NETNOGRAPHY:
REDEFINED

2nd Edition

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The world with all its riches, life with its astounding achievements, man with the constant prodigy of his inventive powers, all are organically integrated in one single growth and one historical process, and all share the same upward progress towards an era of fulfillment – Tielhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (1957: 15)

Billions of individuals joined into networks partake in a complex world that not only reflects and reveals their lived experiences but is also, itself, a unique social phenomenon. Netnography can help you to understand that world. It can help you understand the various contexts that make it possible, the new social forms it advances, and the old forms it replaces. There are many challenges you will encounter when undertaking to research the world of online social interaction. This book offers solutions.

*Netnography: Redefined* uses social science methods to present a new approach to conducting ethical and thorough ethnographic research that combines archival and online communications work, participation and observation, with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis and research representation. With this edition, I continue my focus on the practical workbench level, focusing on how netnography comes together as specific sets of research practices, but I amplify, specify and extend the overall approaches in light of the rise of social media, critiques of community and culture, the various tensions between the networked individuals, the proliferation of online ethnographic methods, and the maturation and spread of netnography. *Netnography: Redefined* is a discontinuous
break from the past, a second edition that develops a radical new stance in the service of clearly differentiating the approach. In order to accomplish this, an introductory overview chapter is required. First it overviews the changing and always contested terrain of ethnographic inquiry. Secondly, it surveys the nature of online social experience and interaction: the phenomenon we wish to study.

- How can we understand human to human and human to machine interactions and experiences? What is the cultural and social phenomenon manifesting as social media, and how does it relate to concepts we already know such as networks, communities and culture?
- What are the research practices that guide, inform and structure netnography? How do historical precedent, extant theory and adaptive reasoning support them? How do the applications of these practices lead to cultural understanding?

As we outline and examine notions of online sociality and grapple with some of its vexing and important issues, it becomes apparent that simply opening a mobile phone and typing in some search terms is not, in itself, netnography. Netnography is, instead, specific sets of research positions and accompanying practices embedded in historical trajectories, webs of theoretical constructs, and networks of scholarship and citation; it is a particular performance of cultural research followed by specific kinds of representation of understanding. Thus, as a methodological primer, and not simply a book on method, this book must traverse and map some craggily shifting terrain, namely, the evolving, novel and challenging developments surrounding ethnography, technology research and social media.

In the former edition of the book, social media and online communities were still a bit of a novelty. Currently, with Facebook's active monthly users numbering over 1.3 billion, and social media and the Internet already widely recognized for changing politics, business and social life, there is little to be gained in belabouring the point that the study of social media is widespread, important and worthy of research attention. However, because of its timing, the former book misses much that is currently of operational interest to ethnographic Internet researchers, such as direct applications of netnography to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, and examples of successful tactics for doing so.

Applications and publications that use netnography are burgeoning across fields as diverse as Geography, Sociology, Media Studies, Travel and Tourism, Sexuality and Gender Research, Nursing, Addiction Research, Game Studies and Education. In the field of library and information studies, for example, Sally Burford and Sora Park used netnography to study how mobile tablet devices and their apps change young adults’ access to information (Burford and Park, 2014). In the field of food sociology, Cronin and colleagues (2014) used netnography to examine discussions of over-consumption of food and alcohol and to then illustrate and develop a theory of their ‘carnivalesque’ qualities. Contributing to the language studies field, Sultana and colleagues (2014) used a netnography of Facebook groups to study
the use of the ‘linguistic, social and cultural practices’ of young Bangladeshi and Mongolian adults. In economic geography, Grabher and Ibert (2014) used their netnographic study of online hybrid professional–hobbyist communities to conclude that the physical ‘distance’ in these communities should not be considered a deficiency, but rather an asset that helped them to collaboratively learn in ways different from face-to-face learning.

Across academic fields, netnography has been found immensely useful to reveal interaction styles, personal narratives, communal exchanges, online rules, practices, and rituals, discursive styles, innovative forms of collaboration and organization, and manifestations of creativity. This book captures the waves of exciting new social media research appearing across almost every academic field since the publication of that first edition. At the time of the last book, most of which was written in early 2009, there were few examples of the diverse forms that netnography was beginning to take, and the book contained very little systematic discussion of the various methodological and operational choices made by ethnographers seeking to use online archives and Internet communications as their main field site. This is remedied by the book’s current edition.

University of Amsterdam professor Richard Rogers (2009) traces the trajectory of Internet research and attempts to distinguish between digital and virtual methods, largely concluding that appropriate or superior digital methods should be native to the digital environment, and use such affordances as crowdsourcing and social network analysis, rather than trying to adapt extant ‘offline’ techniques to the digital environment ‘online’ (see also Caliandro, 2014; Marres, 2012; Wesch, 2009). The idea that blind application of extant techniques to online social interactions will not work has been a founding principle of netnography, which explicitly seeks intelligent adaptation. However, intelligent adaptation means considering all options and not simply throwing out past approaches because they have already been done. Even in revolutionary times, and perhaps especially in revolutionary times, history and continuity are important to the making of wise decisions. In this edition, netnography remains rooted to core ethnographic principles of participant-observation while also seeking to selectively and systematically incorporate digital approaches such as social network analysis, data science and analytics, visualization methods, social media research presence and videography.

The current edition of this book seeks to provide a text that:

- engages with, describes and illustrates netnography that uses the different social media sites and forms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and others;
- offers various up-to-date examples of successfully conducted and published netnographies across a variety of academic fields, including Library and Information Studies, Education, Nursing, Media and Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Game Studies, Tourism and Travel, Urban Studies and Geography;
- grapples with sophisticated anthropological critiques of ethnography and provides suggestions for an evolution of its approach;
• develops and promotes a nuanced view of the online social interaction that is aligned with current cultural and social theory; and
• gives particulars regarding the different choices of netnographic form and focus, including other forms of online ethnography, that are available to researchers.

WHY NETNOGRAPHY IS NEEDED

Research is, at root, a set of practices. Boil a flask over a burner. Inject a substance into a vein. Write up a study with many impressive equations, tables and statistical analyses. Read a paper at a conference. Each recognized, legitimate particular form of research has clear affiliations, roots and sets of practices. If we do not know the affiliations, roots and sets of practices that govern a significantly different research approach, then we leave it up to individual authors to, so to speak, ‘reinvent the method’ every time they use it, and to claim (or have claimed for them) a uniqueness of their findings making them difficult to generalize because of their lack of specification. Uniform adherence to a standard set of practices simplifies communications, or at least helps to aggregate common knowledge so that the wheel of method turns smoothly even as it is – inevitably – being reinvented.

A set of postings on my blog debated the necessity of a separate term for ethnography conducted online. The debate benefitted from the insights of a number of commenters, especially those of Jerry Lombardi, an applied anthropologist with considerable marketing research experience. Although Jerry initially questioned the need for yet another neologism, eventually he wrote that:

the worlds of research and intellectual innovation are strewn with neologisms that might’ve sounded odd or wrong when brand-new: cybernetics, psycholinguistics, software. So yes, new mappings of reality sometimes call for new names, and sometimes the names take a while to settle in.

We must consider, then, whether online sociality is different enough from its embodied variants to warrant a ‘new mapping of reality’. Is online ethnography – whether we call it by this more generic term or by more specific terms such as virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, web ethnography, mobile ethnography, smartphone ethnography, or ICT ethnography – actually, significantly, different from other methods or from anthropology conducted face-to-face? In practice, the proliferating set of terms and practices is itself evidence that new adaptations are needed to differentiate online ethnography from its face-to-face predecessor.

In fact, online access to vast amounts of archived social interactions alongside live access to the human beings posting it entirely changes the practice of ethnography and, in fact, all of the social sciences. Into this vast and evolving ecosystem of social and individual data and captured and emergent communications, netnography is positioned somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis. At times, it is more like
a treasure hunt for rare marine species than a standard fishing trip or an activity like trawling the sea. Actual netnographic data itself can be rich or very thin, protected or given freely. It can be produced by a person or by a group, or co-produced with machines, software agents and bots. It can be generated through interactions between a real person and a researcher, or by sitting in digital archives. It can be highly interactive, like a conversation. Or it can be more like reading the diary of an individual. It can be polished like a corporately created production, or raw and crude, full of obscenities and spelling errors.

In addition, netnographic researchers are not dealing merely with words, but with images, drawings, photography, sound files, edited audiovisual presentations, website creations and other digital artifacts. Netnography provides participative guidelines, including an advocacy of the research web-page, the inclusion of Skype interviews, and in-person participative fieldwork, in order to migrate the refined perceptivity of ethnography to online media. With methodological rigour, care and humility, netnography becomes a dance of possibilities for human understanding of social technological interaction. Netnography requires interpretation of human communications under realistic contexts, in situ, in native conditions of interaction, when those human communications are shaped by new technologies.

When an approach is significantly different from existing approaches, it gains a new name and becomes, in effect, a discipline, field or school in itself. There are very few, if any, specific, procedural guidelines to take a researcher through the steps necessary to conduct and present an ethnography using social media data, attending to the scrupulous preservation of a humanist perspective on online interaction. With its first presentation in 1996, netnography is certainly one of the first. With this book, I aim to make it the most lucid, defensible, differentiated and supportable.

Consider the system of academic research and publication. When undertaking a research project in an academic setting, such as research funded with grants, or Masters or PhD dissertations, it is customary for the researcher to provide proposals for the research that reference commonly accepted procedures and standards. Further, institutional review board or human subjects research review committees must be informed of research approaches and their utilization of reputedly ethical methods. On the publication side, which is what makes the academic world go round, it greatly helps to have clear standards and statements so that editors and reviewers will know what to look for in the evaluation of such research. If the method is reputable, then the reviewers and editors can concentrate on the utility and novelty of the theoretical findings.

These are the multiple roles played by methodological standards in the conduct of normal science: they assist with evaluation at the proposal, ethics review and publication evaluation stages. Standards and procedures are set and, as terms regarding them fall into common usage, these standards make evaluation and understanding clearer. Social scientists build an approach that, while maintaining the inherent flexibility and adaptability of ethnography, also has a similar sense
of procedural tradition and standards of quality. Although experimentation and critique is welcome and useful, the consistency of ‘methodological rigour’ benefits scholarship, providing clarity, better theory-construction, minimizing heedless replication and, in the end, generating greater recognition and increased opportunities for all scholars working in the area.

For an interesting overview and assessment of netnography and its adoption as a methodological innovation in the social science, I recommend Bengry-Howell et al.’s (2011) NCRM Hub research report (see also Xenotidou and Gilbert, 2009; Wiles et al., 2013). In particular, I draw on one poignant critique of netnography contained in Wiles et al. (2013: 27; see also, among others, related critiques by Caliandro, 2014; Rokka, 2010; Weijo et al., 2014): ‘What I can’t see from where I’m standing is a very distinctive perspective that makes netnography different from Hine’s virtual ethnography or different from the kind of work that lots of people are doing …’ This is an important critique, and I believe that it emanates from two aspects of my past writing. First, the fact that the social media field has grown, and online or digital ethnography methods have proliferated, including virtual ethnography. Second, that netnography has been cast more at a ‘workbench’ and ‘how-to’ level which insufficiently discussed and developed its epistemology. With the next section of this chapter, I seek to begin to ameliorate this deficiency by discussing recent discussion and developments in anthropology and considering how they must impact and alter the conception and practice of netnography.

REFORMULATING ETHNOGRAPHIC FOCUS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA STUDIES

What exactly does netnography study? Traditionally, anthropologists and sociologists studied culture and community. Thus, these constructs would seem the most worthwhile foci for netnographic investigations. Indeed, my writing on netnography has consistently focused on constructs of online community and online culture, or ‘cyberculture’ (e.g., Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2002a, 2010). However, with this edition that focus changes. Culture and community have become increasingly unstable concepts in anthropology. They are particularly unstable, as we shall see in this chapter, when used to reference online social phenomena. To develop a more subtle sophisticated foundation to guide netnographic practice, we begin with the nuances of destabilized (online) culture and community. Summarizing historical notions of online culture and community, this section problematizes these two concepts prior to a more in-depth examination of the core concepts of culture and community in the section following.

How did notions of community and culture appear historically in relation to computer and networked computing? In the 1950s, when the main image of a computer was a centralized corporate or government mainframe, many descriptions of computers compared them to giant brains. Later, as computers became smaller
and more ‘personal’, entered people’s homes, and were connected together into networks, the guiding metaphor for this construction was ‘the information superhighway’. The term dates to at least 1988 and, if former American Vice-President Al Gore is to be believed, to 1979. In an intriguing book on the archetypes, myths and metaphors of the early Internet, Mark Stefik (1996) presents four then-prevalent metaphors of the information superhighway:

1. **Online Library**: a repository for publishing and storing collective knowledge, a form of communal or collective memory.
2. **Digital Communications Medium**: a place for email and, eventually, many other forms of communication.
3. **Electronic Marketplace**: a location for transactions of goods and services, including digital commerce, digital money and digital property.
4. **Digital World**: a gateway to new experiences, including new social settings, virtual and augmented reality, telepresence and ubiquitous computing.

Even in this early work, positioned in the same year I introduced netnography to the scientific community, we can clearly distinguish the different communicative modalities and possibilities offered by the Internet. There is a discernible ‘Tale of the Internet’ that proceeds through the four stages as follows. Early in its development, during the ‘Dark Age’ of computing, the creaky early computer peer network period that has sometimes been called ‘Web 1.0’ was born. With Web 1.0, the online experience was often (but not always) more like the reading of a book than the sharing of a conversation. Hence, the online library metaphor is still a powerful one. With major web-pages, online archives, and a vast majority of social media ‘participants’ simply reading or ‘lurking’, we could argue that the Internet retains much of this ‘read-only’ quality. Indeed, much of the big data stream now is rather unintentional: the never-really-random clicks and searches of everyone’s everyday life. To be human today is to make approximately one hundred and seventeen discrete choices on our devices every day – more or less.

The plot thickens as we are slyly told that the Internet has evolved somehow. It has become much more than this. Some time around 2004 or maybe 2003 the so-called ‘Web 2.0’ revolution began to occur. The Internet forever after became based upon a backbone of software that increasingly enabled and empowered people to use the technology to interconnect in seemingly grassroots ways. This enabled a type of online consumer choice, one that was driven in a person-to-person manner. All sorts of new styles and modes of interconnection blossomed as a result, including ones which facilitated new relationships (think eHarmony and online dating, TripAdvisor and hotel recommendations) as well as ones which helped manage existing and older relationships (think social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn for existing personal and business contacts).

Of course, relationship-management notions have been a part of Internet and World Wide Web lore almost since its inception. Interconnection between people
in a decentralized manner was the idea of Arpanet in the first place, and certainly a part of the Web that had long been emphasized by Tim Berners-Lee (the Web’s creator), David Weinberger (co-author of the *Cluetrain Manifesto*), John Perry Barlow, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and other thoughtful Internet influencers and organizations. In fact, I used the Compuserve and Prodigy networks in the late 1980s and self-organizing groups such as fan and creative writing communities were easy to find. These networks allowed you to make contact with new people who shared your interests, and to start new groups at will. Even at that time, one did not need to know computer programming to join a group or start one. All one needed was to learn a few easy commands.

Whether we call the resulting sites social media, communications forums, marketplaces or virtual worlds, the guiding metaphor and concept for quite some time has been the community. The use of the term seems likely to have originated in 1978, when a husband and wife team, computer scientist and programmer Murray Turof and sociologist Roxanne Starr Hiltz, wrote one of the earliest books about how people were beginning to use computer networks (or ‘computer conferencing’) to socialize, congregate and organize. Published 12 years before both the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee, *The Network Nation* (Hiltz and Turoff 1978) clearly predicted a world where social media were commonplace, and even ubiquitous. Clearly, the web was social from its beginnings.

As the Internet grew through the 1980s and early 1990s, a prevalent form of communication was the so-called ‘community’ forum, usually manifest as an interest or location-based bulletin board that assembled multiple attributed textual posts, and contained different, but centrally related, topical threads and active discussions. It was in this era of the community forum that Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold (1993: 5) continued the work of Hiltz and Turoff (1978), defining virtual communities as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on … public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’. Based on his observations of online interest-based forums, support groups and role-playing games, Rheingold noted that people in online communities ‘exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk’ (1993: 3). And Rheingold was right. People in those forums did indeed seem to be enjoying the support and camaraderie we usually associate with in-the-flesh communities like neighbourhoods and religious groupings. However, the types of emotional depth and interconnection were not evenly distributed. His book depicts a range of forms and depths of human social interconnection. The use of the word community is highly significant. For as soon as we use this word, we find its critiques. Some of those critiques are now so substantial that they force a significant redefinition and reconfiguration of netnography.
Culture, Community and its Critics
Contested and Shifting Notions

How are we to understand notions of community and culture in the context of netnographic research practice? In the field of anthropology, the questioning of the underlying notions of stable community and culture which began strongly and in earnest in the crisis of representation in the 1980s (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986), continues. Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport’s (2002) *The Trouble with Community* interrogates ‘the ethnographic enterprise and its ethnographic subjects’ when they are ‘no longer fixed conveniently in singular places’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 1). As they explain, the notion of collectivity or community has long served as an anchor for sociological and anthropological research. Where location is unspecific, as in transnational or multi-sited cultures, then collective identities, including nation, ethnicity, occupation or political movement have been conveniently invoked.

Poet, novelist and anthropologist Michael Jackson (1998: 166) relates his encounter with self-styled Australian historian Frank Ropert whose dismissive and ridiculous accounts of Aborigine history were intended to demonstrate how they had ‘lost their tradition culture’. However, Jackson (ibid.) uses the incident to demonstrate how the notion of culture is ‘frequently invoked as an essentialized and divisive notion … [which] militates against the recognition of the humanity we share, and the human rights to which we have a common entitlement’. The meaning of aboriginal culture and aboriginal identity is no more uniform, monolithic, fixed or stable in time than that of, say, British identity. It would be absurd to say that British people had ‘lost their traditional culture’ because they did not speak, believe and behave the same as British people did 400 years ago on that same territory. The salience, for example, of my status as a Canadian, a professor, a *Game of Thrones* fan is not a constant, permanent, nor a central aspect of many of my social dealings in person, but one which shifts and is fluid. This is even less the case when I am projecting my identity through the misty, ever-shifting image-ethers of the Internet. Yet, like Frank Ropert, some scholars still seek cultural and communal constancy even as many of the processes they study – of dislocation, displacement, alienation, plurality, hybridization, disjunction, compartmentalization, escape and transgression – continually toss its possibility into doubt. We must be cautious not to assume as fixed and permanent those identities and inter-connections we observe in temporary, perhaps even transitional, form.

Similar critiques can and should be levelled at ‘mechanistic, social-structural notions of culture and society as organically functioning and evolving wholes’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 108). Michael Jackson (1998: 16) reminds us:

That which we designate ‘culture’ … is simply the repertoire of psychic patterns and possibilities that generally have been implemented, foregrounded, or given legitimacy in a particular place at a particular point in time. But human culture, like consciousness
itself, rests on a shadowy and dissolving floe of blue ice, and this subliminal, habitual, repressed, unexpressed, and silent mass shapes and reshapes, stabilizes and destabilized the visible surface forms.

We should not underestimate the fluidity and instability of the human social realm. Culture adapts quickly to technologies and becomes technoculture perhaps because it is always in liquid motion, transforming and transformative. When studying online interaction, we surely wish to identify clear cultural categories such as nationalities, ethnicities, localisms, religiosities and occupational identities. However, we must strive to view them less as solid states of being than as liquid interactional elements that individual members bring to life as mental meanings. Rather than manifesting steadfast conditions of constancy, stability, functionality, reliability, timelessness, emergence and boundary, the processes at work in this post-structural and post-functionalist conception of culture are more about multiplicity, contradiction, randomness and unpredictability. Such a conception reminds us that there are degrees to which individuals choose their cultural identifications and opt to act as its standard-bearers and members. Cultures, on the other hand, do not own or have rights over their individuals or members.

Joonas Rokka (2010), building on his work with Johanna Moisander (Rokka and Moisander, 2009), conceptualizes online communities as new ‘translocal sites of the social … i.e. not global or local but as contexts which are both transnational and local’ (Rokka, 2010: 382) and calls for more analytic attention from netographies, particularly by paying close attention to ‘cultural practices’. With radical, but translocally resonant, implications for Durkheimian sociology and our understanding and use of the concept, practice-based analyses such as the one Rokka (2010) recommends can help us to move further in the direction of realizing the extents and ways in which culture is adopted rather than ascribed.

Society and culture can no longer be conceptualized in fundamentalist fashion. The realist tellings of ethnographic tales are outdated (Van Maanen, 1988). No longer can cultures be represented as reified, holistic, discrete, internally integrated and ontologically secure things-in-themselves. Instead, they must be portrayed as fluid processes, liquid Baumanite identities (Bauman, 2003), Appadurian transnational flows of complex translocal scapes (Appadurai, 1990). They are animated, borne, maintained, mutated, dispersed and transformed by individual consciousnesses. Although cultures and communities may be represented by members as homogenous, monolithic, and thus a priori this is, as Benedict Anderson (1983) reminds us, only an ‘imagining’. It is idiom.

Interacting human beings are neither gigantic social machines nor vast evolving organisms, but symbolic constructions that assume different patterned forms depending upon which method we choose to use to study them. Cultures and communities are ‘worlds of meaning’ that exist purely because of their continued adoption and use ‘in the minds of their members’ (Cohen, 1985: 82). Individuals, with all their multiplicity, heterogeneity and unpredictability, come before cultures and communities,
ontologically and morally. The traditions, customs, rituals, values and institutions of cultural communities all depend upon ‘the contractual adherence of interacting individuals’ for their continuation, meaningfulness, maintenance and value. Adopting this perspective, we might see that any given cultural community exists as an ‘assemblage of individual life-projects and trajectories in momentary construction of common ground’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 111). This more fluid perspective on online culture and community leads almost effortlessly to the notion of consocial identity and interaction.

Consocial Identities and Interactions

Rather than the tight bonds of community, an important form of contact guiding human relations in contemporary society seems to be consociation. We can think of consociation as a commonplace, largely instrumental, and often incidental form of association, one that we often take for granted because it has become so natural. It revolves around incidents, events, activities, places, rituals, acts, circumstances and people. For example, we might socialize with the people we are sitting next to at a play or a concert because the context creates conditions for this type of temporary, bounded, yet affable relationship. We are consocial with most of the people we work with, with other students, with other conference or trade show or festival goers, with many of our neighbours, with our parent’s friends and their kids, with the parents of children at our children’s schools, and so on (see Dyck, 2002). Some may become close friends. Some may join with us in groups of lasting relations. These close relationships and lasting relationships are not consocial, but social. But in many cases, as with neighbours and workmates, we see these people repeatedly but are unlikely to feel that they are close or important to us in a way that extends very far beyond the place- or event-based and ephemeral relationship. Although these relationships can be important and meaningful in the moment, they are entirely contingent upon our continued involvement in a particular association or activity. When we get up from our seats at the play, we may say goodbye, but we do not exchange phone numbers. When we change jobs or move, the friendly relationship with the co-worker or neighbour dissolves. Perhaps it only appears through Facebook. It remains dormant until an occasion occurs when we again need the person for one reason or another.

The ties that bind consociality are thus friendly, but not particularly strong. Consociality is conceptualized ‘first and foremost by reference to what is held in common by members rather than in oppositional categories between insiders and outsiders’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 59). Consociality is about ‘what we share’, a contextual fellowship, rather than ‘who we are’, an ascribed identity boundary such as race, religion, ethnicity or gender. The two forms are distinct and, even though one can shade or lead into the other, we should be careful not to systematically confound them. Applied to online social spaces, we might use this notion
of consociality to wonder if the widely used terms ‘online community’ and ‘virtual community’ are, indeed, strong examples of this conflation of ascribed and achieved communal identity. Simply because one registers as a ‘member’ and then posts to an online group, seeking a particular kind of interaction, does this then mean that one becomes a ‘member’ of that ‘community’ online? Not, it seems, in any way similar to that of communities such as those based upon race, religion, ethnicity or gender.

A Netnographic View of Ascribed Culture and Community

This critique of culture and community suggests that collective entities such as community and culture are considerably less stable than some prior theory makes them out to be. Instead of more fixed and permanent communal identifications, more consocial forms of contact may occur, perhaps prevalently. Consociality eschews notions of inside-outside boundaries in favour of an emphasis on what is shared between people. Similarly, in a world of flowing cultural scapes transfigured by translocal qualities (Appadurai, 1990), cultural categories such as religion and ethnicity must be considered to be more fluid, multiple and unpredictable than ever before. In fact, this liquidity of culture and interaction may be one of the defining elements of our time. Hastened by technology and the exigencies of capitalism, dividing and connecting people from each other, people are liberated from ascribed culture and community. As Sasha Baron Cohen’s ridiculous comic figure of Ali G suggests, being black is now a matter of individual choice. It appears that this freedom to choose even such hardwired identities as race and gender becomes ever more flexible on the Internet.

Relatedly, and drawing on Paul Ricoeur (1996), Amit and Rapport (2002: 116) suggest that we reconceptualize ethnography as a setting for responsibly reconceiving and recounting entangled individual stories. We would do this by a ‘respectful exchange of life narratives’, a ‘genuine labour of “narrative hospitality”’ in which we write ‘existential narratives – rich in subjectivities and interpersonal relations’ (Amit and Rapport. 2002: 116). The outcome would be ethnography – and netnography – that portrays individuals who are free to choose a range of identities and subject positions doing just that. Emphasizing agentic identity over social structure, Amit and Rapport (2002: 117) counsel us to write about these individuals as free to believe in, adopt, evangelize, disbelieve in, function ironically within, and drop all sorts of communal, cultural and consocial identities and relationships.

What are the research implications of this view of culture and community as achieved, rather than ascribed? In the first place, it becomes incumbent upon netnographers and all other cultural researchers to analyse attachment to a community or adherence to cultural norms as, at least to some extent, a matter of individual choice rather than necessity or duty. The existence of communities, online or otherwise, should be treated analytically as an expression of an ongoing
negotiation between individuals. Online cultural and community identities are adopted by people, sometimes temporarily, and often to varying extents. Can it be entirely acceptable to assume that someone who posts on YouTube is also partaking in YouTube ‘culture’ or is a member of the YouTube ‘community’ and shares some sense of common ‘identity’? To do so stretches the limits not only of the terms, but also strains the credibility of the netnographer. We can see the practice of YouTube posting as significant, surely. We can analyse the content of the posting, its relation with other posts, attendant ‘minding’ behaviour such as tagging, offering keywords, linking and replying to others’ YouTube comments and posts. But it would be questionable to assume that this set of practices says anything more about the poster’s lasting identity or loyalties unless we found further evidence of this in connected research.

Relatedly, anthropologist Roy Wagner (2001) charts an ‘anthropology of the subject’ that uses the holographic worldview and perspectives of Melanesians to explore the relationship between the part and whole, intersubjective relationships in general and the anthropological and ethnographic endeavour itself. Among his core ideas are that anthropologists do not learn from culture members, but teach themselves to these members, that meaning is ‘an insidious mental contagion’ and that ‘artificial reality is nearer to life than life itself’ (Wagner, 2001: xiii–xiv). We will pick up a number of these important themes as we traverse the methodological development and upgrading of netnography in Chapters 2 and 3.

In a relevant article, Henri Weijo and colleagues (2014) note that my methodological development of netnography has had to increasingly acknowledge the fragmentation, proliferation and delocalization of online communities. They find a situated individualism and delocalized performances that benefit from a netnographic attention to introspection and re-emphasize the importance of researcher participation and reflexivity. These comments are astutely on target. With a more firm sense of the multifaceted social experiences we encounter when we observe online social experience, we can then proceed to a more macroscopic view of Internet use and online social behaviour, beginning with global figures.

**Behold the Online Human**

Almost 3 billion people around the world currently crank the handle daily on some kind of Internet box in their homes, whether via a laptop, desktop, or mobile device. In 1995, that number was less than 15 million. This is, without a doubt, the single most important, rapid change in communications, learning and interconnection in human history. It is leading to some of the most tribal and primitive acts in our history, alongside some of the most utopian and militarily advanced. The Internet’s interpersonal interconnections are an amplification of everything, a self-and-other reflecting reflection that ramifies through the rapid infiltration of the world into boxes in everyone’s homes, purses, cases and pockets.
As Table 1.1 shows, as of 2014, over 68% of the population in Europe, over 67% of Oceania, and almost 85% of North Americans are home Internet users. In Asia, there are over 1.2 billion users. Although about 60% of the world's population do not have home Internet access, this number is skewed by the large numbers of people in Africa and Asia without such access, many of whom are likely not currently to have infrastructure that can support such activity. Yet, for much of the world, the Internet and social media have fully arrived. Excluding (for calculation purposes only) the almost five billion people in Africa and Asia, the total number of people in the Middle East, Latin America, North America, Oceania and Europe combined who are not connected to the Internet sinks to only 37%. Yet it is also important to remember that Asian users currently account for almost half of all Internet users worldwide, about 49%. And although the number of non-English websites is spreading rapidly, with Chinese, Spanish and Japanese the three next most commonly used tongues, about 55% of the most visited websites across the entire Internet still use the English language.

The Pew Internet Report, which surveys United States' citizens about their Internet usage, has repeatedly found Internet use to be strongly correlated with age, education attainment and household income. Although only 15% of United States' adults do not use the Internet or email, it is clear that those who use the Internet most tend to be younger, more educated, and to have higher household...
income than those who do not. These user characteristics seem to be global. Technologies such as laptops are still expensive beyond reach for many worldwide; similarly, computers and their operating systems require literacy and can be found difficult to operate. Hence it is rather unsurprising that countries with lower income levels have less Internet usage. However, this fact is partially offset by the effect of mobile phones with Internet access. Younger people worldwide are turning to the Internet and to social media. Netnographers should be attuned to the contextual cues surrounding technology usage, which help us to more appropriately conceptualize the various uses and users of Internet connection.

The power to connect is an authentic social power. As well as enabling and empowering, it threatens and disrupts. In recent history, we have seen multiple instances of connective technologies fomenting revolutionary ideas that have turned into political action. Consider the Twitter-based organization in Libya and YouTubed beating to death of its former leader in 2011. These are incredible social media outcomes, regardless of their cause. Breaking news stories around the world have revealed just how extensively all of our social media communications are monitored by intelligence agencies around the world, in particular the National Security Agency in the United States. In terms of state censorship, Saudi Arabia and China still censor Internet content heavily, including social media. Other countries, such as Russia and India censor selectively. The censorship situation is in flux in a number of other countries, including Turkey and Australia. These social situations are particularly sensitive in the Middle East, with its so-called social media led ‘Twitter revolutions’. A country such as Turkey provides an excellent example of the simultaneous fragility and political power of open and democratic social media access, with waves of support and suppression of social media Internet tools and platforms and apps constantly ebbing and waxing. Hence, netnographers must also be attuned to the legislative, state surveillance, and regulatory context limiting or facilitating both the use of social media and its users’ self-surveillance and self-censorship.

Social Media as Social Life

Already in 2006 a survey found that 52% of American online community members went on to meet other online community members in the flesh (The Digital Future Report, 2008). In 2008, that number went up to 56% (ibid.). By 2010, the question of in-person interaction and its answer had become meaningless because almost everyone on Facebook meets some of their closest Facebook friends every single day. This is the way of social media and the Internet. It has evolved from anomaly and nerdy pastime to mainstream with lightning-like rapidity. Past research must be constantly questioned in the light of the present. Current research must be constantly reviewed in light of the past.

Similarly, the questions asked in 2008 about people’s sentiments towards ‘their online communities’ seem dated already. How should we interpret the figure of 55%
who declare their devotion to online communities, professing that they feel every bit as strongly about their online communities as they do about their real-world communities (ibid.)? In an age of social media, where, for example, I am socially and consocially linked to my children and cousins, workmates and significant other, closest friends and parents on Facebook, does such a comparison have any meaning? Of course, the fact that this was 2008, and these were almost certainly blogs and forums that were being compared to immediate social, religious and neighbourhood-based relationships is rather revealing. Coming from a time before the major social media sites hopelessly conflated physical and virtual social connections, this research finding speaks to the depth of involvement and connection imparted by early instances of Internet connection. Although Facebook makes efficient increasingly global relationships, it can often be an intensely local experience.

Now, we move to the effects of Internet communications among existing relationships: a most interesting thing if we consider that most Internet-mediated interactions are conducted with people we know well, good friends, or are related to, or married to, or are otherwise joined into some sort of close relationship. As of 2014, 67% of American Internet users credit their online communication with family and friends with generally strengthening those relationships; only 18% say online access generally weakens those relationships (Fox and Rainie, 2014). That rather overwhelming difference points to how deeply people in America, at least, feel that online communications have strengthened their existing social ties rather than weakened them. Interestingly enough, there are no significant demographic differences tied to users’ feelings about the impact of online communication on relationships (ibid). Equal proportions of online men and women, young and old, rich and poor, highly educated and less well educated, Internet veterans and relative newbies say by 3-to-1 or better that online communication is a relationship enhancer, rather than a relationship detractor.

As of 2013, a full 73% of online American adults use a social networking site of some kind, with Facebook clearly dominant at 71%, followed by LinkedIn, Pinterest, and then Twitter (Duggan and Smith, 2013). Facebook has become a part of many people’s daily routines as well, with 63% of users visiting the site at least once a day, and 40% doing so multiple times throughout the day. Facebook and other major sites have both mainstream and specific elements or areas containing particular interest and identity groups. These reports chart the qualitative shift in social media consumption – a term preferable to online community membership in many ways. As more Americans have adopted social media – and Facebook in particular – it has become inevitably more mainstream and more demographically representative.

Although Facebook is a mainstream site, appealing to a wide demographic cross-section, this is not the case with other sites, which are more stratified and either appeal or cater to specific groups’ needs. For instance, a Pinterest user is four times more likely to be a woman than a man (ibid.). LinkedIn appeals much more to college graduates and members of higher income households. Twitter
and Instagram user bases tend to overlap, and to skew to younger adults, urban dwellers and non-whites (ibid.). As well, a plethora of other sites cater to all sort of local, identity, activity and interest-based tastes and social configurations. An entire ecosystem of other ‘targeted’ sites and online meeting places has developed. Netnographers have unprecedented choice and unprecedented opportunity. In addition to the more professionally oriented LinkedIn, consider the relationship-facilitating Tinder and Couple, and the more urban hipster oriented Foursquare. As well, we still have over 170 million blogs, a vast and literally uncounted space of many hundreds of thousands or even millions of forums and wikis.

We must also not forget visual and audiovisual sites such as YouTube, with a billion users per month watching a mind-blowing 6 billion hours of video (40% of them accessing the site from mobile devices). Instagram, owned by Facebook, has 200 million active monthly users as of 2014 – as many as Facebook did in 2009 and only about 50 million less than Twitter has in 2014. By the time you read this on paper, or in an ebook, there is little doubt that these numbers will be significantly higher: the growth rates are incredible. What they mean, what we are doing with them, and what we do with them as a civilization – one with challenges running the gamut from ideological and religious wars mutating with Internet interconnection and tribal instincts, to virulent diseases increasingly spreading, to inequality, hardship, poverty, ignorance, climate change and inhumanity – is part of the purpose of netnography.

The social media space is complex and varied, with sites that range from the social to the informational, specific sites for specific purposes and interest, and particular sites targeted to the needs of particular groups and also targeted to idiosyncratic needs. In netnography, we must be aware of this landscape as we seek to match our research interests to available sites, procedures. We will pick up and develop further these ideas in Chapter 7 when we discuss the quest for data. More people are connecting through more sites in more ways for more purposes than ever before. Chatting and checking in with others about one’s day or about the news, or before or after a purchase, a doctor’s visit, a parenting decision, a political rally, or a television show is becoming second nature. For many people around the world, online sociality is a part of their overall social behaviour, even their everyday social behaviour. It is already familiar, mundane, taken-for-granted. Normal. Natural. The latest technologies, it seems, have become natural, even ‘human nature’.

Through social media, we can learn about this phenomenon, of technological adoption and adaptation. Though their media shall ye know them: from posts and updates, Twitter poetry, YouTubery, and of course blogs, we can learn about real concerns, real meanings, real causes, real feelings. We can learn new words, new terms, new techniques, new products, new answers, new ideas. We will encounter genuine concerns, genuine needs, genuine people. As I wrote in 1998, ‘These social groups have a “real” existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour’ (Kozinets, 1998: 366). Online social experiences have authentic consequences for social image, social identity.
In fact, they can 'amplify' causation in social connection: they are interconnection. Even before you can have communication in this same point-to-point manner, you must have interconnection.

THE CONSTRUCTS INHABITING THIS BOOK

This book is arranged as a series of logical steps to lead you from a conceptual understanding of netnography and theories about online social interaction and experience to learning the specific research practices, codes of behaviour, epistemological and theoretical orientations, representational styles and different forms of netnography. The book positions netnography within different approaches used by social scientists. It provides tools, framework and many examples. In its concluding chapters, it explains and illustrates the four essential kinds of netnography: symbolic, digital, auto and humanist. The way that this journey unfolds in chapter structure is detailed below.

The opening chapter will explain the function and need for netnography, for a redefined, fully updated, and upgraded version of netnography, and for the book as a whole. Chapter 1 will begin the reformulation of netnography by incorporating anthropological critiques of culture and communities and then by exploring notions of consocialities. An overview will follow of some soon-to-be-outdated statistics that nonetheless provide a current snapshot and benchmark for the future and against the past.

In Chapter 2, we will examine online social interaction and experience that transports us from cultural conceptions to archetypes of network structure, prefiguring the more synthetic and hybridizing forms of the latter part of this book. On the cultural side, Chapter 2 first discusses technoculture, ethnographic approaches, sociality and the cultural-communal debate. It conceptualizes four ideal types of online social experience and relates them to a variety of extant social media sites, which are also contexts for our research. Next, the chapter moves into social structural types of social media understandings. It provides six quantitatively generalizable archetypes of network structure: polarized and tight crowds, brand and community clusters, broadcast and support networks. The chapter will then extend this to a full discussion and incorporation of networked individualism that concludes with its 12 principles. As it fades to give way to Chapter 3, Chapter 2 will begin to circle around some preliminary thoughts about the human, the social, the story and the plenitude.

Chapter 3 will delve into different methods considered complementary with netnography. It will begin by taking a macroscopic look at the choice of method. Netnography is about obtaining cultural understandings of human experience from online social interaction and content, and representing them as a form of research. Complementary methods include social search ‘big’ data analytics survey data and findings, interviews and journal methods, and social network analyses. We will find in this chapter that, compared to traditional ethnography, netnography has six
essential differences: alteration, access, archiving, analysis, ethics and colonization. The chapter explores the implications of these six differences to the research practices of netnography before turning to one of the most key chapters in the book.

Chapter 4 will redefine netnography as a specific set of related data collection and creation, analysis, interpretive, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet, including the myriad of mobile applications. Its emphasis on significant amounts of Internet data will differentiate netnography from approaches such as digital ethnography or digital anthropology that are more general in orientation and can include more traditional ethnographies. The chapter will then proceed to a discussion of Hine’s virtual ethnography, the roles of materiality in digital anthropology, the creeping mundaneness of technologies and the importance of storytelling. The chapter then will provide an overview of the state of netnography today, examining the growth and development of netnography as an interdisciplinary research field. From this, a portrait of the spectrum of netnographies resolves. Key elements of this portrait are its voyeurism, quest for intimacy and engagement. The chapter concludes with a new 12-step process for netnography: introspection, investigation, information, interview, inspection, interaction, immersion, indexing, interpretation, iteration, instantiation and integration.

Chapter 5 will begin to get you ready to conduct a netnography. The chapter opens with a reminder that our state of readiness is not always as prepared as we think it might be and that many types of decision and research practices may be needed before we can initiate our data collection. Researcher introspection begins the netnographic journey, and several exercises lead you onto that path. Next, the axiology of netnography will be explained and detailed as a guiding principle. The heart of the chapter will help you formulate a research focus as well as research questions that can be answered using a netnographic approach. Netnographies of online social interaction and experience tend to focus on sites, topics and people.

In the next chapter, you will be given a general overview and set of specific guidelines for the ethical conduct of netnography. The netnographer has choices when it comes to research practices, and being informed about Internet research ethics procedures and accepted human subjects research protocols is important to netnographic undertakings in academic settings. This chapter follows a model of territorialism and spatial metaphor in online social relations. Public versus private debates will be reframed as being about how we treat people’s digital doubles in our research. Informed consent will be discussed as well as the general principle of doing no harm with our research. The chapter will then proceed from these ideas and principles to offer guidelines for ethical netnographic practice: stating your name, being honest, using your existing social media profiles, following personal branding principles to represent yourself, asking permission when needed, worrying about terms of service when necessary, gaining clear consent for interviews, citing and giving credit, and
potentially pursuing proposed procedures for concealing and fabricating. In summary, Chapter 6 will provide you with the up-to-date foundations and specific guidelines for the ethical conduct of netnography.

Chapter 7 will treat a central practice within netnography – data collection. In netnography, data are found in archives, co-created and produced. This chapter elaborates the various important choices in data ‘collection’. What are data? How should we ‘collect’, co-produce, find and produce them in netnography? This chapter will provide the guidelines pertaining to, searching for, finding, filtering, selecting and saving data. It will provide the criteria you need to decide which sites to search in depth, and which data to collect and curate. It concludes by providing fundamentals behind the actual workbench level of capturing, collecting and storing data from archives and online social interactions and experiences.

Under the guiding injunction to participate in online social experience, Chapter 8 will continue the discussion about data collection. This chapter will discuss the creation of interactive and produced netnographic data from online social interaction and other participation. It will provide detailed and illustrated examples to guide researchers interested in using the recommended netnographic practice of a research web-page. A section will follow on the use of interviews in netnography. Next, the chapter considers the production of reflective data, often called fieldnotes. Reflective data is reconceptualized as an ethnographic affordance and guidelines given for its conduct. As with the prior chapter, technical advice and examples will be provided throughout.

In the next chapter, we will explore the essence of netnographic data analysis and interpretation through hermeneutics and deep readings. Chapter 9 deploys the word ‘interpenetration’ and the metaphor of the collage to discuss the ways that analysis and interpretation may cohere and conjoin. It provides and describes seven analytic movements: cultural decoding, re-memorying, visual abstraction, tournament play, abduction, imagining and artifying. Next, the chapter discusses hermeneutic interpretation as well as holons and holarchic systems and relates them to the analytic and interpretive needs of netnographers working in complex social media spaces. A detailed example from Facebook coverage of a new story about an Ebola outbreak follows. Data is displayed and interpreted. The final section provides the nuts and bolts of three types of data analysis and interpretation: manual, semi-automatic and using algorithmic software. The use of analytics in digital netnography is discussed. In closing, the chapter offers some thoughts about the unique elements of netnographic data that might guide its analysis.

Anthropology has been at the centre of issues of scientific representation since the Crisis of Representation in the 1980s. Chapter 10 will open with a history lesson focusing on ethnographic representation. It will then provide the four ideal types of netnographic representation: symbolic, digital, auto and humanist. These forms constitute an approach to the ethnography of online interaction and experience that ranges from the reflective, subjective and personal to the statistical, expansive and descriptive. The choice of final research product form determines
choices about data collection and analysis. Symbolic, digital and auto netnographies are explained in this chapter.

In Chapter 11, we explore the final of the four types of netnography: humanist netnography. Humanist netnography takes netnography’s representational challenge to the highest level. Humanist netnographers focus on human interactions and experiences with and through technology in the contemporary, global, corporate-run and government surveilled landscape. They seek resonance, verismilitude and polyphony in their representations, and embrace multiple methods. Inspired by developments in the digital humanities, netnographers producing a humanist netnography will seek a widening audience to share and collaboratively build ideas that work for positive change in the world. This chapter overviews the vision and standards for humanist netnography and provides one possible example of the kind of work it seeks to inspire.

In the social media era, scientific representation in netnography is a public, deliberate and ethically charged act of self-presentation that is closely related to academic goals of successful scholarship and career advancement. With this introduction to the book now complete, we will turn to an examination of some of the theories and conceptions that guide our understanding of online social interactions and experiences.

**SUMMARY**

Technology use becomes more invisible and natural to us with each passing day, with the Internet and mobile becoming increasingly seemingly indispensable. This book considers social and machine interaction from a human perspective, discussing the implications of online social interaction and experience in the context of conducting and representing academic ethnography. In this chapter, we overviewed anthropological critiques of the notions of cultures and communities, and learned about the need for a redefined and updated version of netnography. The reformulation of netnography began through exploration of notions of networks, socialities and consocialities. We also began to examine the field sites of ethnographic interaction, overviewing research and statistics that provide a current snapshot of online social experience. Finally, we learned about the structure of this book and its approach to netnography.

**KEY READINGS**


1. In the first chapter of the last edition of the book, which I wrote in early 2009, I thought I might be overstating when I wrote that there are at least 100 million, and perhaps as many as a billion people around the world who participate in online communities as a regular, ongoing part of their social experience. Currently there is no doubt that social media touches numbers far greater than this through ubiquitous mobile technologies. At last count, there were 6.9 billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide for a world population of 7.1 billion people. These subscriptions potentially connect billions to the Internet and social media sites. I feel more assured that I am not hyperbolizing this time when I write that, although currently not quite there, social media has the near-term potential to be ubiquitous.

2. I herein formally acknowledge important and useful books such as Hine’s (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, Boellerstorff et al.’s (2012) *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, Horst and Miller’s (2012) *Digital Anthropology* and Underberg and Zorn’s (2013) *Digital Ethnography*. In fact, all of these books have usefully influenced and guided my own thinking about netnography. My statement is intended to point out that, although these books may offer theoretical overviews, general advice, examples and case studies, they tend to be focused on particular field sites (e.g., virtual worlds, such as Second Life), or particular approaches (e.g., eliciting and collecting online storytelling narratives). They are examples of different forms or sites of netnography. With this edition, new practices like introspection and personal academic branding exercises are intended to clearly differentiate the method from all other approaches to online or digital ethnography.

Netnography remains a pragmatic and workbench-level explication of an approach, and as it branches out and extends far beyond what physical ethnography could ever do, it also maintains a strong connection with the anthropological and sociological ethnographic past. With this edition, I also hope that it benefits from increasing conceptual sophistication and cross-disciplinarity.

3. Some scholars have suggested adaptations, for instance, of netnography’s ethical standards. Others have opted to use those adaptations, and cited the adaptive work. I present as many diverse viewpoints as I can in this book, while still oh-so-gently suggesting particular standards and practices as netnography, or, more accurately, as ‘appropriately netnographic’.

4. We have barely begun to count television screen and videogame consoles, although clearly they must at some point be included.

5. NSA surveillance is empowered by the fact that so much data flows through the Internet. Also, because the American intelligence agencies were able to collaborate so closely with so many social media companies, such as Facebook, Apple, Skype, Microsoft and Google, there should be little doubt that surveillance by state intelligence agencies is both widespread and global. We can and should get into debates about whether this is a good or a bad thing, as we are a free society facing many security challenges and Internet surveillance is a key matter pertaining to both our safety and our freedom. We should always listen to both sides, but proceed as true social scientists with evidence and with viable, peer-reviewed research. The Internet is a far more effective and insidious surveillance tool than even George Orwell’s hideous telescreens: we should know as much as we can about this side of it as well as the side that advances our knowledge and reveals our humanity.

6. Yet I find it interesting to note that Saudi Arabia also has the most avid YouTube users, with 90 million views of the online video channel per day.