

Anthropology Goes Online: An Ethnography of Online Interactions

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Despite its incredible pace of development - or perhaps because of it - anthropologists have been cautious in their approach of the internet to date. Research has been undertaken on the subject of online sociality, but by and large anthropologists have operated offline with having taken internet interaction as both subject and medium. Nonetheless this is exactly what I hope to achieve in this essay through an ethnography of my experience of fieldwork among commenting participants on the web logs ('blogs') *The Untrusted* and *Untrusted, Too*. In an extended virtual discussion with these 'commenters', I began by asking how they differentiated computer-mediated and face-to-face social interactions, but ended by realizing that their conceptualizations of internet sociality rejected the internet-'real world' distinction I had assumed in favour of a more complex and often ambiguous figuring of what is 'real' within one world that embraces both online and offline sociality.

This essay is also, however, a reflection on the task of doing anthropology online, a reflection that had been in the back of my mind from the outset of my fieldwork, but that the above realisation forced into focus. In the 'real world' encounters of traditional research, anthropologists use social relations to investigate social relations and so I shall consider how the anthropological project changes when this method goes online. For me, using the medium of the internet to approach and converse with informants had a revelatory quality crucial to my understanding of the experience of sociality on the internet. This project, then, seeks to combine what I have learned about the constructed realities of online social interaction through my discussions with individuals on the internet and my observations of their behaviour with my own reflections on situating myself as anthropologist, and by extension anthropology in general, online.

The Story: Finding the Field, Finding my Focus

The story of my fieldwork is a long and convoluted one, which begins with my experiences not on *The Untrusted*, but on The Guardian's *Comment is Free* website (CIF).¹

¹ *Comment is Free*, The Guardian, at [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree>]. CIF is a quintessential example of the phenomenon known as 'Web 2.0' in that it emphasises user interactivity over top-down

On online fora such as these participants become known to one another through the 'comments' they leave on stories, even coming to describe each other as friends despite typically never having met face-to-face. While I myself had never been an active participant, I browsed CIF often and was interested by the strong sense of community that I had witnessed developing between posters online. My original decision to take CIF as my field in the sense of both medium and topic for this project thus came naturally: it was the locus of internet interaction I knew best and, having no face-to-face acquaintance with any CIF commenters, my only immediately obvious point of contact.

My first foray on CIF did not go as planned; the comment I posted there was largely ignored by other readers (see Appendix I). Fortunately, however, one commenter noticed my attempts at conversation and gave me a link to another, smaller blog, called *The Untrusted* (the UT), where they thought I might have more luck.² Having introduced myself there, I was promptly invited by a number of other users to write a piece about my project for their companion blog *Untrusted, Too* (UT2) which, like CIF, contains longer essays on a variety of subjects which readers discuss by posting comments beneath them.³ Accordingly, in April I wrote and posted to UT2 an essay explaining my anthropological attempt to compare online and face-to-face social interaction, beneath which ensued a month-long discussion with a number of UTers about their ideas and experiences of sociality online.⁴ As this discussion proceeded, I began to recognise these ideas as forming part of the narrative of my own experience in the field. My analysis of what UTers said to me and did on their blogs will thus lead directly into my reflections on doing anthropology online.

content delivery; it is effectively an online editorial page, frequently updated with short opinion pieces commissioned by The Guardian, beneath each of which follows a 'thread' of replies left by readers or 'commenters'.

² *The Untrusted*, at [<http://cifthreadrefugee.blogspot.com>]. The UT is communally maintained by a group of CIF regulars who branched off to start their own forum. Rather than responding to commissioned articles, 'UTers' use the 'comment' feature on their communally-edited blog to talk about whatever they choose, be it the events of their own days, the goings-on over on CIF (which many UTers still frequent), or any other subject of interest from physics to philosophy to pop culture.

³ *Untrusted, Too*, at [<http://untrusted2.blogspot.com>].

⁴ 'Social interaction for anthropologists', *Untrusted, Too*, at [<http://untrusted2.blogspot.com/2010/04/social-interaction-for-anthropologists.html>].

What They Said and What They Did: Constructing Online and Offline Realities

In the UTERS' conceptualisation of the internet and their activities on it, a theme that emerged and re-emerged in conjunction with their sensitivity to the idea of 'difference' was that of 'reality'. From the outset of my project, I had been aware of treading a difficult terminological line here. I perceived the segregation of online and offline interaction as necessary, but was anxious to avoid suggesting that the world of the internet was somehow 'less real' than the world offline. As a compromise, I resorted to referring to the dichotomy as between the online world and the 'real world', in inverted commas, thus acknowledging the internet as a technology within, but separate from and perhaps subordinate to, the 'true' concrete world.

When I published my essay on UT2 using these terms, however, the questioning was turned back on me over precisely this imputation of 'difference'. In the first lengthy response to my piece, a commenter going by the name BeautifulBurnout took issue with the distinction's implication that actions online, by virtue of their separation from the so-called 'real world', were not themselves 'real' or 'serious' (02/04/2010, 13:11).⁵ She described this as a 'daft' notion that was nevertheless prevalent among younger users of internet fora. In her view, 'interaction with people on the internet is just as much a part of real life as anything else we do in life.' BeautifulBurnout gave particular mention to internet users who used online fora to post rude or offensive material: the typical defence of such behaviour, she wrote, was predicated on its 'unreality' by virtue of its separation from the offline domain, where social constraints of acceptability are more easily enforced through the immediate, face-to-face presence of the other. Nonetheless, she and others felt that this was no justification. Messages left on online fora were still a form of communication between real people, words that therefore could and did have real implications for these people in their offline lives.

In a past CIF thread about online communities I had seen commenter penileplethysmograph (known as pen, also active on the UT blogs) make a similar point.⁶ Online communities, pen suggested, are no less real for being routed through computer

⁵ I shall follow commenters' own spelling of their usernames exactly, meaning that some names will appear uncapitalised or incorrectly spaced. Comments will be date-stamped in the format (dd/mm/yyyy, hh:mm) for reference purposes.

⁶ See comments on Mariam Cook, 'The true worth of online communities', *Comment is Free*, The Guardian,

networks rather than rooted in time and place (25/03/2010, 14:00); the effectiveness of these 'mediated' interactions is proven, he further claimed, by instances of online interactions overlapping onto the offline world (25/03/2010, 14:08). He adduced the Guardian-affiliated 'atheist bus campaign' of 2008 as an example of this, in which an idea for an advertising campaign to counter Christian messages on the sides of UK buses became a reality after attracting attention on a CIF thread. The rigid quarantine I had tried to impose on the internet failed to account for how events in what I had called the 'real world' found their origins online, and conversely how the concrete ramifications of online sociality manifested themselves offline.

In an interesting development, a similar case of online-offline overlap involving pen himself came to light early in my fieldwork on UT2. It was revealed to me that pen was unwell and writing his comments from hospital. Many of his fellow UTers, learning of this for the first time, had sent him cards and gifts; some were even planning to visit him in person. Here again, then, was an instance of the boundaries between internet and 'reality' blurring. I could not deny the continuity joining the online relationships many UTers had built with pen to the offline concern they genuinely felt for him as someone they considered a 'real' friend. Nonetheless, my instinct to subordinate internet relationships to those formed in the flesh persisted. Once pen's visitors had met him face-to-face, I felt, surely their relationship just had to be more *real* to them.

Nevertheless, my informants once again rejected my attempt to make a neat distinction between a 'real' world offline and a virtual one online. In the words of commenter JayReilly, in online relationships formed on fora like the UT blogs 'you might not know what someone looks like but you know their views, in some depth, on just about every topic under the sun' (08/04/2010, 21:15); many UTers told me that this mutual intellectual acquaintance gave online relationships a reality that was missing from even their closest offline ones. PhilippaB, for example, wrote that in one sense she felt she 'knew' many UTers better than her own best friends because of the 'pure access to a poster's thoughts and ideas' on a 'comment site' such as UT2 (02/04/2010, 14:02); 'online relationships might be seen as more real', she said, 'because you get straight to the ideas' (02/04/2010, 14:05). Rather than figuring the displacement of online interaction as something separate from or

at [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/mar/25/online-communities-virtual-worlds>].

auxiliary to 'real world' interaction, then, these users told me that internet encounters simply had a different kind of reality to them.

These observations suggested to me a Weberian subjectivist approach to the internet. 'An association does not "exist",' in Weber's words, '... except by virtue of the possibility that an action proceeding from such an intention will be performed' (1922: 34). This statement seemed perfectly to echo my informants' explanations of the reality of online relationships - that is, their 'existence' - with reference to 'actions' overlapping from on to offline. I also found it helpful to think about internet sociality as a manifestation of Weber's theory of the efficacy of mental representations. Online fora such as the UT blogs demonstrate 'a dynamic set of systematic social meanings that enables participants to imagine themselves as a community' (Weiss et al. 2005: 206). Within the emergent Web 2.0 phenomenon, these 'systematic social meanings' are constructed by those participants themselves. Weber, obviously, was referring to pre-internet sociality when he argued that individuals interacted primarily with representations, rather than abstract 'facts'. In applying his theory to the internet, however - a seemingly disembodied technology existing simultaneously everywhere and nowhere - the workings of a sociality predicated on 'ideas about the world' are made more abundantly clear than ever. Rather than directly interfacing with one actual objectively-existing reality, internet users act according to how they represent their fora, that is, according to their 'ideas about reality'.

Many other themes and ideas came out over the course of my discussions with the UTERS, including the distinctive qualities of encounters based in text, rather than audio-visual cues; the closely related problem of 'reading' the other in the absence of these cues, at the same time as each participant only selectively reveals the self; and the question of whether cross-geographical lines of common interest along which people engage in interactions online can ultimately produce cohesive internet 'communities'.⁷ Regretfully, I have no space to discuss these fascinating ideas here. During my fieldwork, however, I did

⁷ This last point of inquiry is one of the most widely-discussed in current work on internet sociality. Evans (2004) refers to the 'self-selected' quality of online relationships as forming different sorts of communities to those constrained by geography and chance meetings offline. Chambers (2006), however, rejects the terminology of 'virtual communities', arguing that this very phrase sets up the false dichotomy criticised by my informants in this project, while Wilson and Peterson, too, question 'community's' connotations of coherence and boundedness.

have the opportunity of observing for myself how these ideas spoken about by the UTERS, as well as some unspoken ones, ramified into user practice.

One evening on the daily UT thread, a regular user named Paul launched into an apparently unprovoked tirade in which he insulted almost every UTER in the most offensive terms and accused the community of racial discrimination.⁸ This entire episode, as upsetting as its violence and racial overtones were, was a transfixing demonstration of many of the ideas my informants had brought out in reflecting on their online experiences, but also of many from which they had dissociated themselves earlier in my conversations with them. Initially, the exchanges seemed to bear out the notion of the online-offline 'indistinction'. The fury of Paul's attacks on the other UTERS seemed surely to belie a certain level of 'real' involvement on his part. The surprise and offence taken by other users too was palpable, and so much more so as Paul began to draw on details of their 'real lives'.

Simultaneously, however, a subtle tendency to distinguish and privilege offline sociality over online relationships seemed to emerge from both sides of the dispute. In one comment, for example, Paul labelled BeautifulBurnout a poor parent in the 'real world' for spending time on the internet instead of with her teenage son, whom she had mentioned in an earlier comment, thus suggesting that this '*really* real' relationship ought to be privileged over merely 'virtual' online encounters. Many other UTERS, too, despite their earlier assertions to me that the two are not in any simple sense separable, exploited the inevitably perceptible fissure between communication mediated by the internet versus that undertaken face-to-face to mitigate the force of Paul's attack. BeautifulBurnout dismissed it as an inconsequential 'internet moment', stemming from textual misinterpretation and thus unique to the written exchanges of the internet (08/04/2010, 19:41). The lapse into the old virtual-reality dichotomy with which I myself had begun was even clearer in the comment of one annetan42, who told Paul to 'grow up' and wrote that 'in the real world people can disagree without being abusive' (08/04/2010, 20:17).

Throughout this confrontation one UTER, heyhabib, remained notably unscathed by Paul's tirade. The relationship between the two was unclear: despite Paul's having

⁸ This thread accessible online at [<http://cifthreadrefugee.blogspot.com/2010/04/080410.html>]. Since my first reading of this episode on the UT, the website registers that Paul has deleted all the comments he made. Here again is a very interesting example of how online interactions are in at least some regards qualitatively different to offline ones, in which statements cannot be so easily retracted!

addressed many posts to him, heyhabib never replied on the thread. My first instinct, based on the racial content of his messages to heyhabib, was that Paul had selected him as an ally of sorts on the assumption of a shared non-white identity, based on the his name and profile picture, and that heyhabib's silence was a rejection of this questionable show of solidarity. As Paul persisted in addressing heyhabib despite the latter's failure to respond, however, the oddly specific references contained in his comments made me wonder whether the two knew each other offline, perhaps sharing a workplace.

The conclusions I drew from this entire event were twofold. First, the uncertainty of my interpretation of the incident with heyhabib seemed to me to represent the ultimate ambiguity of the online-offline distinction. I found myself unable to tell what the relationship between the two was or 'where' it existed. This disorientation confirmed for me that which, despite my difficulties understanding, the UTers had told me from the very beginning: online and offline are not always clearly distinguishable. Participants can construct these worlds within one other, and this within a single reality that comprises both forms of interaction. At the very moment of this understanding, however, I also saw a discrepancy between this mental construction of the internet and my informants' actual use of it. In practice, I saw them moving smoothly from the position that online interactions are distinctively yet equally real to offline ones into a contradictory register that discounted Paul's abuse by virtue of the online medium in which it was delivered. The abstract terms in which they phrased their behaviour were in many ways enlightening and yet their use of them, and mine, were merely contingent interpretations. The same users easily reworked their perspectives on the online situation and their position in it to explain unexpected and otherwise inexplicable behaviour, such as Paul's, as unique to a clearly-bounded, quasi-unreal internet.

This experience of finding an imperfect correlation between what informants say and what they do is common to all fieldwork. It can often provide, as it did for me, an heuristic point of entry to better understanding both what one has been told and what one has seen as part of one story. In my case, this common fieldwork experience played an integral part in what I ultimately see as the most significant product of my research, that is, my understanding of my own place in the encounters I experienced as an anthropologist online. It is with reference to this experience that I shall conclude this essay.

Anthropology Goes Online: Making Virtual Reality

From the very outset of my project, I was self-conscious. I felt from the beginning that, wherever my fieldwork took me, one of the most interesting experiences it could give me would be the opportunity to reflect first hand on my position as the novice anthropologist. As I found my field and navigated through its situations, I became preoccupied with this reflexive impulse, and had to be careful not to let it occlude my informants altogether. Nevertheless, the ideas that grip me most as I conclude this project are those I have gleaned from turning the anthropological gaze upon the discipline itself. I deeply regret that I do not have room to go into much greater depth on this subject, but a brief resume of the conclusions I have drawn from it follows.

If I have taken nothing else away from my work online, I am left with a deep and abiding impression that anthropology is like social interaction as my informants theorised it, in that its pursuit both does and does not change when taken online. On the one hand, when online I still struggled with many of the traditional field's perennial problems. How was I to manage reciprocity with my informants, when all we exchanged were words? The question of objectivity, too, arose throughout my project. I caught myself thinking of the blog post I had been invited to write on UT2 as a literally 'author-itative' soapbox from which to expound my anthropological 'knowledge'. More than once, I had to consciously remind myself not to imagine that I could use internet fora as my medium externally to the very peculiarities of online interaction in which I was interested - without being misinterpreted, interrupted, ignored, and roundly criticised for my ideas, without the constraints of face-to-face niceties. These problems, of reciprocity, of objectivity, of using any form of social relations to investigate those selfsame social relations, are defining qualities of the anthropological project, and they did not abandon me when I went online.

Yet in other ways, I found that things did change enormously on the internet. My first experiences commenting on CIF were difficult. I found the pace and round-the-clock activity on the threads disorienting and almost impossible to keep up with; I lost many opportunities to speak with users by taking too long to compose my messages and replies, out of concern at how easily words were misinterpreted. Likewise, I sometimes had difficulty reading my own interlocutors. I found pen's first messages to me so cryptic, for

example, that I initially wondered whether he was mocking me (17/03/2010, 11:15). Such troubles, while not eliminated in face-to-face conversation by any means, are at least mitigated with face-to-face cues. Fieldwork online, however - like any online interaction - loses these cues and must find ways of compensating textually.⁹

My most enlightening moment throughout the entire project, however, struck me at the time of the Paul crisis on the UT. I had not seen this dispute unfolding in real time, but had been referred to it the next day by another UTer who thought it might be of interest to me. As I read backwards in time, the question of 'being there' sprang to my mind. Spurred by earlier thoughts about how the saying-doing discrepancy migrates online, I realised that locating the anthropologist and his or her role in online fieldwork is one way in which going online really does change the project of fieldwork. Simply reading the stream of comments from the night before, without any interaction with their authors, it suddenly occurred to me that the entire necessity of 'being there' in order to observe how people's actions differ from what they say they do had been transfigured. For most participants, who do not know each other offline, all that constitutes their online interactions is written. As a reader, then, I could see everything, because in online exchanges everything is there for anyone to see, recorded indefinitely on the archived pages of the internet. What, then, was the purpose of my interaction, when these exchanges were already laid out before me in their entirety? Why 'be there' by writing, when I could equally 'be there' simply by reading?

For my part, still, actually interacting with the UTers rather than merely reading covertly what they wrote was important. I say this for the same reasons to which I attribute the value of undertaking fieldwork online in the first place: I do not believe that any of these interesting aspects of online encounters would have occurred to me had I only read, or had I worked offline. My own first-hand experience of floundering on CIF, then adjusting on the UT blogs was a necessary one. Seeing how interactions change on the internet - even if it is a change that tends towards a blurring of the distinction implied by 'on the internet' in the first place, rather than a demarcation of distinction from the offline - was crucial. Indeed, it took the process of immersing myself in the context within which my informants were

⁹ See Menchik and Tian (2008) for a discussion of such 'semiotic tactics'. Anthropological analysis' intersection with literary theory on Web 2.0, as it was described to me by pen on the UT thread for 17 March 2010 (17/03/2010, 12:17), is an interesting one which deserves closer attention in the literature.

speaking about and acting on this very notion of blurring before I could really begin to understand what I was told about it and what I saw in practice.

Looking back at the way my conversations with my informants proceeded, I see how my original inquiries as to 'the difference' between online and face-to-face social encounters must have seemed shallow and reductive. My interlocutors showed me that difference in this context must not be taken for granted, since the very online-offline division is itself ambiguous. Most importantly, however, by working *online* I further realised that the questions I came to ask, and what I saw and was told in response, were equally part of the narrative of my own fieldwork experience as it unfolded on the internet. Ultimately, what I have learned in these few short months - not only about online sociality, but about the anthropological project itself - has far surpassed what could be taken from a purely offline approach to understanding internet interactions. Taking anthropology online is as fascinating as it is necessary to the discipline's continuing project of seeing the world, in its ever-developing embrace of online and offline together, through different eyes.

Appendices

Appendix I

Below is the first comment I posted to CIF. It was one of the first on a thread marking CIF's fourth anniversary and inviting users to discuss whether CIF had 'made a difference' over the years (17/03/2010, 09:18).¹⁰ Interestingly, the reason my post went largely ignored by other commenters was that, one day previously, one of the forum's oldest and best-known commenters had been banned by the CIF moderators for a post they had deemed inappropriate and so regular users were in the midst of a heated debate on this topic, to the exclusion of the set theme. Fortunately, one user suggested the UT to me, where some of the ideas below were indeed allowed to develop.

I'm a student of social anthropology in the UK currently undertaking fieldwork for an ethnography of online interactions, so Comment is Free's 4th birthday really interests me. Although this is my first-ever post on CIF, as a long-time

¹⁰ 'Happy fourth birthday, Cif', *Comment is Free*, The Guardian, at [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/mar/17/comment-is-free-is-four>].

reader I've been very interested to watch how it's developed 'below the line' [i.e. the line dividing commissioned piece from reader response] over the years. I'm particularly interested in how the social dynamic of an online community like CIF differs from that of in-person encounters. So, does CIF make a difference? I'd say it does make a difference to the way we interact.

It strikes me that the simple act of entering into discussion with another user on a thread is equally one of entering into a relationship with that user: however brief and impersonal the virtual exchange may be, it is a social interaction. Furthermore, I think anyone who knows CIF would agree that the relationships formed there very often do take on personal qualities as well. We form powerful bonds of solidarity or antagonism over discussions of issues like sexuality, gender, race, or class. Even friendships and romantic relationships - and long-distance enmities! - can develop between people who have never met face to face.

But what I find most interesting is that, for all their similarities, the relationships formed on CIF are qualitatively different to those stemming from face-to-face interactions. In person, our physical proximity to each other ramifies into the social relationships that we develop. We make conscious and subconscious judgments about the people we interact with, based on our immediate perceptions of their person and manner; we are so judged ourselves. These nuances lend social encounters in the flesh an ambiguity: interpose a computer screen, however, and the immediacy is removed. A conversation in person is a negotiation of a different sort to the mediated exchange of posts on CIF.

I'd be extremely interested to hear from all CIFers old and new what they make of this. Is the social dynamic on CIF different to that of 'real world' interactions? What are the implications of this? For those of you who have met friends or partners through CIF, or who have had the chance to be at a physical get-together of CIFers, it would also be interesting to know what it's like to meet and interact with your fellow commenters in person, having gotten to know them online.

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