

Call for papers

New Groups and New Methods? The Ethnography and Qualitative Research of Online Groups

Online groups, also called «virtual worlds», «virtual communities», or «digital collectives», are those social groups whose members' interactions are mediated primarily by the Internet. Participation in these groups has a variety of purposes and takes place via a variety of technological platforms. These include, for instance, platforms for social networking (such as Facebook, Second Life and social networks in general), platforms that have a productive purpose for participants (such as projects for the development of Free and Open Source Software), or platforms whose goal is to provide entertainment or a pastime for users (for instance Multiplayer Online Games such as the Massive Multiplayer Online Games or Online Poker).

Nowadays, the social relevance of this phenomenon has become quite clear in several areas. For example, social networks like Facebook or MySpace now count millions of users that interact online, with a variety of goals, practices and tools (Beer, 2008). The proliferation of socio-technical phenomena such as Wikipedia, Creative Commons and Free and Open Source Software has changed some of the traditional assumptions about organizational hierarchies and paid labour (Kelty, 2008). Or again, Online Games' virtual economies are tied to real economies, in ways that challenge traditional assumptions about property (Castronova, 2005).

Social, cultural, economic, and technological dimensions are, therefore, closely intertwined in the phenomenon of Online Groups. In this special issue (volume 4, number 2, 2011) of «Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa» (Ethnography and Qualitative Research) we are looking for contributions with a strong empirical bias that can tackle this hybrid complexity and that specifically offer reflections and practical experiences for a discussion on the theoretical and methodological dimensions of the phenomenon. This involves reflecting on one or more of the following topics.

Firstly, some reflections might focus on the theoretical dimension. Often the literature, in both the social sciences and economics, for example Benkler's (2006) or von Hippel's (2004) works, has associated the birth and proliferation of online groups with a process of democratization and the construction of a new democratic balance of power and knowledge. (Consider the case of Free and Open Source Software or the advent of Web 2.0 and User Generated Con-

tent.) However, this literature is often linked with individualistic approaches, the methodological dimension of which does not focus on the «fine grain» of social practices and on the power relationships these practices might imply. One of the goals of this special issue is therefore to stimulate a debate on how ethnographic or qualitative research in general can help to balance this optimistic view, in which «online» is seen as a place of pure democracy.

Secondly, the research on online group interactions requires a discussion of and reflection on the assumptions of traditional qualitative and ethnographic research. Indeed, the researcher herself is required to take part in online interactions and to use the Internet to conduct the research. This consideration illustrates that there is an inherent reflexive element: the researcher studies a phenomenon that she is also contributing to identify. It is therefore important for researchers to reflect on the use in research of the same technologies and platforms used for online interactions. This includes, for instance, tools for collecting qualitative data, for analyzing data and also for the communication/dissemination of research results. Examples could be: the use of blogs or wikis as tools to keep and organize field notes or even to build a relationship with participants in the online groups themselves; the use of online resources (such as software tools) that can be used for data collection and analysis, for example extensions for the Firefox browser or web-based CAQDAS software; and the use of blogs, wikis and other platforms to disseminate research results, in this way contributing to the construction of online interactions.

Finally, ethnographic and qualitative online research requires specific reflections on the ethical aspects of the research. For instance, the availability of archived material in a space that is neither public nor private, according to classical categories in the ethics of research, and whose authors are not always reachable, poses challenging problems. Indeed, often the user communications and interactions are public, in the sense that they are easily accessible by almost anyone through an Internet connection. This type of «sharing in a limited context» by users raises ethical questions for researchers, as the users' original purpose was not to provide «data» for researchers (Bakardjeva and Feenberg, 2001). Therefore, an approach that takes the situation into account should be used when discussing the status of public/private information in relation to Internet conversations and interactions (Teli, Pisanu, Hakken, 2007).

In conclusion, we invite empirically grounded research papers that address one or more of the dimensions outlined above, but which may also expand them and include other aspects. Contributions might include (but are not restricted to):

- The ethnography and qualitative research of online groups: social networks, online games, Wikipedia, etc.
- The construction of groups: the role of the researcher and qualitative research
- Ethnographic and qualitative approaches to power and to online data

- Power and knowledge: digital archives, avatars
- Your experiences with using online technologies for the collection and analysis of qualitative data
- The ethics of qualitative research on online groups

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Important Dates

15 May 2010: Abstract: abstract 500 words. We will accept any abstract we consider interesting for the aims of this special issue. The selection of the articles to be published will then be done on the basis of the Full Papers.

Full Paper Submission: 15 September 2010

Review Results: 15 December 2010

Final Paper (maximum ten thousands words), camera-ready: 15 March 2011

Abstracts and Articles may be submitted in English or Italian. Articles must be submitted via email to the editors (see address below) in the Journal's approved house style.

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About the Editors of the Special Issue

Stefano De Paoli is a post-doctoral researcher at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, where he is conducting research on the Future of the Internet. Stefano has worked in Science and Technology Studies since 2004, focusing on an investigation of software licences. Recently, his research interest has been Massive Multiplayer Online Games, with a focus on cheating. More on Stefano at http://www.nuim.ie/nirsa/people/postdocs/stefano_de_paoli.shtml

Maurizio Teli is a researcher at the Museo Tridentino di Scienze Naturali and collaborator at the University of Trento, Italy. He is conducting research on the relationships between online technologies and the construction of everyday societal facts. He has worked on Science, Technology and Society, as well as in Organization Studies and Internet Research, since 2004, mainly investigating the political reality constructed by software developers' practices. Recently, he has been working on the "My Ideal City" project (EU Grant Agreement n° 230554), questioning how three-dimensional virtual environments can be used in the dissemination of alternative realities.

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