

Virtual migrant communities: 'Orkut' and the Brazilian case

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide some insights into ethnography on the internet, more specifically research on the use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) by migrants. Starting from the Brazilian migrant communities in Europe, it raises the question of the usability of the analysis of virtual migrant communities for the study of transnational networks. Can offline and online observations be combined? Does virtual research lead to high quality data? The paper illustrates the methodology of virtual research by exploring the example of the online social network site 'Orkut' which is enormously popular among Brazilians, both among those who are residing within Brazil as among those who migrate. Providing an important resource for migrants from different social classes, Orkut plays a significant role as an access gate to information and as a place where the status of Brazilian migrants can be discussed. It also functions as a stage to re-affirm Brazilian nationality. Within the variety of Brazilian websites, magazines and satellite channels, Orkut is often mentioned as the most important application to keep in touch with other Brazilians inside and outside Brazil. Recognizing the growing importance of SNSs such as Orkut, a growing body of scholarship addresses several aspects of these sites and the practices they enable. Most scholars recognise the importance of these SNSs for community formation and the formation of a diasporic public sphere. This paper highlights the significance of social network sites as a topic of research. The fact that participation on social network sites leaves online traces offers unprecedented opportunities for researchers. Even so, because of the relatively recentness of SNSs, there are some methodological and ethical limitations. These will also be discussed and further explored.

Introduction

In contrast to the old idea that migration means a sharp break from the home community, current theorizing about international migration is rooted in the concept of transnationalism. Transnationalism refers to processes whereby migrants structurally operate in social fields that transgress national borders (Basch et al. 1995; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Mazzucato 2004). Within these transnational relationships, homelands often serve as important symbolic anchors (Faist 2004; Hiller & Franz 2004). Transnationalism aptly suits the study of population movements in a deterritorialized and globalized world where rapid technological development and a revolution in communication are interconnecting individuals and groups, making it increasingly easy for migrants to maintain close links with their regions of origin and with other migrants around the world.

Social sciences have responded to this deterritorialized transnational reality by introducing the concept of multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1995). Differing from a mere comparative study of localities, the essence of this mobile ethnography is to quite literally follow people and their connections and relationships across space (Falzon 2009; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995: 97). Being as mobile and/or spatially dispersed as our informants has thus become a form of participant observation. Besides research on more than one physical space, this multi-sited research also makes use of new types of material, such as electronic media. Rather than relying solely on physical ethnography, contemporary field studies recognise the increasing importance of these electronic media in our social worlds. The wide-spread use of mobile phones or the Internet for example, are at the centre of the new and diverse kinds of imagination that interconnect people all over the world.

The continuing growth of global Internet access and the expansion of time online have posed a significant challenge for our understanding of research methods. The will to research the new social formations that arise when people communicate via Internet goes accompanied by anxiety about how far existing research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions (Hine 2006). This paper looks at the methodological implications of the new transnational approach to migration by focusing on one possible 'site' of multi-sited research, namely Social Network Sites (SNSs).

Recognizing the increasing importance of SNSs, a growing body of scholarship addresses several aspects of these sites and the practices they enable. The fact that participation on social network sites leaves online traces, offers unprecedented opportunities for researchers. Even so, because of the relatively recentness of these sites, there are some methodological limitations. Based on my novice experience as an online researcher, I illustrate the methodology of virtual research by exploring the example of the social network site 'Orkut' which is enormously popular among Brazilians, both among those who are residing within Brazil as among those who migrate.

Brazilian migrants in Belgium

According to data from the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs approximately 4 million Brazilians, about 2 % of the population, live abroad. The role of Brazil as an emigration country is relatively recent, beginning in the 1980s and intensifying in the last decade. The growth of Brazilian emigration is remarkable, given the socio-economic status of Brazil as an upper middle income country (as one of the BRIC-countries, Grevi & Vasconcelos 2008), which is rapidly evolving to become a major hegemonic key development player in the Latin American context. This upward striving potential contrasts, however, sharply with the persisting intra-national inequalities, which make Brazil one of the most uneven countries in the world (UNDP 2009), a reality that is likely to influence the Brazilian migration pattern.

Although the United States, Paraguay and Japan remain the most popular migration destinations, migration flows have also changed gear to Europe (Pellegrino 2004). In Western Europe, the traditional low-skilled labour migration from the Mediterranean Area has recently been replaced by a more complex pattern of intercontinental migration flows (Martiniello et al. 2010; Meuleman & Billiet 2003). Latin-American trans-Atlantic migration forms a significant part of these 'new' migration flows. The number of Latin Americans who have come to work and live in Europe has increased significantly in the past decade (Pellegrino 2004).

While Portugal, Spain and Italy are the European countries with the highest number of Brazilian migrants, Brazilians represent a large amount of the New Migrants in Belgium as well (3860 officially residing Brazilians in January 2008, among which 63.3% women, CGKR 2009). Recent data of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) illustrate that the official numbers largely underestimate the real size of the Brazilian community, which is estimated between 10000 and 50000 migrants, a number that is expected to further increase in the future (Reyntjens 2009). The presence of a significant number of Brazilians migrants is

facilitated by bilateral agreements between Belgium and Brazil, allowing Brazilian nationals to enter Belgium without previously having to request a visa. Many among them remain within the Schengen associated countries after the allowed tourist stay of 90 days (Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken 2009: 73).

The main geographical regions of origin of Brazilian migrants in Belgium are the states where economical development is low, complemented by some micro regions that experience a gap between economical opportunities and job opportunities, such as some areas in the states of Minas Gerais and Goiás (Reyntjens 2009).

Internet use among Brazilian migrants

For my PhD project I conduct research among Brazilian immigrants in Belgium, focusing on the impact of their transnational behaviour on the development of their communities of origin. Even though I didn't focus on internet as a medium initially, the social network site 'Orkut' soon became one of the sites of my ethnographic fieldwork. Within the variety of Brazilian websites, magazines and satellite channels that I encountered during my fieldwork, Orkut was often mentioned as the most important application to keep in touch with other Brazilians inside and outside Brazil. Like other social network sites, Orkut mainly works through profiles and communities. Members can construct their individual profile, a unique page that users can personalize to express their interests and tastes. On this profile, one has the possibility to add personal information and to upload pictures and videos. The friend network allows users to link to their friends and traverse the resulting network of profiles.

Orkut is one of the most widespread online communities in Brazil. Launched in January 2004, Orkut is named after Orkut Büyükkökten, the Google employee who developed the service. Although the site traces its roots to the United States, originally having an English-only interface, Portuguese-speaking Brazilians quickly "invaded" the site and became the dominant user group (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Kopytoff 2004). According to Orkut's own data in March 2010, 50,87% of the more than 100 million users worldwide is coming from Brazil, followed by India with 20,24% and the United States with 17,65%. Pakistan, fourth in rank, only has a share of 0,87% (Orkut 2010; 18 march 2010).

One of the most commonly-used features of interpersonal communication on Orkut is the scrapbook, on which one can leave public comments (scraps) on the message board that is linked to someone's profile. Orkut also offers the opportunity to sent private messages to other Orkut members and to chat with your friends who are online. Besides individual profiles, Orkut members can also create communities and invite people to become member.

Some of these communities are open to everyone, while others only give access after the moderator has approved membership. The types of communities vary strongly, from supporter communities of sports teams to student communities of certain universities or adherents of a political party. Community members can post upcoming events, initiate a poll or start a topic in the forum. Especially this last application is quite popular since it allows members to discuss certain topics with one another over a period of time.

One of the compelling aspects of social network sites such as Orkut is that they transcend the limitations of time and space. Messages posted on these sites can be consulted at any time of the day, anywhere in the world. The catalyst of interaction within computer-mediated communication is not necessarily provided by a shared location, but rather by shared interest (Da Cruz et al. 2009; Das n.y.; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson 1997). Even so, for migrants, having a common geographic location of origin or living in a common territory often provides a basis of these shared interests, in spite of the fact that in their offline life they may never have personally interacted (Miller & Slater 2000). Computer-mediated communication in general helps migrants not only in maintaining relationships with their networks back home, but also helps them trace and contact other migrants from the same place of origin in their new place of residence (Hiller & Franz 2004).

In many cities with a significant number of Brazilian migrants, Orkut members have formed virtual migrant communities, opening up new pathways for community formation. Popular Orkut communities among Brazilian migrants in Belgium are *Brasileiros na Bélgica* (Brazilians in Belgium) and *Brasileiros em Bruxelas* (Brazilians in Brussels). Providing an important resource for migrants from different social classes, these virtual communities play a significant role as an access gate to information that can be used to organize their migration and daily life at the scene of arrival. Participants in these virtual communities exchange information about a variety of topics concerning their settlement in the city and the practical problems they encounter in their day-to-day life, but also about upcoming events and the location of Brazilian shops and restaurants. While much could be said about it, in this paper I will not so much focus on the dynamics and the contents of the Brazilian virtual communities in Belgium. Instead, the emphasis will lie on the question of the usability of the analysis of virtual migrant communities for the study of transnational networks and the methodological implications of this virtual research.

Methodological issues

In contrast to the field of consumer and marketing research for example, anthropologists seem to have been rather slow and reluctant to follow social groups online (Hine 2000; Kozinets 2010: 1-3). With the exception of a relatively small group of ethnographers who focus research efforts on the Internet (for example Hine 2000; Kozinets 2010; Miller & Slater 2000), most ethnographers still conduct studies that are exclusively situated in the “offline” social world. However, Garcia et al. (2009: 53) state that focusing solely on the “offline” social world denies that contemporary life is increasingly marked by virtual and geographic mobility. Social scientists should respond to this digitalization of our social worlds by looking for methodologies to follow people’s online social activities and encounters. The authors go so far as to advise that virtually all contemporary ethnographies “should include technologically mediated communication, behaviour, or artifacts (e.g., Web-sites) in the definition of the field or setting for the research” (Garcia et al. 2009: 57).

Following these authors, I argue that online research sites such as SNSs must be understood as mundane and as a defining and integral part of how people live today. Researchers who ignore this reality will find their work more and more outdated and not rooted in contemporary reality. Especially research on migration can no longer close its eyes to the existence of transnational networks and the role of the Internet within these transnational interconnections. The online environment requires however an adaptation of the ethnographic approach. When online phenomena are studied, there are adjustments in data collection and analysis that must be made. Moreover, online ethnographic research has raised a number of ethical questions.

Over the past several years, many social scientists have written about the need to adapt existing ethnographic research techniques to the unique conditions in the online environment (see e.g. Escobar 1994; Garcia et al. 2009; Guimarães 2006; Kivits 2006; Kozinets 2010; Miller & Slater 2000). A close reading of ethnographic literature about computer-mediated communications and online communities reveals four critical methodological differences between face-to-face ethnography and online ethnography. First, ethnography on the Internet allows an unprecedented level of access to heretofore unobservable interactional behaviours of people. Online data are mostly plentiful and easy to obtain (Kozinets 2002: 62-64). The fact that online communication leaves tracks to an extent unmatched by that in any other context makes researcher able to easily observe, record and copy these interactions (Newhagen & Rafaeli 1996). The amount of available data forces online ethnographers to

make explicit choices about the delimitation of their research question, the place and duration of online data collection and the way data will be analyzed.

Second is the problem of anonymity. Computer-mediated interactions optionally afford their users a wide degree of freedom in their self-representation. As Kozinets (2010: 70) states, this anonymity can “confound and trouble researchers seeking to fix a particular demographic onto textual and other productions posted online. Who is one communicating with in an online cultural interaction or through an online interview?” (Italics in original). A related issue is the problem of contextualization: if one doesn’t know the identity of his informant, how can one contextualise the postings of this person on the Internet? These differences with face-to-face relations is less relevant for the analysis of social network sites such as Orkut, since most members of social network sites usually are very open about their identity. Most SNS-members make no efforts to deceive others, since they use their true identity to stay in touch with friends, family and acquaintances. Still, even in this context it is meaningful for researchers to be aware of the much wider degrees of freedom in self-presentation in the online world compared to the “offline” reality.

Third, the nature of online data is rather different from the data obtained through a face-to-face ethnography. Rather than information on people who are speaking and acting, an ethnography on the Internet provides mainly textual and visual material (such as the use of pictures, page layout, videos and so on). Technological improvements are also increasing the role of oral communication on the Internet, using VOIP protocols, with a possibility of visual access to each other (e.g. via webcam) (Garcia et al 2009: 64-66). Instead of focusing solely on the written word, Soukop (2000) emphasizes the importance of analysing the full range of modalities available. This requires ethnographers to also integrate visual aspects of data and to develop a new set of skills and methods of data collection.

Fourth, when researchers chose to include online participant observation in their research, an obvious difference with physical ethnography is the way they have to find an entrée into the community they want to study. In gaining access to the research setting, online ethnographers can not rely on their physical presence and interactional style. Although the problem of how to present oneself also exists within traditional ethnography, the challenges involved in obtaining access differ (Garcia et al. 2009: 68-73; Mann & Stewart 2003). The anthropological researcher’s online presence also raises an important ethical question: Is it acceptable for researchers to simply observe online without participating (“lurking”) or to participate without making themselves known? The following section of this paper will go deeper into the ethical aspects of online ethnography.

Conducting ethical online research

As shown, online ethnography differs from traditional ethnography in many ways. The specificities of this research setting also ask for a re-examination of the institutionalised understandings of research ethics. Research ethics may be one of the most important differences between traditional ethnography and online ethnography. Ethnographers must learn how to apply standard principles of human subject protection to a research environment which differs in fundamental ways from the face-to-face research contexts for which they were conceived and designed. The availability of an easy access to online data, the ability of a researcher to record these data without the knowledge of participants, the complexities of obtaining informed consent and the question of ownership of online data fuel the need for directive guidelines for ethical online ethnographic research. In this section, we will overview some important issues and stances in the debate on these protocols, in order to allow an understanding of online research ethics, and, consequently, of the ethical responsibilities of online researchers.

One of the specific anxieties which has arisen in relation to online ethnographic research is indicated by the debate over the issue of assumption of privacy. This debate revolves around the blurred distinction between public and private domains in the online world. Are researchers allowed to download online data, such as comments on the scrapbooks of SNS-users and discussions threads from forums, for analysis? Does the posting of things on the Internet makes these public property, available for researchers to use without asking permission? Some researchers would answer affirmatively to this question, arguing that all cyberspace postings are in the public domain and thus imply an implicit permission for their use by others (e.g. Denzin 1999; Finn & Lavitt 1994; Magnet 2007; Schaap 2002; Sharp & Earle 2003; Slater 1998). Many of these researchers have explicitly chosen to conduct physically 'invisible' research, maintaining a covert position in their research site. One of the major advantages of this approach is its entirely unobtrusive character and the chance this provides to research naturally occurring behaviours. King (1996: 125), however, stated that "[t]he perceived level of privacy with which most members of cyberspace forums post notes is the level that researchers are obligated to protect." Agreeing with this position, other researchers (e.g. Döring 2002; Kozinets: 2010; Roberts, Smith & Pollock 2004; Schrum 1995; Walther 2002; Waskul & Douglas 1996) also argue that some Internet locations are inherently private. They urge online researchers to communicate who they are and to ask for permission to use the online data for their research.

However, while there may be advantages to immediately announcing one's presence as an online researcher, in some cases disclosing one's presence to ask for consent may disturb the normal activity of the site (Garcia et al. 2009: 58-60). An inappropriate entrée into a community can also cause a hostile reaction towards the researcher (Kozinets 2010: 74-94). For this reason, some ethnographers have chosen to begin a participant observation study of online phenomena by lurking in order to familiarize themselves with the setting before asking questions. Still, while this silent lurking can give the researcher important information about the norms of the online setting, participating immediately in the online setting can give researchers a more authentic experience. Moreover, this allows online researcher to gain the informed consent of research participants, another cornerstone of ethical research (Sveningsson 2004: 50-51).

Given my stance that respect for the expectation of privacy overrides the distinction between public and private spaces, I found it important to obtain informed consent from people to be interviewed in the environment of Orkut. However, since most online communities I research have more than one thousand participants, the method of obtaining this consent was more problematic than in my offline fieldwork. Moreover, I was already a member of Orkut before I started my PhD. Therefore, at the moment my research started, I introduced myself in my new role as a researcher. After this introduction, I didn't continue to regularly post messages on forums introducing myself as a researcher, in order to maintain the naturalness of the conversation. Instead, I chose to make sure that the fact that I am conducting an ethnographic research is appearing permanently in my user profile.

Despite this overt presence as a researcher, many participants will not be aware of my study because the composition of online communities and friend networks often changes. For this reason, before using quotes in publications, I ask for the permission of research participants. Whenever possible, I try to meet the community members whose quotes I want to use, in order to gain their trust, and to ask for permission to share their scraps for the study. Research participants that are geographically dispersed are provided with an information sheet sent via Orkut-mail. All participants are also informed that they will be properly masked in order to protect their privacy and that they can withdraw their participation from the study at any given point.

Regarding citing, Kozinets (2010: 153) provides some ethical considerations that should be balanced: '(1) the need to protect vulnerable human participants who may be put at risk from the exposure of a research study, (2) the accessible and 'semi-published' qualities of much of what is shared on the Internet, and (3) the rights of individual community and culture members to receive credit for their creative and intellectual work'. I chose to give the actual

name of the online community I study, but to alter online pseudonyms, names, and other means of identifying the person. Even though this denies credit where it is due, I found the omission of potentially damaging information more important.

The methodological and ethical concerns brought up in this paper illustrate that ethnographers have to reflect on a number of issues before making their initial posting on their online research location. After locating appropriate online locations in which they will investigate their research question, researchers need to ensure that they are meeting all ethical, professional and legal standards that apply to their research project. They have to reflect on the way they will approach this community and design strategies to collect, structure, analyse and represent the available data.

Conclusion

While some argue that the “virtual” world is a different social space than the “real” world, I stated in this paper that “online” activities are part of how people live today and thus affect “offline” aspects of social life. Therefore, current social scientists must include technologically mediated communication in their research, either through an online ethnographic study or in a different way. For research that takes a particular social phenomenon such as migration as its focal area of interest, an ethnographic study on the Internet can play an important supporting role. The surge of new forums where migrants discuss different aspects of their migration experiences directs our attention to the fact that we have to think about the changing multi-sitedness of ethnographic research. Despite my focus on social network sites in this paper, these are only one among the various possible sites of online culture and community. Moreover, despite the fact that global Internet access is continuing to grow, access to these technologies remains stratified by class, gender and age (Mann & Stewart 2000: 31-37; Murelli & Okot-Uma 2002; Murthy 2008). SNSs should therefore be placed within the wider spectrum of mediations that affect people. Studying only one medium of communication that certain migrants use may blind us from the fact that people draw on different media in order to communicate with each other. Because internet media are “continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (Miller & Slater 2000: 5), we should adopt a dialectical research praxis, trying to understand how different research sites are interrelated. A balanced combination of offline and online ethnography, including

data gathered in face-to-face as well as online interaction, therefore can provide a fuller, more comprehensive account of the phenomena of interest and of transnational processes.

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