Beyond the screen: Methods for investigating geographies of life ‘online’

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Abstract

The internet and being ‘online’ is an integral part of everyday life for a substantial proportion of the population. There is an increasing impetus for researchers to engage with ‘online’ activities, not only as particular activities themselves but also as a part of the context of a wide range of geographies. The purpose of this article is to offer an overview of contemporary methodologies of researching geographies of life online. The article is structured in four sections. Beginning with a discussion of how to address a ‘field’, the article goes on to explore how geographers have addressed spatial understandings of the internet. Subsequently themes of identity and authenticity are raised as key concerns for studies of life online and accordingly the article moves on to discuss the ethics of such research. This article demonstrates how geographical thinking can inform and enhance social scientific research concerning the internet, particularly in relation to the articulation of spatial experience and knowledge.

Introduction

The internet is integral to everyday life for a growing number of people, with a third of the global population (2.3 billion) having access to the internet and with over 18% having mobile broadband (International Telecommunications Union 2012). Networked Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are instrumental in significant parts of our everyday lives, from regulating mains water pressure to mediating financial transactions and, most likely, enabling you to read this article. Our social interactions are also increasingly conducted online: from email and text messaging to social networking services, such as Facebook, and audio-visual communications, using services such as Skype. Many

of our daily activities both for work and for leisure thus involve being 'online' in some way. This article offers an overview of some of the ways in which life 'online' can be addressed by geographers.

With the growth in the use and importance of ICTs there is an increasing impetus for researchers to engage with 'online' activities, not only as particular activities themselves but also as a part of the context of a wide range of geographies. As 'virtual' ethnographer Christine Hine suggests:

> the Internet is both a hugely significant social phenomenon of our time in itself and, in turn, a fascinating fieldsite for social science research of all kinds (Hine 2012, 3).

The extent of internet use today makes it increasingly likely that human geographers researching any particular group of people or state of affairs will, at some point, encounter online activities. As Mark Graham has observed, the internet has been widely considered 'to represent not just a new form of communication, but instead a new organizational form' of society (Graham 2008, 771-772; following Castells 2002).

A range of geographical research has been conducted concerning the internet, from early 'virtual geographies' (for example Crang et al. 1999; Shields 2003) and mappings of 'cyberspace' (Dodge and Kitchin 2000) to emergent spatialities of computer mediated communications (Bingham 1996), children's sense of place and performance of identity online (Bingham et al. 1999; Holloway and Valentine 2001a; 2001b; Jones et al. 2003), the changing spaces of mothering (Longhurst 2009), the expression and contestation of public and urban space (Crang and Graham 2007; de Freitas 2010; Graham 1998b; 2005; Thrift 2004), and the negotiation of the global and local in geographies of commerce and development (Graham 2008; Pritchard 1999; Sheppard 2002).

Addressing life 'online' in research is a complicated task. Not only is the internet understood as an array of entwined information and communications devices and systems but also as a means of organising culture. The internet is increasingly representative of a 'broad swathes of the population and of diverse activities' (Hine 2012, 11). However, we must note that those activities and people are not necessarily limited to what we consider to be the internet nor do they represent the population as a whole, there remain many people without

internet access. Yet, and as Hine goes on to suggest, the internet 'is readily accessible' to the majority of social scientists and 'allows for imaginative new research questions to be explored and for previously hard-to-reach populations to be accessed' (Hine 2012, 11). There are also rich imaginaries associated with the internet, from the technological enthusiasm of the 'digital age' and 'Internet revolution' (Graham 2004) to dystopian fictions of 'cyberspace' (Kneale 1999), which call forth detailed yet conflicting representations of life online. Contemporary research into geographies of life online necessarily involves the negotiation of these various opportunities and concerns.

The purpose of this article is to offer an overview of contemporary ways of researching geographies of life online. With the fast changing nature of the internet itself research techniques also rapidly develop and change, and there are of course a number of good introductions to specific techniques (for example: Burnett et al. 2009; Fielding et al. 2008; Hine 2012; Kozinets 2010; Russell and Purcell 2009)[1]. This article is concerned with the issues we can face when developing a research project. While 'big data' and e-Research have been embraced as ways of revealing new patterns to everyday life, qualitative research remains important in understanding the specificities of 'computer-mediated' experience. What follows is therefore a discussion of important issues concerning studying life online using qualitative research methods. This is not an outline of specific techniques but rather a discussion of methodological issues to consider when designing online research projects.

The article is structured in four sections. Beginning with a discussion of how to address a 'field', the article goes on to explore how geographers have addressed spatial understandings of the internet. Subsequently themes of identity and community are raised as key concerns for studies of life online and accordingly the article moves on to discuss ethics of such research. This article demonstrates how geographical thinking can inform and enhance social

[1] There are a number of web-based resources addressing online research methods, for example: http://www.restore.ac.uk/orm/ http://digitalmethodsnmi.com/ and https://www.digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/TheWebsite (accessed: 22/02/2013).

scientific research concerning the internet, particularly in relation to the articulation of spatial experience and knowledge.

Addressing a field/site

In 2000, when Christine Hine published her landmark 'Virtual Ethnography', studying life online (still) meant engaging with quite specific activities, often conducted in a limited number of locations. There was no mobile internet, with no popular infrastructure for wireless data transmission, and computers were most likely tethered to a particular location: a desk in an office for example, with an Ethernet cable providing network connectivity. The 'field' then seemed fairly distinctive. Researchers could be reasonably confident that informants were in one of a limited number of environments and the activities conducted online could often be separated from 'the rest of life'. This distinction between 'online' and 'offline' was convenient and allowed a fairly obvious delineation of 'the field', although from the outset Hine (2000; 2005b) problematized this distinction. With the growth in internet access, a diversity of 'internet enabled' devices, associated activities and resulting further technical innovations, there are a number of questions about how we might address a specific field site for online activities.

The methods we employ to gather data play a role in shaping our view of the field, and its limits. A range of literature offers overviews of specific online research methods (see: Burnett et al. 2009; Fielding et al. 2008; Hewson et al. 2003; Hine 2005b; 2012; Kozinets 2010; Markham and Baym 2008; Russell and Purcell 2009) but they include: online surveys and questionnaires, online interviews and focus groups, and online ethnographies. The data from such methods is digitised in the process of research, arguably reducing the data processing time and potentially increasing the speed and accuracy of data collection. Questionnaires can be conducted by email or by using web-based survey software (for an overview see: Schonlau et al. 2002; Vehovar and Lozar Manfreda 2008). Online interviews can be conducted in 'real time' using systems such as Skype, and instant messaging systems, or they can be conducted asynchronously using email (see Bampton and Cowton 2002; Meho 2006). Ethnographies 'range from systematic observation of online communities … [to

the] production of webographies' (Madge and O'Connor 2004, 145; see also: Eicchorn 2001; Hine 2000; and on recent developments, see: Hine 2011; 2012, 91-100)[2].

More recently, researchers have addressed and actively participated in blogging (Hookway 2008), social networks and participatory media (Hogan 2008; Gauntlett 2011) and multi-user 'virtual environments' (Schroeder and Bailenson 2008), blending techniques such as participant observation and autoethnography to adapt to new and different circumstances for research (see also Butz and Besio 2009). We can also add discourse analysis using data harvested from particular communications groups online, such as news groups and email lists, to these methods (for example: Kozinets 2010). As we can see from the range of literature, internet-based studies require as much, if not more, thought and effort as more traditional studies – studying life online is *not* an 'easy' option.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

We can see that, just as with other forms of research, the kinds of methods we use to address a particular state of affairs that we find interesting necessarily shapes what we see as 'the field'. There are some internet-oriented activities that require the predominant use of online settings for the conducting of research. For example, when studying the multiplayer online roleplaying game 'EverQuest' TL Taylor extensively participated in gameplay, communicating with players within the game, as well as attending events (see Taylor 2006). In contrast, to investigate children's performance of identity online Nick Bingham, Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine conducted surveys and face-to-face interviews to draw out data (see Bingham et al. 1999; Valentine and Holloway 2002). The sites of study may be topographically disparate, ranging between places of work and study, residences, places of leisure, such as internet cafes, and meeting places, such as conference centres, located on a number of continents, but the field is also convened topologically–in relation–by the network of connections constituted by the activity or state of affairs under scrutiny.

[2] There are also active forums discussing how to conduct online ethnographies, such as: http://www.netnography.com/ (accessed: 26/02/2013), run by Rob Kozinets.

When studying electronically mediated activities, thinking about and articulating scale becomes a problem for addressing the field. Rather than relying upon spatial propinquity to settle our circle of concern, as was the case historically with regional studies for example, the internet provokes questions about other forms of spatial formation. This is partly a matter of identifying the bounds of research 'site'; partly a case of a method acting as a lens that focuses at a specific spatial resolution; and partly an issue of theoretical frameworks pointing in particular directions of study. There may be apparently neat delineations of a field available, such as a given community or a particular activity. Nevertheless, as a connective apparatus, the internet holds the potential to lead us in surprising directions. The 'global' and the 'local', considered in terms of the internet, can become questions rather than assumptions as different forms of connection are created with and through ICTs. In a sense, the scales of 'global' and 'local'

> offer points of view on networks [of relations between people, places, things and so on] that are by nature neither local nor global but are more or less long and more or less connected (Latour 1993, 122; see also Murdoch 2006, 57-77; Whatmore 2002).

By convening a field 'site', especially when studying life online, we are always negotiating forms of relation and distance, change and stability in a variety of spatial registers.

As Dwyer and Davies (2010) suggest, the negotiation of fixity and fluidity and connection and exclusion is a central part of studying the role of the internet in everyday life. The internet is increasingly the apparatus of flows of capital and commodities, not only for corporations but also for everyday consumers and producers. Indeed, the line between production and consumption is troubled by the different forms of production and exchange facilitated by the internet (see Bertacchini and Borrione 2011; DeLyser et al. 2004; Pickerill 2007). As connective systems, online forums, social networks and other community-oriented websites can facilitate otherwise marginalised communities to gain agency (see Crooks 2006; Davidson 2008; Valentine and Skelton 2008). However, just as with other arenas of life, these systems can also give rise to online bullying and stalking, identity theft, increased exposure to gambling,

pornography and other activities considered undesirable (see Griffiths et al. 2010; Li 2006; Salter and Bryden 2009). Many of the forms of connectivity afforded by networked technologies are expressed in complex 'hybrid' networks of socio-spatial relations, for example using text messaging (Thompson and Cupples 2008) or online video sites such as YouTube (Longhurst 2009; Meek 2012)[3]. Equally, the extraordinary access to information, media and online activities sometimes deemed undesirable has prompted civic and governmental interventions (Graham and Shaw 2010; Wilkinson 2011).

As a number of researchers have argued, there is no need to set aside 'conventional' qualitative methods to address activities on or mediated by the internet (Hine 2005a; Holloway and Valentine 2001b; Jankowski and van Selm 2005). When addressing the users of a particular website or online service it may often be necessary to interview research informants 'offline', using established techniques: 'much… is to be gained through the application of conventional research methodologies and practices' (Jankowski and van Selm 2005, 200). It should not therefore be a case of the application of one or the other method with regard to online/offline research. Not only is it important to address, and assemble, the field by following the 'thing' of interest (following Cook et al. 2004) but also to address the agency of what is apparently immaterial, such as code and data (Kitchin and Dodge 2011) and money (Christophers 2011). We may therefore choose to combine and innovate with methods to address situations where the difference between online/offline has become less meaningful.

Both within and beyond geography, there has been significant discussion about the forms of spatial experience and spatial knowledge that computer mediation and ICTs may engender. For example, Paul Adams (1997; 2005), Stephen Graham (1998a) and Ken Hillis (1998; 1999) examine the role of metaphors in understanding the spatial experience of ICTs, work that has been recently extended by Mark Graham (2013). Beyond geography there is a wealth of research addressing the various roles of the internet in everyday life, from internet access to the convening of community online (Rainie and Wellman

[3] We might also look at the complex organization of campaigning websites for 'crowd-sourcing', such as: http://www.ushahidi.com/ (accessed: 26/02/2013), which facilitate 'ground-up' and distributed forms of organisation.

2012; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002) as well as reconfiguring the means of production and intellectual property (Benkler 2006; Lessig 2004), reshaping scholarship (Borgman 2007) and ways to play games (Dovey and Kennedy 2006). In the next section we will explore how spatial experience and knowledge are articulated.

Spatialities of the internet

Early discussions of emerging uses of the internet and fictional accounts of its possible future addressed a 'cyberspace' as an alternate dimension of spatial experience. As Nigel Thrift remarked:

> There is a mode of writing about electronic telecommunications technologies which is now becoming ubiquitous. According to this body of literature, what we are seeing is nothing less than a new dimension coming into existence (Thrift 1996, 1465).

Fifiteen years on, in the absence of an immersive 'virtual reality' and with the significant growth of mobile ICTs (such as the iPhone) and associated infrastructures, it seems less possible to identify a separate space that can be studied as the 'online' condition. Extensive continued discussion about how technologically inflected life is constituted spatially (what we often term: spatiality) within geographical literature concerning the internet signals that such issues are far from settled. Spatial experience and spatial knowledge of and through the internet and its associated technologies is an important part of any study of life online, even if only implied.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The discourses of the internet are stabilised through the 'powerful role of spatial and territorial metaphors' (Graham 1998a, 165), which Stephen Graham (1998a) suggests can be grouped into three ways that space and place are conceived in relation to ICTs: 'substitution and transcendence', 'co-evolution', and 'recombination'. Metaphors of substitution and transcendence suggest replacing physical territory with a 'virtual', using new technologies. 'Co-evolutionary' metaphors imply that both physical and electronic 'spaces' are necessarily produced together but remaining separate. Finally Graham (1998a) suggests a 're-combinative' understanding of socially constructed forms of

spatiality that are topological (i.e. linkages between a variety of actors, including humans, technology, money and so on, formulate spatial experience). Graham (1998a) identifies a problematic form of Cartesian dualism (a split between mind and body) implied by his first category, which also somewhat underlies the second, because 'the virtual' implied as a 'new dimension' of space is disembodied. He further argues that this dualism advances a form of uncritical technological determinism, whereby it is technology that drives what we see as human (historical) progress (for more on determinism see Bingham 2005).

Representations of the internet have been predominantly formulated as spatialisations, mostly in the language of maps (Dodge and Kitchin 2000). Euclidean geometries feature widely in the representations of websites and online systems often using spatial metaphors. Furthermore, these metaphorical descriptions and Euclidean mappings are used to define what exists and where that existence is located. As Mark Graham suggests, such accounts imply a distance between the apparent space of the internet and the user and to render 'the Internet', as a proper noun, as a singular entity (Graham 2013). Despite arguments that technology leads the way, and rather than acknowledging the agency of software in the production of space, the internet, websites, and social networking systems are often presented as inert, monolithic entities. Thus, we may find it necessary to take code, infrastructures and other technological entities seriously (Kitchin 2011, 950).

For a number of geographers, spatial formations, technically mediated or otherwise, are in some way performed. To investigate a particular state of affairs is thus also to participate in its understanding:

> both our thought (ideas) and action (practices) assemble the relations of human and nonhuman and announce the discourses through which we exchange and, through description, make our experiences meaningful (Dewsbury 2000, 477).

When discussing 'life online' we might thus consider how human and nonhuman actors perform the activities of concern and what kinds of structures, however temporary, these performances convene. We could also consider the expected or perhaps surprising linkages created between bodies, devices and locations, connecting multiple territories of experience and expression. So, following

geographers such as James Ash (2009; 2010) and Mark Paterson (2006; 2007), we can consider the kinds of material spaces constituted between bodies, devices for control (games controllers, computer mice and so on) and screens while interacting with others through the internet at a (topographical) distance, for example: while playing video games online (Ash 2009; Ash and Gallacher 2011; Graham et al. 2009). Of course, digital media themselves are folded into the research methods employed for such studies, asking further questions about nonhuman technological agency (see Laurier et al. 2008; Rose 2007; Simpson 2013).

Mediated forms of social interaction afford access to potential research participants that may be otherwise remote. However, that mediation also provides a range of ways for those communicating online to project and represent themselves differently, and perhaps multiply. A significant concern when studying online social activities has been identity and how to claim authenticity for internet-based studies. In the next section we will explore identity as both a methodological and conceptual issue for studying life online.

Authenticity and identity online

The internet can be a relatively anonymous medium for social interaction. While there are increasingly sophisticated ways to track and analyse people's internet use, there remain a range of issues of interest to geographers that are not necessarily suited to such analysis. Due to a perceived anonymity, however, people may feel free to perform their identities in different ways or attempt to perform an alternate or different identity for various reasons. When attempting to describe and analyse a particular activity or scenario that involves internet use researchers may have to negotiate participants communicating online in varying personal and social contexts and for differing reasons. Issues of identity thus have both a methodological and conceptual importance for studies of life online, as illustrated by a range of research around gender and identity in various activities online (for example: Ackland and O'Neil 2011; Kennedy 2002; Longhurst 2009; Todd 2012; Walkerdine 2006). Equally, we must be cautious of claims that the users of online services are representative of broader

populations, there remains something of a 'digital divide' with two thirds of the world's population having no access to the internet.

The perceived validity of research, the authenticity of the claims made by researchers about a field of study, is contingent on the observations made offering a fair reflection of what is considered to be real (for more discussion, see: Anderson and Harrison 2010; Butz and Besio 2009; Macpherson 2010). The ability to bend and alter representations and performances of identity through mediated communication is therefore often treated as problematic (compare, for example: Hine 2000; 2012; Turkle 1995). Many online, or 'virtual', ethnographies have been conducted from the standpoint that social interactions are *performed* and so, as with other parts of life, those online interactions are approached as a form of 'dramatic' composition (Robinson and Schulz 2011; following Goffman 1959).

Many of the early ethnographies of life online suggest a degree of control over the performance of identity available to those interacting online not available offline. Robinson and Schulz observe that identity was reduced to being only a matter of 'projection' because established categories of identity tied to the body were not considered to hold (Robinson and Schulz 2011, 181). In his popular study of 'virtual communities', Howard Rheingold documented various ways in which he observed people pretending to be someone else, or even 'several different people at the same time' (Rheingold 1998, 151). There is, of course, a continuing debate about whether researchers need to 'prove' the authenticity of an identity performed online or accept the vagaries of mediated communication (for extensive discussion see Hine 2012, 51-90; see also Madge 2007).

To mitigate apparent disparities between online/offline performances of identity several researchers adopted a 'verificationist' approach (Robinson and Schulz 2009, 689), attempting to verify 'real' identities in physical interviews to compare with behaviour observed online (see in particular Correll 1995; Turkle 1995). As with earlier forms of anthropology that presented foreign peoples and customs as exotic (for a broader critique see Said 1978), so too were the novel forms of internet-based social interaction. This was further compounded with the primacy of text, which according to Robinson and Schulz was 'yet another

factor bolstering the perceived disjuncture between online and offline identities and realities' (Robinson and Schulz 2009, 689). Researchers such as Donath (1999) argued that the limits of textual communication 'liberated' users from embodied constraints. We can see, then, that identity online has been addressed such that it quickly segues from being a conceptual issue to a methodological one.

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Just as the linkages between identity and specific community or nation have been problematized from a variety of standpoints within geography and cognate fields (see Butler 1990; du Gay and Hall 1996; Featherstone 1995), so too have researchers studying life online. It can be argued that such alternative perspectives were there all along, not least through the work of feminist scholars such as Donna Harraway (1991). Methodologically, researchers such as Hine (2000) and Markham (1998) argued that, rather than interfering in the interpretive process, online studies operate in similar modes to 'traditional' forms of qualitative research. Whereas 'offline' studies require researchers to transpose spoken words and actions into text for interpretation, online studies are already 'encoded'.

Contemporary ethnographic studies examining the performance of identity online have absorbed these various positions into what have been described as 'multi-modal' approaches (Robinson and Schulz 2009). Furthermore, just as the researchers who attempted to legitimise 'cyberethnography' recognised the need to make multiple readings of a given online field site, with the advent of far more interactive 'web 2.0' technologies many researchers are conducting research as active producers of images, text and videos within online communities (for example: Lange 2010; Pink 2007).

A corollary to the growth in online media that incorporate a greater degree of social participation, often referred to as 'web 2.0' (for further discussion see Beer and Burrows 2007), is a shift in understandings and expectations of privacy. With the growth of social networking services there has also been a growth in voluntary, and sometimes conspicuous, disclosure of what has previously been considered 'private' information (Andrejevic 2002; Waters

and Ackerman 2011)[4]. This unbalances traditional notions of the public-private delineation often asserted in established discourses of identity. An ethical ambiguity also arises as significant amounts of data are potentially made available to researchers through participatory and social media. On the one hand this can be seen as a challenge to established understandings of authority (resting with the academic), but on the other it raises questions about consent (for further discussion see Snee 2008). Furthermore, significant concerns have been raised about a perceived commodification of identity, as performed online through social networking services, that require social scientists to examine the role of the systems themselves in ordering and filtering the information we are attempting to analyse (see Bucher 2012; Pariser 2011; Zook et al. 2004; Zook and Graham 2007).

Reflexivity is an important aspect of any kind of qualitative research, not least when conducting studies of life online. Not only should researchers consider the ways in which identity is performed by research participants but we should also consider how our own identities play out and affect the conditions necessary for us to be effective participants as well. As Hine (2012) notes, qualitative researchers have always had to go to significant efforts to access their fields of research and, rather than being 'practical difficulties', such tribulations can be 'important methodological moments in which the researcher learns about … what unites and separates different cultural contexts' (Hine 2012, 81). Reflexivity is brought into further relief as researchers venture into proactive participation in the field, for example as content producers for video sharing websites. Issues of identity are thus, of course, not limited to the identities of research informants but also necessarily involve the identities of researchers.

The negotiation of identities performed online both by researcher and researched prompts significant ethical questions about how we can and should conduct research into life online. In the next section we will review some of the

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[4] Some activities that were previously considered private are now being carried out online, in 'public', such as grieving for people who have died, e.g. http://www.gonetoosoon.org/ and http://www.muchloved.com/ (accessed: 26/02/2013).

principle ethical concerns researchers have identified in carrying out research concerning the internet.

Ethical considerations

Ethics is a significant agenda in contemporary human geography, with attention paid to a variety of ethical issues and approaches (Cloke 2002; Cutchin 2002; Smith 2001; Valentine 2005). Alongside other arenas of social sciences research, geography has also addressed online research ethics (notably Madge 2007). In this section four key points are foregrounded from the wider discussion of online research ethics to highlight some of the particular concerns with studying life online[5].

First, in much of the early online research methods literature the settings for interaction with research participants are raised as an ethical issue (see Hine 2005b). These concerns are twofold: first, the online setting of any interactions may have an ambiguous level of privacy; and second, the physical locale of the research participant can significantly contribute to their attitude towards disclosure (Hine 2005a). This is further complicated by the trend towards voluntary disclosure of apparently personal information using social networking services such as Facebook (Waters and Ackerman 2011). In most cases the agency lies with the participant, as the researcher has no indication of from where and how the participant is interacting with them. Nevertheless, it remains possible for participants to disclose more than they might otherwise by virtue of communicating in a 'nebulous setting' (Rutter and Smith 2005): a physical location of perceived comfort (at home, for example) or a familiar setting online (such as a favoured forum or social networking site).

Second, the convention of informed consent to participate in research has been highlighted as potentially problematic. Formal consent forms require a form of signature, or similar electronic transaction, for the verification of identity (Madge 2007, 657-658). If identity can be considered a flexible category then the form of identity the participant is being asked to confirm should be considered,

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[5] There are useful resources for considering online research ethics available from: http://www.restore.ac.uk/orm/ethics/ethcontents.htm and http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchethics/7-1-webres.html (accessed: 26/02/2013).

for example: the identity they perform as an online game character or their identity as a user of Facebook and so on. There has also been significant discussion about deception. As Madge notes, 'In theory any research should not involve deception, but in practice there is a contested debate over the issue' (Madge 2007, 659). While posting on public forums is by definition 'public', it has been asserted that disclosing research activity remains necessary because the posted information is being used for unanticipated purposes. However, some researchers suggest that 'lurking', or covert observation, is an important research technique utilised prior to formalising informed consent (Chen et al. 2004). However, this viewpoint has been contested, with suggestions that 'lurking' in online communities may be perceived as harmful and actually damage communities (Eysenbach and Till 2001).

Third, like any form of electronic data, the security and confidentiality of data storage is an ethical issue for online research methods. For example, a post on a social networking service can be copied and disseminated without the knowledge of the author (Madge 2007, 659). Furthermore, the content of a post can easily be altered, deliberately or otherwise, in the process. While encryption and other security measures may be offered, Madge (2007, 660) notes that these may act as a disincentive for participation. Mann and Stewart argue that researchers can assure participants of confidentiality in their own use of the data but cannot definitely promise that data will not be accessed by others (Mann and Stewart 2000, 43; see also Jankowski and van Selm 2005). There are, of course, occasionally legal requirements to release data, where alleged illegal activity is investigated by the police for example, although in practice this has been rare (Madge 2007, 660).

Fourth, the perceived ambiguity of the delineation between public and private has been raised as an issue. Madge (2007, 661) argues that the lack of a clear consensus on what is private has led to a 'vibrant debate surrounding privacy issues'. Some argue that data made deliberately and voluntarily 'public' should be utilisable by researchers providing anonymity is assured (Hewson et al. 2003), thus raising issues of confidentiality. As Madge (2007, 661) suggests, whether individual participants consider their correspondence to be public or private is a key issue. However, Barnes (2004) observes that for discussion lists,

and perhaps by extension social networking sites, there can be an illusion of privacy which influences users' behaviour. The privacy policies of websites and services may also feature in these cases. On a different tack, David Berry (2004) makes a nuanced argument to suggest that privacy is a confusing concept to apply to the internet. He suggests, instead, that a form of 'open source' ethics should be applied that includes a greater degree of participation and mutual support not only in the research but also in the research process itself.

There are, of course, a host of significant issues to be addressed in the consideration of ethical research conduct for research online. In many cases these will be addressed through an institutional framework, such as an ethics committee. However, following this discussion of research online, it seems useful to consider ethical practice as a negotiated agreement of values and responsibilities between researcher and researched in a particular setting.

Conclusions

It is hopefully clear, from this brief overview, that the internet and the host of associated systems and technologies produces a highly changeable 'landscape' for research. In the last ten years alone there have been significant changes and an extension of the mobility and kinds of access, roles and uses of the internet. The everyday experience of the internet now extends beyond email and the web into a range of devices and services. Studying life online is not an 'easy' option for research, however, as is hopefully evident from the discussion in this article. The internet, as the 'field', how we access it, the activities performed on and through it (politically desirable and otherwise) and the techniques with which to conduct research on all of these will undoubtedly continue to change significantly. The focus of this article has accordingly been key issues for designing online research projects and not the specificities of technique. In the second and third sections of this article we saw that addressing 'the field' requires a degree of negotiation contingent on *both* methodological techniques and upon conceptual groundings. In the fourth and fifth sections of the article identity was discussed as a key methodological concern that leads to some significant ethical considerations.

In addition to the debates around techniques with which researchers of life online must engage, there are significant underlying theoretical issues concerning the articulation of spatiality in relation to technologically mediated experience, and in particular the networked technologies of the internet. There remains a problematic tendency towards normative splits between 'the real' and 'the virtual', online and offline, which hide the material bases of contemporary sociotechnical forms of life. It remains the case, as Thrift strikingly argued in 1996, that we need to assert that:

> [ICTs] are no longer an economic, social or cultural earthquake, but rather a part of a continuing performative history of 'technological' practices, a complex archive of stances, emotions, tacit and cognitive knowledges, … which seek out and construct these technologies in certain ways rather than others (Thrift 1996, 1474).

Conducting research into life online therefore carries the necessity to attend to the fullest meaning of methodology, that is, as researchers of the internet and connective ICTs, we need to employ *both* theory and practice. Geographers are well placed to inform and enhance social scientific research concerning the internet, particularly in relation to the articulation of spatial experience and knowledge.

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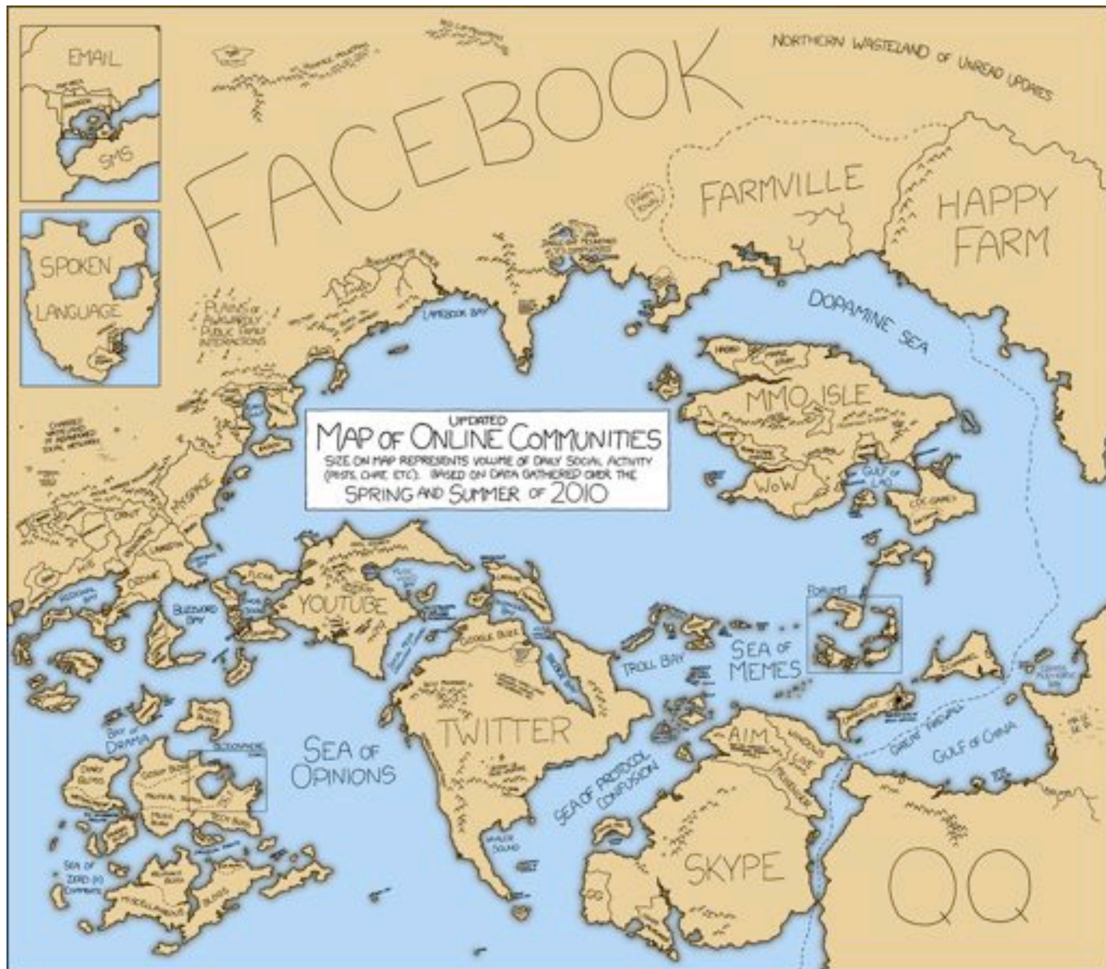
FIGURE 1



CAPTION FOR FIGURE 1

A ‘Map of Online Communities’ for Spring and Summer 2010, from the online comic ‘xkcd’. source: http://xkcd.com/802/ (accessed: 14/02/2013).

FIGURE 2

CAPTION FOR FIGURE 2

Source: Robert Thompson, The Guardian, Online section, 29th March 2001, page 4, in Graham (2013, 8).

FIGURE 3

CAPTION FOR FIGURE 3

The 'Facebook ID' card, part of a project by artist Tobias Leingruber. Source: http://fbbureau.com/ (accessed: 26/02/2013).