Behind an Open Source Project

Combining On- and Off-line Ethnographic Methods

a paper abstract

Ethnographers usually study social environments by "being there." Traditionally, *being there* was understood as being there *physically,* ideally for an extended period of time and in some isolation from one's native environment – much like Bronislaw Malinowski, who spent four years on the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 1967). This approach to *being there* has become complicated recently. The increasing importance of connections between faraway spaces, resulting from physical movement of people and increased communication – what Giddens (1990) calls "time-space distanciation" – has lead to growing interest in multi-sited ethnography, the practice of following people, things, or projects as they move across multiple physical locations. The appearance of "online places" such as mailing lists, chat groups, wikis, or social networking sites created altogether new kinds of "there" that the researcher could visit, "space-less places" (Harrison & Dourish 1996) that may seem altogether disconnected from physical space. This presents us with many questions about what methods are appropriate for the study of such virtual places, some of which have been increasingly discussed (e.g., Hine 2006).

One of those questions is whether online places should be considered ethnographic sites that the researcher can enter, the "there" of an ethnographic project, or merely artefacts that are ultimately produced by real people in real physical places – making those *real* places the appropriate sites of ethnographic investigation. The answer ultimately depends on the specific "place" and a specific perspective that the ethnographer chooses. Online spaces are experienced as natural, pre-existing "places" by many of their participants and it may therefore be appropriate for the ethnographer to focus on "being there" in the online place, to the extent that the goal of the research is to understand the experience of the participants who see those places this way.[1] At the same time, we must remember that such place are *produced,* perhaps even strategically. Looking at their production may teach us a lot about the nature of their place-ness. This production of online environments as places of a particular kind, is often a performance in Goffman's sense (1959), and understanding this performance requires that we look for the "backstage" in which it is prepared. (This is of course the case with *all* places, not just the virtual ones.) We may find such backstage in a different online "place" or in a physical one. In fact, we may find a sequence (or rather a network) of stages.

Following the participants as they move between online and offline places allows us to see how such

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1 This would of course imply an assumption, that *either* (1) the participants' offline lives have little relevance to their experience online *or* (2) the online participants are sufficiently similar to the ethnographer or the people she or he had studied earlier, that the ethnographer can imagine their offline lives and see any relevant connections *or* (3) any relevant aspects of the participants offline lives will be reflected in the online behavior. Since those assumptions are rarely justified, "virtual" ethnographers usually have good reasons to at least complement their investigation with face-to-face encounters with the participants.

places are produced, observing both how face-to-face interactions are used in the production of online places as places of a particular kind (for instance, "an open community mailing list") and how online interactions structure social relationships in face-to-face contexts. In my experience studying an open source project, which I will present in more some detail in the paper, I find such a network of places, each serving as a backstage for the production of a different one. Some of those places are virtual, others are physical, and neither kind can be fully understood without the other. To give some examples, the project involves a small network of Brazilian software developers, all graduates of the same university and all but one residing in the same city (Rio de Janeiro), communicating face-to-face, over email and over IM, usually in their native Portuguese. The project is funded by a government agency and must present to the latter a "front" of a successful "*Brazilian open source software"* project. It also has a mailing list, in English, for the project's "international community." While this "community" may appear to exist as a natural social place to some of its members, it is actively produced as an "open source community." This performance is prepared off the list, through face-to-face interactions, private email and IM between the core developers. The mailing list itself serves as a backstage for the production of code and the website, which then become "tokens" (again in Goffman's sense) used in performances in front of a wide range of audiences. The situation is complicated even further with the arrival of "an American interviewer" (the author of this paper, who is not actually American), who becomes an audience for the presentation of "Brazilian software," being seen as a delegate of the foreign development community. "The American interviewer," at the same time becomes a token used in local performances (the fact that someone from a major American university is writing a dissertation about the project increases its value in the eyes of some), and is also recruited as an resource in the back-stage planning for the production of "open source community" on the mailing list – first just as a source of knowledge of what the foreign community expects of an open source project, then increasingly as a co-conspirator. (Needless to say, the American interviewer uses his interactions with the local and online members as a backstage for his performance in front of the academic audience back home.)

Such work presents a number of challenges, which I will discuss in detail in the paper. Movement between places is complicated first of all by the resistance to ethnographer's entry into the backstage once they have witnessed a performance. Entering through the backstage (in my case approaching the project members in person in Rio de Janeiro, rather than over the mailing list) solves this problem partly. (This approach, however, makes it harder to see the place through the eyes of the audience, after having been exposed to and become a participant in the backstage preparations.) It also does not fully solve the problem of access. Traditional ethnographers often gain access by starting with – literally – a foot in the door: negotiating the right to be physically present in the place, then using that presence to observe the activities of the participants, eventually gaining enough of local knowledge to gain more trust and more access. In observing open source software work, however, mere physical presence does not go very far. Without literally looking at the developers' monitors over their shoulders, both at work and at home, keeping track of their solitary work, private emails and IM conversations, cell phone calls and face-to-face chats, one can hardly see all the work that goes into the creation of the software

project. While no method can reconstruct the project in its entirety, *participant* observation provides the ethnographer with a partial solution: a situated and integrated picture that weaves together *some* private emails and IM conversations, *some* late night conversations over pizza, as well as quite a few hours alone in front of the monitor making sense of debug traces. By becoming a participant in the production of social contexts together with other participants, the ethnographer can see the links between the different places in a manner most similar to the way the participants see it, even if having little guarantee of being able to interpret such observations the same way.

The role of participant observer presents a number of further challenges. Becoming a regular participant in a software development project requires a certain amount of skill, and either too little or too much skill can become a challenge. It also presents the methodological challenges of getting involved without "going native" – a serious risk for any researcher who has the technical skills for this job. (Though, a certain degree of re-socialization is of course a crucial aspect of the ethnographic experience, hence many ethnographers believe in doing ethnography far enough from home to achieve isolation from the home environment – see Van Maanen 1988.) Participant observation of virtual places also complicates ethnographer's commitment to the place. It is such commitment that makes one a *participant*,[2] yet the ethnographer is expected to *leave* the field when the fieldwork is completed. In traditional ethnography the obvious need to physically return home may provide ethnographers with a natural end to the involvement – and hopefully keep them from making unrealistic commitments before that. Online places create an opportunity – and in view of some members an *obligation* – for the ethnographer to maintain commitment to the project through continued remote participation. The paper will discuss the benefits and challenges of such continued participation.

References

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2 I was often asked by other members if my participation in the project was "serious" or "just a research project."