

Crossing the 'Divide'

Virtual Ethnography in the 'real world'



Dr. Dave Snell
Waikato Institute of Technology

Introduction

- Bogs 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.

Re-enacting online

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 actions in one space may have implications in others.

DAVE.SNELL@WINTEC.AC.NZ