Crossing the ‘Divide’

Virtual Ethnography in the ‘real world’

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Introduction

• Bogans and social networking sites
• Social networking websites as representational/interactional spaces
• Similar characteristics to offline
• Part of our everyday routine
• Shift within, across and between both online and offline sites
• Methodological issues
The everyday bogans

• Thesis that looked at the construction and development of a social identity and community across places. This included online places such as social networking sites.

• Included in the methodology were ‘web-audits’ of social networking sites. Participants taking me on a tour of their page – why they chose certain pictures, how they used the sites, and how the sites were situated within their everyday lives.

• Yes Bogans (working class Heavy Metal fans) use the internet, despite their claims that:

‘If it doesn’t take petrol and need a pull start, I don’t know how to use it’ (NAIL)
Social networking sites

- Myspace, Bebo, Lastfm, Facebook, Twitter, Google+

- Series of interlinked websites. Each website is ‘owned’ by an individual or group, and they choose to decorate it how they want.

- Variety of features across the different types but very similar in terms of features – usually a popularity contest between companies – but practically very little difference amongst most of them.
Common features

• The Wall

• Fan Pages/Hobbies

• Photographs

• Comments, messages, status updates, and “likes”

• Friend lists
Representational spaces

• A place to communicate identity to other people through the selection of images, fan pages, and status updates.
• Interactional space – the place is created through continued interactions with other people (e.g. sharing photos, ongoing conversations etc.)
• This is built up and continues to develop through sustained interactions.
Different or similar?

- Offline spaces are interactional and relational too.
- Created and developed through their decoration, and interactions within and across places.
- Come to represent the people who inhabit and transcend them.
- Practices and behaviours may differ somewhat, but processes are very similar.
“time the real world broke into the virtual”

Robins, 1984, p. 4
Double articulation of space

- Notion that we occupy several spaces at once, both virtual and physical (Silverstone, 1999).
- So I have a presence on my Facebook page as I’m interacting with others, but I’m also physically occupying my lounge, office, or walking down the street.
- Even if I’m sitting at home, I’m still moving through a variety of different places.
Oh every day. What I generally do is cos this thing [his computer] takes so long to [start up] I come in, boot it up while I have a shower and by the time I’ve finished my shower it’s all getting ready to login. In between pages I’ll go out and have my dinner or muck around, watch a bit of TV or whatever, I’ve gotta keep doing other stuff cos I don’t wanna get into the habit of sitting on my computer six hours a day, uploading Myspace videos or upgrading the Myspace pages or searching for friends or whatever. I normally get home [from work] at half past five, by the time I’ve had a shower its six o’clock, yeah by the time about eight o’clock or so I’m ready to turn it off (Chopper).
Everyday Life

- No real clearly defined “online” or offline” – Chopper moves between the two seamlessly in his daily routine.
- People often layer different modes of communication and can move across, between and through the media landscape in their daily lives (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2008).
- This process of movement also includes navigating across both online and offline spaces.
Space Ghost status: CARCASS!!

Burton C Bogan status: The threads of global fabric are untied!

Burton C Bogan: Fucken CARCASS!! I’m still buzzing. Although the diseased penii...not a fan...can’t believe [Ripper] missed that...lucky him!

Space Ghost: Hahahaha yeah man, I can still hear the ringing. The penii were...an interesting touch. Carcass is lucky they don’t have to look at them. CARCASS!
Re-enacting online

- An attempt by the two of us to bring the offline and extremely physical experience online.
- Even though there are no photographs or any smell option (thankfully!) online, Metal concert attendees attempt to bring sensual elements (physicality, smell, sound, sights) online through conversation and posting messages.
- Using an online space to remember and reconnect with offline spaces through sharing past events that we were both involved in.
- In this way, we bring the two spaces together, connecting them and in the process experience feelings of community and shared identity.
That was at a friend’s 30th [birthday party] … cos a few of her friends, or acquaintances or friends of friends were all at the party as well and they had started talking to me online a couple of weeks prior, knowing that I was going to be at this party and then I met them there…it was just one of those things where ‘Oh you’re off the Internet’ … this is the guy I met, started talking to him online and then met him at a party … it was a meeting of pretty much people off Bebo really, cos some of the people I took along with me and some others I knew through Bebo, so they met each other … There were jokes all night about ‘Haha don’t pose like that or it’ll end up on Bebo.’ Sure enough, three months later it ends up on Bebo.
Inception?

• The complexity of places for experiencing community is negotiated and re-negotiated through interactions (party), representations (photographs), and postings (online).

• Multiple layers that overlap and inter-relate – taking the offline online, and then back offline again.

• Party attendees are shaping and negotiating the offline space through photographs and ‘threats’ of online postings. So even though the online space isn’t immediately visible, it’s still ‘there’.

• Once photographs are posted online, people can view and comment.
Methodology

• Yet another space to consider and immerse oneself in when you’re a researcher

• Similar methodological approaches as offline – ‘big net’ or ‘snowballing’ technique of recruitment, on-going engagement with participants, useful elicitation mechanism for interviews.

• A virtual ethnography can be a part of a larger ethnographical study.

• Several advantages – useful in recruitment, easy access to participants, and an excellent dissemination device.

• Tensions – careful of privacy and other ethical issues.
SUMMARY

- Places can be interactional and representational – online or offline
- Social networking sites and the internet have become part of a lot of people’s daily routines.
- We can occupy multiple spaces and move across within and through.
- There are spaces that interconnect and overlap.
- Each influences the other and we flit back and forth, aware that are actions in one space may have implications in others.