Assignment

Conduct ethnographic research into an online community or culture. Write a report about your findings and a presentation to give the class about your research.

Purpose

Ethnography is a pre-digital research strategy which is about creating detailed and in-depth descriptions and interpretations of people's everyday lives and social and cultural practices. This is most often done with the help of contextualized research data that has been collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Those data are then closely described, read, and interpreted to carefully map out patterns of thinking and acting. What one might call *digital ethnography*, then, is an approach aiming to generate such knowledge about lives and practices in digital society--both online and in settings where digital media intersect and entangle with our offline selves. An ethnographer must not simply report observed events and details, but must also render and explain those observations in ways that help decode the webs of meaning from an insider perspective.

Ethnographers study social communities ("cultures") from the inside out – the researcher lives in and among the people they study for months or years, speaking the language, participating in daily life. They take copious notes on the details of everyday life. They transcribe thousands of hours of taped conversations. Then they write articles or books finding patterns and lessons in this massive data. Obviously, this is not possible in a quarter, which is why you're writing a Mini Ethnography. The process is the same but on a much smaller scale.

You will need to find an online group that shares an interest or an identity. This must be a group that has something in common, so that you can treat them as a "culture" to study. You will "observe" or participate in the group on at least two occasions, taking notes on as many details as you can, paying special attention to how members communicate and interact with one another in digital spaces; you will interview at least one member of the group; and you will do additional research on the group. Once you've completed all this, you will then review your material and interpret your experience, looking for patterns in the details. Your final written assignment will include two elements: the observation/interview/research and your interpretation of what you find.

Process

1. Select an online community

You will identify an online culture or subculture—a group of people who share online behaviors, objects, language, and values—for the purpose of understanding that community. You will need to identify the online spaces/places where these groups participate and join them (ideally, you'll work with a group you already belong to).

You must get approval from me for your group selection. You will upload your "Plan of Action" by Nov 14th. I will write back with approval and suggestions.

2. Observe/Interview/Research

You are the primary researcher for this assignment—acting somewhat like an anthropologist—by going out into the digital world where these people can be found, observing them, and writing down your observations. You need to observe your group on at least two occasions. Identify at least one member of the group that you can interview. We will discuss interviews in class. Finally, you will consult reputable secondary resources (e.g., peer reviewed journals, credible websites, etc.) to learn more about your group or about the type of group you've selected.

Tips on observation/interviewing/research: It's best to take notes during the observation/interview. If that is impractical, take notes immediately afterward. Summarizing your memories of an event is not what ethnographic observation calls for (though it's okay in journalism or memoir). You want to get down detailed, specific, observations, on details such as:

- examples of communication (e.g., real-time discussion/chatting, writing in forums, texting, etc.) (see the warning below about privacy)
- other examples of communication, including written materials
- ways of greeting, initiating conversation, beginning and ending an event
- the online environment (the spaces/interfaces used by the group – draw maps, write descriptions)
- social environment (describe the larger community this group is a part of, and where they fit in that)
- timelines (you can write down what happens every five minutes, or you can write down a time next to each observation.)
- any other concrete detail of behavior, speech, or the environment
- Interview questions should focus on how one member interprets the above details, plus any other pertinent information such as how the group communicates

Secondary research should on focus on information that puts the group into a broader context. For example, if writing about a specific gaming team, you would want broader research that describes how that team fit into the wider scale of the game itself. Plus, you would want to research any answers to any questions that arise as a result of the observations you make.

Privacy Warning: Use common sense. Be aware of privacy issues. Make sure you follow the ethical guidelines ⧉ published by the Association of Internet Researchers. If you are observing a public setting, remember that your subjects didn't give permission, and avoid using real names or reporting anything personal. If you are observing a private setting, let people know you are a researcher and will be writing a paper based on your research. Don't report private conversations; report typical examples of speech, and snippets of conversation.

3. Interpret Data/Findings and Write the Mini-Ethnography.

It will be easy to write the assignment if you have a wealth of detailed observations to write about, so make sure you are thorough in the above sections. You will write two sections: What you observed and found via research, plus your interpretation of the research.

Remember that as you interpret, you are conveying your own thoughts. There is no absolutely objective way to measure the truth of what you say – but it will be well supported if you can point to detailed observations to back up your thoughts. It is okay to use first-person ("I") to discuss your impressions and feelings. Just use examples to show why you arrived at that thought. We will read and discuss various ways of interpreting data in class.

While it is up to you how to structure your paper, you should still have an introduction, body, and conclusion, and cover all *important* aspects of the community that relate to your thesis or focus. If you cover only one aspect of your community, you must adequately research that aspect and ask interview questions that relate to it. Be sure to include an original title that reflects the content of your ethnography and a descriptive thesis.

You should begin the writing process by reflecting on your observations and choosing a focus. Instead of giving a comprehensive overview, you should concentrate on specific points. *Consider yourself an expert in this paper*. You should not only restate what others have told you, but should **develop your own conclusions from your observations**. However, all of these conclusions *must* be supported by observation or other research. *Thick descriptions* (see Lindgren Ch 15 reading pp. 260-61) *and quotes must be included for your Ethnography to be complete*

Deliverables

1. Research Report (100 points)

- 2500-3000 words
- Review Section 3 above for details about what to include in your paper
- Use standard academic format (i.e., 1" margins, double space, title, name, etc.)
- You may incorporate visuals (e.g., images, video stills, screen captures, etc.) in your paper
  - If you take visuals from a source other than your own work, you must cite visuals
- You must have at least 5 reputable sources (in addition to your primary research)
- Sources should be documented using APA ⧉Style

2. Presentation (25 points)

- 3-5 minutes (You will be stopped at 5 mins. This is an exercise in planning and conciseness as well as presentation.)
- Presentation softwares are visual tools, so while your presentation should reflect your paper it should not simply be a text-based experience for the class

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Example Papers

Sample 1 ⧉ (A)

Sample 2 ⧉ (A)

Sample 3 ⧉ (C)