Authenticity Online: using webnography to address phenomenological concerns

In this paper, I will aim to describe and evaluate the success of a webnography based approach to exploring issues of the authenticity of being in online spaces. Early studies (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995) held the prevailing view was that online communities were exotic places and fundamentally different to the norms of everyday communication, but in the intervening years it should be argued that online communities have become a fundamental, rather than exceptional, part of user’s experiences and lives, and that differentiating in this manner is mistaken.

The issue of authenticity still demands enquiry, and using Heidegger’s categories of angst and resoluteness as moods of authentic existence, it will be argued that the extent of authenticity being online can be assessed taking an ethnographic approach, the webnography. By asking about the nature of anxiety in online communications important insights about the possibilities of authentic response can be established. It is easy to envisage potential anxieties arising in an online community – disagreements, arguments, the spreading of bad news or tragic events. The architecture of online communities and social networks provide a constant stream of information, some superfluous, some meaningful, but all fed to individual users in the online community – do users grasp this information authentically, by relating it to their own being and making it a part of their own being, or do they ignore or treat it indifferently? The responses of users to such news and information can be used to glean an insight to the possibility of authentic mood, response and existence in online communities and social networks. By using my ongoing webnography, I will assess whether a sense of the uncanny, and care for being, is a feature of online worlds or whether the technological mediation which is necessary in online worlds prevents these key markers of authenticity.

The term ethnography may be loosely applied to any qualitative research project where the purpose is to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice. In more exact terms, ethnography may be defined as both a qualitative research process and method (one conducts an ethnography) and product
(the outcome of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is cultural interpretation (Geertz, 1973: 3); Maanen (1998: 3) states that ethnography is “the written representation of culture”. Ethnography strives to create descriptions of individual or collective subjectivities for the purpose of understanding different cultures (Rybas and Gajjala, 2007). The ethnographer goes beyond reporting events and details of experience. Specifically, the ethnographer attempts to explain how these experiences represent what can be called "webs of meaning" (Geertz, 1973: 5), the cultural constructions, in which people live.

What is virtual ethnography?

In simple terms, virtual ethnography is the process of conducting and constructing an ethnography using the virtual, online environment as the site of the research. However, this is too simple an explanation; the virtual ethnography also involves using a different set of tools for the collection of data from a traditional ethnography. While an anthropological ethnography that occurs “in real life” is conducted to detail the experiences of people in specific cultural milieu, a virtual ethnography will look to do the same job, but in an environment that lends itself to different means of collection of data. Traditionally, in ethnography a researcher will immerse themselves in the community that they wish to study, and become familiar with the people in that community, and the practices that they undertake in everyday life. The interview and survey that is so important to the ethnographer can be supplanted by the collection of pre-existing information that is abundant in online environments such as social networking sites and internet forums. Information can be located and archived from the internet without it having to be recorded and
transcribed as the traditional ethnographer would need to ensure. This can be done without sacrificing the need for the ethnographer to participate within the environment and reflect upon the experiential insights of being immersed in the community that the traditional ethnographic approach allows.

The virtual ethnography can utilise a number of computer-based methods of data collection in order to collect the data that can be used in the construction of the ethnographic profile of a community. Participant observation still remains the critical element of the ethnographic process, but the role of the researcher is somewhat different to the traditional anthropological ethnographic role. According to Miller and Slater (2000: 21-22) the immersion in a particular case, the reference to a specific locality and participant observation (e.g. in chat rooms) are still the cornerstones of ethnographic research, even when using the internet as the research environment. However, the notion of the field itself is radically altered; since the field is now text on a screen and the group of people involved in the community can be scattered worldwide in physical geography – however, sharing the same space as one another thanks to the use of the technology. Another key difference is the role of the researcher; whereas traditionally the researcher has been embedded within the community being researched, which is not a necessity with research using the internet as the location for the community being studied. Morton (2001: 6) states that there are possibly two ways of conducting ethnography on the internet – distanced or involved. Schwara (1999: 271) extends the term involved to mean “discursive and communicative”. Distanced research might be constituted by the evaluation of sources such as texts, images, or emoticons and the observation (but not participation in) of social interactions in online spaces. Discursive or communicative research, the active
involvement of the researcher in the environment being researched, can lead to the subjectivity of the actors being revealed (Schwara 1999: 271) – enabling the researcher to have theoretically a better understanding of the identity performance of the user, and the significance of the interactions taking place, in comparison to a distant piece of research (Kendall 1999: 71).

Boellstorff (2008: 53) notes that the first recognisable ethnographies of virtual worlds were conducted by Michael Rosenberg in 1992 (ethnography of WolfMOO), and by John Masterton in 1994, who conducted an ethnography of Ancient Anguish. These ethnographies were of text based virtual worlds, and many other ethnographies of such environments have been conducted since those early studies, focussing on specific topics of interest within such environments. These include studies on community (Baym 2000; Blascovich 2002; Hudson-Smith 2002), identity (Bromberg 1996; Donath 1999; Rheingold 2000) and there have been ethnographies of multiple virtual worlds (Fornäs et al, 2002; Juul 2005). Boellstorff notes that there is an emerging set of ethnographies on graphically based virtual worlds, and his own work is an ethnographic study on “Second Life”, the graphical virtual world.

While these works provide exemplars of virtual ethnography, they also show considerable differences between one another in the approach taken to ethnography and the nature and analysis of the data collected. In lieu of a uniform method, Hine (2000: 66-71) has produced arguably the most complete methodological framework for the construction of virtual ethnographic internet research. Hine's own research involved an ethnographic investigation of web sites and newsgroups that were concerned with the case of British nanny Louise Woodward, who was accused and
eventually acquitted of the murder of the child she was hired to look after. Following this research, Hine developed ten principles of virtual ethnography, which Hine paraphrases as:

1. We can use ethnography to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful.

2. Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact.

3. The ethnography of mediated interaction often asks researchers to be mobile both virtually and physically.

4. Instead of going to particular field sites, virtual ethnography follows field connections.

5. Boundaries, especially between the “virtual” and the “real”, are not to be taken-for-granted.

6. Virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion.

7. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. Our accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities.

8. Intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography.

9. This is ethnography of, in and through the virtual – we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings.

10. Virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.
Hine's broad framework is intended as a general set of rules for the conduct of ethnographic research – but not a prescriptive or indeed exhaustive set of rules (Hine, 2000: 71). The statement on the internet being both cultural, and cultural artefact, is particularly important, as it links the internet itself and the practices of users on the internet with the method of ethnography itself. Just as ethnography is both a method and a product, the internet is both a way of conducting social interactions and a product of those interactions. The mirroring of method and site of study is therefore apt. Hine describes the internet as a place of performance spaces and performed spaces; there is ongoing interaction and a wealth of recorded, existing material for the ethnographer – a place of ongoing activity and static, pre-existing information, both of which can inform the ethnography being undertaken.

Hine’s contention that virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion, is also important. This indicates a greater flexibility in the ethnography process, and would even allow for a single researcher to perform a comparative ethnography of more that one site at the same time, something that would be impossible in traditional ethnography without the use of a research team, and the issues of inter-reporter reliability that such a research design would face. A virtual ethnography will allow therefore for a comparison of different types of community that exist in the online environment to be undertaken simultaneously using the same research methodology, coding techniques and reporter interpretation – increasing the validity of the comparison being undertaken (although not avoiding underlying issues of validity that exist in such studies).

Hine’s other point concerning virtual ethnography, that it is necessarily partial, is
also worthy of comment. That the accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities means that multiple sites can be used to construct an ethnographic survey rather than trying to convey a faithful reproduction of a particular cultural setting. The obvious criticism is that a virtual ethnography will not have the sufficient breadth of coverage to make significant points about behaviour of online actors; but this is a criticism that can be levelled at any number of research methodologies throughout the social sciences, from experimental psychology to anthropological ethnography. What is advantageous in this case is that there is the possibility of breadth – ethnographies rooted in one community will have depth of information on that community, but will be hindered by the fact that it is only a singular community that is being studied. A virtual ethnography may encompass some degree of breadth of communities without sacrificing the depth of study that is a defining characteristic of the ethnographic method.

As was mentioned above, the process and product of ethnography can vary considerably between projects. Hammersley and Atkinson (1989: 110) state that “ethnography is not clearly defined in common usage; there is some disagreement about what count and what do not count as examples of it”. Mariampolski (1999: 75) added to this stating “ethnography cannot reasonably be defined as just another single method or technique.” Despite Hine's guidance, there is still not a complete method to be distilled from the framework, as the interpretation of the points could lead different researchers to different means and techniques. However, a consideration of what makes ethnography rigorous and acceptable as an academic exercise can lead to some guidelines that will inform this project. Kozinets (2002: 61) argues that ethnography depends upon credibility and dependability rather than validity and reliability for judgement of the quality of the research. The key question is whether the ethnography is a credible piece of work, and
this can be insured through the detailing of the ethnographic process and returning to the community that has been studied for comments and analysis – a hermeneutic feature of the ethnographic process. Ethnographic researchers also must question whether the reports that they collect, collate and analyse are sufficiently representative of the communities that they study, especially when considering notions of truth in the accounts that are given (Hair and Clark, 2003: 2-3). Importantly, researchers need to assess carefully whether the experiences of users is reflected in subsequent hypotheses and theory developed from the ethnography.

Another key consideration of the ethnographic approach is that transferability, rather than generalisation, is an important assessment criteria. Shadish (1995: 419) argues that there is a phenomena of naturalistic generalisation, where a reader is able to intuit whether there is a case similar enough to warrant generalisation in other cases. However, this appears a misappropriation of the scientific nature of the term generalisation, in the spirit that is intended to be used in the research process. Transferability, whether the features of the production of the ethnography can be used in other research environments without affecting the quality of that research, appears to be a better tool for assessing the quality of ethnography.

This question of generalisation sheds light on the emphasis on the researcher to take a critical approach to the process and product of ethnography. According to Brookfield (1987: 15) being critical in ethnography involves:

1. Identifying and challenging assumptions behind ordinary ways of perceiving, conceiving and acting.
2. Recognising the influence of history, culture and social positioning on beliefs and action.
3. Imagining and exploring extraordinary alternatives, ones that may disrupt routines and the established order.

4. Being appropriately sceptical about any knowledge or solution that claims to be the only truth or alternative.

From this it can be surmised that being “critical” is a function of reflection both on the part of the researcher and the participants in the research. This critical ethnography is, according to Thomas (1993: 4), an answer to the question of what utility does ethnography have for an audience, especially when considering relevance to the world. This critical ethnography approach, when applied to virtual ethnography, should lead to a lessening of the “disinterested observer” phenomenon that can be identified in ethnography, and emphasises the role of active participation within the community being researched.

In conducting ethnography, Hair and Clark (2003: 7) have identified a procedure for virtual ethnography. The first step is identifying proactive communities. Foster (1994: 92) reported that gatekeepers that restrict access to online communities (be they moderators or influential members) can actively discourage research on the grounds of privacy. There are also potential problems that will originate from members themselves wanting to maintain anonymity (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 116), and so the researcher must take into account if the project is to be successful. One potential method is to use virtual sites or communities that the researcher is part of; this should be easier given the more pervasive nature of social networking compared to the turn of the century. Permissions are required though from moderators of online communities, and this is an important first step. If permissions can be secured, then the researcher can move towards making contact with key participants. This second step is negotiating access, where the possibility of interacting with and interviewing participants becomes the focus. Hair and
Clark (2003: 8) emphasise that to successfully do this, the researcher needs to be open about the aims and objectives of the research, and needs to emphasise that the research is both about the community and for the community – again, the process and product of ethnography. The nature of online communities – with the ability to publish information both in public and through private messages – should be conducive to the dissemination of relevant information. Considering research ethics, it should also be emphasised that participants can choose to withdraw from the research at any time (BPS 2000, in Gross 2005: 612).

The third stage is contact, where the researcher makes contact and actually begins the process of research. This will entail not just interaction with the participants, but experience of the culture itself; in lieu of the experience that a traditional ethnographer can have from the immersion in a geographically-centralised community, the need to interact in virtual communities becomes important. Participant observation is the critical mechanism for achieving this goal – Singh and Dickson (2002: 122) argue “observations...have then to be translated into intense reflection on reasons for the behaviours and events observed. This allows the researcher to speculate and then seek confirmatory and non-confirmatory evidence about the phenomena.” This is not a licence to be unsystematic, but to take advantage of the uniqueness of each case and how they might relate to the themes of the research, allowing potentially for a more representative theory.

Following contact, a further step is the conducting of electronic depth interviews. Anders (2000) (in Mann and Stewart, 2000: 50; 77) argues that the use of email allows respondents to shape questioning over time, and of course assists the researcher as all interview data is received “auto-transcribed” in textual form. This collection of interview
data can be more interactive on the part of the researcher and respondent compared to a one-off face-to-face interview. The use of electronic data collection in this case can potentially lead to a richer source of information than traditional means. The final step is to return results and analysis to the community – the hermeneutic element of the virtual ethnography that can be used to assess the authenticity of the representation of the community within the research, and adjustments can be made to the research and theory in light of this commentary. This step also allows for critical reflection on the part of the researcher on the product of the ethnography, and whether it represents a satisfactory account of the community in which they have embedded themselves.

**Why is a virtual ethnography being used in my research?**

The ethnographic approach is being used in my project to collect information of sufficient length and depth necessary to infer the phenomenological aspects of belonging to an online community, and how being in an online community affects people in their average everydayness. For a phenomenological investigation, it could be suggested that a phenomenological research method would be the most appropriate form of study; I do not concur with this. A phenomenological account, be it an introspective account of experience or a series of subjective accounts from participants, is necessarily narrow and limited in the scope that such an investigation can have when charting experience. While the production of a Ulysses-like account of online experience could be both interesting as an academic exercise and as a cultural product, it is arguable that such artefacts already exist in the form of blogs and diaries, and moreover it is doubtful that significant research biases could be avoided when taking such a purely subjective approach to the research questions. Such a study, in being so narrow, will also run the risk of missing many insights that can allow for
further investigation on the hypotheses of the research while not actually addressing the hypotheses themselves. There is no reason why ethnography, which will allow a fuller and more complete account of individual reflections on the experience of being part of an online community, cannot be used to infer phenomenological insights in how being online affects the everyday lives of participants, and whether these insights can be related to the Heidegger-influenced theoretical frame being proposed in this research. Most importantly, by utilising the critical ethnography approach outlined in this chapter, the research biases inherent in phenomenological research can be avoided – that is not to say that ethnography does not have biases of its own to contend with, but with the hermeneutically-informed approach being taken in this research, there is an attempt to minimise this, not withstanding the recognition that the production of ethnography is in itself a subjective exercise.

The virtual ethnography being undertaken in my research will take the form of a comparison between users of epistemic communities and social networks, and will look for three main phenomenological features of everyday being: does being online lead to an intensification of Enframing or *gestell*; does being online lead to an intensification of inauthentic modes of being as exemplified through fear as opposed to resoluteness; and does being online lead to a different type of alterity when considering other users. From the fully constructed ethnography, a discourse analysis of the responses will be used to assess the phenomenological implications of participant responses to being online, and from there the key questions of this research project can be assessed. The critical virtual ethnography, which has been outlined in this paper, will provide the type of information that is required to address the questions posed without reliance upon an overly subjective set of accounts based on a
purely phenomenological investigation. By adopting the critical approach, the
produced ethnography can also be redistributed amongst the participants to assess
their impressions of the final product, and the authenticity of the final ethnography
can then be assessed, alongside this being an opportunity for further reflection upon,
and refinement of, the ethnography itself, and as was stated earlier, this is a way of
improving the credibility and dependability of the ethnography, lessening the potential
for reporter bias and potentially allowing for a more representative account of the
virtual community, given the validation of the ethnography (or indeed criticism) from
those that are part of the community itself, and have been participants in that research.

Progress so far...

Here are some of the findings of interviews using Facebook private messaging
so far – this first response concerns why this respondent (EVS in my anonymity
coding) uses Facebook. Asking direct questions about Heideggerian concepts is not
something that I would advise to anyone when dealing with “real people”, and so the
purpose of this question was to assess why someone would choose this world – given
Heidegger’s concept of world from *Being and Time*, that is a place filled with things
that are present-to-hand or ready-to-hand, and with which we form meaningful
relationships as we strive to understand the world as Dasein:

*It is all to do with self interest. Facebook is there so that you can tell
everyone about yourself. What you are doing at a specific moment of time etc.
I mean if I write a particularly sad status I am guaranteed to get people asking
me what is wrong etc. If I write something interesting people will comment on
it too. I love it. I shouldn’t, but I do. Even the people writing on my status*
updates or commenting on my every mood only want me to do it in return to them. They want me to show an interest into their lives. The majority for example, live the same as each other. We all go to school and then we all have our own families and for the most part we all do the similar 9-5 job after education. It is only the little bits that they do in their lives that they see as cool or different that they try to force down everyones throats.

But it isn’t just us trying to make us look more interesting to everyone else. It is a sad strange little culture which I hate to be a part of because there is no room for secrets. We whore out our entire lives to people who we haven’t seen in years, people we barely speak to, our family, and people who already know too much about us. Facebook is addictive because it is all about selling ourselves. That is what “Social Networking” is. We sell ourselves and we LOVE it. Actually love it. Everyone loves reading about themselves whether it is good or bad, and everyone loves interacting with others over the internet because it is easier than doing it on a one to one basis, where heaven forbid you might have to look at the person you are speaking to, or be in close range.

Why do that when it is so much easier to talk to them from the comfort of your own room or home?

It is basically the 7 deadliest sins all rolled up into one social networking site.

EVS’ response points to a revealing of a world that is in necessity superficial, and has the essence of unabashed self-disclosure (Mark Zuckerberg’s recent comments that privacy is not a feature of modern sociality are interesting given this). This world is characterised by a radical presence-at-hand, with no further interaction that would allow understanding of any entity (even other people) at the level of ready-
to-hand, and therefore the extent to which meaning and significance can be derived from the environment is compromised. The world EVS describes is one of being-with rather than Dasein-with – entities existing with one another but in a radically atomised manner, without significant interaction or understanding.

In response to a question of how, if at all, has Facebook changed your life, and from the Heideggerian perspective therefore changes the world in which Dasein resides factically, EVS responded:

Yes of course it has! If I don’t know someone well now then the first thing I am going to do is bring up Facebook, because likely hood of things is that we are facebook friends. But being Facebook friends with them doesn’t mean that we hang arond together or even socialize. Some person added me before they got to uni and has never talked to me face to face until last week. We have been facebook friends for well over a year, and we wouldn't have even talked if I hadn't taken the initiative and wished him a happy birthday when it was just the two of us outside. Facebook has changed the world for me I think. I consider it to not be normal anymore if someone doesn't have it. For me, a daily user it is like an extension of myself and if I don’t have it then I do go slightly mental and I feel terribly cut off from everything.

There is something inside me that loves to know everything about everyone, so I love the Newsfeed because it tells me about people. I love peoples pictures because it does the same thing. It is wierd because if facebook didn’t exist then that would be the equivalent of me going through someones room and their diary and looking through every album they had. It is stalking! Sort of. I
I think Facebook has changed out I exist in the world because it is like an extension of myself on the internet. The only way I can describe it is to imagine I had surgery on my brain and instead of anything being taken away something is added to one side of my brain. The added part is social networking and it is like a metallic brain part. It goes over the side I would normally use for socially interacting with people and attaches itself to it. I am now an extension of Facebook with practically everyone I know at my fingertips. It is a bizarre thing. I can’t even manage to go a day without Facebook anymore because it feels wierd.

I relate to people differently too. There seems to be this unspoken rule that you don’t interact with everyone on your friends list in real life. I mean people I knew from school and from infantcy add me. They don’t add me to be my friend, they add me to see what I am doing, what I am up to (this really does bring the whole stalking thing to light again). I do the same though! Maybe then the word friend needs to be re defined. With 350 million facebook users in the world I am pretty sure that a lot of them feel the same way I do if they think about it. Perhaps a new definition needs to be coined for the term "Facebook Friend".

I think to a lot of people I know, I exist more in Facebook than I do in real life. It is the same the other way around too. I don’t see a lot of these people and they do seem to have more presence to me on Facebook than they do if I meet them in real life. There are some girls who I am facebook friends with in uni because they added me before they got here and we just started chatting, but we never met up or anything and then I found myself standing outside of the
examinations with them at the end of last term and it was too strange for my poor little warped brain to comprehend. I went through a whole discussion in my head about whether or not it was okay for me to talk to them outside of Facebook, whether it was acceptable. Would they know who I was and if so would they reject me. It is such a horrible thing. Facebook has made me more socially awkward than I have ever been in my life. It has done this in such a way that If I am ever surrounded by a group of my facebook friends who I don’t talk to out of facebook then I feel like the lonliest person in the world. I should probably mention that I only interact with about 5% of my Facebook friends outside of Facebook.

In this account EVS identifies the possibility of Enframing (in that a day without Facebook is weird), and EVS also makes many references to how Facebook has altered existence in average everydayness – searching for people is everyday, social awkwardness derived from the status of friendship online, and the notion of isolation which could be discussed in reference to angst and authenticity in Heidegger. The answer also touches upon the McLuhanist notion of extension through media, and this could be interpreted as a radical Enframing from the Heideggerian perspective.

In contrast, and with one analytic eye on Heidegger’s notion of Enframing from *The Question Concerning Technology*, this response from SEJ offers another perspective on the view of the world that Facebook offers:

*I don't think facebook has changed the way I see people or relate to them. It can sometimes give an insight into other people's thoughts/feelings/actions but that's about it. I think facebook is*
kind of superficial (i think that's the word) kind of where you only see the surface of people, it's not that deep, but i suppose that's all its for. It would take one hell of a comment or post to make me think twice about one of my friends, then again it's only really the people I see outside of facebook which I really worry about, it wouldn't bother me if I wasn't friends with half the people on facebook because I don't see them outside of facebook. Do you know what I mean? It's nice to see what they are up to but not everyone is relevant or important to me, so I'm not worried about how I feel about them.

This response illustrates a freer relationship with the technology, and is more representative of the majority of responses; note however a questioning of the nature of relationships online and the idea of being-with online is again drawn into question in this response.

This is a very short account of one potential method of webnography and how the method can be employed to investigate in a quasi-empirical manner a topic that has traditionally leant itself to purely theoretical investigation. While some will question the use of method in the investigation of Heideggerian philosophy a priori, this research will hopefully add contours to the research that would be sadly absent in a purely theoretical investigation.
Bibliography


