

Editorial

Special Issue: Methodological Approaches to the Study of Virtual Environments and Online Social Networks

Dr. Delia Dumitrica

With more and more graduate students interested in the ubiquitous presence of new media in our lives, questions of methodology become crucial: how to study online environments? What challenges and barriers have to be taken into account when approaching the internet as a site of research? How are graduate students re-appropriating and adjusting the existing methodological repertoire of social sciences to the investigation of virtual worlds and online social networks? Driven by such questions, this Special Issue brings together an eclectic group of young researchers negotiating the conditions under which their interest in and approach to virtual worlds and online social networks become a legitimate and established part of social sciences methodologies. The research presented here bridges both quantitative/qualitative and social/technical divides. Most of our contributors in this issue are currently undertaking their MA or PhD studies in journalism, communica-

tion and culture, cultural anthropology, sociology, arts and humanities, or science and innovation studies, while three of the authors hold a faculty or a research position. In terms of geographical scope, the contributors are working or studying in Austria, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Virtual environments and online social networks have become an increasingly important social arena where our personal and public lives are unfolding. Yet, the study of such arenas is just as difficult and complex as the study of social life in general. As Steve Woolgar (2002, 4-6) has remarked, we are still in the process of moving from the “sweeping grandiloquence” of a research program interested in the social context of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to the realization that our theoretical vocabularies, tools of analysis as well as personal beliefs play a central role in the very constitution of this research

program. He further observes that we need to question who we (the inhabitants and researchers of these virtual spaces) are, what new lines of division and exclusion are (re-)introduced, and how the intertwining of the virtual and the real translates for different groups, cultures and societies. All of this calls for enhanced reflexivity in the process of doing research in and on cyberspace and reminds us that the latter is primarily a social space as opposed to a space of anonymity, freedom, equality and, above all, unrestricted possibility. Indeed, cyberspace provides a sphere in which the longstanding issues of the relation between social structure and agency, the position of the researcher and the politics of methodological choices remain crucial.

I would like to echo this perspective here: all too often, the students I teach take it for granted that virtual environments are available to everyone everywhere, that such spaces are within their control, and that if exclusion or division do happen in and around these spaces, they are a consequence of “bad”, yet personal, choice. From this viewpoint, there is little to be said about the relation between these highly individualized virtual spaces and, for example, the social implications of the commodification of identity, information and communication. In a virtual world like *Second Life*, the buying and selling of body parts such as skins, enhanced breasts or lips, or

chiseled pectorals are at the same time a familiar continuation of the mainstream obsession with beautiful and fit bodies, and a surreal, yet disturbing, exaggeration of it (Dumitrica and Gaden 2008; Gaden and Dumitrica 2011). A dismissal of such practices as simple “games”, “fantasies” or “escapism” fails to consider the mutual shaping of online and offline social practices. In questioning this surreal commodification of the body, we are also questioning the values, norms and practices through which we attempt to create and make sense of our own lives.

In his usual bold manner, Marshall McLuhan (2010, 108) once declared that the mere presence of a medium was the “message,” “for the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” The “virtual” (or the “cyberspace”) has been similarly hailed as the new solution to all social problems; its mere existence seemed to make change happen. This rhetoric of benefic change portrayed the internet as “a technological marvel, thought to be bringing the new Enlightenment to transform the world [...]. All were supposedly connected to all, without boundaries of time and space” (Wellman 2004, 124; see also Mosco 2005; Woolgar 2002). Yet, as inspiring as McLuhan’s statements may be, it is only too easy to forget that there is no such thing as a “mere presence” or a “sudden introduction” of virtual

spaces into our lives. The functions, configurations and values that come to constitute these techno-spaces are molded political choices and negotiations over the distribution of resources and power relations in society. The study of “virtual environments” should not ignore the ways in which social and technical aspects are infusing each other.

In many ways, the contributions to this Special Issue address these concerns. Each methodological approach highlights an aspect of the difficulties in studying virtuality. Together, they point to the complexity of these “spaces,” signaling that the mere labels of “virtual environments” and “online social networks” are violently forcing a multiplicity of experiences and dynamics under all-encompassing, yet still empty phrases. Each one of the articles included here forces the reader to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a unitary “virtual space.” Furthermore, the contributions are also prompting us to acknowledge the role of our own disciplinary constraints in approaching online worlds as sites of “legitimate” academic research. The contributors to this Special Issue reflexively engage with their own understanding of online worlds in their papers. For instance, Milner asks to what extent his own method of “silently analyzing ‘discourse’ from a forum, comments section, blog, chat room, or Twitter feed was good enough to get to ‘culture.’” Jonhas recalls how

a discussion with one of her professors prompted her to question how she understood the role of the infrastructure of websites in shaping users’ interaction with the concept and practice of “race.” In a similar vein, Schönian attempts to bring to light the ongoing choices that researchers have to make throughout the research process, reminding readers of the difficulties of capturing and analyzing everyday practices.

Putting together this Special Issue has been particularly rewarding for two reasons: Firstly, it was encouraging to see the variety of approaches in the field as well as to consider the epistemological questions they raised. As Burnett, Ess and Consalvo (2010, 2) remark, the field of internet studies is increasingly becoming more mature, with a growing “body of literature that represents [...] an increasingly sophisticated set of theoretical reflections regarding appropriate methods and research ethics.” One of the implicit threads running through this edition is that of the crucial role of the researcher’s a priori assumptions about online spaces in the development of the research design. The papers included here expand the existing ethnographic approaches to virtual environments by incorporating insights from semiotics, phenomenology and postmodernism. Where the existing literature on online social networks tends to focus on identity, networks, connections and privacy (boyd and Ellison

2007), this Special Issue looks into the details of developing suitable research tools for these networks, proposing ways in which the traditional research methods can be adapted to new configurations. For example, Munteanu approaches photography blogs from a postmodern perspective, recommending an analysis that moves “from preliminary empirical, observational online data towards speculative possibilities of framing these observations within a credible theoretical context.” Forrest, on the other hand, argues for a non-visual approach to photography by focusing on the “practices and ‘doings’ of photography” and their potential for researching the online practices of sharing photographs.

Secondly, it was particularly rewarding to note the increasing interest in recuperating the interplay between the technical affordances and the social aspect of online environments. In my previous work on virtual environments (Dumitrica and Gaden 2008; Gaden and Dumitrica 2011; Dumitrica 2011), I felt that this interplay was often ignored at the expense of an interest in analyzing text, images or behavior online.

The first section of this edition brings together five articles dealing with various online and offline practices of use. Working with the example of video game fans, Milner questions the often taken-for-granted assumptions that online cultures are either “texts” or “places,” and that the researcher is either “par-

ticipant” or “observer.” He proposes that such assumptions need to be brought to the forefront of the research process and reflexively interrogated in terms of the methodological choices that they recommend and legitimize. By exploring his own research on FallOut fans, he discusses the complex relationship between methodological and the researcher’s own views of online environments. In a similar vein, Forrest argues against the artificial separation of online and offline practices. Using Flickr as an example, she considers the advantages of adopting a mixed theoretical framework combining phenomenological philosophy and non-representational theory. Recuperating the historical dimension of visual representation, Clark proposes an analysis of the representation of nature in Second Life. Using semiotics, he draws our attention to the importance of “ideology” as a theoretical concept in understanding and analyzing such virtual environments. The last two papers in this section take us into the realm of blogs. Reynauld, Giasson and Darisse explore the challenges and opportunities of using blogs as data for analysis. Looking at the case of Québec political bloggers, they argue that traditional sampling techniques need to take into account the specificities of the medium. In contrast, Munteanu offers a different take on blogs: his analysis, focused on a “nostalgic” or “vintage-oriented” blog, challenges

the view of young people as proponents of “newness.”

Although several of these contributions raise questions about the relation between the code behind online applications, their content (which is visible through the user-friendly interface) and the ways in which these applications are used, the papers grouped in the second section of this Special Issue take this relationship as a central lens through which to look at virtual spaces and social networks. In her discussion of online dating sites, Jonahs questions to what extent the choices embedded in the infrastructure of these websites are part of a wider discourse on “race.” In the following paper, Kramm details the methodological challenges faced by a multidisciplinary team investigating online social networking sites. He argues for the necessity of conceptualizing such sites as both a field of research and a tool for collecting the data. Schönian further investigates the relationship between the technical and the social aspects of the internet. She explores the theoretical and methodological possibilities opened by the idea of “praxiography,” an epistemological approach proposed by anthropologist Annemarie Mol (2002) that focuses on how objects are used and made sense of. Schönian provides an insight into how this idea has shaped her own research on the upgrade of a telecommunication company’s intranet. The last contribution in this

section, by Radstake and Scholten, reports on the inclusion of an online tool for connecting citizens and experts in a larger project. Although their research focuses primarily on the challenges of incorporating such a tool in citizen-engagement processes, this article also prompts us to reflect on our own assumptions of what online applications can or cannot do. The question of infrastructure may not be at the heart of the research project, but it certainly looms in the background of the researchers’ understandings of what the internet is, what it can do and how it works.

The Special Issue concludes with four book reviews providing a synopsis of published works on social media analysis software (Trowbridge), ethnographic practices in Second Life (Jensen, Chin) and methods for analyzing learning processes in virtual worlds (McKee).

Importantly, all of these contributions approach methodological issues for the study of virtual worlds and online social networks from the viewpoint of graduate students. This is an opportunity to reflect on the sinuous process of doing research: too often, our research is presented in a format that hides away the complicated operations through which we made choices about our case and our analysis, why we selected particular perspectives and ignored others, and how we advanced ideas and arguments, only to go back and reformulate them again and again.

As most of us discover through our graduate research work, questioning one's approach to and understanding of these online environments is simultaneously a process of self-discovery.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the reviewers who have made this Special Issue possible. Both graduate students and faculty members alike have ensured that the papers selected for the edition meet the academic standards that we have come to expect of peer-review publications.

References

- boyd, d. and N. Ellison. 2007. Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1): 210-30.
- Burnett, R., M. Consalvo and C. Ess. Eds. 2011. *The Handbook of Internet Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Dumitrica, D. 2011. An exploration of cheating in a virtual gaming world. *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 3(1): 21-36.
- Dumitrica, D. and G. Gaden. 2008. Knee-High Boots and Six-Pack Abs: Autoethnographic Reflections on Gender and Technology in Second Life. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1(3). <http://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/323> (accessed November 20, 2011).
- Gaden, G. and D. Dumitrica. 2011. Disciplining Fantasy Bodies in Second Life. In Krijnen, T., C. Alvares and S. Van Bauwel. Eds. *Gendered Transformations. Theory and Practices on Gender and Media*, Bristol: Intellect, 133-147.
- McLuhan, M. 2010. The medium is the message. In Durham, M. G. and D. M. Keller. Eds. *Media and Cultural Studies*. KeyWorks, Malden, MA: Blackwell, revised edition, 107-116.
- Mol, A. 2002. *The Body Multiple*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mosco, V. 2005. *The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power and Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Woolgar, S. 2002. Five rules of virtuality. In Woolgar, S. Ed. *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-22.