

Ethnography in a brave new world: exploring research in cyberspace¹

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Abstract:

Can we establish the importance of an ethnographic choice through the deconstruction of the method assemblages mainly used in web-based research? How can we face the related ethical problems? In this paper we will face these questions, drawing from the advancement in CMC and Internet research in the last decades. The presence of utopian and dystopian views about ICT suggest us to search for a point of view able to overcome this dichotomy. Considering research as a situated practice, we focus on ethnography as the method which can help us to discuss the *a priori* assumptions we can find both in the utopian and dystopian views, as well as in the methodological accounts about on-line research. So, we consider as an example the Complementary Explorative Multilevel Data Analysis by Galimberti and Riva, to show how it constructs the reality observed before starting the observation itself. Stressing the situated character of organizational research, we propose the Internet a library-of-people metaphor in order to catch with an evocative image both ethical and methodological issues studying cyberspace. In conclusion, telling stories about our PhD researches, we show how ethnography is able to deconstruct methodological accounts like the CEMDA, crossing micro and macro levels, and give insights about the construction of the relationship between the researcher and the groups studied.

Preface

The growth of the Internet is one of the most emphasized cultural phenomena of our time, involving almost all areas of our life. So it is not surprising there is a rapidly increasing body of ethnographic work that studies computer mediated communication and interaction, but also related spaces that are highly mediated and interactive: virtual cities, telemedicine, e-commerce, etc.

We decided to write this paper to catch an integrative approach between two disciplines involved in the study of virtual or cyberorganizations in the web in the last three decades: psychology and sociology. We just want to shade off the barriers and the controversies about what social is and how people re-assemble it in a messy place with a disappearing physical support but

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highly “connections” oriented (Latour, 2005). We want to argue against the “Internet as psychological laboratory” perception (Skitka, Sargis, 2006), in which neopositivistic approach is still predominant and in which researchers try to study strange middle-earth places populated by college students samples.

One of our paper main influence is that cyberspace-based organizational research should be focused on the Internet as a discursive-created phenomena: it is a collection of discourses and texts as practices (Stanley, 2001). The process of constructing multimedia-texts is a part of web creation process for people engaged in it. Internet could not exist without off and on line conversations in and about this enduring “proto-cyberspace” (Hakken, 1999).

This paper follows the discursive psychology tradition also, considering language as an activity *di per sé*, rather than a simple mirroring tool to represent the out-there reality. When people talk and write in and about the Internet they are not only reflecting about Internet reality, they are participating, through their text and argumentations, in a social life.

From the sociological point-of-view, this paper is inspired by a practice-based approach: cyberspace is the result of an ensemble of hybrid practices constructing it. The technological discourse and the social one participate to the coproduction of cyberspace, both in the on-line side and in the off-line one. People writing code and stabilizing standards are involved not only in the construction of technological cyberspace, but also of society (Lessig, 1999).

Introduction

The point is: can we establish the importance of a ethnographic choice through the deconstruction of the method assemblages mainly used in web-based research? How can we face the related ethical problems? These are our main research questions. As every text this one starts with a title that we use to introduce our argument, focusing on four main elements: ethnography, brave new world, exploring and cyberorganizations.

The first one, *ethnography*, is intended in a interpretative sense (Geertz, 1973). To interpret and describe are main issues in reality construction (Latour, 2005). Or better we think about methods and techniques as different method assemblages: “practices that can cope with an hinterland of pre-existing social and material realities [...] they detect, resonate with, and amplify particular patterns of relations in the excessive and overwhelming fluxes of real” (Law, 2004: 13 – 14).

Each methodological assemblage hides what it is *in-here*, that is practices sustaining studied and described reality construction, to underline the *out-there* of truth constructed (Law, 2004). Assuming that, we will show you how one of actual on-line research methodological frameworks contributes to the construction of things we are analysing. After that we will explain how

ethnography can be considered across this construction, positioning itself as entropy element between out-there and in-here.

Why *Brave New World*? In 1948 B. F. Skinner, one of the fathers of the American behaviourism, published his first novel book “Walden Two”, with the aim to describe the wholly happy and productive world utopia, created thanks to the use of behaviouristic efforts *inside* society. Ten years before the philosopher Aldous Huxley with his “Brave new world” outlined the dangers related to an evolution of modern society, with a dystopian vision, in which a mix of deterministic control and repression are the development main issues. In the meantime dissidents are still *outside* from “civil” society.

We can summarize the Internet Studies history inside the continuum within these two literary *topoi*: a brand new world created by electronic interactions, designed as resolving utopia or as instable dystopia, based on visions defined “computopian” or “compputopian” (Hakken, 1999). Utopian, or computopian, approaches always paint new technologies mediated worlds as positive ones creating an enduring better society. Dystopian, or compputopian, approaches are much more doubtful, focused on continuous and even suffered changes.

Web-based research utopian approaches, as well as the utopian fiction, behave like Walden Two main character, that is an *outsider* discovering little by little the new world. The researcher in this mood, describes the characteristics and measures the new world pros and cons, with an unbiased and cool-blooded attitude, having little engagement (i.e. Sproull, Kiesler, 1986).

The dystopian ones consider researchers as a part of this world, like a knowledge and changing oriented participant agents. The narrative reversal seems to be quite clear: utopian researcher sees from the *outside* the main issues related to society; dystopian one observes from the *inside* all the changes, dreaming to be far away from them (i.e. Simons, 1986).

Our point of view is like an *exploration*, going away from utopian and dystopian visions. We just want to achieve a better understanding without methodological *a priori* decisions. Exploring research states the aim of our paper: following research practices related to *cyberorganizations*, without suggesting black-boxed solutions, but underlining the *situatedness of research* and making issues arising.

Cyberorganizations are, in our view, organizations which recognize a great role to computer mediated communication in their everyday life. We prefer the “cyborg” metaphor (Haraway, 1991; Hakken, 1999) than virtual one because of the continuous reminding cyborg has in entangling the human and non human participants to the organizations. Summarizing, we take for granted the hybrid character of *cyberorganizations*², exploring research methodologies studying them through

² We know that Cooper and Law (1995) suggested the term *cyborganizations* to sustain the hybrid and unfinished character of organizations considered through the cyborg suggestions by Haraway (1991). Our lemma,

the lens of ethnography peculiarities, considering the unpredictability of organizations, continuously drifting, not able to be fixed in a planned way.

For a better explanation of our work we firstly describe changes inside Computer Mediated Communication research field during the last three decades. Our today interaction potential with the others is still changing in time and space, thanks to the enduring technology development. A great mass of researches about the use of new technologies in labour and training contexts have been conducted; other ones about the ways in which technologies should make easy collaborative processes; and about the ways in which ICT sustain social interactions. As noted by Heath and Luff (2000), even though the great development of research activities in this field from different disciplines (like psychology, sociology, ergonomics, system engineering, just to cite the most famous), we know a little bit about the ways technologies influence our daily life. We still do not know nothing about psychological process driving our social interactions.

Modelling and progressive adaptation processes requested by interaction with a new medium are not trouble-free matters. Bolter and Grusin (1999) called this process “re-mediation”: from one hand new medium looks like the older; from the other it is an explicit improvement of it. New media and research contexts lead into different kinds of reflections, both innovative and conservative. New communication contexts guide people fulfilling different experiences of interaction. They ask then to social sciences (in particular sociology and psychology) the re-mediation of a different conceptual framework to sustain the development of communication process explanation.

In this context it is possible to gain an easy access to a big mass of stored material, as well as forum conversation threads, without the need to be a conversation participant. The gap between *staying outside* and *staying inside*, and between naturalistic unobtrusive oriented research versus a participated one could be constantly problematic (Bakardjieva e Feenberg, 2001).

The aim of acquiring information apparently likely and objective (Corposanto, 2004), in a sort of natural sciences mimesis, has been put in discussion by the results of three researchers generations and by hermeneutic, phenomenology and post-structuralism during the last century. Today, thanks to the influence of these philosophical approaches, a new point of view has been created, looking at situated research practice (Hine, 2005), related to situated ethical and methodological issues.

Our work will be organized as follows: a starting brief introduction about the history of Internet and CMC research; a second preliminary part about two Italian scholars methodological proposal (Riva, Galimberti, 2001) that seems to follow an integrative intent between *inside* and *outside* orientations; a third part in which we face some questions related to research ethics and in which we

cyberorganization, refer to a peculiar kind of *cyborganization*, one which has the characteristic of being clearly present through computer mediated communication technologies.

introduce the Internet as library-of-people metaphor, situating the *inside/outside* problem; a closing part in which we talk about the CMC research techniques issues, de-assembling and re-assembling the Riva and Galimberti's proposal through crossing features of our different cyberethnographies.

The Internet and Computer Mediated Communication research: from computers to communities (or from outside to inside?)

After 25 years of studies it is possible to assign to the CMC a crucial role in clarification of social and cultural phenomena concerning interactions between people connected. The aim of this review is to explain developments of these "connections" (Sproull, Kiesler, 1991) even when they seem to be casual and chaotic. There are important communication issues in emerging concepts like web, community and virtual groups.

Considering CMC as the main object of research, we want to describe his evolution through (or related to) communication theories staying in background, from a linear model of information transmission to a conversational one, to look, in the end, at a participatory model of communication, the basic line of early web-phenomena as on-line groups and communities. We suggest a three-generation analytical explanation of the CMC research development:

- the first generation is related to the technical system, the computer inside asynchronous communications;
- the second one is focused on the emerging use of technical systems influencing the relations among users;
- the third generation is still engaged in a new scenario characterized by social and cultural construction of communication issues.

Each of these generations is focused on one single dimension (computer, use and users), but the other ones are also comprised and interrelated with different degrees. There are also methodological differences among: the first and the second one seem to be quasi-experimental oriented whereas in the third the ethnographic approach is prominent (Talamo, Zucchermaglio, 2003).

The first generation (focus on technology)

Since the creation of the Arpanet (1969), the CMC is still engaged in a enduring development. The technical features of the net drove researchers to analyse a single-way-mode direction of information, that is centralized, hierarchic, top-down. Hiltz and Turoff (1978), for example, direct their own interest not only to the deterministic change of mediated communication due to the ICT, but also to the effects of introduction of these artefacts inside organizations to sustain communication exchange among their members. The main hypothesis concern the parallelism

between communication and social relations: influencing the net characteristics it is possible to control social relations in organizations and in the same way it is possible to enhance the efficacy of organizational behaviour. Recurrent question in that deterministic approach is: is it possible to generalize results from one context to another? In these years researchers start to study, at individual level and with quasi-experimental research designs, the effects of medium characteristics: a-synchronicity, whole text-based features and interactivity among the users.

The second generation (focus on different technology use)

The works of this period (in early 90's) are characterized by two different research approaches: first one studies the impact of CMC on the individual and its social relations mediated by computer communication inside and outside organizational environment (Sproull, Kiesler, 1986, 1991; Spear, Lea, 1990, 1994); the second concern CMC aids in teaching and learning activities inside the educational and e-learning contexts (Kaye, 1992). The object of these studies is the comparison between virtual (text oriented) and face to face groups (verbal oriented) performance. The results show the reduction, in virtual contexts, of social cues, constantly present in face to face environments. Virtual messages are unable to express physical and social signs with two main consequences: the computropian one is related to aggressive and un-social behaviours, i.e. flaming; the computopian is linked to a democratic view of hierarchical structures, with less social barriers. As noted by Hine (2000) these studies are based on the assumption that the system of mediation is the exclusive independent variable.

From another point of view, based on the British social psychologist Henry Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1981), Spears, Lea et al. (1990, 1994) note that the characteristics of the perceived social contexts in which the electronic communication develops is the main variable: social pressure is not related to physical settings but it is extremely "path-dependent" (Lea, Giordano, 1999: 343). The study of emerging socio-cognitive characteristics of groups has been done according to the structures and patterns of interactions, the level of participations and, more rarely, through a content analysis of messages exchanged. A quantitative oriented approach still remains the principal one, using *a priori* variables and surveys.

The third generation (focus on users)

Scholars working in Computer Supported Collaborative Learning field (CSCL) underline the strong relationship between conversation and activity. From this point of view, conversation allows to create an inter-subjective meanings to share subjective meaning referring to common activities (Dillenburg et al., 1996). In face-to-face modality, the exchanges have social and cultural features in conversation, that's the point of view of authors based on social theories of learning. Lave (1997)

states that learning is a co-construction of social meanings and consequently verbal exchanges must to be analysed inside cultural mediated settings in which interactions appear. The attention towards cultural phenomena and natural contexts of everyday life shifts the focus from individual analysis of cognitive processes to collective phenomena by which people construct reality and human actions improve their meaning.

CMC third generation research is trying to explore virtual community phenomenon: scholars are looking for main concepts, their boundaries and useful methodological tools. The conceptual shift from individual to social and cultural systems is causing a new configuration of observation and data collecting strategies (Hicks, 1996; Wertsch, 1998). Researchers are trying to study the meaning of the actions inside the cultural context in which they have been produced. From this point of view there is the necessity to set new methodological tools to define context boundaries and to identify related participants meanings.

The Complementary Explorative Multilevel Data Analysis(CEMDA) framework

The Internet (and CMC) phenomenon is complex: people in interaction, media in use, relationship between people and media, situation, level of social presence, cultural context, and situation matters. Galimberti and Riva have recently proposed (Riva, Galimberti, 2001; Riva, 2004) a method of analysis taking into account all the previous things and elaborating levels of analysis. Complementary Explorative Multilevel Data Analysis (CEMDA) is a set of research tools considering:

- the strategic role of cultural resources influencing the interaction inside (and through) the medium;
- the importance of each level of analysis (people, situation, context), using ad hoc mixture of methods according to the needs of the moment;
- the combination of results obtained in different level to sustain the analysis process and data interpretation;
- the integration of quantitative and qualitative tools to collect and analyse data.

Levels	Frames	Objects	Quantitative analysis	Qualitative analysis
Context	Institutions, Macro-groups	Shared History, Social rules	Survey questionnaires	Social network analysis, Interviews, Document and records reviews
Situation	Micro-groups,	Norms, Roles,	Survey questionnaires	Social network analysis,

	Social and physical environment	Environmental constraints, Practices		Interviews, Focus groups, Document and records reviews
Interaction	Relations, Actors, Artifacts	Goals, Competence, Affordances, Behaviours (including the communicative ones)	Individual questionnaires, Quantitative interaction analysis (duration and structure, computer monitoring, eye tracking, etc.)	Qualitative interaction analysis (Speech acts analysis, discourse analysis, analysis of conversations, etc.) Participant observation, Interviews, Dairies

Table 1 Units of analysis and methods used within the Complementary Explorative Multilevel Data Analysis (CEMDA) framework (from Riva, Galimberti, 2001).

In their proposal, we have to indicate first the frame and object of analysis for each level. At the context level we found institutions and macro-groups (communities) forming social framework. At the situation level we consider all the actors and objects engaged in collective report construction and diffusion, the communities of practices representing/linking them and physical settings in which the process growth. The last level is represented by people involved in with their aims, needs and opportunities perceived using the medium. Closing level is the whole amount of people's activities in interaction with the technological objects. Outcomes of every level are related in a recursive way supported by a vigorous set of research tools, as indicated in the table.

What we want to underline is that, as any methodological account, the CEMDA is shaping the social world it is investigating. What kind of instrument and reflection help us recognize context, situation and interaction? Or is the analytical distinction giving answers before the beginning of research, creating contexts, situations and interactions? Is an *infra-language* preferable (Latour, 2005), without giving a set of black – boxed solutions? We will try to answer this questions with a reflection about research ethic and with the presentation of our researches.

Facing ethical issues in the Internet research: the Internet as library of people metaphor

In this paragraph we will face one particular theme inside the debate between CMC and Internet researchers: the research ethics. After a look at some contributions coming from the literature, we will suggest a metaphor which could be useful for the researchers when approaching the field: the metaphor of the Internet as a library-of-people.

One of the main effort in the definition of ethical guidelines for Internet research is the result of the work of the Association of Internet Researchers ethics committee (Hess et al, 2002). The

specificity of this contribution is the will to not substitute discipline specific guidelines or to set a strict protocol to be followed, but to suggest some point which will be cross-disciplinary in a contextualized research process. The result of this two year work is a series of question, inspired by the principles of ethical pluralism, cross-cultural awareness and the will of not giving black – boxed solutions. One of the main problem is how to consider data disposable on the Internet, with the difficulties to use the private/public dichotomy (Bruckman, 2002; Whalter, 2002).

Amy Bruckman (2002) suggested a solution: to consider people posting material on the Internet like amateur artists, referring to the category of semi – published material between the unpublished one and the published one. Another contribution facing the same problem is that by Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2001), who express the concept of alienation: researchers have to understand if people, using the Internet for publishing their material, have the intention of renouncing to their control on that.

Both these contributions, as well as the AoIR guidelines, are grounded on the idea of research as a situated practice, involving the development by the researchers of the ability to speak with the others (Geertz, 1973). Our metaphor of Internet as a library-of-people has the same roots.

The starting ideas is that in 'traditional' research we have two main sources for the data: the libraries, for literature or archived research data, and the field, for new empirical data. With the libraries³ we have a 'pick-up approach', reading, extracting informations and giving back results in forms that can be stored in libraries again, like books, articles or conferences proceedings. There is no negotiation, the data collectable are simply there, we need only access to the libraries, we can be called unobtrusive.

With the field, both in quantitative and in qualitative research, we need to start a negotiation, explaining the aim of the research and giving back data not only like research report, but also with a confrontation with the people involved . The Internet can be seen as a continuum between a library and a field.

We suggest that if we think at Internet as a library-of-people we can enter a situational field, and develop situational skills able to give us more coordinates in order to develop a more aware ethical and methodological behaviour. Let us explain the origin of this metaphor.

In the novel “Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury (1953) the world is characterized by a refuse of books and the firemen have the aim of burn the books themselves. People loving literature, like we discover at the end of the novel, leave the cities and memorize books, in order to keep trace of them.

³ We have also to notice that technicians, like Mitch Kapor or Ed Krol, sustained the parallelism between Internet and a library (“What we had was a library where all the books were dumped on the floor and there was no card catalogue” Ed Krol in “Getting up to speed on the computer highway”, by Joshua Quittner, *Newsday*, November 3, 1992); instead social researchers have often adopted the “human subject model”, considering the Internet as built up only by people. In this sense, quite joking, we can sustain that our metaphor has a socio – technical flavour.

The people involved in this project recognize each other with the name of the book they memorized.

Our idea is that Internet can be seen, from the point of view of a researcher, like a library where books are represented by people. In the shelves we will have people, not only text. So we need, approaching the shelves, to develop an interaction and show interactional skills, in order to understand, when we look for data in a CMC context, if we are in front of people using the web like a stage or more aware of his privacy. So, if we are not in front of explicitly published material, i.e. an on-line newspaper, we probably need to start an interaction with the web page maintainer and with the community involved. It is a very situated choice. The analogy with the library-of-people can make us remember that the situatedness of research can not be faced with a “recipe” or rigid model, i.e. the CEMDA.

The Internet as library-of-people metaphor has, then, an aim to affirm the situatedness of research practices giving researchers an image able to gather ethical and methodological difficulties without sustaining black-boxed solutions.

We will describe after in the following paragraphs some ethical and methodological choices we did in our PhD thesis work. We analyse two different kind of cyberorganizations: the first one is a software development group inside the Free/Libre and Open Source Software movement; the second one is a interdisciplinary European association engaged in studying and promoting entrepreneurship inside and outside academic places. A particular focus about practices is due to the belongingness of these organizations to so called technoscience (Haraway, 1996). They produce technological artefacts (software) and scientific one (a paper submitted for a conference). As shown by Gherardi (2005), the focus on practices leads to crossing over traditional categories like “micro” and “macro”⁴.

From this point of view the CEMDA model three categories distribution (context, situation, interaction) is cross widely de-constructed due to his micro – macro dichotomy closeness. We don’t want to abandon traditional research tools in this way, but we just want to consider them inside a situated awareness. In the same time our explanation is going to reinforce our favourite cyberorganizations concept (instead of that of virtual organizations⁵): through this one it is possible to underline the hybrid trait, between human and non-human, between on-line and off-line characteristics, of organizing processes detected by our studies⁶.

⁴ Look at Callon and Latour’s work (1981) to know something about critics on micro and macro distinction.

⁵ We are not saying that virtual organizations researchers taken in account just the on-line presence. The common sense opposition between virtual and real lead us to prefer the term cyborg (Haraway, 1991; Hakken, 1999).

⁶ We are not saying that virtual organizations researchers take into account just the on-line presence. The common sense opposition between virtual and real lead us to prefer the term cyborg (Haraway, 1991; Hakken, 1999).

Cyberethnography inside cyberorganizations part 1: ethical choices and research techniques

All the issues stated before are present during the field access negotiation process inside the software developers community. This community is strictly connected with the release of the code of a proprietary operating system, due to the choice by a corporation to embrace an Open Source license. At the project starting point a coordination board have been appointed by the corporation. The board is composed by five people from outside Italy with the aim to coordinate development work and to proceed to community building activities to preserve independence from the corporation. Field access negotiation and starting point process were contemporary, both following a mixed on-line/off-line trajectory.

First contact has been an off-line meeting with one of the corporation Italian manager. We explained him the research design (he is not directly involved in the development project and we asked him to be a linking node with the developers community). A via e-mail interaction has been followed after the first contact with board members, facilitated by the mediation of the Italian manager. My first e-mail has been posted on the project mailing list following a precise request of a board member. After that, without any public comments by community members, an off-line meeting with two board members followed: this one means the field access achievement with the opportunity to made e-mail interviewing and with the link with some laboratories in which the project was started before public release.

After that I created a web page⁷ to present my research and I posted a message in the project main mailing list. This one was followed just by a single public comment declaring interest and two private email, one of these to appreciate and the other one to disapprove. Disagreement is not for my research about FLOSS developers community, but most of all because my choice was to study this community and not other ones more interesting from the person who posted the message (an observer he wrote, not an involved participant).

The aim of that long story is to underline the hybrid issue of cyberorganizations research. A lot of relevant interactions about it happen off-line, not only in “virtual” way. Looking at picture 1 (the webpage to introduce the research) it is possible to underline a couple of elements. Firstly, the title, as well as the subtitle, has the declared aim of posing my research activity at the same level of that of the community studied, discarding a completely out-side approach. Secondly, the academic aspect on the right side is shown with the personal information on the left one. That choice is due to an analysis of some community participant’s web-logs, containing comments and indications about FLOSS world, as well as information and pictures related to bloggers’ private aspects. The peculiar FLOSS reciprocity idea had been put in the centre, to carry on, as we will see after, a library-of-people influenced understanding.

⁷ <http://arcadia.lii.unitn.it/MaurizioAndOpenSolaris/index.html>.

Maurizio and OpenSolaris

An open source research with an open source community



Yes, it's me, [Maurizio Teli](#).

I was born in the 1977 in Novara, a one hundred thousand inhabitants city in the north-west of Italy, between Milan and Turin.

After some years between schools and university, living in Oleggio, a small town near Novara, I had my first degree in Political Sciences at the University of Milan, with a thesis about the relationship between supermarket workers and customers.

During the writing-thesis period, I came in contact with the FLOSS world, in particular with the web browser Mozilla Suite and the OpenOffice.org suite.

How is freedom working?

(My temporary research title)

Introduction

The Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) has a strong political view, as shown by the essays by Richard M. Stallman and Eric S. Raymond, strictly connected with the idea of freedom. In the academic literature this characteristic has been considered mainly in order to evaluate the motivations moving developers contributing to FLOSS projects, the consequences for the development organizational model, or for the business opportunities related. As far as I know, no one make the enactment of the concept of freedom the centre of a research. This is my aim: understanding how the idea of freedom is performed by the community members and how it plays a role in the development process and in the community life.

The field: OpenSolaris

Every ethnographer has to choose a field for her work. A particular part of the world, which is considered useful for the construction of an answer to the research question. Why did I choose

Picture 1 The webpage of presentation of the research.

Following the analysis of present research we show how a cyberethnographic approach could cross over the CEMDA model, allowing us to choose the most useful research techniques starting from a precise research question. One of the questions we are trying to give an answer is: how software license take part into community of developer's life? This question become relevant not only for the role played by licenses in FLOSS world but also because a debate about the license itself has been present inside the project main mailing list for over two months. In this way participant observation, the main ethnographic technique, lead us to focus our attention about one of the possible questions studying FLOSS. At this point a document analysis about origins of used license inside the project, as well as a grounded theory based analysis about the mailing list debate

lead us to underline the role of mediator taken by the license itself inside the developers community. Inside that role we can find the context of FLOSS social world and software development, the organization of the project itself and all the participant's behaviours (Teli, De Paoli, 2006), as shown in the following quotation:

“No, *some* users and developers want their software to be GPL. And just as those users will be turned off by OpenSolaris because it is not, there will be many that will be turned off if it becomes GPL. [...] It would make it more attractive those developers that actually care about the license, or are GPL zealots. The majority of users don't care what license a program is under. They just like good software.”
[SW, osol – discuss, discussion dated 20 August, 2005]

Who are the participants? How do they define themselves? What is their positioning inside FLOSS social world? What kind of aims and interests do they have inside this world? What are the users interests? These are the main elements opening connections, globalizing the local and localizing the global. Thanks to the use of participant observation and document analysis, ethnography is going across different CEMDA levels without *a priori* assumptions, showing FLOSS social world construction happening inside developers daily practices.

How did we faced ethical problems related to mailing list posting use? In this case the suggestions of Berry (2004) have been useful as well as the conversation about field access we shown before. Mailing list are public issues, they have free access. But can we face the alienation problem shown by Bakardjieva e Feenberg (2001) we were talking about previously? Berry suggest that open source software developers permits the use of their main artefact (the software) under the conditions of license they use; researchers should consider the artefacts from FLOSS community in the same way.

The suggestion is to consider the mailing lists as they were subjected to the same software copyright system, inspired by reciprocity. So, we did the choice to publish texts about community on the web, allowing changes⁸. That choice shows the library-of-people metaphor power: it has been the interaction and the understanding of community studied to determine the boundaries of using mailing lists and not the application of a black-boxed solution.

⁸ The licence chosen is a Creative Commons one.

Cyberethnography inside cyberorganizations part 2: studying the “identities on the talk” moving on the field

It is difficult to remediate innovative and situated methodological accounts in computer mediated research. So, our aim is to find a mixture between old/new tools and new contexts. New developments in the practice of ethnography are our hope.

In the following we will not refer to the critique of textual representation - to the “graphic” - any more. Instead we turn towards the second issue of ethnographic practice which is under fire - to the critique of “ethno” (Wittel, 2000). The strategy to overcome a traditional concept of fieldwork is a remediation from material spaces to so-called cyberspace.

One of our cyberorganizations is a work group organizing a European work and organizational psychology association activities on entrepreneurial issues. This group is working via e-mail and web-site mostly. The aim of this particular research is to study how group members reproduce a feeling of social presence, that is group identity (Rogers, Lea, 2005), thanks to electronic textual communication. Our methodological choice was to follow this group interactions through a cyberethnography, with an unobtrusive observation, field notes, analysis of collective documents creation and website use and asynchronous one-to-one electronic-interviews with each group member.

Before doing so, however, another problem has been addressed. If fieldwork loses its relevance as the main feature to describe ethnographic practice, what then is left? How can we conceptualise ethnography beyond the idea of a long-term residence in utopian (or sometimes dystopian) place? First of all a good way to prepare the ethnography is to define his aims. From this point of view literature tell us that ethnography ones could be many and heterogeneous (Clifford, Marcus, 1986). Our proposal is to create a contiguity between research aims and ethnography ones. In this case the first aim is the context complexity discursive reconstruction. The second one is researcher co-presence discursive negotiation again with social situation we are studying. This method potentiality lies not in a reduction of complexity, not in the construction of models, but in what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description".

Field access is the first problem we faced doing this cyberethnography. So, gate-keeper “use” has been useful to define field access request and researcher presentation inside the group. This one lead us to access into the field with a situated gate-keeper pre-presentation, closed to group characteristics and expectations.

----- Original Message -----
From: "Francesco Pisanu"
Subject: Introducing IN***E

Dear IN***E members, I'm Francesco Pisanu and I'm a PhD Student in "Information Systems and Organizations" at University of Trento. My PhD thesis work is about social and organizational issues in virtual work groups and you appear to be a finest one, I'm sure. I asked to Professor ***** to "observe" you in a "cyber-way" in your computer mediated interaction to sustain your work activities during the next months. As French cultural anthropologist Levy-Stauss stated, I'll be your "fly-on-the-wall", in your virtual rooms, of course. So don't mind to the fly and don't be afraid of "him" also. All I ask you is just to put my e-mail address (francesco.pisanu@soc.unitn.it) in Cc for all kind of messages you send inside your group (for example when one member sends to all members a message or he sends only to one or two people and so on). Through this tracking I just want to follow your complete work practices during these months.

As a psychologist first and then as a researcher I assure you a whole deontological behaviour treating your communications. I'm sure that my presence in your group could be useful for you, for a better understanding of your "being group without physical sustain".
I really thank you in advance for your willingness.

Best wishes,

Francesco

From our point of view introduction is quite important to underline the "identities in the talk" (Antaki, 1996; Wooffitt, Clarke, 1998):

- to define the group from outside group itself ("you appear to be a finest one, I'm sure");
- to (re)assure group members about researcher presence quality and his aims ("I just want to follow your complete work practices during these months");
- using informal approach introduction ("I'll be your fly-on-the-wall, in your virtual rooms, of course. So don't mind to the fly and don't be afraid of him also");
- assuring with a formal speech deontological behaviour collecting and using field data ("As a psychologist first and then as a researcher I assure you a whole deontological behaviour treating your communications").

At the end of the statements a focus on ethnography and research aims again:

- results will be not taken for granted but peer to peer negotiated ("I'm sure that my presence in your group could be useful for you");
- to establish the ethnographic usefulness with participants ("for a better understanding of your being group without physical sustain").

We consider this first step as a legitimating request, the beginning of a socialization process in which we will be, silent. Silence is frequently the cyberethnographer language, more than off-line research situations. The ethnographer is likely to find herself in a beggar position (Wittel, 2000). Access is usually negotiated within an economic frame, on the basis of exchange, it depends on what the ethnographer has to offer. And in this case, the ethnographer is offering hope of insights and development. She's just saying "I'm useful to you" so "trust me, and behave as well as I was one of you ... in silence. I'll tell you some things, sometimes".

Cyberethnography collected data are as much "valid" than traditional off-line ethnography ones. Collecting exchanged e-mails inside work groups is the main source to construct a interactive context through rhetorical and social issues. Inside a web-based research translational perspective (Skitka, Sargis, 2006) e-mail texts could be similar to what ethnographer can see and feel inside a traditional context. Trying to go over this: written text is not pure information because of its social nature, but it is an enduring reflexive/interpretative step:

Cyberethnography is a study of online interaction. It allows the subjects being studied to talk back even as the process is occurring. The talking back is part of the cyberethnographic process (Gajjala, 1997).

Identity and belongingness are strictly connected with social presence (Rodgers, Lea, 2005) and are embedded in communicational practices to sustain group participant's work activities. Thanks to exchanged e-mail texts we can re-assemble the enduring negotiation puzzle to re-define group activity field and belongingness qualities.

We give a good example of this enduring identities re-negotiation through work practices: we can find it in the following quotation, written after an off-line presence group meeting in which one participant defined himself as a "outsider" thinking about all the work done by the group and about his future contributions to it. It is a precious material for the ethnographer, obtained just standing and listening. In cyber-based ethnography it is usual to find some messages like that and we can consider them as conceptual nodes of the we are trying to re-assemble. We will show connections later in our paper.

----- Original Message -----
From: US
Subject: Verona minutes

Hello everybody,

as promised I went through the minutes (MR's preliminary version). I absolutely agree with the time plan for the research proposal and also that it is top priority. When reading through the minutes I kept thinking that we somehow try to describe the whole entrepreneurship domain from intentions over starting, growing to succession planning. It is my impression that the model you developed in Verona is fine and basically needs a bit refining, but that we can already accept it. But I don't think we can research all this and somehow I'm a bit worried that we might get lost in the process of building one all-encompassing model and lose valuable time meanwhile. I think it might be more productive if we start concentrated discussion now and develop research questions and hypothesis e.g. regarding growth, work-life balance, intentions [how about applying TPB to growth intentions by the way?] rather than waiting with this until after Athens. I say this from a somewhat 'outsider' perspective, which I hope to be a little bit more objective. I'm sure, if I'd been with you in Verona, I would like to spend longer on developing a model.

Identity clues are firstly tracked down in the object and in the e-mail introduction line. The participant uses a shared term to point out a collective document called "the minutes". But he felt insecure, maybe because he was out of working activities to create this document, and he give the document nickname brief explanation ("Martin's preliminary version"). He explain doubts about it and about the work strategy to produce a matter under discussion shared model ("But I don't think we can research all this and somehow I'm a bit worried that we might get lost in the process of building one all-encompassing model and lose valuable time meanwhile").

The message continues with a proposal of integration and methodological adjustment to face future tasks in a better way ("I think it might be more productive if we start concentrated discussion now and develop research questions and hypothesis"). He closes his message with a paradox underlining his being peripheral: "I say this from a somewhat 'outsider' perspective, which I hope to be a little bit more objective". Just being out of group, he seems to say, I could be much more objective, but I should contribute to group development just becoming a real member ("I'm sure, if I'd been with you in Verona, I would like to spend longer on developing a model").

These are quite interesting statements about group well being we obtained just through our presence in the field, that is thanks to ethnography. We talked previously about each single part of conceptual network re-assembling. Another important ethnography feature in reconstructing connections among different parts of network is field-noting activity. It is just through field notes that researcher could catch a better sense of daily web-based data flowing on his personal computer screen.

This one is an interesting feature of our study because writing a paper is a reproduction of field notes logic itself with more reflexive material. Field notes are one of ethnographer favourite tools because they have a long tradition in anthropology (Talamo, Zecchermaglio, 2003). Mostly when we analyse particular interactions in group life, when a new work become concrete and new practical matters increase their presence in facing new problems. Here field notes are an important tool to identify relevant phenomena driving future data analysis. Field notes are often useful to explain on-line events, as we could understand from this brief following quotation:

Note # 123

Date March the 3rd 2006

Setting: negotiation about common document written off-line to introduce a shared model in the next conference attending.

AD explained today his disagreement about collective report management. In her opinion there are few people engaged in vigorous participation and innovative ideas production. For the rest there are easy consensus, immediate positive answers and less critical opinion about the collective document. In her opinion this behaviour could lead towards a decreasing of group motivation and scarce productivity looking at future engagements with all together defending collective theoretical model. The unspoken message is: if we are not sharing activity now in inspired times, that ones could not exist after, during the implementation times, due to high presence of outside people developing the project and do not feeling about it as their project and as a collaborative group product.

Field note is useful to stop the interaction time and to describe some important passages of group work. But it has the main function to describe psychological and social field limits of group activity also. Knowing the dynamics of field limits is an important issue for on-line researcher activity: the important it is to discover the functioning of limits development to orient ourselves inside the complexity of group activity.

Other ethnographical and dialogical issues are still missing in our research, as well as e-interviews and on-line focus group, and web-site construction analysis that we are going to realize in next months. These tools go towards a highly definition of the field: the interviewer is largely in a powerful position as he or she is expected to, and does define the situation. Conversely, cyberethnography operates on the premise of a dialogic process between the cyberethnographer and people in the field.

Discussion and Conclusions

As we stated a lot of time in our paper, research is a situated practice, as well as any other human activity. In John Law's words, as researchers "we all go native; we all interact with what we study" (Law, 1994: 39). Sometimes this interaction happens in the sound of silence, sometimes there is a messy place with thousands of voices, our account is able to emphasize the polyphony in-here or creating silence around the reality out-there.

Long time ago social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1944) underlined the importance of topological reconstruction of psychological and non psychological factors in doing research. Today Bruno Latour's (2005) theoretical issues are converging towards re-assembling research practices, drawing links between human and non-human actors, managing the uncertainties hidden in every research field. In cyberspace this is particularly slow: connections starting from the in-here are indefinite, multiple, loose coupled, hybrid.

Cyberorganizations are obviously characterized by on-line interactions among their participants. But on-line does not mean an *a priori* off-line absence. On-line workers spend a great part of their time alone with just keyboards, screens and mouse as physical friends. But this does not mean an *a priori* group belongingness absence. Or this does not mean an *a priori* community norm and values absence, this does not mean an *a priori* shared organizational culture absence. So the first cyber-researcher's rule is: reassemble the puzzle of groups.

From this socio-psychological point of view researchers need a precise definition of some issues related to aims, methods, tools and techniques to collect, to analyse and to interpret field data. But they need first of all to "touch and feel" the field. It is time for researchers to stop to stay so far away from it. Again, we must all interact with what we are studying.

We told a story moving from the changes in the researchers focus in CMC research, reaching a comprehensive account, the CEMDA, articulate and complex. But this story seems far from the group studied: it is the discourse on method which bring to them. Our practice of method cross this model, starting from the participants behaviour: is the analysis, staying inside the groups that, following connections, make interactions, situations and context emerge. In our story, they do not exist before. So, maps like the CEMDA are useful, but after that we recognize interactions, situations and contexts.

How to stay inside ethically? How to collect data properly? We introduce the Internet as library of people metaphor to reaffirm Computer Mediated Communication research situatedness and to give to researchers an evocative image in which they can find useful suggestions to carry on enduring ethical and methodological choices.

Paper closing parts are dedicated to our research practices. In line with the library of people suggestions, the approaching activities have been described in their on-line/off-line character, in

their understanding and construction of the group studied. The process of re-assembling the social around and through web-based context must be sustained by trust and mutual understandings between researcher and people in the field, both involved in the construction of the proto-cyberspace. As Hine (2000) underlined, main (cyber)ethnography aim is making the taken-for-granted emerge. To do that we must all go native for a day, obviously, and follow connections rather than just stay for a period in the field *di per sé*. We have to move from the inside to the outside and come back.

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