Title: An anthropological approach to locating the web: methods for studying the impact of new media on- and off-line

Abstract

Anthropological approaches to the Internet and new technologies are rapidly expanding areas of inquiry within the social sciences. While the existence of desktop hardware and wireless devices is self-evident, the elusive placelessness of the web has caused profound practical and analytical issues. In popular science, the study of virtual worlds like Second Life and World of Warcraft makes headlines for challenging what we know about place-based society. Such arguments have prompted field researchers to fundamentally rethink the methodologies that have traditionally been applied to ethnographic fieldwork in order to explore virtual networks and online communities on their own terms. However, online concerns are not separate or detached from offline realities. New technologies are thoroughly embedded in our everyday lives. My research adventure has therefore been to *locate* the Internet. I embraced traditional on-the-ground methods to bypass virtuality in making sense of the "placeless cloud" that we take for granted. How do we situate websites, Facebook, email and texting within a communicative framework that is continually evolving in crosscutting trajectories with other forms of paper, wired and wireless media? Are "Web 2.0" and "social media" anything new? Is the Internet a social tool or an ego-centric, individualizing entity? Is it bounded by traditional categories of social stratification like class, gender and geography, or does it efface and transgress them? My doctoral research, based on 15 months of intensive participant observation in a Catalan city, tackled these issues head-on with a multifaceted approach to understanding the social impact of new media in a contemporary urban setting. I present here a critical review of my methods for Internet research wherein I explored technology as a continuous aspect of physical geography and reveal key findings which proved these methods to be worthwhile.

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