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Jenna Burrell
jenna@ischool.berkeley.edu
Assistant Professor
School of Information
UC Berkeley

The Fieldsite as a Network: a strategy for locating ethnographic research

Abstract: Through the work of constructing a fieldsite, researchers define the objects and subjects of their research. This article explores a variety of strategies devised by researchers to map social research onto spatial terrain. Virtual networked field sites are among the recent approaches that are challenging conventional thinking about field-based research. The benefits and consequences of one particular configuration, the fieldsite as a network, that incorporates physical, virtual, and imagined spaces will be explored in detail through a case study. I will focus in particular on the logistical issues involved and practical steps to constructing such a field site. This article includes suggestions for ways of studying social phenomena that take place on a vast terrain from a stationary position.

This article draws on theories about networks and ethnographies of the Internet to address issues of fieldsite selection in ethnographic research. Interest in ethnography - a complex of epistemological framings, methodological techniques, and writing practices - has spread into many domains and disciplines beyond its roots in cultural anthropology. It has been directed increasingly towards pragmatic outcomes beyond academic knowledge production ranging from political action and the development of social programs (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood et al. 2003; Madison 2005) to product design (Lewis, Mateas et al. 1996; Salvador, Bell et al. 1999). It is now firmly entrenched within a range of disciplines including sociology, media studies, education, science and technology studies and more. It has long since branched out of academia and become incorporated (with varying degrees of acceptance) into the corporate world (Suchman et al. 1999; Orr 1996; Jordan and Dahl 2006)[1] and international development institutions (Tacchi, Slater et al. 2003). Given the diverse set of research interests represented by these various spheres, ethnographic practice has been reconsidered and reconfigured at different times and in different domains. Some of the convenient fictions that facilitated

ethnographic approaches in the past have been less applicable to the new issues, theoretical and pragmatic, undertaken by researchers.

The term 'fieldsite' refers to the spatial characteristics of a field-based research project, the stage on which the social processes under study take place. For ethnographers, defining this space is an important activity that traditionally takes place before and in the early stages of fieldwork. It involves identifying where the researcher should ideally be located as a participant-observer. Once fieldwork concludes, an ethnography cannot be written without at some point defining this spatial terrain where the social phenomenon under study took place. This is both an act of exclusion and inclusion indicating what the research does and does not cover. A realization that the fieldsite is in certain ways constructed rather than discovered is crucial to contemporary practice. Yet, the practical work of constructing a fieldsite has not often been discussed. This article will review some of the fieldsite configurations researchers have developed in recent years and will explore a promising one, the fieldsite as a heterogeneous network. The advantages of this particular configuration and the on-the-ground practical and logistical concerns involved in constructing such a fieldsite will be explored in detail.

Over the course of several decades of methodological reflection, ethnographers have called into question the traditional conception of the fieldsite as a bounded space containing a whole culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In the anthropological tradition this place of fieldwork was frequently a village in some remote region. There were advantages to the construction of such a bounded and disconnected fieldsite. It put anthropologists in a position to make strong arguments about cultural difference that unseated presumptions of the universal or biological basis of social practices. Reliance on a bounded fieldsite did not extend as far as claiming complete disconnection from external forces, but the influence of what was 'external' to the fieldsite was treated as secondary. This particular way of configuring the fieldsite also had consequences for the ethnographers positioning as participant-observer. The ethnographer upon entering the fieldsite worked to transition from outsider to insider becoming accepted as a quasi-member of the society under study on an equal footing to others of similar social standing. A measure of such acceptance and enculturation was the ethnographer's ability to receive and interpret experiences as an insider would. At the same time, it was

recognized that the researcher should maintain the ability to analyze social processes as an external observer avoiding a complete conversion. This critical distance was often effected by ‘exiting’ the field to enforce a physical distance necessary for the work of analysis.

As anthropologists moved to take on new social issues they began to propose new configurations of the fieldsite. In 1986 Marcus and Fischer reflecting on Neo-Marxist movements, most notably World-Systems Theory, pointed to an awakening interest among anthropologists in, “how to represent the *embedding* of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy” (Marcus and Fischer 1986:12). Such work was a matter of examining how larger systems were registered and materialized at the local level. They pointed to macro-scale social changes as prompting such methodological questioning. Changes in the structures and interconnections of late capitalism, they argued, had increased the scale and complexity of social processes. The approximate containment of a culture within a small bounded space such as a village if it ever held, was therefore increasingly less accurate. In later years, ethnographers joined the debate to suggest that such a containment of culture did not necessarily even hold in traditional studies of an “out of the way place” (Clifford 1992; Tsing 1993; Piot 1999). Such a challenge to ethnographic practice arose not simply from rapid, global social change, but also from theoretical developments, the draw of new objects of anthropological inquiry, and (one can speculate) the incursion of disciplinary outsiders.

The perspective on ethnographic work as the study of global processes as they are experienced locally did not suggest that the global might somehow be studied directly. Marcus in a later book revises his earlier writing on, “knowable communities in larger systems” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) that relied on notions of ‘embedding’ in favour of studying the ‘larger system’ itself through an “ethnography in/of the world system” (Marcus 1998a). He argues that such a system is indeed ‘knowable’ and underlines the need to, “efface the macro-micro dichotomy...” (Marcus 1998b:35). Marcus joins a number of other scholars in shifting from a notion of culture as essentially stationary to culture (or the social) as constituted by intersection and flow (Clifford 1992; Hannerz 1992b; Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996; Ong and Nonini 1997). In this newer conception, the movement of objects, of individuals, of ideas, of media, and of the fieldworker herself

are attended to, uncovering insights and objects of inquiry that were not visible in studies that assumed culture was spatially fixed. Marcus (1998a) addresses directly the matter of fieldsite configuration suggesting several possible modes that lend a coherence to research projects without being spatially bounded. They include 'follow the person,' 'follow the object,' and 'follow the metaphor' among other configurations, all lending an overarching cohesion to "multi-sited" ethnographies. These arguments highlight how movement is central to social practice, but also that coherent cultural processes may take place across great distances linking up disparate entities. They may also take place on the move.

Challenges to locating field sites are not limited to the understanding that social processes could take place over vast physical terrain. Hannerz, in a compatible argument, draws attention to the heterogeneity of culture. He notes that within contemporary societies cultural processes register in the lives of individuals to varying degrees. Exposure to a diversity of meanings in such societies produces members who are self-determining (Hannerz 1992a). Therefore an attempt to describe the culture within a bounded space, whether a village or a nation-state elides the inconstancies that exist within any heterogeneous population. The practical problem for researchers becomes the challenge of foregrounding - how to pull something coherent forward from such overlapping and intertwined social terrain.

These studies provide the foundation of a contemporary understanding of how culture is (and is not) located. However, with the exception of Marcus proposal for multi-sited ethnography, they do not explain how *fieldwork* may consequently be located. Given arguments for the vast terrain and complex intermingling of cultural spaces it is clear that fieldsite selection must become something that is done continually throughout the process of data gathering. It cannot be decided once and for all in the early stages. As a matter of deciding what to include and what to exclude, this work will require some difficult, strategic choices. A further elaboration on Marcus' proposal to 'follow' the objects of ethnographic research will be undertaken in this article in an effort to make these conceptual developments available to practitioners of ethnographic work.

Locating the Field in Cyberspace

The argument for an alternate configuration of the fieldsite presented in this article is built upon the new ground established by Marcus, Gupta and Ferguson, Hannerz and others discussed above, but it also draws from new methodological approaches devised to study the Internet. As the Internet emerged in the early 1990s a distinct set of debates arose around its status as an object of research. Concerns about how to define the fieldsite and fieldwork, issues about the relationship between social phenomena and space were again central.

Emerging online spaces of the Internet appeared to belong to an entirely new category of space. Online discussion groups and text-based virtual worlds[2] presented compelling new settings of social activity. The Net exhibited non-Cartesian properties and the activities there did not conform to standard laws of physics. Mitchell described the Net as, "profoundly antispatial…You cannot say where it is or describe its memorable shape and proportions…But you can find things in it without knowing where they are" (Mitchell 1996:8). The Net frequently produced (especially among new users) a profound sense of spatial disorientation. Researchers experimented with research practices in online realms formulating the concept of a 'virtual' ethnography (Ruhleder 2000, Hine 2000) or cyber-ethnography (Ward 1999). The technical properties and social practices in online spaces allowed for research explorations that straddled the physical and the imaginary.

Methodological debates around the Internet were complementary to the ongoing effort to treat global processes as the proper subject of ethnographic fieldwork[3]. Yet, the case made for a virtual ethnography had certain strengths that were lacking in this other set of critiques. First and foremost, it was well-grounded in empirical work. Through participation, close observation, and interviews researchers showed how inhabitants experienced certain virtual sites and certain forms of engagement on the Internet as both profoundly spatial and social (Turkle 1995, Rheingold 1993, Baym 1995a, Baym 1995b, Watson 1997). This was justification for ethnographic, site-based approaches to the study of what took place online.

Virtual ethnographies were able to show how individuals made sense of ambiguous, non-Cartesian social terrain in the course of lived experience. As Hine (2000) notes, this form of fieldwork did not require the corporeal displacement of the

researcher, but was rather a mental immersion and an engagement with the imagination. Taylor (1999) describes the "plural existence" of the researcher as simultaneously an online 'avatar' and an offline body. Virtual ethnographies demonstrated the possibility of awareness and analysis of spaces beyond what can be physically inhabited. A break between physical presence and spatial experience is heavily utilized in the argument of this article. This insight makes it possible to conduct fieldwork on social phenomena that take place across vast distances and in unconventional spaces.

Despite the innovations around notions of space in virtual ethnographies, many early studies fell back on the notion of a conventionally bounded fieldsite (albeit virtual) and consequently proposed a sharp division between offline and online spaces (i.e. (Taylor 1999; Sunden 2002)). Bassett describes such a division unequivocally as a "technologically mediated rupture" (Bassett 1997:550). Those who pursued this style of virtual ethnography rarely combined such explorations with sustained empirical study of spaces away from the computer. It would not be accurate to suggest that these studies neglected to consider users' offline lives as many of these studies involved interviews and participant-observation in other modalities (typically telephone or face-to-face) (i.e. Turkle 1995, Correll 1995). Yet, the principal fieldsite, was typically conceived of as the discussion group or virtual world with offline engagements supplementing, supporting, or serving as a contrast to the online.

In recent years the chorus of voices challenging an assumed division between online and offline has grown (McLelland 2002, Henriksen 2002, Leander and McKim 2003, Carter 2005, Wilson 2006). Miller and Slater suggest that alternately, "we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (Miller and Slater 2000:5). Their advice for an ethnographic approach to the Internet is to start from a site offline rather than within its virtual spaces. In their study of the Internet in Trinidad they conducted household surveys and spent time observing sociability in Internet cafes and other spaces to understand norms of Trinidadian social life that extended into online spaces as well[4]. A few researchers have taken a further step to propose structural concepts as heuristics to help overcome the exaggerated distinction between online and offline worlds. In a particularly sophisticated example Wakeford studied an Internet café in London looking at "landscapes of computing" defined as "the overlapping set of

material and imaginary geographies which include, but are not restricted to, on-line experiences" (Wakeford 1999:180). In a study of knowledge production about genetic disorders, researchers sought 'nodes' that served as points of intersection between online and offline worlds and also worked back and forth between the online (i.e. websites) and offline (i.e. laboratories and support groups) to develop a more comprehensive picture of knowledge practices (Heath, Koch et al. 1999). The network form advocated in this article is another structural concept that, like landscapes and nodes, can guide thinking and shape methodological practice in ways that escape strong offline/online divisions.

Ethnographies of virtual spaces have implications beyond the study of the Internet. The principles and new possibilities proposed by this approach can be extended to the study of mass media spaces and imagined spaces. Extending fieldwork in this way raises some interesting questions. Should we define the field site by the movement and dwelling of the fieldworker or alternately, as the space upon which a social phenomenon takes place? These are no longer considered one and the same. As Marcus notes, contemporary ethnography is often a study of parts rather than wholes (Marcus 1998b). The researcher cycles in and out of the field, skips certain areas entirely, and may rely on the recollections of participants in interviews to map out the space. The fieldworkers' movements are no longer co-extensive with the way the social phenomenon under study extends across space.

Constructing a Field Site: Lessons Learned

A major concern that I wish to address in this movement towards mobile, multi-sited, and virtual ethnography is the issue of logistics. If socio-cultural processes are taking place across vast terrain, how do we, as researchers, cope with the inevitable limits in time and funding? How do we gain deep knowledge through fleeting social encounters or interactions with the ambiguous inhabitants of ephemeral, virtual spaces and where these 'sites' might disappear altogether? The acknowledgement that researchers now often study 'parts' rather than whole cultural processes is one logistical accommodation. Additionally, there has been some discussion and reflection on the occasional failures among researchers to recruit participants due to the fleeting nature of social encounters (Couldry 2003) or the atypical subject matter and mode (such as e-mail) of the request

(Hine 2000). In this section logistics will be central. There are limits to what can reasonably be accomplished in a contemporary, boundary-less ethnography. To address this concern I will include some suggestions about how spatially vast field sites may be understood where the researcher physically inhabits only certain parts of the space.

The case in question is a study of the social appropriation of the Internet in Accra, Ghana that involved an 8-month period of fieldwork. This study presented a number of challenges to defining a field site. I was interested in particular in understanding how the Internet was described and spoken about amongst users. I hoped to better understand the process users went through to learn how to manipulate this complex technology. My intent was to relate this discussion to efforts in high level international development agencies like the UN that championed access to new technologies like the Internet for developing countries like Ghana. I selected Internet cafes, as opposed to other sites of Internet use, in part because they were publicly accessible. In terms of logistics, I expected that conducting observations and recruiting interviewees would be more effective in this type of setting. Furthermore, these cafes represented a model of shared access that some argued was particularly well suited for the developing world where the Western norm of personal computer ownership was out of reach for most. Therefore by looking at Internet cafes, I was positioned to respond to debates in development and technology studies.

On a more general level, this research met with challenges faced by many researchers nowadays who do field-based studies. It dealt with an urban environment. It included an examination of non-Cartesian virtual spaces. It was concerned with the relationship between global processes and situated experiences. The impossibility of drawing a boundary around such a social phenomenon arose from several conditions. First, the subject matter was the Internet, a global network of machines, information, and people and yet the Internet is too vast be studied as a whole. Second, it was also a study of everyday life in Accra that, beyond the Internet, is lived in the broader context of daily interaction with a material and media culture that has ambiguous and/or multiple origins. The distinction between local and foreign goods and media is often blurred. Strategies of naming intentionally render the local more global and the global more local. For example, it is common for businesses and churches to include the prestigious term

‘international’ in their name despite the fact that they have no branches abroad. In contrast, region specific advertising (i.e. for soap or beer) purposefully rubs-out an indication of the foreign source of many products re-inventing them as local through imagery and narratives about family, gender, work, and recreation. These ambiguities of origin may be intentional or accidental, either way they serve to thwart those efforts to describe culture that employ a dichotomy between local and global. These examples illustrate how everyday life in Accra is oriented towards the ‘external’ world, but furthermore that local and global are not meaningful or discernable as distinct categories. What was once firmly external has been pulled into the city incorporated and hybridized into an infinite supply of new cultural forms in language, advertisements, music, clothing styles and more.

Initially the Internet café itself seemed promising as a stand-alone ‘field site’. I could select several of these small businesses and simply spend my days inside these air conditioned oases observing activities, perhaps providing technical assistance, and gaining an understanding of social processes shaped by the café environment. Yet it became clear early on that I had overestimated the role of these spaces as a socialized place with any cohesive, communal sensibility. Customers came very irregularly and often for only short periods of time. I could not count on encountering anyone on a regular basis outside of the operators who worked there. Internet café users similarly noted that they had made no friends or contacts (in face-to-face interactions) at these Internet cafés.

Yet, from observing people in these Internet cafes sitting, attentively observing the computer screen, often deaf to any surrounding noise and activity, it appeared that many were engaged in deeply immersive, social experiences in a virtual space. Their physical presence in the café became muted and hollow. These social experiences were frustratingly difficult for me to observe as a researcher, materialized primarily as scrolling text in a small window. I could intervene in such a social engagement from only one side and thereby risk obliterating the interaction in a quest to understand it.

I found that observing the customer circulations through the Internet café alone was insufficient for my purposes; to better understand of the role of Internet use in the everyday lives of the urban inhabitants of Accra. The Internet cafes were encompassed

within neighborhoods, the neighborhoods within the city. I began to follow people from the café, starting out by arranging an in-depth interview often staged at a nearby chop bar[5]. Ultimately following these Internet café users led me to homes, churches, schools, foreign countries and into the future (if only imagined), and back to the Internet café where I was ultimately able, in a few cases, to observe more closely the immersive social encounters these Internet users were enjoying.

In one sense my fieldsite broadened out to become the city of Accra since all of the Internet cafés I studied, homes I visited, and roads I travelled during my fieldwork phase were within the city or its suburbs. However, the city was paradoxically both too complexly heterogeneous (too inclusive a fieldsite) and simultaneously too geographically limited (too exclusive) as a unit of analysis. It was too inclusive in the sense that it was composed of layer upon layer of intersecting and overlapping activity. Most of this activity, however, had little relevance to my main research interests. A way to more selectively define the fieldsite was necessary, outlining its social and material shape within the city, making the social phenomenon visible within a complex social space.

The boundaries of the city were also too exclusive since a variety of locales, institutions, and people near and far have a direct bearing on the appropriation and use of the Internet in Accra. For example, the foreign chat partners of Internet café users, their family members living abroad, and the immigration regulations of countries such as the U.S. and U.K. are among the many relevant constitutive forces that define Internet use in Accra. Therefore the fieldsite must be defined without relying on broad territorial boundaries that are simply too imprecise.

To reconcile these spatial complexities I conceived of my fieldsite as a network composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects. Hannerz advocates for this form of 'network analysis' as a way to conduct ethnographic inquiry in a disciplined way (Hannerz 1992b). The network as a concept is quite compatible with the aim of ethnographic work to escape the concepts, categories, hierarchies, and presumed relations that structure quantitative research methods and formal surveys. As Strathern notes, "a network is an apt image for describing the way one can link or enumerate disparate entities without making assumptions about level or hierarchy"

(Strathern 1996:522). Similarly, Hannerz comments that, "Networks...can be seen to cut across more conventional units of analysis" (Hannerz 1992b:40). Therefore networks provide a way for developing an unconventional understanding of social processes. It is a structure that can be constructed from the observable connections performed by participants.

Another advantage of defining the fieldsite as a network is that it is produced as a continuous space that does not presume proximity or even spatiality in a physical sense. Continuity does not imply homogeneity or unity. Instead continuity implies connection. The continuity of a network is evident in the way that one point can (through one or more steps) connect to any other point.

In a 'fieldsite as network' the point of origin, the destination(s), the space between and what moves or is carried along these paths is of interest. It is an approach, "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (Marcus 1998a:90). Defining the fieldsite as a network is a strategy for drawing the social phenomenon into view by foregrounding it against the social complexity of its urban setting. To foreground is to draw the contours of the phenomenon distinguishing it from the competing and intersecting activities also taking place within the spatial field that is defined more traditionally by the territorial boundaries of the city. The term 'contour' best describes the outcome of this act of foregrounding by indicating that greater precision is achieved than would be obtained relying on the boundaries of the city, the country, etc. At the same time this term preserves the quality of irregularity and the notion that the social phenomenon is outlined rather than detached from its context.

In translating the many theoretical arguments for mobile and multi-sited ethnography into a practical reality I arrived at several strategies that I will detail here. These strategies draw, in part, on some practices that are well established in ethnographic research, but are here reframed, related to the demands of contemporary practice, and connected to some novel techniques. This is an attempt to extend and render concrete some of Marcus suggestions for multi-sited ethnography. The following are some

proposed steps (roughly sequential) for fieldsite construction in contemporary ethnographic practice:

1) Seek entry-points rather than sites: To study the fieldsite as a network the researcher must also make a strategic decision about what position(s) to take within the network. I found that this was a matter of searching for 'entry-points' rather than bounded locations (Green 1999; Couldry 2003). Hine similarly suggests that ethnographers, "might still start from a particular place, but would be encouraged to follow connections made meaningful from that setting." (Hine 2000:60). In this study, I sought to trace out a fieldsite using Internet cafés as a starting point. I did this in one way by tracing paths through the city defined by Internet users to get a sense of their everyday lives. For example, I followed a young woman from the Internet café where she chats with her foreign husband to the market where she is apprenticing with a hair dresser in preparation for her move abroad to the Western Union office where she receives money from her husband earmarked for the purchase of a flashy new mobile phone. This approach provided a richer sense of the interconnections between Internet use and other aspects of Internet users' lives. A well selected entry-point is able to generate a broad spatial mapping that maintains a concentrated engagement with the research topic. The Internet cafe with its frequent circulation of users and digital objects had great potential for spinning out these broad webs across urban and virtual terrain.

2) Consider multiple types of networks: Marcus encourages fieldworkers to 'follow' people, objects, and stories but doesn't describe the pathways that are traversed. Existing infrastructures for transporting people, goods, and digital objects come in a number of overlapping forms, some that are already understood as networks. These include phone networks, other telecommunications networks (such as the Internet), transportation networks (such as airlines), road networks, and social networks. By identifying these various networks they too become foregrounded in the fieldsite and can be understood as constraining and facilitating particular movements. By considering this multitude of networks up front, the many possible directions that could be followed are laid out for the researcher to consider. In traversing these networks the fieldsite becomes a *heterogeneous network*. It is distinct from what Olwig and Hastrup promote as, "field

work sites [that] have been defined by the human relations that were the subject of study" (Olwig and Hastrup 1997) as well as Howard's ethnographic approach incorporating social network analysis (Howard 2002). The fieldsite as heterogeneous network incorporates mapping out the social relations of research participants but also their connections to material and digital objects and physical sites. Hannerz (1992b) notes that such a 'network analysis' will engage with the way meaning flows through other relationships such as the state, market, and media. Accepting heterogeneity preserves the possibility that the social phenomenon under study may be defined not only by social networks, but by material flows and other modes of connection.

3) Follow, but also Intercept: There is also the issue of more distant locales and of spaces more geographically ambiguous than the city where activities of following and inhabiting are less feasible. This is where notions of 'following' as a physical act must be revisited and revised. One approach would be to follow messages from their origins in the Internet café to their destinations at the points of Internet access for chat partners in various countries. I took, instead, a second approach as advocated by Marcus to study a single site with an *awareness* of its multi-site context (Marcus 1998a). I interpreted this to mean that the Internet café could be treated as a point of intersection where an understanding of the Internet was produced in part by the conversations and circulation of 'data' through these computers. Doing this from a stationary position was a way to avoid the unwieldiness of expanding the fieldsite into multiple countries.

Internet cafés are sites that experience constant circulation. Studying the café as a point of intersection meant attending to the connections from this site to other distant sites as well as tracking the movement of material and digital objects and people circulating through the café. The origins or circulation record of these objects, if available, is also of interest although as I have previously acknowledged this is often ambiguous. Using this perspective I found that Ghanaian Internet café users exchanged messages with an extraordinarily wide range of chat partners online including people not only from the U.S. and Europe, but also from Pakistan, India, Israel, Hong Kong, and many other locations. They sought out mass media imagery of major news events (like the 2005 Tsunami and the war in Iraq). They also acquired American hip-hop and rap

music and videos. The result was a vision of both a chaotic, destructive, and glamorous world outside of the African continent.

4) Attend to Indexicals in Interviews – language can be instrumental in providing clues about things to follow and sites to visit. Through language, speakers often construct associations to and between spaces. In terms of methodological practice, distinguishing and attending to what is indexical in speech is generally treated as part of a later analysis phase (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). However, paying close attention to references to space and place in speech (or texts) earlier on can also be a guide to the further movement of the researcher. These references map out how the social phenomenon is perceived spatially. For example, in the course of interviews on Internet cafe use with young people, I heard stories about the school yard and the class room as spaces where students discussed their forays on the Net. Without necessarily visiting these schools, I came to understand how the school, a space where similarly-aged young people met and socialized, played an important role in how the Internet was collectively understood. References to places also served as suggestions for new locales to physically visit. Interviews with Internet users in one neighbourhood yielded references to 'Bases,' informally organized groups of youth who created hangouts on roadsides and in unfinished buildings in the surrounding neighbourhood. These informal organizations turned out to be significant sites where technical knowledge about the Internet and about mobile phones was passed along. Following from these interviews, I was able to spend time at a 'base' and at a more formally organized youth club that alternately met in an Islamic school or on the back patio of a local NGO. Through speech these spaces were brought forward out of the complexity of the urban neighborhood as sites of technology appropriation. They would otherwise likely have gone unnoticed.

5) Incorporate Uninhabitable Spaces – Studies of virtual worlds highlight how the spaces constructed by people through social interactions may not be physically inhabitable. The study of these spaces as dimensions of the fieldsite will require some alternative approach. Use of the Internet frequently involves an engagement with the imagination and the production of imagined spaces because there is much that this medium conceals. Imagined spaces are "social imaginaries" (Anderson 1983, Taylor 2002) conceived of in spatial terms. For example, Ghanaians constructed a notion of

cyberspace and who was in it from their experiences and other sources of information. From conversations it became clear that many Internet users conceived of chat rooms, dating websites, and other online spaces designed for mixing and mingling as providing access to philanthropists, potential business partners, and wealthy older people. Yet, these expectations did not mesh with their experiences. Internet users tended to encounter teenagers and twenty-somethings in these spaces. The particular technical configuration of chat rooms where the bodies of participants were concealed, where ambiguous screen names were used, and where an unknown number of individuals could be 'lurking' without speaking facilitated such speculative imagination.

Besides cyberspace, geographic territories such as foreign countries were also imagined by Internet café users. Their fantasies were constructed partly from what they encountered in mediated form through Internet chat partners, websites, the news media, music videos, TV shows, movies, stories told by Ghanaians returned from abroad, encounters with foreigners in Accra, and rumours. The U.S. registered an impact on the appropriation of the Internet in Ghana in other ways, most tangibly as the material source for many of the technologies that make up the Internet, but also in terms of government regulations on foreign immigration that constrained the mobility of most Ghanaians. However, the United States was also a space that was constructed in the social imagination of Internet users in Accra as a desirable destination for education and employment and a source of enormous wealth. Appadurai argues for greater consideration of the fantasies people construct through engagements with mass media since they shape aspirations and real-world activities (Appadurai 1996). In Ghana, there was a consequential impact of these imagined spaces as they were frequently treated as real and correspondingly acted upon.

Imagined spaces can be documented primarily through interviews and are found in the repetition of themes between multiple sources demonstrating a social reality beyond the individual. There is no clear way to participate in or observe these spaces. Participant-observation can take place in the sites where the consequences of such imaginations play out. Particularly intriguing are the sites where such imagined realities intersect and are contradicted by harsher alternative realities (such as the U.S. embassy where Ghanaians sought and were often denied travel visas). Imagined spaces

constituted an important source of meaning that could be related to the experiences and activities of Internet users on a non-imaginary plane of existence.

6) When and Where to Stop – the potentially infinite size of the network and the lack of a natural stopping point presents problems for researchers (Strathern 1996). Practically speaking, one simple way of determining when to stop is when time runs out. As Hine (2000) points out, if one embraces the notion that ethnographic work is no longer about studying cultural wholes, then the question of completeness becomes unproblematic, one stops when one must. The dilemma becomes how to strategically construct the selected part in a way that produces something coherent and some approaches to this have been detailed above. Meaning saturation is one well-established approach[6] that does not rely on spatial boundaries to define the ending point of research. When interviews with new people and observations in new locales yield a repetition of themes, this may indicate that the research process has come to a natural conclusion. Additionally, research that follows connections may move into a site where there are less and less frequent encounters with the topics of interest. This may not mean stopping the research entirely, but rather that the researcher ought to return back to the fieldsite's 'starting point' to pursue another set of connections and move in another direction.

Consequences to the Researchers' Role

One consequence of defining the fieldsite as a network is that it creates an alternate and indefinite role for the researcher. The network form reorganizes the relationship between the foreign researcher and the group under study. Entering the fieldsite is no longer a process of crossing the boundary from outside to inside. There are consequently a multitude of possible ways to define the connection between researcher and researched.

In the classic notion of fieldwork, where the object of study is a remote village that is treated as a whole culture, there could be few connotations attached to the arrival of a foreign researcher. He is merely a curiosity. Nigel Barley's fieldwork account in The Innocent Anthropologist is an example of this way of rendering the foreign researcher. He explains how among the Dowayo people of northern Cameroon his presence was tolerated because his bumbling attempts to master the language and fit into

the community were such a source of amusement (Barley 1983). There was no sense of portent or promise attached to his arrival in the village. Yet, few ethnographers arrive at their fieldsite so innocently and so unmarked anymore. Media exposure is one way foreigners are marked before their arrival. In contrast to Barley's account, Diane Nelson notes that upon her arrival in Nebaj, Guatemala when she gives her name, crowds of children begin chanting, 'Diana, queen of the lizards!' She soon learns that 'Diana, queen of the lizards' was a character in an imported science fiction show they had watched on television (Nelson 1996). Similarly, my arrival in Accra was met in short order with shouts of 'obruni, obruni' (meaning white person/foreigner) a term that was also imbued with many meanings. I discovered that much was presumed about me by virtue of my being foreign, American in particular. This meant that I was not entirely a mystery, and to an extent I had already been 'figured out' before I even spoke.

The connotations of foreignness interfere with the researchers attempt to become a member of the community. An ethnographer instead finds upon entering the fieldsite that she is already part of it. She has been given her own position in the network, but in a role that is often quite different from the people she is studying. In my own experience I found that it was most worthwhile to seek an understanding of what it meant to be a foreigner moving about an urban setting in Ghana rather than to necessarily attempt community membership. In general, examining the role(s) assigned to the researcher by those she studies is one route to understanding the highly-connected lives and global orientations of people and societies in the 21st century.

Conclusion

By defining the field site as a network in accordance with the guidelines described above, the field site transitions from a bounded space the researcher dwells within to something that more closely tracks the social phenomenon under study. This fieldsite is constructed in terms of how such a phenomenon is perceived and acted upon by participants. Ultimately this approach is in keeping with the *emic* ideal of ethnographic practice. The fieldsite comes to be defined by the physical movements, indexicality of language, and social imaginings produced by research participants. The researcher still, of course, plays a role in the 'siting' of research interests and the resulting fieldsite is a

collaboration between researcher and researched groups. Through an openness to following participants through space as well as in language, there is potential for empirical surprises and novel insights.

In the particular example of my field work experience, Internet cafés served as an especially productive 'entry-point' for research into the appropriation and use of the Internet in Accra. Strategically, they served as an accessible public space where people could be recruited for interviews. Internet cafés were focal points, points of circulation and intersection from which I was able to expand outward tracing the contours of the social phenomenon of Internet use. This was accomplished by both following the movement of Internet users through the city and by intercepting the flow of media through the Internet as it arrived in the Internet café. This made it possible to narrow the scope of the fieldsite considerably while still acknowledging how forces from various locales near and far were incorporated into the setting.

Logistics are an often inadequately acknowledged dimension of field-based research. I referred to a number of accommodations in my own field work experience. I advocated staying in place to 'intercept' circulations of data, people, and goods rather than following them. I suggested that a spatial mapping could be drawn out, in part, through references to place in language (in interviews and conversations) without visiting each and every one of these locales. The strategic selection of a site (the Internet café) where several networks converged, where people and objects came to me (rather than the other way around) also aided this effort. The work of 'efficiently' defining a field site as a network involved conserving movement while switching between directions and objects of interest. While not applicable to all field-based research, this approach is likely to be particularly useful to certain topics of social research including migration, new communication technologies, broadcast media, transnationalism, and global institutions among many others.

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[1] See also proceedings of The Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (2005, 2006, 2007).

[2] Text-based virtual worlds called MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and MOOs (MUD object-oriented) have dwindled as the capabilities of the Net have progressed rapidly. However new shared computing environments that facilitate identity play with richly visual environments have become quite popular. These include ‘Second Life’ and a host of MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-playing games)

including EverQuest. Social research continues in these spaces (Williams 2007) and new interests are developing on the economics of 'virtual' objects.

[3] For an extensive and thorough analysis of the connections between the methodological debates in mainstream anthropology and those generated by virtual ethnographies see (Hine 2000).

[4] Hampton and Wellman (2003) also pursued an offline ethnography to understand how Internet connectivity facilitated neighborhood interactions and activities in a wired suburb. They use this position to argue against claims that the use of the Internet was isolating people.

[5] A chop bar is a place that serves local fast food.

[6] See Charmaz (2006:113-114) for a nuanced discussion of what saturation is and what it entails in a grounded theory approach.