

Ethnology and the Internet

Remarks on a relation

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What does Ethnology has to do with the Internet. More than a lot of ethnologists think, though their scepticism on that subject is not without reason. The relation between ethnology and the Internet (as a synonym for modern communication technologies) will be examined under the following aspects:

- 1. The Internet as a means for scientific communication, i.e. a medium for the exchange of information and ideas among scholars and researchers.**
- 2. The Internet as a field for research.**
- 3. The Internet as paradigm or perspective under which research in a so called 'global village' can be conducted and ethnology sees itself facing the challenges of the digital age.**

The Internet as a tool

The Internet provides means of communication which open up modes of interaction so far impossible with traditional communication technologies and neither ethnologists nor scientists in general are the only ones who make use of these. The core is its bi-directional, ubiquitous technology, which enables an exchange of data, information as well as direct communication, that renders every participant into a receiver and a sender. New emancipatory models of media reception, production of content and circumventing censorship arise along with it. These changes affect the relations among researchers and between them and their works, and the hierarchies that exists in Ethnology between students and professors.

The most trivial improvement is the speed of data transmission and the ubiquitous accessibility. Therefore this technology can be used from any point in the world disregarding national or geographical borders. This makes it possible for researchers that reside far away from the western centres of ethnological discourse to take part in these discourses. The advantages may make such discourses more sustainable than it has been the case so far.

The same holds true for the circumvention of censorship of scientific results and critique, e.g. by governments (the researchers' own or that of a given host country) or other donors. Examples for such alternative discourses are the numerous mailing-lists or UseNet-groups, open or moderated, which give room to many different views, even those that would not necessarily be heard in the traditional media of ethnological discourse and discussion.

Regarding the often lower scientific level and the 'noise' of many of those groups, this is not always to the advantage of ethnological research and scientific discussions. These disadvantages are produced by the system's inherent debates about the 'right' behaviour on the net, as well as by the possible anonymity of the medium. The threshold for aggression is lowered and discussions may

drift to banalities and personal insults. The modes of controlling these forums and lists are a constant issue on the Internet, as the relation between the right of free speech and the functioning and quality of scientific oriented discussions is at stake here.

This anonymity however has also a positive effect on the communication and the exchange of information. The Internet ignores hierarchies and gives a platform where students and professors come together on a common level without predictable differences. Whoever subscribes to such a kind of exchange has to accept the rules of this exchange or communication. This does not mean that these differences may not be reintroduced by the individuals if they wish so, but that generally the Internet favours an egalitarian mode of communication among its participants.

Another way to present ideas and research results is the World Wide Web (WWW), in which it is less the ability to exchange ideas, but rather the presentation of ideas and content which is of primary concern. The advantages of the Internet may apply here, too, which means that the WWW is a publishing platform for alternative contributions. A very interesting example from the fringe of ethnology is Eric Gans' [Anthropoetics](#) with his [Chronicles of Love and Resentment](#) ([more resources](#) can be found at the end of this article)

The inherent logic of 'one world' or a 'global village' (of scientists and scholars) does have consequences for research, even without actively using the Internet. On the one hand this logic forces researchers to look beyond their usual environment and recognise the work of others, especially of those whose work they could ignore in the past thanks to their own privileged position (e.g. west/north vs. the south) The same logic however may also liberates those that were constrained by national or regional discourses.

On the other hand this logic suggests an omnipresence and validity of one's own research and findings, so that existing discourse relations will prevail. Not last does the Internet have a political-economic dimension, which is reflected in a possible domination of discourses. A logic that fabricates a global village of American origins, will take over the discourses as well. The Internet is part of such a strategy, but it can be used as a subversive medium for alternatives as well, which demonstrates its dilemma and makes it interesting as a field for research

The Internet as Field

The Internet or rather its services and various features provide an excellent and very interesting field for research. Most of the ethnological oriented research regarding the Internet focuses on the so called virtual communities. These were established around mailing lists and other discussion environments, like the [WELL](#) in San Francisco, where people meet online to discuss aspects of their daily life, help each other or argue over things. [Rheingold](#) portrays this community extensively in his book '[Virtual communities - Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier](#)'. Other research has focused on the structures and relations in Multi-User-Dungeons (MUD's), adventure-fantasy environment, where 'reality' is constructed as part of the game. [Irina Leyde](#) has made a splendid contribution on this issue with her work about a German MUD, covering the history as well as the social aspects of the game and its participants. Similar research has been undertaken by [Elisabeth Reid](#), who examined the 'Communications and Community on Internet Relay Chat'. (1)

These works show that there is an interest in the phenomenon of Internet generated groups and their structures. Contrary to some visionists claims that the Internet renders all differences insignificant or has no use for one's identity, it seems that identity and culture are the points that are at stake here and therefore an ethnological contribution to these phenomena is needed and meaningful.

Concerning culture, identity and modern communication technologies, which enable a global communication, it becomes interesting to see how identities are constructed in the various Internet based groups and what role culture plays in the usage of the technologies.

With an ethnological approach it seems possible to view global communications and the cultural change that results from it, from a non- technological perspective. Such a perspective must consider two levels however, it must examine the interaction, communications and relations that constitute such groups as well as the general social, cultural and political context in which such groups are formed or such a form of communication is used.

According to Arturo Escobar who has raised a wide range of questions regarding ethnographic research and modern technologies in his article 'Welcome to Cyberia' (in his case covering bio-technologies as well) it is important to see, "what new forms of social construction of reality ('technoscapes') and of negotiations of such construction(s) are introduced by the new technologies? How do people routinely engage technoscapes, and what are the consequences of doing so in terms of the adoption of new ways of thinking and being?"(2)

With the use of the term 'technoscape' Escobar wants to point out the impact of technology and the operational need of information and computation on culture. At the same time it seems equally interesting to take a look at how technology and its content (e.g. TV programmes or Internet information) are used and translated according to different cultural codes, something that lies at the heart of ethnology. Morley/Robins in their book "Spaces of Identity", refer to various studies that examined the relationship of cultural codes or concepts and the readings of media programmes according to these concepts.(3) Marie Gillespie's study 'Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change' shows how Pakistani youths in England translate western cultural codes transported in TV series and commercials to their own cultural values, which differ from those of their parents. (4)

Gillespie's study hints at a development that is one of the outstanding features of the Internet, namely creolisation. This does not mean that with the Internet identities and cultural are arbitrary and unimportant. Quite to the contrary: they get more important and at the same time more difficult to understand as global migration, global tourism and global communication establish complex discourses in which culture and identity become key factors for a participation in these discourses. Although national and geographical borders and frontiers will be deconstructed to a great extent, new frontiers will be erected which once again will separate 'Us' from 'Them' or the 'Others'.

The Internet certainly contributes to the 'Retribalization' of the world and it is therefore that ethnology has to have a look at this phenomenon to see which and whose cultural values are in fact determining new forms of in- and exclusion. It is the stated tribal character of the Internet that should gain ethnologists attention and make them research this area.

The Internet as paradigm

Besides becoming just a field of research the Internet and/or global communication could also be viewed as an approach or a paradigm for research in what is often called a 'global information age'.

It has become quite clear in this article that it is not so much the technology itself, the wires and computers that are of interest for the ethnologist but the cultural context in which they are used and the impact they may have to peoples lives. And it also became clear that any research concerning the Internet can't be restricted to the Internet alone, but must take its context into account.

Using the Internet as a paradigm actually means an even further departure from the Internet as an object of research, as now it is the inherent logic of the Internet and global communications that become the focus for research.

This logic may be described as de-centralized, bi-directional, ubiquitous, interactive, producing unstable variable identities and 'postmodern virtualities' as Mark Poster calls them in his book 'The Second Media Age'. The Internet is non-national and is very much about crossing boundaries and borders, to the disapproval of many nation-states.

This logic is not limited to the Internet, nor is the Internet the only promoter of this logic. Global communication in general, global tourism and migration as well as the global exchange of goods and cultural values provide other examples where this logic can be found. These points, which may be part of the 'process of globalization' all raise questions of identity, culture, subjectivity and self-determination.

As Featherstone (1995)(5) states: "The process of globalization, then, does not seem to be producing cultural uniformity rather it makes us aware of new levels of diversity. If there is a global culture it would be better to conceive of it not as a common culture, but as a field in which differences, power struggles and cultural prestige contests are played out."

Using the Internet instead of globalization as the paradigm (or approach) pays attention to the role of technology in these processes, as thereby new modes of producing and shaping cultural values, identities and spaces of identities are introduced or older one radicalized.

Furthermore in making the Internet a paradigm of research means to shift the view from a rather western-centered position towards a de-centered viewpoint in which the complexity and the multipolarity of today's world is reflected.

In applying this paradigm to ethnology, ethnology will be able to analyse the techno-global processes and their complexities, which very often challenge the objects of its research today. Even if not directly enjoying the benefits of today's techno-media-economy, many groups (ethnic and other) around the world are subject to their influence with little possibilities of choice whether they want this or not.

On the other hand does ethnology provide a variety of useful tools, with which an analysis of global processes (the Internet included) and its logic will be enriched and may take a shift away from purely economical or technological explanations and their accompanying hype.

An approach focused on bi-directionality and de-centralization hopefully will establish non-ethnocentric discourses of cultural diversity instead of producing images of the 'Other' as fixed stereotypes used to exclude or include people. The latter however is unfortunately the flipside of the Internet's potential, which then could develop into a 'network of tribes' whose only similarity would be their exclusiveness.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to speculate on and discuss possible relations between ethnology and the Internet. Although I therefore divided the paper in three sections, it became clear that a differentiation is not easily made as all the topics I discuss surface in any of the three sections. The

technology has an impact on how ethnologist (and researchers in other disciplines as well) will be communicating with each other and about which topics.

If the Internet is considered as a field where research is conducted, it will not only be the means with which the results are transported but also the subject of the research and the carrier of the discourse. As I was trying to show, this might culminate in the use of the Internet and its connotations as a paradigm for the research in question as well as other studies that do not primarily deal with the Internet but with the complexities, whereof the Internet is but one part.

These sections have therefore not been chosen to separate the issues at hand, but to analyse three possible levels of a relation between the Internet and ethnology as a discipline. And I believe that it can contribute to new insights and new modes of communication between researchers and scholars as well as between them and an interested audience of students, activists, politicians and ordinary citizens around the world.

Still it must not be forgotten that it is not the technology that thinks and provides the standards of a discourse or any given research, but the people involved. Finally ethnologists and ethnology mustn't fall for the hype and the techno-centric views others already have given in to.

Notes:

1. [Sabine Helmers](#) also did some interesting research in this area.
2. Arturo Escobar: Welcome to Cyberia. In: Current Anthropology, Vol. 35, No. 3, June 1994, S. 211-231.
3. David Morley and Kevin Robin: Spaces of Identity, London 1995.
4. Mary Gillespie: Ethnicity, Television and Cultural Change, London 1995.
5. Mike Featherstone: Undoing Culture. London 1995.

Further resources (my selection): (the urls may not be active today)

- [Haddon online](#), an ethnographic film archive
- [Allen Lutins Anthropology resources](#)
- [Anthropology and American Indian Sites on the Internet](#)
- [AnthroGlobe](#)
- [CyberAnthropology](#)
- [Nick Gessler's Home Page of Artificial Culture and Cyberculture](#)
- [RAI](#), the Royal Anthropological Institute
- [Avenir des Peuples des Forêts Tropicales](#)
- [ERaM](#), Ethnicity, Racism and the Media
- [ESPR](#), Ethnicity and Social Policy Research Unit
- [INCORE](#) Internet Service on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity
- [Ercomer](#), European Research Center on Migration and Ethnic Relations

- [Anais do Seminário Preparatório sobre Aspectos Sócio-Culturais da Internet no Brasil](#)
interessante Papers
- [Inuit on the Internet](#)