

FROM REAL TO VIRTUAL: “ETHNOGRAPHY” OF AN ON-LINE COMMUNITY

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In an attempt to do ethnographic “fieldwork” in a virtual community composed of high school classmates who are now in different continents all over the world, with diverse occupations and interests, on-line and off-line interviews were conducted to gather community members’ views on how the group has remained interconnected considering spatial and temporal dimensions. This report looks into the group’s characteristics and the interactions that take place both on-line and off-line. It attempts to describe and discuss how off-line social roles and existing cultural practices are played out in on-line communications in a virtual community.

Defining community in the age of internet

The internet has connected people in different countries all over the world. One can virtually visit, talk, and even see other people from the other side of the globe. Playing and shopping could also be done via the internet. These developments have led to the emergence of several virtual communities on-line, covering a wide range of interests, objectives and characteristics. The definition of community as bounded, homogenous, face-to-face interaction is continually being challenged in the context of a globalizing world.

One of the earliest views of “community” was that of Ferdinand Tonnies (1957). He called groups that form around essential will, in which membership is self-fulfilling, as *Gemeinschaft* (often translated as community). This is characterized by harmony guided by folkways, mores and religious beliefs. People are related to one another by descent and kinship. Folk life and culture persists in the *Gemeinschaft*. On the other hand, *Gesselschaft*, Tonnies points out, is based on a union of rational wills and rests in convention and agreement safeguarded by political legislation of the state. Here the state has moved away from forms of community life. It frees itself more and more from the traditions, customs and beliefs. People undergo new changes to adapt to new and arbitrary legal constructions.

When the town develops into the city, characteristics of community are almost entirely lost.

Redfield (1956) defined communities using the characteristics of distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity, and all-providing self-sufficiency. Redfield saw the community as divided into social groups, but did not consider the community itself as just a social group. He instead proposed other ways of seeing the community as a whole, including social structure, ecology, and moral outlook. Thus, his definition of the community became lost in a variety of holisms, each with its own dimension. Redfield's "community" is a slippery concept, impossible to grasp and use in a specific sense. (Dow 1995)

Definitions that emphasize the boundedness, homogeneity and isolation of communities, limit the significance of individual and community interactions and the heterogeneity of the community itself. Individuals belong to several communities, bounded in varying contexts and ways. Thus, a more fluid concept of community is more appropriate in ethnographic explorations in multi-sited situations with complex, spatially diverse communities (Marcus 1995 in Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Bartle points out that "community" is a social construct. It is not just the people who are in it, since a community usually already existed when all of its residents were not yet born, and it will likely continue to exist when all of the people in it have left. It is something that is beyond its very components, its community members. He elaborates that a "community" may not even have a physical location, but be demarcated by being a group of people with a common interest. As such community "boundaries" may not be clear, since interactions take place both within and outside the physical boundaries. There is more heterogeneity as the boundaries become wider. This is commonly observed in urban areas, when various factors such as occupation, place of origin, language, religion, and class, come into play within the community. In general an urban community has more fuzzy boundaries and is more difficult to demarcate, is more heterogeneous, more complex, and more difficult to organize, and has more complex and sophisticated goals, than rural communities. Urban anthropology has faced a dilemma as regards units of analysis as well as field methods, given the relatively more heterogeneous nature of urban communities. Contextualization and explanation of communities in a changing world has been a concern of urban anthropology over the years. This same circumstances and challenges are now being faced by emerging studies of community and culture in cyberspace (Schwimmer 1998). The web provides people with limitless opportunities to virtually visit and become part of cyber-communities. The boundaries of physical locations of real communities have been erased with this new communications technology.

As a communication medium, the internet has ignited the possibility of direct person-to-person interaction on a massive scale (Dicks 2003). The internet is fast becoming an important research site for social scientists as it is a medium uniquely capable of integrating modes of communication and forms of content. This network links people and information through computers and other digital devices which allow person-to-person communication and information retrieval. The Internet emerged in 1982 and rapidly spread like wildfire in the early 1990s. Today, it is considered an essential medium not only for communications, but also for trade and commerce, banking and finance, and entertainment. It has given way to various social changes in cultural patterns, interactions, and the social structure (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001). Wilson and Peterson (2002), in their review of the *Anthropology of On-line Communities*, point out that there have been few ethnographic works on internet technologies within anthropology. But they further point out the suitability of anthropological methodologies to investigate cross-cultural, multilevel and multi-sited phenomena.

Methodology

The site of online ethnography is the internet or cyberspace, which is not a geographical, livable space. This is where online ethnography differs from traditional ethnography. The ethnographer can do his “fieldwork” without leaving his desk. But he is already somewhere in cyberspace, at a website. The boundary in this case is the specific website of the community being studied, which the ethnographer may move in and out of. In terms of time, the ethnographer may not really be present in front of the desk, but he is virtually present all the time, as online communities leave permanent records of interactions and changes in their site. It is usually considered that online communities are woven into the fabric of offline life rather than in opposition to it. Offline life provides the fabric for the online (Hine 2005). In this case, I did my “fieldwork” both online and offline. On-line I am the group moderator, but off-line I am a mere member of the group. I reviewed the messages, photos, databases, links, and all other on-line group activity since the site virtually started in 2002. I also participated in the mini-reunions and the alumni homecoming of the group.

My research was done in the stc_hs_batch85@yahoo.com site on the internet. This site is exclusively composed of high school classmates at STC Cebu batch '85. As contained in their home page, “this group aims to promote unity even as we live miles apart from each other”. There are 168 listed email addresses of members, some of whom have two email addresses. A check on the number of actual members estimates it at around 140. This

number is around 80% of the population of the real group (i.e. STC high school batch 1985). The site was created on April 28, 2002 starting out with 20 members, and growing to around 140 over a 4-year period. Membership is restricted and is limited to those who have been part of the real group. The initial membership was based on a mailing list of one of the members. Other email addresses were added through networking with the existing members, until it reached the present number.

Members are now based in different locations all over the world, half of which are outside the country (including the United States, Australia, Africa and Europe). The rest are either in Cebu, Manila or other Philippine provinces. Members share several characteristics in common: age, sex, place of origin and to a certain extent, educational background. Those who belong to the group are aged 36-39; female; from Cebu; and are Theresians (i.e., have studied at St. Theresa's College, Cebu). But they also have varied characteristics in terms of occupation, income level, and place of residence. Various occupations include nurses, physical therapists, doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, accountants, businesswomen and housewives. In terms of place of residence, around 60 are in the United States, 5 in Australia, 3 in Europe, 1 in Africa, 10 in Manila, 4 in other Philippine provinces and the rest are Cebu-based.

On-line Interactions

These members seldom see each other face-to-face because of location and work, providing spatial and temporal limitations. Interactions are mostly on-line through group email. For this year, the group averages 200 messages a month. The most number of messages sent in a month was in August (1017 messages) and June 2005 (864 messages), around the time of the 20th year homecoming of the batch in July 2005. This activity was the biggest event organized and participated in by the group. The group site made possible the gathering of majority of group members, including some who are based abroad, for the event, as well as the raising of funds.

Other events are posted in the group calendar incorporated in the group features, mostly containing birthdays of members. Regular birthday reminders are sent automatically via the group email for the whole year. Thus birthday greetings comprise most of the email exchanges in the group. At times, death notices of members' immediate family members, are likewise posted in the group email. Occasionally, some members organize mini-reunions in specific locations, where those living within the vicinity get together for dinner. At times, members get in touch during wakes of family members of the group's members. These mini-reunions are made possible through communications over the internet through the group site. A brief announcement is posted, clarifications and discussions as to the venue, date,

time and other details are done through group email. Confirmations and cancellations of attendance are also done on-line. Aside from the usual greetings and activity preparations, there are also occasional discussions on various topics, the latest one of which was regarding Korean culture. Some members likewise forward quotes, jokes, stories and anecdotes regarding love, life and religion.

In a group survey conducted on-line, all members who responded stated that they think the e-group is a venue to reminisce the good old days and it helps them keep in touch with old pals. From observations of on-line interactions taking place on the site, out of the 140 members, regular message sending and replying is done by only about 20 members, mostly those based abroad, with an occasional note or two from the others. Most members are silent. From off-line interviews done, some Cebu-based members mentioned that they seldom log-on to the internet either because they do not have access to the internet in their homes or they are busy with work. Thus, when they go on-line, they get to read the hundred messages sent for the duration they were off-line. According to them, they delete most of the messages and read some of them. And because they have not been updated, most of them choose not to say anything. Others send belated greetings for birthday celebrants, and apologize for not having logged-on for quite some time. Others reply in bulk, meaning, they reply to all the messages in one email after they have read all the prior messages. Some are content with just reading email exchanges among other members. A positive note shared by group members is that on-line interaction facilitates the possibility of off-line interactions. For example, phone numbers are exchanged over the internet, but actual interactions take place over the phone. Another is the communicating over the internet the time and venues for mini-reunions, but actual interactions occur face-to-face. Thus, internet use has increased the interactions among the batch mates both online and offline.

Photos of these mini-reunions in Cebu and in the US are posted in the photos section of the group site. To date, there are 27 albums, mostly on group gatherings, a few old pictures from elementary to high school, some family pictures and some current pictures of the STC school grounds. The high school yearbook is also found in the links section. There is also a link to a photo collection of the present "look" of the members. Photos on the 20th alumni homecoming have also been posted both in the photos and links section. These photos are an important component of the site, as it provides members with an update on how their batch mates look like at present. Most comments on the photos are that "you haven't changed a bit" or "you look the same as you were in high school".

Differential access to the internet is one of the factors for varied levels of on-line interaction in the group. Members with internet connections at home, tend to be very active in sending messages. Most of them are based abroad. Other members, who have internet access in their workplace are also active in the group. Those who are abroad have better access as most of them have computers at home or in the office that are connected to the internet. Variations in the levels of interaction among members with direct internet access, depend on the personality of the individual as she was known back in high school. The more out-going ones tend to be more vocal compared to the “shy” ones. Variations may also be because of differentials in user competence. Some members say they do not know how to use the computer, or they do not know how to access the group site, etc.

There are also sub-groups within the large group. Just like any other community, there are groups based on level of friendship, location and interests. The high school “barkadas” tend to interact with their group within the larger group. Aside from group emails, they also interact more frequently either through private email or off-line. In this case, gender is not an issue, as all members are female. Other studies have pointed out that women tend to access the internet more than men do.

Interaction patterns were observed to follow a cycle. Newly-added members tend to communicate more than the old ones. The first round of emails sent by these members is usually on being overwhelmed at seeing their good old high school pals again after so many years. They provide updates about themselves. They are quite thankful to the moderator for hooking them up to everyone else. This initial reaction, would later decline to “e-mailing once a week”, then further declining to “once-a-month emails”, and to just reading the mails. Group interactions are livelier when there is an occasion or an upcoming real activity.

These patterns of interactions observed clearly point out that the internet has contributed to the maintenance of community ties through both on-line communication and face-to-face interaction. As a result of their virtual interconnectedness, they communicate even more with their batch mates. The internet has also helped maintain contacts of members over long distances. This validates similar research findings that the Internet sustains community bonds by complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction. This may be the difference of purely virtual communities to communities that are both real and virtual.

What are the implications of these changing patterns of interaction, with the growing number of cyber communities? One thing is for sure – the spatial and temporal dimensions of “community” have become redefined to a certain extent. Communities’ physical locations can now include


“cyberspace”. Interactions within communities are a continuum from off-line to on-line, complementing each other. These may be one of the positive effects of globalizing technologies – bringing people closer to each other crossing time and space. However, there may be limitations in the participation of group members in these virtual communities, based on off-line issues such as differential access, user competence, relationships, members’ occupation and personality, among others.

The methodology of online ethnography is in itself exploratory. But given the trend in communities from rural to urban to cyberspace, anthropologists need to further explore and develop methodologies to effectively do “fieldwork” in a globalizing world in cyberspace.

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