Robert Kozinets’ *Netnography* (2010) is primarily a beginner’s guide to doing ethnographic work on online communities in the field of consumer and marketing research. As the author defines it, “netnography” is a form of ethnographic research, adopting the participant-observational approach and taking online interactions as its fieldwork. As such, the book itself may be useful to the undergraduate student thinking of doing ethnographic research on online communities. After providing a very general survey of the different methodological approaches to studying online communities, Kozinets outlines the steps that the researcher must take to undertake and assess a netnography: thoroughly plan the research project, gain entrance to the community, collect and analyze the data, deal with the ethical considerations, and finally reflect on how such a research project can/will be evaluated.

Whether netnography is indeed a method different enough to warrant a new name remains problematic. According to Kozinets, opting for this neologism is a necessary step in legitimizing such a qualitative approach to the online world in consumer and marketing studies:

> What [netnography] signals to various constituents of the research – those who approve its ethics, those who sponsor and finance it, those who consent to it, those who participate in it, those who audience it, those who review it, and those who read it – is that this particular research follows in a specified, distinct, common sense of methodological procedures and protocols that have been agreed upon by a community of scholars. (2010, p. 60)

Yet, online or virtual ethnographies have been around for as long as bulletin boards and multi-user dungeons, without the need for a neologism to legitimize their methodological underpinnings (e.g., see Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000).

There is yet another reason to doubt the necessity of a new term in this case. As Hine (2000) argues, ethnographic approaches necessarily bring into question the boundary between online and offline worlds. On its side—and for the reasons outlined above—Kozinets’ netnography places too much emphasis on the online communities and cultures, as if the online and the offline can be neatly separated from each other. In our autoethnographic research on the virtual world Second Life (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2008; Gaden & Dumitrica, 2010), my co-author and I found that this border simply does not hold up to scrutiny, as users bring with them their own cultural contexts in making sense of their online interactions (for more established work, see Miller & Slater, 2000). This is not to say that research on online communities is insufficient or incomplete, as Kozinets fears, but merely to point out that a thick description of such online cultures cannot be divorced from the offline positions, values, meanings, etc. that users bring to the online environment.

This awareness of the inseparability of online and offline realms brings us back to the question of the role of the researcher’s own values and beliefs (about the world,
about the culture that he/she is about to study, but also—and more importantly perhaps here—about the relation between online/offline spaces) in approaching and analyzing his/her fieldwork. In a recent contribution to a special issue on methodological approaches to virtual worlds, R.M. Milner provides precisely such an account of the tensions experienced by the researcher engaged in a virtual fieldwork:

When questions of method and ethics can be argued from opposite ends, sensitivity to our own personal positions is essential. Even if easy answers about methods and ethics elude us, the reflective process has value because it gets us asking questions. (2011, p. 30)

On the other hand, if ethnographic research on virtual communities does indeed differ in several respects from the “usual” (i.e., offline) ethnographies, then the difference stems from the presence of an infrastructure (both in terms of hard- and software) affecting the development and the affordances of these online communities. Kozinets captures this infrastructural element in the four characteristics of the virtual fieldwork: the nature of the interaction (different from face-to-face encounters), the relative anonymity of participants, the accessibility of the community site, and the possibility of archiving all minutiae of such communities. Unfortunately, although I would argue that this infrastructural element is crucial, the book fails to further incorporate it in terms of specific methodological considerations for online ethnographic work; specifically, how can the researcher become sensitive to and capture the role of this infrastructure?

Although I would use some of the chapters of this book as an introductory text for undergraduate students, the book does not constitute a significant contribution to the methodological discussions of online ethnographies. My major concern, however, remains that of an ambiguous anchoring of this textbook in the field of consumer and marketing studies. While the book is introduced as an attempt to legitimize the method within this field, the remainder of the book hardly ever reminds the reader that we are dealing with an ethnographic work aimed at studying consumers for specific marketing related purposes. This absence remains troublesome, as both researchers and participants need to be fully cognizant of the end-goals of such studies. On the other hand, the absence also renders ethnographic research ambiguous, as the boundary between and the different ethos of critical and administrative approaches remain widely unacknowledged.

References:


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