

(Continued)

- 5 Collect your data with the appropriate methods. Make sure you keep a research log of all the choices — big or small — that you make and which affect the composition of your dataset in the end. Gather data while being open to following the research question and the field where it leads you. Combine several different strategies if needed. Stop collecting when you have enough.
- 6 Analyse your data in ways that follow from your research question and the type of data that you have. Systematise, code, mine, and crunch the data with the help of your toolkit. Use techniques such as text mining and social network analysis when suitable, and hermeneutic approaches when suitable. Be open to the use of computational approaches when you don't necessarily think it is suitable, and try to challenge 'quantitative' results with hermeneutic interpretation.
- 7 Draw on the ethnographic idea that *writing up* the research is also a key part of the analysis and interpretation itself. Write not only to publish, but also write as a research method.

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DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Key questions

- What is ethnography and why is it useful for studying digital society?
- What new opportunities and challenges for ethnography arise with the arrival of the internet and social media?
- How must the notion of an ethnographic 'fieldsite' be renegotiated when research is done in 'virtual' settings?

Key concepts

Ethnography * fieldwork * thick description * embedded internet * digital anthropology

In this chapter, I will provide an introduction to the methodological strategy of digital ethnography. As discussed in the two previous chapters, I see ethnography as an important tool for studying digital society. In discussing ethnography, I will also argue that it is often not enough to study the online internet alone. In order to fully respond to most research questions relating to digital sociality, the offline contexts where the internet is embedded and comes to play a part in people's lives must also be taken into account. Depending on the type of study, its aims, data, and design, the balance between online and offline aspects can vary widely. To complicate things further, I will address the problems inherent in making a distinction between online and offline altogether.

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 contextualised 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 lives. The key authors in this area are sociologist Christine Hine, who authored the influential book *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and several follow-ups, and anthropologist Daniel Miller, who has played a very important role in developing a framework for what he has labelled *digital anthropology* (Miller & Slater 2000; Miller & Horst 2012).

Analysing digital society and sociality from an ethnographic point of view is about reading it as if it were a text, and trying to grasp the ways in which participants make meaning. 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. While each digital social researcher will, as was argued in Chapter 13, develop her or his own 'methodological bricolage' in different ways in relation to the different tasks that might be at hand, ethnographic exploration of some sort is often a very useful component.

OUT IN THE FIELDS

Classic anthropology and ethnography had emerged from the academic discipline of natural history, and, typically, the early ethnographic studies were about apparently 'primitive' cultures and people living in European colonies. Since then, however, an increasing number of studies have been made by researchers in the communities where they live and work themselves. What has remained, however, is the aim to identify and interpret underlying meanings and principles of the social setting that one is analysing, as well as the idea of relatively long-term engagement in a fieldsite. This means that ethnography poses a double demand on the researcher. It is assumed that in order to develop an adequate understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, one must become immersed in it and take part in it. But at the same time one must maintain the role of being a relatively detached observer.

In terms of data collection, ethnography does not rely on any single approach. Instead, ethnographic understanding is developed by exploring several different sources of data in close detail. The most common methods for collecting ethnographic data are observation studies — where the researcher may or may not be a participant in the analysed context of interaction — and interviews. Ethnographic researchers

may also collect other sources of data, the character of which may differ depending on the specific nature of the research setting. The notion of ethnographic *fieldwork* is often used as an umbrella term for all of the different strategies that a researcher employs to gain an insight, as rich and detailed as possible, of the milieu under analysis. The primary source, however, tends to be observation studies, often in the form of so-called participant observation, where the researcher assumes a dual role of both taking part in and observing the setting. As linguistic anthropologists, Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie (2010: 7) note: 'Fieldwork is the moment when the researcher climbs down to everyday reality.'

The underlying assumption of ethnography is that in order to develop an adequate understanding of what it is like to live in, or be part of, a setting, a balanced mix of immersion and detachment is needed on behalf of the ethnographer. The most classic ethnographies, predominantly carried out by anthropologists, have tended to involve the researcher spending many months, even years, in the 'strange' or 'foreign' contexts that they wanted to try to understand. The key was long-term engagement, and the forging of quite deep and lasting bonds with people. For example, iconic anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote several books about his 32 months of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands off the coast of New Guinea, and another very important anthropologist — Clifford Geertz (1973) — wrote his most famous study about Balinese cockfighting. It was, in fact, Malinowski's work that pioneered the key ethnographic idea that the researcher should use participant observation to get 'the native's point of view'. In classic ethnography, the 'field' is understood as clearly delineated, and as an actual 'recognizable place to go to that contains the people we are interested in' (Hine 2012: 24).

But, even without taking the internet into account, ethnographers have had to deal with the fact that people of today very rarely locate their existence to predefined and fixed places. A history of increasing mobility, migration, tourism, and commuting, as well as mediated communication, has relativised the ethnographic notion of the field. In digital society, an ethnographer can be 'in the field' whenever and wherever they wish. But, Hine explains, the notion of a bounded fieldsite was always flawed. As new media researcher and anthropologist Andreas Wittel (2000: 1) writes:

The idea of 'a culture out there', with the implication of being, firstly, a coherent entity and secondly, unique and different from other cultures becomes increasingly difficult to sustain given the developments and transformations we've been witnessing the last few decades.

The pluralisation of cultures in general makes the notion of 'the field', as a geospatially defined area of research, problematic. This is further accentuated when one uses

the internet, or parts of it, as one's ethnographic fieldsite. Instead of seeing the field in terms of spatially defined localities, the focus then shifts towards 'socio-political locations, networks, and multi-sited approaches' (Wittel 2000: 8).

THICK DESCRIPTIONS

Drawing on seminal work by Geertz (1973), the ultimate goal of ethnography is to provide a *thick description* of the patterns, modes, and functions of social life. The basic assumption on which this approach rests is that culture is 'semiotic' — it is made out of a complex set of symbols in the form of language, traits, customs, gestures, attitudes, actions, and so on, which are webbed together in systems 'within which they can be intelligibly — that is, thickly — described' (1973: 14). He wrote further:

Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with — except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection — is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. [...] Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript — foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (1973: 9–10)

Suspended in webs of significance

One of Geertz's key influences was the sociology of Max Weber (1922/1978: 4), which was focused on 'the interpretive understanding of social action' — on the subjective meanings that people attach to their social actions. Drawing on Weber's idea of *Verstehen* (understanding), according to which society should be analysed from a participatory and interpretive point of view, Geertz (1973: 5) famously stated:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be

therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.

So, Geertz argues that ethnography is about analysing the meaning that people ascribe to their self-created 'webs of significance'.

Similarly, Malinowski (1922: 9) said that ethnography should lay bare unknown social and cultural principles that govern what previously seemed 'chaotic and freakish', 'sensational, wild and unaccountable'. As opposed to thin description, which just provides an account of facts, without interpreting them, thick description is characterised by specifying many details, the laying bare of conceptual structures, and the revelation of meanings. According to Geertz, it is the task of the ethnographer to not only present facts, but to comment on and interpret them. The researcher must try to trace the ways in which meaning is ascribed. Against this background, it should be easy to see that ethnography is highly relevant in digital society, not least because now 'The Internet is the fabric of our lives' (Castells 2002: 1).

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE INTERNET

In her book *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine (2000) argued that internet contexts deserve to be taken seriously as places in which to undertake ethnographic studies. At the time she wrote this book, it was important to make the argument that things of a broader social significance were indeed taking place online, and that ethnographers could do fieldwork on the internet as well. Work such as that of Hine played an important part in the development of the internet as a serious setting for the social research of things other than cybercultural peculiarities. Her main idea is that as the internet has become a mainstream phenomenon, rather than a subcultural one, it offers a significant and innovative resource for social science. As discussed previously, the emerging and transforming data environment leaves a wide range of persistent traces of people's everyday interactions, which are accessible for scrutiny by researchers. And while a lot of discussion in this area has focused on the possibilities for research using big data (see Chapter 12), Hine's focus is on the significant new opportunities for ethnographic and interpretive research.

No matter what social or cultural issues we research, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid dealing with online aspects of communication and interaction at some point. It is important to note Hine's argument that the internet and social media

do not just provide researchers with an additional arena where social things occur. Rather, she writes, the analysis of online settings is helpful to research social issues that extend beyond the internet itself. This is because the internet can be understood not only as a cultural artefact — a thing in the world — but also as a culture — an important aspect of the world itself. As people are simply going about their everyday lives in their use of the internet, by necessity in the process they leave traces that researchers will be able to draw on. Hine summarises her point:

The Internet is, to summarize, increasingly reflective of broad swathes of the population and of diverse activities: it is readily accessible, it allows for imaginative new research questions to be explored and for previously hard-to-reach populations to be accessed. It offers rich data on almost every imaginable aspect of existence. Internet research has developed from being a somewhat esoteric and unworldly frivolity to serving as a route to explore significant and weighty social issues. (Hine 2012: 11)

The internet makes it possible for researchers that use ethnography to observe a wide variety of social behaviours, patterns, and phenomena, which were not nearly as readily available to see before. In digital society, otherwise ‘private’ discussions take place in online public spaces, and many of the interactions persist, as archived and searchable digital material. This makes it possible to carry out research that otherwise would be impractical, due to the demanding, daunting work needed to negotiate access and traverse social barriers. Furthermore, Hine argues, because of the disinhibition caused by online anonymity, and the development of trust through mutual disclosure over time (cf. Chapter 4), people will discuss things on the internet that they might not talk about comfortably, or in the same way, in face-to-face interactions. This exposes aspects of social life to the researcher that may otherwise be very difficult to access. However, this does not mean that everything documented on the internet is automatically available for social research. Hine (2012: 14) writes that ‘the ethical question persists throughout: simply because something happens online does not make it socially trivial or openly available as research data’.

There is also the issue of how much data, and contextual information, is enough. Interpretative research strategies, such as ethnography, are more generally about the distillation of multifaceted, complex, and rich social data into something that is more straightforward and easy to grasp. Even with thick descriptions, the aim of the description is still to render complex matters more comprehensible. While in any type of research it may feel problematic and unsatisfying to be aware of the extent to which one has to simplify and leave out complexity, the internet — with its gargantuan amounts of potential research data — accentuates this difficulty.

Furthermore, while research of any type, in any context, can be overwhelming, the possibilities presented by the opportunities to search and get such huge amounts of data online will emphasise the feeling that one lacks the capacity as a researcher to account for the full complexity. Both the issues of ethics and issues such as the one about reducing complexity in data are best dealt with through constant critical reflection, and through being open about the ‘messy details’ of our research process, as discussed previously in Chapter 13.

In sum, Hine’s argument is, first, that the internet is an important venue for ethnographic research. It offers a mirror of people’s everyday existence, and people often talk on the internet with a candour and frankness which is very rare in many other research settings, such as in interviews or surveys. Internet ethnography makes it possible to look at sociality and social interactions in their ‘natural environment’. We can study discussions that arise for their own sake and which are not artificially topicalised by researchers’ design. The internet also affords the possibility to search for social data in ways that were not at all possible before digital society. Second, Hine argues that ethnography is a distinctive and useful way to research social uses of the internet. The ethnographic method allows for in-depth understandings of how people engage with each other, and with, and through, technology.

ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE INTERNET

In the years since writing *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine has increasingly questioned whether online settings should be used as ethnographic fieldsites in themselves. Is it enough to simply analyse online interactions in order to draw meaningful conclusions about social reality? Is it useful at all to adhere to the online–offline boundary when designing ethnographic studies? Hine (2012: 14) asks:

Can the study actually be reliable if it is not rounded out by pursuing its concerns more deeply into the lives of participants? Would we be able to trust what participants said about themselves? Put bluntly, can a study that only looks at online phenomena be more than mere voyeurism?

And Hine does indeed think that ‘online-only’ studies can be justified. Many significant social things do happen in settings that are online-only, and as long as one is clear about which conclusions can be drawn with a given research design and object, without becoming speculation, all is fine. As Hine points out, one of the pioneering studies of this kind was Nancy Baym’s 1993 ethnography of a Usenet newsgroup where a community of soap opera fans was emerging (Baym 1994, 2000). An even earlier example was Elizabeth Reid’s (1991) thesis on internet relay chat (IRC).

Translating ethnographic principles to the online setting

In her study of an online forum for soap opera fans (the discussion group *rec.arts.tv.soaps*, abbreviated *r.a.t.s.*), Nancy Baym did participant observations, carried out online interviews and questionnaires, and conducted detailed analysis of the roles, hierarchies, shared values, and evolving practices of the group. In the extract below, Baym (2000: 24–25) describes her methodological strategy in a way that illustrates the translation of ethnographic principles to an online setting.

This study, like most ethnographic work, has evolved as it has developed, and I have maintained *a dialectical relationship with the data*. I began with a set of research questions knowing that as I moved among observation, data analysis, and theory, I would end up taking paths I had not foreseen. One of my primary methods was *participant observation*. I began participating in *r.a.t.s.* in 1990, a year before I began to study it, and continued to participate actively through 1993 (at which time I began writing about it so much that I no longer had time to read it). My experience as what one *r.a.t.s.* participant called ‘a member in good standing’ (at least at the time this research was conducted) lent me a certain degree of legitimacy in speaking for *r.a.t.s.*, and my *intuitions and understandings as a member* guided this project at many stages. The *r.a.t.s.* newsgroup is written in English but has its own style and referents, and my participant status gave me *the background and experience to interpret these social meanings*. The group’s trust in me also resulted in support for, and willingness to help with, this project; indeed, the group’s enthusiasm when I announced and followed through on my research intentions was one of the main reasons I have continued with this work. As a participant, I sought to *remain sensitive* to how my status as a researcher could, at least hypothetically, have influenced patterns of interaction on *r.a.t.s.*

After this description of her method of data collection, Baym goes on to describe the specific strategies she used to analyse the collected data, and the related challenges. I have added italics in the extract above to emphasise the key points that demonstrate Baym’s translation of ethnography to the online world. She writes that ethnography is evolving (dialectically) as the researcher interacts with the data, and must remain sensitive to the process; that participant observation is the key strategy; and that building trust or even becoming a member of the studied group or setting may be important to gain a rich understanding and to be able

to produce thick descriptions. These are broadly the same principles as those of Geertz or Malinowski, and Baym treats *r.a.t.s.* in a way similar to the approach of classic anthropologists to the social settings that they analysed. Baym’s study has definitely led the way both methodologically, by establishing that the Internet could be an ethnographic fieldsite in its own right, and empirically, by showing that online interactions could be enough for the development of social formations that are rich and complex.

Not everyone was equally impressed by such studies, however. Instead, some scholars were quite sceptical about the possibilities of doing anything worthy of being labelled ethnography through online-only analyses. For example, Wittel (2000: 6) argues that such studies stretch ethnographic practice so far ‘beyond tradition’ that it must deal with a number of serious difficulties. He identifies four problems:

- First, that the accuracy of information can hardly be validated.
- Second, that the key strategy of participant observation is about observing ‘real people’, and that this is not possible online.
- Third that the shift towards an ethnography of networks makes it hard to do thick descriptions, as online links are an impoverished way of representing sociality.
- And, finally, that the lack of a physical fieldsite means that there is very little contextual data available, which can help to fully understand the things that one is studying.

Because of such shortcomings, Wittel calls for ‘a modernised version of fieldwork’. He says that all of the problems are related to the fact that online-only ethnography seems to assume that there is a clear boundary between online and offline. Rather than emphasising the differences between material and digital spaces, we should introduce a more relational perspective and concentrate on the similarities, connections and overlaps. Hine, as I mentioned earlier, still thinks that online-only ethnographies may be useful and that the scope of the fieldwork — for example, whether it should include only online or offline settings or both — depends on what the researcher wants to find out. The scope of the study will in turn lead to the researcher knowing different things about the people and settings that are analysed. Furthermore, Hine (2012: 32) writes, it might not even be possible to decide about any exact limits of the fieldsite beforehand:

As the research goes along, a deeper understanding of what the fieldsite should be, in terms of the contexts that the people involved use to make sense of what they do, is in itself one of the products of the research.

Ultimately, sometimes a focus on online interactions alone may be enough, and sometimes such a focus will not be an appropriate choice. Obviously, however, no sociality between people can happen in total disconnection from any material reality, so it is to be expected that ethnographic projects in digital society will force the researcher to look for evidence in various places. Some of these places may be located online and others offline.

ETHNOGRAPHY WITH THE INTERNET

It seems, then, that it is useful to think about the internet in society by moving beyond the idea that there is any clear distinction between what happens in and through digital mediation and what happens in other ways and places. Instead of the ‘virtual ethnography’ that may have been appropriate a few decades ago, Hine has suggested in more recent writings that researchers take a multimodal approach to doing ethnography in digital society. In this case, multimodality means that one should not see an online–offline boundary as important for delimiting ethnographic fieldsites. Instead, we must accept that the things — the topics and issues — we study will often cross that very boundary, or even be agnostic to its existence. These revisions, then, are in line with Wittel’s call for a modernised form of fieldwork, as previously discussed, which is not fixated on the separation of online from offline.

They way in which people today experience the internet is characterised, Hine (2015) argues, by three Es, which refer to the internet being embedded, embodied, and everyday. I will especially focus here on the *embeddedness of the internet*, as it largely also encompasses the other two Es. The internet is embedded, in the sense that it is generally becoming more and more entwined in how it is used, with a large number of other settings, tools, and forms for meaning-making. So, because the internet is ‘embedded’ in our ‘everyday’ lives, ethnography may have much to gain by taking materiality and ‘embodiment’ into account. This is what Hine calls ‘the E³ internet’.

The embedded view challenges the idea, prominent in the early days of the mainstream internet, that it offered a new type of (cyber)space. So, even if this was not always the case, it seems obvious now that, rather than being a new frontier set apart from everyday life, the internet is indeed best understood when it is contextualised and approached from an understanding of how it is embedded into people’s realities. Fundamentally, this means that the internet can mean different things to different groups of people in different places.

The view of the internet as embedded was also advocated by anthropologist Daniel Miller and sociologist Don Slater (2000: 1) in their ground-breaking study of ‘the internet in Trinidad, and Trinidad on the internet’. They argued that, in spite of the views expressed in the first generation of scholarly literature about the internet,

‘the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless “cyberspace”; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations’. Their central idea is that ethnographies relating to the internet should investigate not ‘the internet’ in general, but ‘how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular (though a very complex “somewhere”)’. They write further that:

Social thought has gained little by attempting to generalize about ‘cyberspace’, ‘the Internet’, ‘virtuality’. It can gain hugely by producing material that will allow us to understand the very different universes of social and technical possibility that have developed around the Internet in, say, Trinidad versus Indonesia, or Britain versus India. (Miller & Slater 2000: 1)

They make the point that ethnography should focus not on ‘the internet’ as some sort of meta-entity, but on undertaking detailed studies of what people make of the internet, as such studies will tell us a great deal about both people and the internet. But the argument can be turned around once more, as it may not always be the case that checking what people do offline will reveal ‘the truth’ about what their specifically online existence means to them. Hine (2012: 27–28) writes:

[T]he ethnographer needs to take the time to understand and reflect upon what that virtual-only knowledge of one another means for those concerned, rather than rushing off straight away to triangulate what they say online about their offline lives with face-to-face observation. We may, therefore, have to accept that not knowing all of the demographic details of informants, or not being able to pursue them into other aspects of their lives, is a part of the experience in which we are immersing ourselves rather than simply a lack for which the ethnographer has to apologize. [...] Face-to-face interactions, therefore, need not always be taken as the grounding context within which online interactions are framed.

However, that point is only valid if one agrees that a social sphere with its own distinctive characteristics actually exists online. Let’s just say: it’s complicated!

ETHNOGRAPHY BEYOND THE INTERNET

In a 2016 blog post, Miller argued, rather refreshingly, that he has ‘never, ever actually believed in “The Internet”’.¹ He writes that ethnographic studies of online activity

¹ www.culanth.org/fieldsights/847-the-internet-provocation.

should focus on contextualising these activities from a holistic perspective: 'I study populations whose online activities are a growing element of who they are and what they do. Yet no one lives just online.' So instead of 'fetishising' the internet, there is a point in the examination of the online setting as just one out of many places where people now live and interact. He makes the point convincingly:

After overhearing a two-hour telephone conversation between your husband and his mother, for example, you would not remark, 'Oh, that sounded bad, but what is your relationship like in the real world?' Nor does online represent a consistent trajectory. What people call the Internet has already meant entirely opposite things. The early debates — no one knows you're a dog on The Internet — were all about anonymity and creating specialist interest groups. By contrast, current debates about Facebook are all about a lack of privacy and how it muddles work, kin, and friendship. Middle-aged people used email to demolish the boundary between work and leisure; now young people use email to create a boundary between work and leisure. [...] Because we know that there is no Internet, we are open to finding that people online do entirely unexpected and contradictory things and that the same platform can do opposite things at different stages in its development.

In an impressive series of books, Miller and a number of his colleagues are in the process of presenting the results of fieldwork undertaken by nine anthropologists, who have spent fifteen months in nine communities around the world researching the role of social media in people's everyday lives. The project is called *Why We Post* and aimed, among other things, to show how problematic it is to assume that the internet and social media are the same everywhere:

When we tell people that we have written nine monographs about social media around the world, all using the same chapter headings (apart from Chapter 5), they are concerned about potential repetition. However, if you decide to read several of these books (and we very much hope you do), you will see that this device has been helpful in showing the precise opposite. Each book is as individual and distinct as if it were on an entirely different topic. This is perhaps our single most important finding. Most studies of the internet and social media are based on research methods that assume we can generalise across different groups. We look at tweets in one place and write about 'Twitter'. We conduct tests about social media and friendship in one population, and then write on this topic as if friendship means the same thing for all populations. By presenting

nine books with the same chapter headings, you can judge for yourselves what kinds of generalisations are, or are not, possible. (Miller et al. 2016: v)

The key point here is that, from an ethnographic point of view, it is the content rather than the platform that is of interest. For Miller and Slater (2000) there is, for example, nothing inherently 'virtual' about the internet. Rather, the internet is only virtual in those cases when it is used or perceived as a virtual space. 'Cyberspace' is not always present as soon as the internet is around. So, from the perspective of *digital anthropology*, it is more useful to study a platform such as Facebook by exploring it as being contextually embedded from the eyes of its users than to study what is posted online. An embedded approach to ethnography of the internet will lead the researcher to ask other questions beyond a cyberspatial approach. The aim is to embrace the multiplicity of the internet, and to pose questions about how it comes to mean different things in different settings among different people. Once again, this is because technology in itself does not have any pre-defined or given settings of use. Rather, different practices will generate different and divergent enactments of technology.

Remember, however, that while some ethnographers may be interested mainly in the study of how the internet is embedded in people's everyday lives, this does not mean that online-only ethnography is irrelevant or wrong. As Hine (2015: 38) puts it:

There are still online spaces which develop distinctive and well-ordered cultures. It is still relevant and interesting to find out what people do when they are online, and what forms of identity, structure, and inequality emerge when people come together in online space. However, there are now also many ethnographers who want to study the embedding of the Internet in various dimensions of everyday life.

So, on the one hand, there are online-only studies that use milieus and platforms on the internet as fieldsites for ethnographic analysis, without going beyond what happens in those places. On the other hand, there are studies that focus on how the internet becomes meaningful, through an analysis of how the internet is embedded in material and physical settings. Still, it is often a good idea for the researcher to move 'between mediated and unmediated spaces', since this often contributes to the contextualisation of the online interactions (boyd 2008: 45). After all, 'people do not live in online communities, or not exclusively at least' (Hine 2012: 27).

FURTHER READING

Hine, Christine (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

In this, one of her more recent books, Hine specifically explores how one can adapt the complex process of doing ethnography, striving for thick descriptions, to the changing and challenging conditions of digital society. The internet becomes more and more embedded into our everyday lives, to the extent that it even becomes a rather unremarkable way of carrying out our interactions. This poses methodological dilemmas for the ethnographer as regards whether one should look online, offline, or actually somehow in between.

Miller, Daniel, & Slater, Don (2000). *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

This is Miller and Slater's seminal ethnography of 'the internet in Trinidad, and Trinidad on the internet', as introduced earlier in this chapter. The key contribution here is the notion that the internet, rather than being placeless, should be seen in terms of the variety of new technologies that it encompasses, and more specifically of how such technologies are put to use and become socio-culturally decoded and translated in a variety of different offline settings.

Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Geertz's writing has been crucial in defining anthropology, and ethnography, as it stands today. The most important concept, as also discussed in this chapter, is that of thick description. The goal is to extract the structures of meaning that make up a culture, and this is done through presenting a combination of facts, commentary, interpretations, and interpretations of those interpretations.