

# ANTH 498C/SOCI 498D: CYBERSPACE ETHNOGRAPHY 2.0

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Mondays, 2:00pm—5:15pm

Winter Semester, 2009  
03 credits  
05 January – 06 April, 2009  
Meeting days and times:  
Mondays: 6:00pm—8:15pm  
Campus: SGW, Room H-619

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Ethnography always has been adaptive, and ethnographers always have explored myriad cultural connections, but sometimes we risk forgetting these facts.

—Christine Hine

There's no there there.

—Gertrude Stein (speaking of Oakland, California)

## INTRODUCTION

This course focuses on ethnographic approaches to the study of cyberspace interactions, that is, personal immersion and first-hand research through experience and direct observation. One of our constant challenges will be in deciding if the study of life online is substantially different from life in other settings, and whether established theories can help us to understand online environments or demand new theoretical perspectives. The aim of the course is not necessarily to try to fit the Internet into what we already know, or to ask students to uncritically apply established theories and established ethnographic methods to this still relatively new set of arenas for social interaction and cultural representation.

This course is a combined exploration of research methods and new media studies. New media, such as those contained in the World Wide Web, are unlike mass media. With new media the consumers are often also the producers. The previous recipients of messages mediated by broadcasters is a reality that has been significantly eroded by a new generation of persons who produce messages, the narrow casters, engaged in customized production and consumption. We have moved from a mass media direction of communication that was one-to-many to one that is now many-to-many.

## VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY: Problems and Questions

One of the vital points to be encountered in this course has to do with the *real-ness* of cyberspace, that is to say, that online experiences are not “fake,” “inauthentic”, or totally derivative of and secondary to “meatspace.” Virtuality is a part of reality. Thus one challenge to us is to understand such online interactions in terms of what they mean for participants.

Ethnography has, according to prevailing notions, involved the sustained presence of a researcher in a so-called “field setting”, intensively involved in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the site. As Christine Hine argues, however, when the Internet becomes the focus for our studies, it is imperative that we examine not only how it is used for communicating, but also what it means as an object within people's lives and as a site for the achievement and sustenance of community-like formations.

Does the study of cyberspace tell us what we already know, but just in a new medium? Or does it tell us something about a medium that we did not know? Or something new about what we already thought we knew?

In this course, and in your own research, we will find that we repeatedly encounter the following distinctions, and oppositions, and that hopefully we can surpass them:

- **Real Life (RL) vs. Virtual Reality (VR)**: the assumption that what happens in cyberspace is not quite real, not authentically real, and is disconnected from real social life in part because of the disembodied nature of online representations
- **Face to Face (F2F) vs. Text to Text (T2T), Computer to Computer (C2C), Person to Person (P2P)**: in traditional ethnography, the face to face dimension has long been privileged as a means of accessing truth and reality that speculations from the armchair could not afford, in fact a scientific endeavor that privileged the notion of tangible reality, of directly observable empirical phenomena, of “being there”; cyberspace ethnographers outside of traditional ethnographic schools have challenged such notions of ethnography, and we should examine these arguments further and make our own decisions as to where we may be personally inclined
- **Offline vs. Online**
- **Consumption vs. Production**
- **Situated vs. Mobile**
- **Anonymity vs. Intimacy**

In addition we will need to grapple with debates surrounding the meanings of “virtual ethnography” and “cyberspace ethnography” and what these portend for our understanding and envisioning of the future of ethnography in both sociology and anthropology. This opposition between the two types of ethnography – virtual and physical – the course director will argue, is unnecessary and unproductive, and is of particular interest perhaps to anthropologists alone.

## PURPOSES AND GOALS

One of the instructional purposes of this course is to intensively engage students in developing critical skills that will serve them in various careers and/or in graduate studies. The ability to sift through data; apply theories; write concise descriptive and analytical accounts; presenting one's work to an audience; and to develop a research paper are some of the fundamental features of this course, not to mention that the course bolsters your “portfolio” of research methods. “Ethnography”, in various guises, has become a “hot” commodity in many spheres of media and market research — this course will equip students with a well-structured understanding of ethnography of new media and will guide them in developing ethnographic research projects.

## EXPECTATIONS

It is expected that by the end of this course, the student will have gained a greater appreciation for ethnographic approaches to the study of new media. Students should be able to demonstrate research skills, the application of concepts, and the ability to cover and grasp readings. Students will be expected to keep up to date with assigned course readings, participate in discussions, and work independently outside of class time in pursuing their own research projects.

Materials presented by the course director are not conclusive, complete, and finite; indeed, the lectures will aim to be more conversational, more probing, raising questions, and adding some material not covered by the readings. The emphasis in class will be on collective readings and collective discussion, not the transmission of information from the podium.

This course is may be different from what you have encountered thus far, in the following ways:

- (1) there are no tests or exams;
- (2) there are no readings to purchase, as they are all from online and often open access sources;
- (3) student creativity is especially encouraged – research only what fascinates you the most about cyberspace (but within the confines of this course).

Ask yourself what it is that you find most fascinating, intriguing, exciting, and/or important about your experiences on the Internet; why that is so; and, how that might form the subject of your research project.

Typically, to the extent that anything can be called “typical” in this relatively new research area, virtual ethnographies have focused on how people use the Internet to:

- develop relationships, from friendly correspondence, to confessional revelations, to dating
- construct, perform, and manage identities
- coordinate political action (extending to offline settings)
- achieve status and distinction
- develop alternative publishing
- engage in “citizen journalism”
- express unpopular opinions
- engage in economic activity or other forms of mutually beneficial exchange
- engage in sex or explore their sexuality
- experience alternate imaginary universes

Given how imaginative, creative and talented students can be, one can expect that we will have a great time hearing about some fascinating things during the presentations. There are few such courses, anywhere, and that alone already places you among a small and cutting-edge group of researchers and thinkers.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS, GRADING, AND POLICIES

The simplest way to think about the work for this course is that it is all about one thing: a **research paper**.

Work for this course consists of the following, in no special order of importance:

- (a) Your **BLOG**: this is the equivalent of a journal of ideas, preliminary analysis, research notes — see the course website for guidelines — worth **25%** of the final course grade. This blog is mandatory as a means for the instructor to periodically check on the development of your research work, and, to ascertain at the end of the course that students' research papers are the product of careful development and sustained engagement with a topic;
- (b) **PROSPECTUS** (Jan. 26) for your research paper — see the course website for guidelines — worth **5%** of the final course grade; include your completed ethics protocol form with this;
- (c) Research **PRESENTATION**, with all presentations scheduled for the final four weeks of the course— see the course website for guidelines — worth **15%** of the final course grade, and demanding the keen attention and participation through commentary on the part of your classmates;
- (d) ethnographic **RESEARCH PAPER** (due April 20) — see the course website for guidelines, and take note of evolving class discussions about this assignment — worth **45%** of the final course grade; and,
- (e) **CLASS PARTICIPATION**, which is a dominant part of our time in class, revolving around discussions of readings, plus your active feedback during research presentations — worth **10%** of the final course grade. In the exceptionally rare instance of abusive and disruptive behavior, a grade of zero will be automatically assigned for participation, since this component is intended to be productive and supportive.

## Q>IGNORE AT YOUR PERIL<R

This course is not a substitute for other courses or readings focusing *in general* on culture, social relations, image management, identity, communication practices, or politics on the Internet, nor a history of the development of the Internet or its economic foundations. All of those are extremely valuable areas of learning and at least some will, or should, inform the broad analytical perspectives and some of the background of your own research in this course.

The **focus of this course** is on a relatively narrow slice – it is about building knowledge of many of the things listed above, by following ethnographic methodologies common to both sociology and anthropology. **The course is really about how to do ethnography on the Internet**, and what we can learn from such ethnographies is the subject of your research paper.

While **ethnography** remains the centrepiece of this course, you have two different options for your research paper:

- (1) **AN ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY**: This is the first preference of this course. This is where you personally participate in an online network and record your personal observations, reflect on your own practices within that network, and try to analyze the broader social and cultural implications of the network at the focus of your study. Such a project is well suited to those who enter the course already with some experience in online social environments and networks, such as twitter, Facebook, MySpace, etc.

(2) **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A BOOK-LENGTH ETHNOGRAPHY:** for those who lack personal experience in online networks, or who would rather study what others have done, you can do an in-depth critical analysis of a complete book-length ethnography of the Internet. Only a minority of such projects will be allowed. Students choosing this option should:

(a) choose **one** of the following four ethnographies:

- ***Coming of Age in Second Life***, by Tom Boellstorff. Princeton University Press, 2008.
- ***Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline Identities Online***, by Neil Blair Christensen. Museum Tusulanum Press of the University of Copenhagen, 2003.
- ***Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet***, by Lisa Nakamura. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- ***The Virtual Campfire: An Ethnography of Online Social Networking***, by Jenny Ryan. MA thesis in Anthropology, Wesleyan University, 2008. Available at:  
<http://www.thevirtualcampfire.org/virtualcampfire.htm>

--students will be responsible for securing their own copy of any one of these, should any of the items not be available in a library--

(b) consult encyclopedia articles in the social sciences on what is ethnography, plus parts of a text on doing ethnography (in either sociology and/or anthropology) and ascertain what the authors of those pieces might say about the ethnography you chose to study from the list above – indicate where you stand

(c) try to interview the author of the ethnography from the list above, by email, sending them a very short list of questions (two or three) concerning what they think are the merits and shortcomings of doing ethnography online.

### How Student Work is Appraised:

For all work done in this course you will receive a numerical grade which will be converted to a letter grade when final grades are processed. To translate numbers into letter grades, please consult the following chart, copied directly from a faculty handbook in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. It is vital that you understand that the characterizations below (i.e., “excellent”) are central in guiding the instructor’s evaluation of the quality of a paper.

Work that covers all of the basics, in a reasonably competent fashion, without major flaws, is deemed “satisfactory.” Work that has few flaws, and shows an advanced understanding, writing and research ability is deemed “very good.” Work that leaves little room for improvement (within the context of expectations of a 400 level course), demonstrating that the student has taken considerable initiative, showing sophisticated understanding and ability, is deemed “excellent.”

|    |        |                    |                  |        |                             |          |            |               |
|----|--------|--------------------|------------------|--------|-----------------------------|----------|------------|---------------|
| A+ | 90-100 | } <b>EXCELLENT</b> | C+               | 67- 69 | } <b>SATIS-<br/>FACTORY</b> | D+       | 57- 59     | } <b>POOR</b> |
| A  | 85- 89 |                    | C                | 63- 66 |                             | D        | 53- 56     |               |
| A- | 80- 84 |                    | C-               | 60- 62 |                             | D-       | 50- 52     |               |
| B+ | 77- 79 | } <b>VERY GOOD</b> | <b>VERY POOR</b> |        | } {                         | F or FNS | 40 (30-49) |               |
| B  | 73- 76 |                    |                  |        |                             | R        | 20 ( 0-29) |               |
| B- | 70- 72 |                    |                  |        |                             |          |            |               |

**For all policies governing this course**, please see the course website and read the documents that are linked to it.

**Most important is the fact that *no late work* is accepted in this course. All late work is automatically assigned a grade of zero, unless a very serious, and documented, reason existed for the student being late. Otherwise, extensions are not permitted.**

## SCHEDULE

### Week #1: Monday, January 5

#### INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

[examine the website and course requirements very closely; set up a blog (your research journal for this course); please commence reading for the following week]

### Week #2: Monday, January 12

#### VIRTUALITY, CYBERCULTURE, and VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

#### Readings:

1. Hine, Christine. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
2. Hine, Christine. (1998). "Virtual Ethnography". Paper presented at the Internet Research and Information for Social Scientists conference, University of Bristol, 25-27 March.
3. Hine, Christine. (n.d.). Virtual ethnography.
4. Silver, David. (n.d.) "Introducing Cyberculture". Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies.
5. Shields, Rob. (2006). "Virtualities". *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2): 284-286.

### Week #3: Monday, January 19

#### **DOING VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIES, Part 1: VIRTUAL WORLDS**

Film: *AVATARA* (72 mins.) [this is also available on the front page of the course website, and you can review it in advance of class if you desire]

- take notes on this film
- discussion of pre-assigned questions about the film (see the course website for the handout)

#### **Readings:**

1. Forte, Maximilian C. (2004). Review of *Avatara*, (a “virtual ethnographic” film). *Visual Studies*, 19 (1), 116-118.
2. Bell, Mark W. (2008). “Toward a Definition of ‘Virtual Worlds’.” *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1 (1) July.
3. Maffesoli, Michel. (2008). “Second Life and Hyperreality.” *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1 (2), November.
4. Boellstorff, Tom. (2008). *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Ch. 3.

#### Monday, January 19, 2009

- Last day to add winter term courses
- Deadline for withdrawal with tuition refund from winter term courses



Week #4: Monday, January 26

DOING VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIES, Part 2: RESEARCH ETHICS

Readings:

1. Ess, Charles and the AoIR Ethics Working Group. (2002). *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee*. Association of Internet Researchers. (Read esp. pages 1-10)
2. Frankel, Mark S. and Sanyin Siang. (1999). "Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research on the Internet". A Report of a Workshop, June 10-11, Washington DC. American Association for the Advancement of Science.
3. Danet, Brenda. (2002). "Studies of Cyberpl@y: ethical and methodological aspects."

➤ Research Paper Prospectus due in class

➤ remember to include your completed ethics protocol form if you are doing an online ethnography – see the course website for the form

Week #5: Monday, February 2

DOING VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIES, Part 3: METHODS, 1/2

Readings:

1. Paccagnella, Luciano. (1997). "Getting the Seat of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3 (1).
2. Garton, Laura; Haythornthwaite, Caroline and Barry Wellman. (1997). "Studying Online Social Networks". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3 (1) at
3. Rybas, Natalia & Gajjala, Radhika (2007). "Developing Cyberethnographic Research

Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities.” [33 paragraphs] *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 8 (3)

4. Megens, Helen and Brian Martin. (2003). “Cybermethods: An Assessment”. *First Monday*

### Week #6: Monday, February 9

#### DOING VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIES, Part 4: METHODS, 2/2

#### Readings:

1. Kivits, Joëlle. (2005). “Online Interviewing and the Research Relationship.” In Christine Hine, ed., *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, pp. 35-50. Oxford: Berg.
2. Rutter, Jason and Smith, Gregory W.H. (2005). “Ethnographic Presence in a Nebulous Setting.” In Christine Hine, ed., *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, pp. 81-92. Oxford: Berg.
3. Beaulieu, Anne. (2005). “Sociable Hyperlinks: An Ethnographic Approach to Connectivity.” In Christine Hine, ed., *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, pp. 183-198. Oxford: Berg.

### Week #7: Monday, February 16

#### CYBERSPACE COMMUNITIES & IDENTITIES

#### Readings:

1. Kollock, Peter and Marc A. Smith. (1999). “Communities in Cyberspace.” In Marc Smith and Peter Kollock, eds., *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 3-25. London: Routledge.

2. Turkle, Sherry. (1995). *Life on the Screen*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
3. O'Brien, Jodi. (1999). "Writing in the Body: Gender (Re)production in Online Interaction". In Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds., *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 76-104. London: Routledge.

*Optional:*

Nakamura, Lisa (n.d.). "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet". Online paper archived

Week #8: Monday, February 23

Mid-Term Break

Friday, February 27

- President's Holiday: University closed

Week #9: Monday, March 2

**SOCIAL NETWORK SITES: SOCIAL CAPITAL, SURVEILLANCE**

Readings:

1. boyd, danah m. and Nicole B. Ellison. (2007). "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1), at
2. Ellison, Nicole B.; Steinfield, Charles and Cliff Lampe. (2007). "The Benefits of Facebook 'Friends': Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12: 1143-1168.
3. Lange, Patricia G. (2007). "Publicly Private and Privately Public: Social networking on YouTube". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (1) at

Week #10: Monday, March 9  
**ONLINE NARRATIVE NETWORKING**

**Readings:**

1. Doostdar, Alireza. (2004). " 'The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging': On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan." *American Anthropologist* 106 (4): 651-662.
2. Schmidt, Jan. (2007). "Blogging Practices: An Analytical Framework". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12: 1409-1427.
3. Baker, Nicholson. (2008). "The Charms of Wikipedia." *The New York Review of Books*, 55 (4), March 20.

(presentations will be scheduled for the following weeks, on March 9)

Week #11: Monday, March 16

**PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**

- 4-5 consecutive presentations
- approx. 10 mins. each
- break
- questions to presenters and general discussion

Monday, March 16, 2009

- Last day for academic withdrawal from two-term and winter-term courses.

Week #12: Monday, March 23

**PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**

- 4-5 consecutive presentations
- approx. 10 mins. each
- break
- questions to presenters and general discussion

Week #13: Monday, March 30

**PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**

- 4-5 consecutive presentations
- approx. 10 mins. each
- break
- questions to presenters and general discussion

Week #14: Monday, April 6

**PROJECT PRESENTATIONS**

- 4-5 consecutive presentations
  - approx. 10 mins. each
  - break
  - questions to presenters and general discussion
-