

Ethical considerations in digital communities research: Constructing the field site

Jennifer Terrell
Indiana University
Bloomington, USA
jennterr@indiana.edu

INTRODUCTION

An important component of research design that has significant ethical considerations in sociotechnical research that engages digital communities is the construction of the research field site. Field site construction in digital communities is important because it is complicated, it shapes the kinds of methods available to us, the kinds of data we can collect, how we can analyze that data, and ultimately how well our data leads us to findings that actually answer our research questions.

It is possible to over simplify the process of field site construction in research design that engages digital communities because we can fall into the trap of conceptualizing the field as obvious. Digital communities can be conceptualized as residing in (and therefore confined to) a particular digital medium, for example. However, field site construction is not obvious because the researcher must make choices as to which spaces of interaction to study.

Field site construction in research that asks questions of community in particular is complicated because digital communities are usually transmediated in nature. I use the notion of transmediation to explain the ways in which communities reside not in a single medium, but rather are constructed through social interactions that happen in several different media and communicative spaces. Similar concepts have been put forth by [1] [2] [3] and [4]. As such my work advocates for a multi-sited approach to studying digital communities.

In the following statement I first offer an overview of my dissertation project that exemplifies the ethnographic study of a community which is transmediated (both digitally and non digitally) and illustrates some of the ethical concerns about constructing the field site for this study. I then draw out some potential ethical dilemmas in the construction of the research field site more broadly speaking. Finally, I will conclude with broad questions that my work has generated for me that I think would be great discussion for this workshop.

TRANSMEDIATED COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

Two examples of community I studied for my dissertation project are two related, but distinct, groups of Harry Potter fans. Wizard rock is an independent music scene that consists of a collective of fans that create, circulate, and

perform original music inspired by the Harry Potter series. The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is a collective of fans that uses themes found within Harry Potter to mobilize fans to partake in social action campaigns to fight for justice in the real world. Both of these groups use many different media to accomplish their social goals. They have no specific place of residence either online or off; their communicative and interactive spaces span many different forms of digital media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, iTunes, websites, livestream services, digital phone banking technology, and so on. They also interact in person at concerts, meetings, parties, and various other social gatherings.

My research question for the project that studied these two communities was broadly asking about the best way to go about ethnographically studying the role of digital technology in the construction of social relationships and the production of culture within these groups. As such, I paid special attention not only to which digital technologies the fans were incorporating into their work, but also the challenges of studying such phenomena ethnographically. Doing so proved quite challenging as there were times it felt impossible to be in all places at once, and yet to ignore significant sites of cultural production could have significant consequences.

These challenges presented several ethical concerns. Because participants in wizard rock and the HPA made use of so many communicative spaces, I simply could not be present in each, even if I found that to be the ideal. I was therefore conscious of how my choices regarding which spaces to study might affect my findings.

If my question was about the role of digital media in the construction of social relationships between my participants, my choices of which media to select as my field site would shape a number of aspects of my research. These choices had implications for which interactions I observed, which participants I paid more attention to, and so on. For example, a transmediated field site allowed me to examine the ways in which participants in wizard rock wove multiple media together to circumvent the limitations of any particular single medium. This allowed me to reflect on the ways in which human agency is different than technological affordances or limitations. Our pre-theoretical commitments to notions of agency are significant when we

consider cultural production in digital contexts, and such commitments often have ethical implications.

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF FIELD SITE SELECTION

It is important to remember that researchers do not select a field; they construct one. When engaging with research that asks questions of digital communities from a sociotechnical perspective, a researcher constructs her field site when she decides which communicative spaces, be them online, offline, or a mixed reality setting, she will use to gather data.

While many considerations about field site construction might seem practical in nature, most have ethical implications. For example questions of which spaces will give the researcher access to observable phenomena or access to key informants, might also affect power dynamics and potential privileging of particular actors. Decisions about which sites to include in a study can affect not only which interactions or what kind of communication is studied, but whose voices are heard and whose are ignored.

In addition to affecting the different human actors that are involved in a study, field site construction can also affect how the researcher considers the relationship between human and nonhuman entities in any given sociotechnical context. Sociotechnical perspectives have long established that the articulation of technological affordances (or limitations) and social interaction or cultural production is an important component in understanding the meaning of digital technologies in the construction of social phenomena such as community. This relationship is co-constructed in so many ways, including the construction of the field site, which has profound impact on the entire research project.

ENGAGING QUESTIONS

It would seem like an obvious answer to the questions of how to construct the field site in sociotechnical research of digital communities would be to follow the community members into their sites of interaction or cultural production. However, that is not as straightforward as it may seem. What does that mean practically speaking?

1. How do we learn about different sites of interaction?
2. When do we decide to incorporate new sites of interaction into an existing study?
3. How do you go about collecting data from multiple sites when it gets complicated and being in more than one place at once, even virtually, is impossible?
4. How do you integrate data from differently mediated spaces? This goes beyond online and offline spaces, but spaces where the digital and the social are co-shaped in various ways?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Terrell earned her PhD in Social Informatics from the School of Informatics and Computing at Indiana University in 2015. Her dissertation is titled “Constructing

rooms of requirement: Transmediation and the ethnography of *Harry Potter* fans.” Her work specializes in the ethnographic study of digitally mediated sociality. Dr. Terrell is currently a lecturer in Informatics at Indiana University where she teaches courses in social informatics and computer/information ethics. When not researching, writing, or teaching, Jennifer loves to dance, swim, and hike.

REFERENCES

1. Nancy K. Baym. 2007. The new shape of online community: The example of Swedish independent music fandom. *First Monday* 12, 8 (June 2007). DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v12i8.1978>
2. Andy Crabtree and Tom Rodden. 2007. Hybrid ecologies: understanding cooperative interaction in emerging physical-digital environments. *Pers Ubiquit Comput Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 12, 7 (June 2007), 481–493. DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s00779-007-0142-7>
3. Silvia Lindtner, Bonnie Nardi, Yang Wang, Scott Mainwaring, He Jing, and Wenjing Liang. 2008. A hybrid cultural ecology. *Proceedings of the ACM 2008 conference on Computer supported cooperative work - CSCW '08* (2008). DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/1460563.1460624>
4. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller. 2012. *Migration and new media: transnational families and polymedia*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.