that there is no “place” on the Internet beyond metaphor. Another pertinent topic regarding this approach is the ethical questions such research engenders. In a physical setting, the very presence of the ethnographer is an aspect to be negotiated in the fieldwork, while the “net presence” (Agre, 1994) seems to be something quite indistinct (Barnes, 2004). Regarding traditional ethnography, authors like Winkin (1998) maintain that the ethnographer should be absolutely clear about his/her identity in field situations, and reasonably open about his/her research agenda. In sum, the fact is that the relation between presence/absence has specific and novel implications for Internet research.

The Ethnomethodological Approach

STANDING in opposition to authors who argue that the introduction of computer technology as produces a radical transformation of society, Greiffenhagen and Watson (2005) consider online activities as but transformations, complements or supplements of non-online activities, and are rarely substitutions or something completely without precedents. On the subject of social actions, these authors consider these actions as being locally-situated and practical, that is, they involve a range of practical considerations for being used, in what Schutz (1962) calls “the everyday life attitude.” Such activities are characterized more for their practical than theoretical nature. Thus the authors recommend proceeding through an adequate empirical analysis, on an instance-by-instance basis.

From the ethnomethodological perspective, it is important to study “locally-situated” instances of CMC use, a phenomenon that cannot be interpreted through a global and abstract theoretical description:

the term ‘CMC’ suggests that we are dealing with a single phenomenon. In contrast, we suggest that CMC is not a single, unitary, or self-contained phenomenon. Instead, we are dealing with diverse instances where CMC features in some particular activity or complex of activities. These instances may well show some similarities, overlaps, etc.—but will not be exactly identical. This is why ethnomethodology considers it important to examine single, locally-situated instances of, in this case, CMC use. For us, then, CMC is not a unitary phenomenon which can be rendered through an abstract, overall theoretical depiction. (Greiffenhagen & Watson, 2005, p. 91)

Logfiles, an outcome of CMC technology, are very often taken as “the” data, solving many problems of collecting information. However, Greiffenhagen and Watson point out some risks of such a methodological choice. Logfiles present a “bird’s eye” perspective of the interaction; that is, a point of view typical from the perspective of the analyst, not from that of the participants of the CMC. Moreover, such an approach fails to grasp the way participants establish and maintain their interactions over time. Since computers are involved in diverse activities of everyday life and communication conducted through this medium may have other purposes than communication itself. Thus, depending exclusively on logfiles leads to a decontextualization that risks not allowing the phenomenon to be perceived properly. The decision of some analysts of taking logfiles as independent, and granting exclusive priority to their contents, therefore, removes the peculiarities of CMC.

A Methodological Proposal

THE limits and possibilities noted above make evident the need of developing a composition of techniques for each particular piece of research, a specific methodological device, that Howard Becker (1993) calls “multimethod.” The specific research object analyzed in this paper demanded an appropriate methodological device consistent with its character as a phenomenon. As a result, I did not work with the weblog as a whole, but rather chose some structures, understood as dynamic spots of the communication being held there, along with complementary data: a) the content of the guestbook linked to the weblog, a starting point that lead to the other data sources; b) transcriptions of interviews with informants selected by the contact established in the guestbook; c) fieldwork notes taken during participation in face-to-face meetings promoted by the participants; d) video recordings of natural situations of computer use during communicative practices on the weblog. Beyond the more evident elements of the weblog—posts, links, layout and guestbook—it is possible to perceive a set of principles, values and interpretations of events, dynamic negotiations of meaning and definitions of the situation engaged by participants.

Thus, fractions of definitions of reality appear as topics for debate in the guestbook, followed by other related positions, structuring what has been called a “thread,” defined by Rutter and Smith (2002) as a sequence of comments motivated by a given topic in online interactions. A thread, in this sense, is the result of a double contingency: the discursive order (in its political dimension as a negotiation of meanings) and the interactional order (in its dynamics as a presentation of self of the participants).

An Analytic Application

IWOULD like to note a specific feature of the wide universe of feminine culture that illustrates the application of ethnography to online interactions: feminine computer mediated communication. To do so, I chose as a point of observation the interactional environment around a web log called “Mothern.” The title connects the words ‘mother’ and ‘modern,’ relating the semantic fields of motherhood to those of modernity. Another index of ‘modernity,’ for Brazilian middle class standards, can be found on the use of English words to name the weblog. The focused group seems to be emblematic in Brazilian context, since these women represent the first generation in contact with computer technology in everyday work life.

Motherhood as a topic for conversation nowadays can easily be taken as something outdated, connected to a traditional perspective of femininity, related to the triad husband-household-children. As an example we could think of Miranda, of the TV show *Sex and the City*, who apologized to her friends for the baby pictures on her walls and for allowing matters of motherhood to enter into their interactions and relationship. Once motherhood as a topic for conversation seems to find no place in modern times, it is interesting to think that the Internet can provide a meeting point for discussions of this subject and articulated with the positively-valued meanings of technological updating and participation in the public sphere.

There are many different forms of appropriation of the interactional environment allowed by web logs. In this case, rescuing a traditional feminine practice that, from a male perspective, could easily be understood as futile and unnecessary. In workplaces, from where most of the participants access the Internet, feminine sociability—epiphenomenon of online work—finds expression.

I would now like to describe some interactional modalities that take place within this environment. Online communication, after all, has distinct interaction rituals, different from those practices in face-to-face interaction. The arrival of a newcomer in the guestbook is in general motivated by: a) the exposure of one of the bloggers in conventional media; b) the recommendation of friends that already interact in the guestbook or—at the beginning of the web log; c) friends and relatives congratulating them for the novelty. In these comments left by newcomers, there are some identifiable interactional patterns, both at the entrance and at the reaction to this entrance. Between usual participants, there is a tendency to avoid conflicts, framing the general situation as what Georg Simmel called “sociability” (1983). For Goffman (1998), most of social interaction is possible by the voluntary engagement of participants in what he calls “working consensus” (p. 19), a sort of superficial agreement in which each participant gives up part of his/her personal position to hold a shared definition of the situation common to all. However, sometimes disruption can emerge due to the entrance of a hostile newcomer or to the proposal of a polemical subject. These polemical topics are usually related to the “feminine universe,” such as abortion, drinking during pregnancy, homosexuality, the education of children, and so on. In sum, in mixing both playfulness non-commitment and proposing topics for serious discussion, definitions of the situation are proposed, defended and attacked within this environment, defined by the participants as a place for freedom of expression.

a) the entrance

The weblog has been online for the past two years, and compiling a guestbook during this period, in which participants enter as newcomers with an opening comment that may receive a response from other participants. Most of these first time comments are characterized by words of enthusiastic approving of the weblog, and these words grants them kind replies and welcomes from other participants. Motherhood as a topic is rather frequent, but the simple utterance of a pleasant greeting is the major resource for acceptance between other participants. The reaction to the greeting is usually a kind reply by the hostesses, as on the following example, that demonstrates the warm welcoming:

726 – Marilene: Awesome!!! Everything that I think, doubt, imagine, complain and cry about is here.

728 – Ju: Hi, Marilene! You're welcome here! The Mothern idea is exactly this: let's gather our gang and dominate the world!

Sometimes, the entrance takes place without a pleasant greeting. The newcomer asks directly for advice, information or poses a suggestion, a form that I call 'no-greeting,' which is, at the same time, usually welcoming:

337 – Cristina: Hi! I would like so much to know Laura's mail! I live in BH and as I could see she lives there as well... I have a 5 month old baby who is giving me a ton of work and I am becoming desperate! I would like to exchange some ideas, please! I await an answer. Thanks.

338 – Laura: Cristina, my e.mail is xxx@xxx. Feel free to write me, but if you want to talk about your problem here in the guestbook, it might be better, cause we have a super team of readers-consultants-tip givers-whizzes ;) Best.

However, in some cases the entrance is rather turbulent, with harsh critiques to the topics dealt with in the guestbook. In these cases—not many—the reaction of the regular participants is quick and volatile. They defend any critique to their comments by claiming that the guestbook is a place for absolute freedom of expression, thereby framing the critiques as outrageous assaults on their freedom:

1122 – Renata: What is this? a gossip room or what? You should exchange phone numbers and spare us from this Peoplemagazinelesbiangossipchic atmosphere, ok?

1130 – Cau: No one has to spare anybody anything... the internet is full of guestbooks, everybody picks what suits them best, nobody is obliged to come here to read our nonsense.

It is worth noting that when a disagreement like this one occurs, the reply justifies itself by defining the public space of the guestbook as if it were private. This defensive pattern can be seen in many other conflicts in the guestbook, defined by its usual participants as private property, in which they make the rules, and let the discontents go away.

b) conflicts

Eventually, the usual kindness rules of this interactional environment are disturbed by conflicts between participants. These conflicts are often due to opposite positions regarding polemical topics. In such cases, there are long series of comments in which positions are radically taken, hesitating members are challenged, accusations are exchanged, participants decide to go away or are banished, in a dynamic ruled by conflict. Although this kind of situation does not define the regular interaction within the guestbook, several conflicts have been observed during its two years of activity.

One example occurred when a young participant asked for advice, complaining she was pregnant, but still lived with her parents, just like her boyfriend, who was unemployed. She

asked the guestbook whether or not she should have an abortion. In two days, almost two hundred comments were posted. The specific topic lost its relevance and was changed to a moral argument, with divided opinions between “pro-life” *versus* “pro-choice.” The episode ended with the voluntary departure of two participants who condensed radically the anti-abortion position.

c) informal theorization of femininity

Considering the dynamic process of updating feminine culture, as seen above, it is interesting to note the “encyclopedic” dimension of the topics discussed within the guestbook. They talk about several issues concerning motherhood: alcohol-drinking in front of the children, smoking, drug use, homosexual experiences, alternative medicine, dieting, nutrition for children, breastfeeding, toys, gender roles, media products for children, and many other topics. In doing so, these young mothers appear to re-think motherhood, creating a sort of informal theorization that aims to negotiate contemporary definitions of femininity, available in the context of this mediated public sphere. Examination of these informal theoretical statements reveals a general tendency to re-think old habits, practices and morals in society. Usually, however, these proposals are offered as programs for individual action, and not as proposals of political transformation.

Conclusion

ETHNOGRAPHY appears to be a promising approach for the empirical study of the activities surrounding Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) once some precautions are taken in this application. These emergent social practices present peculiar features that demand a considerable reformulation of the rules of the traditional ethnographic method. For instance, it may be necessary to modify the premises of participant observation as regards online activities, since a “non-participant observation” on the Internet it is perfectly possible. Another risk is to assume that online activity happens exclusively online, or that all the relevant information is readily available in log files, easily accessed and stored.

If, on the one hand, the log files made available by Internet technology appear to offer “everything” that transpires within CMC activities, and seems to minimize or even eliminates the problems of data collection. On the other hand, however, the use of log files as the sole source as the only source of data can lead the analyst to miss the intersubjective meanings shared by the group under investigation. The analysis of CMC activities demands a combination of research techniques for every different case that is studied.

In the case analyzed here, the interactional aspects of the entrance of newcomers shows some features of the tacit knowledge that organizes this situation, an informal—and unwritten—protocol, that regulates and organizes interaction in the guestbook, an important aspect of the way people appropriate the Internet. The conflicts raised there suggest areas of tension between knowledge and points of view to the discussion by the participants who eventually show contradictions and radical differences. As a sort of background discursive modality, the study of the discourse presented in the guestbook points to a contemporary informal theorization of femininity, negotiated amongst the participants under the rules of digital sociability.

References

- Barnes, S. (2004). Goffman and the Internet: Applying Goffman's concepts to online communication. Paper presented at IAMCR Conference. Porto Alegre, PUCRS.
- Becker, H. S. (1993). *Métodos de pesquisa em ciências sociais*. São Paulo: Hucitec.
- Bishop, A.P., Star, S.L., Neumann, L., Ignacio, E., Sandusky, R.J., & Schatz, B. (1995). Building a university digital library: Understanding implications for academic institutions and their constituencies. In: *Higher Education and the NII: From vision to reality*. Proceedings of the Monterey Conference, Sept. 26-29. Washington, DC: Coalition for Networked Information.
- Goffman E. (1998). *A representação do eu na vida cotidiana*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Greiffenhagen, C. & Watson, R. (2005). Teoria e método na CMC: Identidade, género, e tomada-de-turno – uma abordagem etnometodológica e analítico-conversacional. In A. Braga (Ed.), *CMC, identidades e género: Teoria e método*. Coleção Estudos em Comunicação. Covilhã/PT: Universidade da Beira Interior.
- Rutter, J. & Smith, G. (2002). Ethnographic presence in nebulous settings: A case study. Paper presented at ESRC Virtual Methods Seminar Series, Brunel University.
- Schutz, A. (1962). *Collected papers*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff.
- Simmel, G. (1083). *Sociologia*. São Paulo: Ática.
- Winkin, Y. (1998). *A nova comunicação: Da teoria ao trabalho de campo*. Campinas: Papirus.