Virtual Ethnography

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which these two contexts are connected. On one level this is a practical problem: the settings where we might observe Internet culture are different from the ones in which we would observe the Internet in use. One setting is virtual and the other a physical place. It is far from straightforward to design a study that encompasses both aspects of the Internet (Star and Kanfer, 1993). While it might be relatively straightforward to observe and participate in a newsgroup, it is more difficult to visit users of that newsgroup individually and form judgements of the context in which their use of the newsgroup arises. Similarly, while studying users of the Internet in their working or domestic environments is potentially straightforward, it is harder then to form a prolonged engagement with their online activities since this is generally construed as a solitary activity. The practical problem of designing an ethnographic study of the Internet is also a statement about methodological foundations. The 'problem' is a result of a narrow conception of ethnography, focused on prolonged engagement in a bounded social space, whether that be a village, a club, a computer company or a newsgroup. The next chapter explores some strands from current ethnographic thinking that suggest an ethnographic approach to the Internet beyond bounded social locations. This approach plays on the profound ambivalence about the appropriate sites for investigation that stems from seeing the Internet as textual twice over.

3 The Virtual Objects of Ethnography

The crisis in ethnography

Ethnography has changed a lot since its origins as the method anthropologists used to develop an understanding of cultures in distant places. It has been taken up within a wide range of substantive fields including urban life, the media, medicine, the classroom, science and technology. Ethnography has been used within sociology and cultural studies, although it retains a special status as the key anthropological approach. In new disciplinary settings, the emphasis on holistic description has given way to more focused and bounded studies of particular topics of interest. Rather than studying whole ways of life, ethnographers in sociology and cultural studies have interested themselves in more limited aspects: people as patients, as students, as television viewers or as professionals. The ethnography of familiar and nearby cultures has also augmented the ethnography of remote and apparently exotic ways of life. These settings have brought their own challenges as ethnographers struggle to suspend what they take for granted about their own cultures, and attempt to negotiate access to settings where they may be dealing with the culturally more powerful (Jackson, 1987). The upshot of these developments has been a wide diversity of approaches to ethnography, although these share a fundamental commitment to developing a deep understanding through participation and observation. Hammersley and Atkinson provide a basic definition, applicable to most studies, of what ethnography is:

> In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (1995: 1)

The practice of ethnography has continually faced challenges concerning objectivity and validity from the harder sciences. A methodology that offers little in the way of prescription to its practitioners and has no formula for judging the accuracy of its results is vulnerable to criticism from methodologies such as surveys, experiments and questionnaires that come equipped with a full armoury of evaluative techniques. In the face of these critiques the popularity of qualitative methodologies, including ethnography, is based

social life. The emphasis on holism in ethnography gives it a persuasive attraction in dealing with complex and multi-faceted concepts like culture, as compared with the more reductive quantitative techniques. Ethnography is appealing for its depth of description and its lack of reliance on *a priori* hypotheses. It offers the promise of getting closer to understanding the ways in which people interpret the world and organize their lives. By contrast, quantitative studies are deemed thin representations of isolated concepts imposed on the study by the researcher.

One response to positivist-based, quantitative critiques of ethnography has centred on claims that ethnography produces an authentic understanding of a culture based on concepts that emerge from the study instead of being imposed *a priori* by the researcher. Cultures are studied in their natural state, rather than as disturbed by survey techniques or experimental scenarios. This argument depends upon a realist ethnography which describes cultures as they really are (it also, of course, depends on accepting realism and objectivity as the aspiration of any methodology). More recently the realist and naturalistic project has come into question from within the qualitative field, as realist notions more generally have been challenged by constructivist approaches to knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1971). The basis for claiming any kind of knowledge as asocial and independent of particular practices of knowing has come under attack, and ethnography has not been exempt. The naturalistic project of documenting a reality external to the researcher has been brought into question. Rather than being the records of objectively observed and pre-existing cultural objects, ethnographies have been reconceived as written and unavoidably constructed accounts of objects created through disciplinary practices and the ethnographer's embodied and reflexive engagement. These developments in epistemology have constituted what Denzin describes as a 'triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis' (1997: 3) for qualitative research, including ethnography. The triple crisis that Denzin describes threatens ethnography on all fronts: its claims to represent culture; its claims to authentic knowledge; and the ability of its proponents to make principled interventions based on the knowledge they acquire through ethnography. Marcus relates the comprehensive nature of the challenge to ethnography:

> Under the label first of 'postmodernism' and then 'cultural studies', many scholars in the social sciences and humanities subjected themselves to a bracing critical self-examination of their habits of thought and work. This involved reconsiderations of the nature of representation, description, subjectivity, objectivity, even of the notions of 'society' and 'culture' themselves, as well as how scholars materialized objects of study and data about them to constitute the 'real' to which their work had been addressed. (1997: 399)

The 'crisis', rather than suggesting the abandonment of ethnography altogether, can be seen as opening possibilities for creative and strategic

Maanen, 1995) occasioned by the new epistemology entails a re-examination of features of the methodology that might have seemed self-evident. The whole methodology is thus opened up for re-examination and refashioning. This provides an opportunity for reshaping and reformulating projects in the light of current concerns. Recognizing that the objects we find and describe are of our own making entails owning up to the responsibility that recognition imposes. It offers up the opportunity of making the kind of research objects we need to enter and transform debates, and opens up the relationships between research subjects, ethnographers and readers to reconfiguration. This chapter takes the ethnographic 'crisis' as an opportunity for making a form of ethnographic enquiry suited to the Internet, involving a different kind of interaction and ethnographic object from those with which ethnography has traditionally been concerned. This approach involves embracing ethnography as a textual practice and as a lived craft, and destabilizes the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a found field site.

The aim of this examination of ethnography is to find a different way of dealing with some problems with an ethnographic approach to the Internet as described in Chapter 2. These problems include the authenticity of mediated interactions as material for an ethnographic understanding and the choice of appropriate sites to study the Internet as both a culture and a cultural object. The problems with an ethnographic approach to the Internet encompass both how it is to be constituted as an ethnographic object and how that object is to be authentically known. Within a naturalistic or realist version of the ethnographic project these issues seem to render the ethnography of the Internet highly problematic. The aim of this chapter is to examine some recent developments in ethnographic thinking that are particularly useful in developing an alternative approach to the study of the Internet. The account will focus on three crucial areas for looking at the Internet ethnographically. These areas are:

- the role of travel and face-to-face interaction in ethnography
- text, technology and reflexivity
- the making of ethnographic objects.

The examination of these areas is used to formulate the principles of a virtual ethnography that draws on current ethnographic thinking and applies it to the mediated and spatially dispersed interactions that the Internet facilitates.

Ethnography and the face-to-face

A major issue to be confronted in designing an ethnographic study of the Internet is the appropriate way of interacting with the subjects of the

which implies that face-to-face interaction is the most appropriate. Before the widespread availability of CMC, mediated forms of communication simply did not seem sufficiently interactive to allow the ethnographer to test ideas through immersion. If mediated interaction is to be incorporated into an ethnographic project, the basis for focusing ethnographic engagement or immersion on face-to-face interaction needs to be considered. The availability of mediated interaction provides the opportunity to question the role of face-to-face interaction in the construction of an ethnography. We can then examine what it is about their reliance on face-to-face interaction that makes ethnographers' accounts of their research convincing, and explore the possibilities for a reconceptualization of ethnographic authenticity that incorporates mediated interaction on its own terms.

The way of considering face-to-face interaction discussed here owes its basis to the 'representational crisis' (Denzin, 1997). The publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) marked a growing recognition that ethnographic writing was not a transparent representation of a culture. The written products of ethnography were narratives or accounts that relied heavily on the experience of particular ethnographers and on the conventions used to make the telling of those accounts authoritative and engaging (Van Maanen, 1988). Ethnography was a 'story-telling institution' (Van Maanen, 1995), and the stories told could be more or less convincing, but were not necessarily to be evaluated on a basis of their truth to a pre-existing 'real' culture. Whatever the sincerity with which they were told, ethnographic stories were necessarily selective. Ethnographies were 'textual constructions of reality' (Atkinson, 1990). This perspective provides an opportunity to analyse the importance of face-to-face interaction by looking at the role that is played in accounts by the fact of the ethnographer having been to a field site for a sustained period. The primacy of the face-to-face in ethnography can be understood by reflecting upon the way in which ethnography's production as an authoritative textual account has traditionally relied upon travel, experience and interaction. This is particularly useful as a way of avoiding making *a priori* judgements of the richness (and ethnographic adequacy) or otherwise of communications media: an assumption that has proved problematic in relation to CMC (Chapter 2).

Travel has played an important part in the construction of an ethnographic authority. The days of reliance on second-hand accounts and the tales of travellers are cast as the 'bad old days', in which the ethnographer was insufficiently embroiled with what was going on to be able to provide an authoritative analysis, and, worse, could be misled by relying on the re-representations of others. Kuper (1983) equates the 'Malinowskian revolution' in ethnography as comprising the uniting of fieldworker and theorist in a single body, such that the one who went, saw and reported was also the one who analysed. The concept of travel still plays an important part in distinguishing ethnography from other analytic approaches. As Van Maanen says:

> Whether or not the field worker ever really does 'get away' in a conceptual sense is becoming increasingly problematic, but physical displacement is a requirement. (1988: 3)

Van Maanen seems here to be casting the problem as ethnographers taking their own analytic frameworks with them, and therefore failing to address the field site they visit on its own terms, as they have claimed. While for him physical travel is not enough to ensure conceptual distance, travel to a field site is a prerequisite for the ethnographic analysis. It is still not clear, however, what it is that makes travel so fundamental. Some clues are provided by analyses of the ways in which ethnographers write about their experience of travelling and arriving. The role played by travel in constructing ethnographic authority is pointed to by Pratt in her analysis of the role of 'arrival stories' in ethnographers' accounts:

> They [arrival stories] play the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork . . . Always they are responsible for setting up the initial positionings of the subjects of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader. (1986: 32)

Travel in this analysis becomes a signifier of the relationship between the writer and readers of the ethnographic text and the subjects of the research. The details that the ethnographer gives of the way they got into the field encourage us as readers to accept the account that follows as authentically grounded in real experience. Along with travel comes the notion of translation (Turner, 1980). It is not sufficient merely to travel, but necessary also to come back, and to bring back an account. That account gains much of its authoritative effect with the contrast that it constructs between author and reader: the ethnographer has been where the reader cannot or did not go. It is instructive to note that the critique of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1943) was based on another ethnographer having been there too, and having experienced a different cultural reality to the one Mead described (Freeman, 1996). The authority of the critique depends on Freeman's travel. A critic who had not been there might have found Mead's account implausible, but probably could not mount such a detailed and persuasive refutation.

The ethnography of the Internet does not necessarily involve physical travel. Visiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement. As Burnett suggests, 'you travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining' (1996: 68). It is possible for an ethnographer sitting at a desk in an office (their own office, what's more) to explore the social spaces of the Internet. Far from getting the seats of their pants dirty, Internet ethnographers keep their seats firmly on the university's upholstery. The lack of physical travel does not mean, however, that the relationship between ethnographer and readers is collapsed. Baym (1995c) has

on the ways in which they physically reached a field site, but on the ways in which they negotiated access, observed interactions and communicated with participants. These descriptions set up a relationship in which the ethnographer has an extensive and sustained experience of the field site that the reader is unlikely to share (besides an analytic distance which mere participants are unable to share). Methodological preambles are far from innocent in the construction of ethnographic authority. The ethnography described in this book is no different. Chapter 4 is there not just to tell you what I did, but to convince you that I did something that authorizes me to speak. Devices such as the technical glossary at the end of this book display the ethnographer's competence with the local language, just as do the glossaries included with ethnographies conducted in distant places and other languages. Whether physical travel is involved or not, the relationship between ethnographer, reader and research subjects is still inscribed in the ethnographic text. The ethnographer is still uniquely placed to give an account of the field site, based on their experience of it and their interaction with it.

The contrast between ethnographer and reader that forms a large part of the authority claim of the ethnographic text depends not just on travel, but also on experience. Again, we have a contrast with the bad old days when ethnographers remained on the verandah (conveniently close to informants but not too close) and failed to engage fully in the field. As Van Maanen says of the genre of realist tales, 'the convention is to allow the fieldworker's unexplicated experience in the culture to stand as the basis for textual authority' (1988: 47). In some renditions, this experience of the culture informs the written ethnography by allowing the ethnographer to sense the culture, in ways that extend beyond sight:

> The experience of fieldwork does not produce a mysterious empowerment, but without it, the ethnographer would not encounter the context – the smells, sounds, sights, emotional tensions, feel – of the culture she will attempt to evoke in a written text. (Wolf, 1992: 128)

From these observations a sense of ethnographic presence begins to emerge in which 'being there' is unique to the ethnographer. The ethnographer who really went there is set up as the one with the authority to interpret, over and above the reader who might wish to interpret, but does not have access to a claim of having been there. Readers are thus always dependent on the second-hand account of the ethnographer. The ethnographic authority is not a transferable one: it resides always and only with the ethnographer who was there. The authority of the ethnographer is also not transferable, within this model, to the subjects of the study whom we might naively assume were also there. The research subject lacks the analytic vision of the ethnographer, and thus cannot coexist in the analytic space of the ethnography. Ethnography acts to construct an analytic space in which only the

which preserves their authority claim. According to Turner, '"the field" can be conceived of as a space – better an attitude – which far from being neutral or inert, is itself the product of "disciplinary technologies"' (1989: 13). Attempts may be made to cede this space, as in the exercise in coauthorship described by McBeth (1993), but it is the ethnographer's right to grant or withhold access.

Rosaldo (1989) evokes another sense in which experience is vital to the ethnographer. He describes his inability to comprehend the headhunter's conflation of grief with rage, until he himself suffers intense grief and finds himself angry. This foregrounds the necessity of lived experience and participation for full understanding. The ethnographer is not simply a voyeur or a disengaged observer, but is also to some extent a participant, sharing some of the concerns, emotions and commitments of the research subjects. This extended form of experience depends also on interaction, on a constant questioning of what it is to have an ethnographic understanding of a phenomenon. The authority of interaction, of juxtaposing ethnographic interpretations with those of the native, and opening them up to being altered, is another aspect of the authority that ethnography gains from the face-to-face.

The definition of ethnography as participation given by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 2) highlights the interactive aspect of ethnographic research. The researcher does not just observe at close quarters, but interacts with the researched to ask questions and gain the insights into life that come from doing as well as seeing. As Pratt points out, ethnography distinguishes itself from other kinds of travel, and from the accounts offered by other kinds of travellers:

> In almost any ethnography dull-looking figures called 'mere travellers' or 'casual observers' show up from time to time, only to have their superficial perceptions either corrected or corroborated by the serious scientist. (1986: 27)

At least part of this distinction stems from an assumption that ethnography is an active attempt at analysis, involving more than just soaking up the local atmosphere. As Wolf says:

> We do research. It is more than something that simply happens to us as a result of being in an exotic place. (1992: 127)

This interaction also involves the ethnographer in leaving herself open to being taken by surprise by what occurs in the fieldwork setting. By being there, participating and experiencing, the ethnographer opens herself up to learning:

> Fieldwork of the ethnographic kind is authentic to the degree that it approxi-

> time and in an unpredictable way, an active part of the face-to-face relationships in that community. (Van Maanen, 1988: 9)

Again we are back to face-to-face interaction as an intrinsic part of ethnography. The importance of the face-to-face in Van Maanen's account is that being physically present forces the ethnographer to be a participant in events and interactions. An ethnographer who managed to be an invisible observer (a cultural lurker?) would leave the setting undisturbed, but would also leave their interpretations of it undisturbed by trial in practice. The suggestion is that the ethnographer, by opening herself up to the unpredictability of the field, allows at least part of the agenda to be set by the setting. This claim to act as a neutral voice for the field has been used to enhance the ethnographer's authority. As Pratt points out, this does create a paradox for the ethnographic account:

> Personal narrative mediates this contradiction between the involvement called for in fieldwork and the self-effacement called for in formal ethnographic description, or at least mitigates some of its anguish, by inserting into the ethnographic text the authority of the personal experience out of which the ethnography is made. It thus recuperates at least a few shreds of what was exorcised in the conversion from the face-to-face field encounter to objectified science. (1986: 33)

Ethnographers in cyberspace can, of course, lurk in a way that face-to-face ethnographers cannot readily achieve. An observer who might be physically visible and marked as different in a face-to-face setting even when silent, can simply merge invisibly with all the other lurkers in an online setting. To do this, however, is to relinquish claims to the kind of ethnographic authority that comes from exposing the emergent analysis to challenge through interaction. Both Baym (1995c) and Correll (1995) make clear that their findings are the result of observation and interaction.

Correll (1995) stresses that besides her online work she also met some of her informants face-to-face, and thus could verify some things that they said online about their offline lives. While this is presented as a way of triangulating findings and adding authenticity to them, it could also be seen as a result of the pursuit of ethnographic holism. In this case, the group did hold periodic meetings, and Correll took advantage of this convention. Many inhabitants of cyberspace, however, have never met face-to-face and have no intention of doing so. To instigate face-to-face meetings in this situation would place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by informants themselves. In a conventional ethnography involving travel, the ethnographer is in a symmetrical position to that of informants. Informants too can look around them, ask questions, and try out their interpretations, although of course they are unlikely to analyse the results in the same way or publish them as a book! The

who has deliberately to learn what others take for granted. The symmetry here is that of the ethnographer using the same resources and the same means of communication as available to the subjects of the research. This leaves us with a paradox: while pursuing face-to-face meetings with online informants might be intended to enhance authenticity via triangulation (Silverman, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), it might also threaten the experiential authenticity that comes from aiming to understand the world the way it is for informants. Rather than accepting face-to-face communication as inherently better in ethnography, a more sceptical and symmetrical approach suggests that it should be used with caution, and with a sensitivity to the ways in which informants use it.

The question remains then whether interactions in electronic space should be viewed as authentic, since the ethnographer cannot readily confirm details that informants tell them about their offline selves. Posing the problem in this way, however, assumes a particular idea of what a person is (and what authenticity is). Authenticity, in this formulation, means correspondence between the identity performed in interactions with the ethnographer and that performed elsewhere both online and offline. This presupposes a singular notion of an identity, linked to a similarly singular physical body. As Wynn and Katz (1997) point out, critiques of this singular notion of identity are well established and in no way rely upon the new technologies. The person might be better thought of as a convenient shorthand for a more or less coherent set of identity performances with reference to a singular body and biography. We might usefully turn our attention, rather than seeking correspondence and coherence ourselves, to looking at the ways in which new media might alter the conditions of identity performance (Meyrowitz, 1985). Standards of authenticity should not be seen as absolute, but are situationally negotiated and sustained. Authenticity, then, is another manifestation of the 'phenomenon always escapes' rule (Silverman, 1993: 201). A search for truly authentic knowledge about people or phenomena is doomed to be ultimately irresolvable. The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity. This also entails accepting that 'the informant' is a partial performance rather than a whole identity.

Rather than treating authenticity as a particular problem posed by cyberspace that the ethnographer has to solve before moving on to the analysis, it would be more fruitful to place authenticity in cyberspace as a topic at the heart of the analysis. Assuming *a priori* that authenticity is a problem for inhabitants of cyberspace is the same kind of ethnographic mistake as assuming that the Azande have a problem in dealing with the contradictions inherent in their beliefs about witchcraft. It should be addressed as an issue for the ethnography as and when it arises during interaction. The issues of authenticity and identity are addressed again in

Despite this transformation of the authenticity issue from a problem for the ethnographer to a topic for the ethnography, it is fair to say that the ethnography will always have to meet a different standard of authenticity to that prevailing in interactions in the field: the ethnography is ultimately produced and evaluated in an academic setting (Stanley, 1990). What faces the ethnographer is a translation task between the authenticity standards of two different discourses.

Text, technology and reflexivity

In the previous section, the Internet was described as a site for interaction, which, although it might not entail face-to-face communication, was still in some sense ethnographically available. This argument is based on the assumption that what goes on within the Internet is social interaction. Another way of looking, however, would see cyberspace as composed of texts, rather than being interactive. There is no definite fixed line between the two concepts. The distinction is useful in so far as it plays out different ideas about what constitutes and characterizes the two phenomena. Interaction tends to be thought of as entailing a copresence of the parties involved, and a rapid exchange of perspectives which leads to a shared achievement of understanding between those involved (although not, of course, a completely transparent understanding). What we call a text could be thought of as a temporally shifted and packaged form of interaction. While spoken interaction is ephemeral (unless transcribed by social scientists) and local, texts are mobile, and so available outside the immediate circumstances in which they are produced. Texts possess the potential for availability outside their site of production, and hence make possible the separation of production and consumption. Newspapers, television programmes, memoranda, correspondence, audio and video tapes, and compact discs all have a taken-for-granted mobility: they are packaged in a form which means they can be transferred from one person to another. Where clarification is needed, the readers of a text cannot readily ask the authors what they meant. The focus in consuming texts is therefore placed far more on the interpretive work done by readers and less on a shared understanding between authors and readers. We tend (now) not to see texts as transparent carriers of the meanings intended by their authors. It could be said, then, that what we see on the Internet is a collection of texts. Using the Internet then becomes a process of reading and writing texts, and the ethnographer's job is to develop an understanding of the meanings which underlie and are enacted through these textual practices.

There is probably little to be gained from itemizing which aspects of the Internet should be seen as interactive sites or texts. Rather, it is important to keep in mind that they can be both. There is no doubt, however, that some parts seem more interactive than others. IRC, MUDs and newsgroups

conversation. Although not all contributions are visibly acknowledged, enough receive responses for the impression of an ongoing conversation to develop. The early ethnographers of the Internet have had no problems in rendering these settings as appropriate sites for ethnographic interaction. The WWW, as discussed in Chapter 2, seems to pose more of a challenge to those looking for interactive sites. In contrast to newsgroups, the WWW seems to be a collection of largely static texts (although some of these contain interactive settings or discussion lists). The texts of static web pages might be interlinked, and might change over time, but viewed individually they make available no obvious way in which the ethnographer might interact. The ethnographer could visit other web pages and then develop their own web page as a response, but this hardly meets the standards for knowledge exposed to test through interaction and experience described above. This might seem to mean that the WWW is not available for ethnographic enquiry. The ethnographic approach seems to come to a full stop at the point at which the technology no longer promotes interactions in which the ethnographer can play a part. It is worth looking at the ways in which texts have been used by other ethnographers, in order to find some ways forward.

Traditionally, oral interactions have been foremost for ethnographers, and texts have taken a somewhat secondary role as cultural products, worthy of study only as far as they reveal something about the oral settings in which culture resides. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) interpret this reliance on oral interaction as part of the 'romantic legacy' of ethnography, which tends to treat speech as more authentic than writing. They suggest that texts deserve a more detailed appraisal, and that judgement about the authenticity of written accounts should be suspended. Rather than being seen as more or less accurate portrayals of reality, texts should be seen as ethnographic material which tells us about the understanding which authors have of the reality which they inhabit. Texts are an important part of life in many of the settings which ethnographers now address, and to ignore them would be to produce a highly partial account of cultural practices. Rule books, manuals, biographies, scientific papers, official statistics and codes of practice can all be seen as ethnographic material in the ways in which they present and shape reality and are embedded in practice. Ethnographers should neither dismiss texts as distorted accounts nor accept them as straightforward truths, but should draw on their own 'socialized competence' in reading and writing to interpret them as culturally situated cultural artefacts (1995: 174).

Thompson (1995) also stresses the importance of combining a view of texts (here, media texts) with understandings of the situationality of those texts. What Thompson calls 'mediated quasi-interaction' (1995: 84) is facilitated by the texts of the mass media. The mobility of texts enabled by mediated quasi-interaction, resulting in a separation in space and time of producers and consumers, is one of the key features in analysing the social

semiotic interpretations of the content of texts may be useful, it is important also to address the situated writing and reading practices which make those texts meaningful. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and Thompson (1995) therefore converge on a view that the analysis of texts needs to take into account their context. Only then can we make sensible, culturally informed judgements of their significance, and indeed only then can we determine their status as accounts of reality. This does not necessarily entail judging them as true or false accounts, but it does enable a view of the text as an account which has a situated author producing text within a cultural context and a situated audience interpreting text within other cultural contexts. Viewing texts ethnographically, then, entails tying those texts to particular circumstances of production and consumption. The text becomes ethnographically (and socially) meaningful once we have cultural context(s) in which to situate it.

Swales (1998) develops a model he calls textography for his attempt to combine an analysis of texts with an understanding of their relationship to other texts and the working lives of their authors. He explicitly states that this work is a partial one and he is unable to do justice to the 'complex situationalities' of 'personal, curatorial, institutional and disciplinary' influences (1998: 142). The strategic focus on textual production leaves many other aspects unexamined. For this partial approach Swales chooses a spatially defined sample: a university building occupied by three very different departments. The spatial proximity highlights the distinctive disciplinary practices of textual production that are uncovered. Through interviews with the authors of texts and observations of them in their working context, accounts of textual practices which the authors recognize but would not have given themselves are built up. Distinct disciplinary practices are sustained by the textual links between distant sites. These textual links are made manifest in the documents which are found in the offices of those studied and which are used in their work as reference and as models for their own writing. In addition to the working context of the authors, Swales therefore implies a second context, the intertextual context provided by the texts themselves. The discipline to which Swales's authors orient exists for him in and through the texts which constitute it: a feature which is emphasized by his reliance on study within the bounded space of the departmental building. In the same way, we might think of the intertextual context of the Internet as being the space into which the work of web authors is inserted and a context to which authors orient themselves.

In the case of the Internet, tying texts to social contexts of writing is relatively straightforward. Individual web authors can be approached for their interpretations of their practices. Given an accessible field site, an ethnographer could follow the progress of development of a web site and explore the interpretations of those involved as to the capacities of the technology and the identity of the audience being addressed. This analysis could be combined with an analysis of the content of the resulting web site.

the Internet as a repository of texts rather than a site for social interaction. A webography could become a strategically oriented and partial form of ethnography, like a textography. To take this kind of detailed approach to the influences and assumptions antecedent to the appearance of a page on the WWW would be a step forwards from analysing the web pages themselves as isolated phenomena, but would still be a relatively conservative approach. We would still be tied to a bounded physical location, and the influences which we were able to take into account would be largely those which occurred in that setting. This approach would not, therefore, be taking on board the spatial implications of mediated interaction. The more complex issue is how to incorporate the availability of texts (or interactions) across physical locations which the Internet enables. This issue is considered in the next section of this chapter, on the making of ethnographic objects.

While saying that contexts like newsgroups are interactive makes them ethnographically available, viewing newsgroup contributions as textual can also provide some valuable insights. A textual focus places emphasis on the ways in which contributions are justified and rendered authoritative, and on the identities which authors construct and perform through their postings. This approach to ethnography suggests a discourse analytic stance, which remains ambivalent about the nature of the discourse which is under analysis. The reality which texts construct can be evaluated on its own terms, without recourse to an external, pretextual reality (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996). Here, again, the distinction between text and interaction blurs, since the material of discourse analysis encompasses textualized records of interaction as well as solely written texts. Discourse analysis is primarily concerned with the reality which texts construct. It has been criticized for the lack of ways of verifying the interpretations which it produces, although Potter counters this with a claim that at least if the analysis is at fault, the original text is made available for readers to develop their own interpretations:

> Nevertheless there is an important sense in which this approach democratizes academic interaction. For example, the reader does not have to take on trust the sensitivity or acuity of the ethnographer. (1996: 106)

For individual textual fragments this may be appropriate, but for more complex corpora of material the democratic approach may be rather taxing to readers asked to duplicate the analytic effort of the original analyst. We do not always read academic texts in order to discover the author wrong and substitute our own analysis, however much this might sometimes seem to be the case. Availability of data does not imply democracy either, since texts are generally constructed to produce an authoritative position for their authors and discourse analysts are rarely exempt. Rather than

could usefully coexist with ethnographic approaches to Internet interaction. This combination could help to maintain analytic ambivalence about what the phenomena being studied *really* are. Both approaches, however, share a problem of observability: potential interactants who choose to remain silent, and potential authors who fail to write, are lost to the analysis.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) pay considerably more attention to the authors of texts than to the readers. This is no doubt in part due to the problems in making the interpretation of texts ethnographically visible. It is far easier to study the work of producers than consumers: producers embody their concerns in the technologies they produce, and the work of constructing a technology is highly visible and observable. By contrast, users leave no visible marks on technologies, and interpreting the technology is often something they simply get on and do. Ethnographers can, of course, as they routinely do, attempt to make the invisible visible by asking questions or exploring scenarios with willing informants. To make these practices visible the ethnographer has to work harder at producing interpretations from informants, and is opened up to criticisms of having produced a partial or biased account. Another response to this kind of ethnographic invisibility of interpretive and embodied work is to incorporate a reflexive understanding (Cooper et al., 1995). The ethnographer can use an active engagement with the Internet as a reflexive tool to a deeper understanding of the medium. Reflexivity can therefore be a strategic response to the silence of web surfers and newsgroup lurkers. It can also be a way of acquiring and examining the 'socialized competences' which Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 174) suggest that ethnographers aim for. In learning how to use the Internet and in using it to reach their field site and collect their data, ethnographers of the Internet can use their own data collection practices as data in their own right. As discussed in Chapter 2, an ethnographer of the Internet cannot hope to understand the practices of *all* users, but through their own practices can develop an understanding of what it is to be *a* user.

Ethnographers are traditionally warned about the dangers of 'going native' or losing their sceptical approach to things which their informants take for granted. If the ethnographer too comes to take these things for granted, their ethnographic edge as a cultural commentator will have been lost. These kinds of insecurities, still firmly grounded in a realist notion of ethnography, may help to explain some of the reluctance of ethnographers to engage fully in the work which their informants do, and move further along the spectrum from observer to participant. This may explain why ethnographers often develop only limited competences in the technical work which their informants do, as if incompetence was in some way strategic in maintaining strangeness. Often, admittedly, periods of training and required background knowledge simply pose too great a hurdle for the ethnographer to achieve any kind of competence without thoroughly disrupting (and entertaining) the informants they set out to study. In the

the sheer mass of web pages and newsgroup contributions out there testify that it cannot be so hard, surely, if all these people can do it. The process of becoming competent in use of the Internet is a way for the ethnographer to find out just how hard it is, and in what specific ways it is made either hard or easy. Rather than forming a barrier to ethnographic strangeness to be guarded against, competence in using the Internet acquires a multiple significance: as a ground for reflexive exploration of what it is to use the Internet; as a means to deeper engagement and conversations with other users of the Internet; as a way to developing an enriched reading of the practices which lead to the production and consumption of Internet artefacts. With due (sceptical) caution, it appears that there are good grounds for an ethnographer of the Internet to become competent in its use. The processes through which field sites are found and materials collected become ethnographic materials in themselves.

The reflexivity discussed above is a strategic use of reflexivity as a method for interrogating the field. This kind of reflexivity could be incorporated relatively comfortably into a realist account, as a way of giving more authentic and deeper portrayals of what it is to be a cultural member. Reflexivity, however, is a much-contested term, which has precise but quite different meanings in different disciplinary settings (Woolgar, 1991b). In some incarnations reflexivity has a less comfortable relationship with realism. When juxtaposed with ideas about the social construction of knowledge, the claims of ethnography to provide an objective, factual portrayal of culture become suspect. Here reflexivity is applied not just to the work of individual ethnographers, but to the methodology as a whole. Folding back ideas about the constructed nature of knowledge on to ethnography itself poses an interesting paradox: ethnographic knowledge too might be a cultural construct. This paradox becomes particularly apparent for ethnographers of knowledge production, who might claim to be producing objective descriptions of the ways in which what scientists think of as objective fact turns out to be the upshot of social processes. If knowledge is seen to be a social construct, then ethnography has very weak claims to be held exempt, and the case for validating ethnographies on the basis of their truthful representation of underlying reality becomes suspect. Three distinct strategies for dealing with this paradox have become notable.

One approach is to rehabilitate member understandings of culture alongside the ethnographer's account, thus addressing and to some extent redressing the previous imbalance which claimed a privilege for ethnography. This can imply the ethnographer's sensitivity to the ways in which the subjects of the research understand their own culture:

> By including and focusing upon the ways people perceive and define the cultural space within which they exist and their own place in it, these studies therefore view distinctions between external and internal points of view as processes of life that are contingent upon the particular contexts in which they are made. (Hastrup

This approach to reflexivity denies the privileging of the ethnographic account and blurs the boundaries between ethnographic and member understandings. The two are different, but neither is necessarily privileged. The second distinct approach is to place the focus on the ethnographer, reflecting on the particular perspective, history and standpoint which led this ethnographer to be giving their particular account of this setting. This can imply a focus on the ways in which the presuppositions and cultural positioning of the ethnographer shape the study. In this sense, reflexivity is a sensitizing device to counteract the tendency to present ethnographic reports as portrayals of an objective reality. Some view this kind of reflexivity as indulgence, a 'self-reflexive cul-de-sac' (Moores, 1993: 4) in which the ethnographer ends up telling readers more about herself than about the culture purportedly being described. It can also be a strategic device when used sensitively to explore differences of interpretation and understanding between ethnographers and subjects. Moores recognizes the strategic significance of Walkerdine's (1986; 1990) references to her own biography in shaping her reaction and those of the family she observed to a film both parties watched together. Ethnography can be a process of self-discovery and reflexivity can be a strategic element in developing insight.

A final approach attempts to incorporate a destabilization of ethnographic authority within the text itself. In contrast to 'politically correct' acceptances of the significance of member reflexivity and ethnographer standpoint, some ethnographers have taken a more 'epistemologically correct' approach to their ethnography. In the context of claims about the socially constructed nature of knowledge, which owe large parts of their force to ethnographies in scientific laboratories (Potter, 1996), some ethnographers have embraced the challenge this poses for their own knowledge-making practices. Epistemological correctness entails making clear the constructed nature of accounts, and has given rise to a range of approaches to presentation of ethnographic accounts which aim to make clear to readers their constructed and contingent nature (Woolgar, 1991b). Denzin (1997) reports on a variety of new ways of writing ethnography, based on recognition that writing is a constructive act rather than a straightforward reflection of reality.

The three approaches described above are not mutually exclusive, and are associated with differing political commitments and disciplinary histories. No doubt these approaches do not exhaust the possibilities for creative transformation of the ethnographic project in the light of the abandonment of a commitment to realism. Recently ethnographers have begun to explore the possibilities of hypertext and multimedia for expanding access to ethnographic materials and providing opportunities for readers to form their own narratives based on the material (Dicks and Mason, 1998; Slack, 1998). The ethnography which is presented in this book is told in a largely conventional style. I simply say the things which my experiences lead me to want to say, without claiming that these

which might come across in a realist way. In part, this is because I am sceptical that there is an adequately configured readership for the new representational forms in ethnography (Traweek, 1992), and it is not clear that those who do exist overlap with the readership intended for this book. Marcus and Cushman (1982) identify six readerships of ethnography: the area specialist, the general anthropologist, social scientists other than anthropologists, students, action-oriented readers and popular readership. My readership could be any one of these, if we replace the anthropological area specialist with the new category of the cyberspace specialist. Modes of representation can be strategic choices which depend on the assumed readership (not forgetting that the ethnographic text is constructed by its readers). In this I adopt Hammersley's perspective, that:

> How we describe an object depends not just on decisions about what we believe to be true but also on judgements about relevance. The latter rely, in turn, on the purposes which the description is to serve. (1990: 609)

Ways of writing and strategies of familiarization and making strange depend on assumptions about what the audience will find familiar or strange already, and hence are inherently selective (Rosaldo, 1989). This suggests an approach which explicitly embraces the necessary selectivity and constructedness of accounts and which makes clear that this is the account I chose to give in the context of the questions which seem to me to be important. The ethnography which is presented in the next three chapters is neither a truth nor a fiction, but an account of an ethnographically constructed field of social interactions. Just because an ethnography is not a straightforward representation of the real does not mean that it cannot be sincere, unfashionable though sincerity is in playful postmodern times. What seems to be important is that we examine the circumstances which lead us to be telling this story about this object at this time and in this way. As Woolgar says:

> In short, we need continually to interrogate and find strange the process of representation as we engage in it. This kind of reflexivity is the ethnographer of the text. (1991b: 28)

One way in which I have addressed this issue is to compare my own interpretive and representational practices with those of my informants. Another part of examining how we come to be telling a particular ethnographic story is looking at the ways in which the object of the ethnography is constituted. While ethnographers in the past or in other settings may have been able to look at bounded physical settings, when studying the Internet the concept of the field site is no longer so straightforward. In the

The making of ethnographic objects

The traditional emphasis in ethnography on field sites which map on to physically bounded places has some important implications for the constitution of ethnographic objects. The objects produced and studied through ethnography, its communities and societies, have been largely understood in spatial terms (Clifford, 1992). While ethnographers have often been sensitive to the influences of external contacts and influences, fieldwork places an emphasis on culture as something which is local. A 'manageable unit', carved out on grounds of self-evident boundaries, often came to stand in for what culture was (1992: 98). A similar observation could be made about the more substantively based ethnographic projects with which sociology has often been concerned. Silverman (1993) uses Gubrium and Holstein's (1987) work to show that while we might think of the household as the place to go in order to study the family, there are multiple other sites in which the 'family' is performed, such as television programmes, courtrooms and policy forums. The sites which we choose to study are often based on common sense understandings of what the phenomenon being explored is, intrinsically linked with an idea about where that activity goes on, whether the activity be the technical work of software engineering or the experimental work of science (Low and Woolgar, 1993; Knorr-Cetina, 1992).

The tendency to treat the field site as a place which one goes to and dwells within reinforces an idea of culture as something which exists in and is bounded by physical space. This tendency is exacerbated by the historical roots of anthropology in the study of relatively isolated communities, and by the continuing practice of concentrating on a particular region. The very idea of the field as a place which the ethnographer goes to, and comes back from, implies that the ethnographer is the only link between the two and bolsters the impression of separate cultural sites, 'ours' and 'theirs' (Ferguson, 1997). In this way, the world as seen through ethnographic eyes becomes a 'mosaic of unique and distinct cultures' (Hastrup and Olwig, 1997: 12). In sociological approaches the ethnographic object may be carved out through a substantive focus: the school, the street corner, the doctor's surgery, the laboratory. This object, however, is still a bounded physical location, and the aim becomes to describe the life which occurs within that space. The strategic applications of ethnography within sociology carve out particular facets of life for substantive investigation and tend to treat a physical or institutional boundary as the limit for their ethnographic interest (Hammersley, 1990).

In the face of increasing media saturation in all parts of the world and the prevalence of migration, a concern has been growing within anthropology that the implied notion of bounded cultures requires re-examination (Clifford, 1992). More and more, cultures appear to be interlinked, aware of one another, and connected through physical mobility of people and areas of anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and geography have become 'saturated with the vocabulary of mobility' (Thrift, 1996a: 297). This new emphasis provides opportunities for ethnographers to study the reflexive awareness which comes from the inter-visibility of different cultural locations. The balance of authority in ethnographic accounts subtly shifts, as it becomes harder to render the ethnographer/traveller as uniquely privileged in their ability to see across cultures:

> In the present postcolonial world, the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable, except perhaps as a 'useful fiction' or a revealing distortion. In retrospect, it appears that only a concerted disciplinary effort could maintain the tenuous fiction of a self-contained cultural whole. Rapidly increasing global interdependence has made it more and more clear that neither 'we' nor 'they' are as neatly bounded and homogeneous as once seemed to be the case. (Rosaldo, 1989: 217)

Theoretical developments have not necessarily been mirrored by changes in methodological orientation (Hastrup and Olwig, 1997). Recently, however, there has been a considerable effort to struggle with the implications of connectivity and interrelations for the conduct of ethnography. The concern with translocal phenomena in ethnography has been particularly apparent in science and technology studies (Franklin, 1995) and media and cultural studies (Radway, 1988). Two distinct but related responses to the issue of cultural interconnectedness have arisen. One way to deal with this is to aim for a richer, deeper and more holistic notion of the articulation of diverse cultural fragments within particular locations (Radway, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1997; Hirsch, 1998). Situating their argument within media reception and consumption studies, these authors question the particular notions of audiences which emerge from studies based on the reception of a specific media text or technology. They argue that these studies fail to consider the multiple discourses, identities and locations in which the 'audience' or 'consumers' are implicated. Aiming for holism does bring some problems, and is somewhat at odds with Ang's (1996) suggestion that the way forwards for reception studies is to embrace partiality (in its several senses). The idea of a holistic study of a given context is a disciplinary fiction which fails to acknowledge the partiality and selectivity of any ethnographic description (Hammersley, 1990; Stanley, 1990). It also fails to take on board the full implications of interconnectedness: how can there be a holistic study of a site if its boundaries are unstable and only occasionally enacted? Where does the local stop and the global begin?

As a strategy, and leaving aside aspirations to holistic description, a multi-dimensional approach does have an appeal. This strategy would no doubt be a useful one for a study of the Internet. A useful complement to online studies which treat the Internet as a separate cultural sphere would be to conduct sustained contextual studies of the ways in which the Internet

much richer sense of the uses of the Internet and the ways in which local relationships shape its use as a technology and as a cultural context. We could consider the ways in which domestic or working settings were transformed by the interpolation of the new context provided by the Internet, and the ways in which that context was transformed by local concerns. We could, to some extent, study the interplay between the different notions of context which local settings and Internet provide. Moving the study of the Internet to offline settings rather than online ones would be a strategic choice with some obvious benefits. It is difficult to see, however, how this approach would give more than a fleeting impression of the spatiality of the Internet itself and the ways in which the relations within it are organized by the interaction with and construction of separated sites. Concentration on a single geographic location could end up focusing on Internet as technology at the expense of Internet as cultural context. For my purposes, I am drawn away from holism and towards connectivity as an organizing principle. This focus is an attempt to remain agnostic about the most suitable site for exploring the Internet.

Efforts to struggle with ethnography's reliance on bounded locations by focusing on connectivity rather than holism have been made notably in the collection edited by Olwig and Hastrup (1997) and in Marcus (1995). Hastrup and Olwig suggest that a new sensitivity to the ways in which place is performed and practised is required. This might involve viewing the field, rather than a site, as being a 'field of relations' (1997: 8). Ethnographers might still start from a particular place, but would be encouraged to follow connections which were made meaningful from that setting. The ethnographic sensitivity would focus on the ways in which particular places were made meaningful and visible. Ethnography in this strategy becomes as much a process of following connections as it is a period of inhabitance. In similar vein, Marcus suggests that ethnography could (should?) be adapted to 'examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time–space' (1995: 96). He suggests a range of strategies for ethnographers to construct fields in the absence of bounded sites, including the following of people, things, metaphors, narratives, biographies and conflicts. The heterogeneity of this collection of organizing concepts suggests that this will not be easy, and that ethnographers who follow Marcus's advice will need to embrace the insecurity of never quite knowing when one is in the field. Among the problems which Marcus acknowledges that multi-sited ethnography will bring is an anxiety about diluting the fieldwork engagement that ethnography depends upon. The engagement from sustained immersion in a particular place is replaced, in part, by the sensitivity of the ethnographer to mobility across a heterogeneous landscape and the differential engagements which this enables and requires. This sensitivity is exemplified in the work of Martin (1994) on the concept of the immune system, and Heath (1998) in her ethnographic tracing of the transformations of Marfan syndrome between multiple locations and articulations.

place' sense, but are also thoroughly concerned with connection and transformation. Both are able to show how knowledges and places have complex and often unpredictable relationships, and how knowledges are transformed in the processes of recombination and rearticulation which mobility entails.

Sites have a tendency to focus our attention on the ways in which things are kept together as part of a cultural unit. We are focused on the local, the contextual, the interrelated and the coherent. The ethnographic description itself has a tendency to make the field seem homogeneous (Friedman, 1997). By focusing on sites, locales and places, we may be missing out on other ways of understanding culture, based on connection, difference, heterogeneity and incoherence. We miss out on the opportunity to consider the role of space in structuring social relations (Thrift, 1996a). Castells (1996a; 1996b; 1997) introduces the idea that a new form of space is increasingly important in structuring social relations. This space is the space of flows, which, in contrast to the space of place, is organized around connection rather than location. Flows of people, information, money, circulate between nodes which form a network of associations increasingly independent of specific local contexts. The concept of the space of flows will be examined in greater depth in Chapter 5. Here, it serves as a reminder that the organization of social relations is not necessarily linked to local context in a straightforward way. By analogy, the field site of ethnography could become a field flow, which is organized around tracing connections rather than about location in a singular bounded site.

The emergence of multi-sited ethnography, conceived of as an experiential, interactive and engaged exploration of connectivity, is encouraging news for ethnography of the Internet. It offers up possibilities for designing a study which is based on the connections within and around the Internet and enabled by it but not reliant on any one understanding of it. Chapter 2 discussed the reliance of accounts of Internet culture on bounded social settings such as newsgroups and MUDs. In focusing thus narrowly on boundaries which seemed self-evident, it was suggested that these ethnographies missed out on some of the potential offered by ethnography as a way of investigating the making of bounded social space and the importance of interaction between differently connected spaces. Online ethnographies despatialize notions of community, and focus on cultural process rather than physical place. This can, however, be at the expense of minimizing connections with offline life. Despatializing notions of community, in itself, does not guarantee that justice will be done to the complexity of connections which the new technology makes possible. To do this, we need to turn from (static, located) boundaries to networks and connections (Strathern, 1996). Following Strathern's advice, the ethnographer could usefully follow connections and also pay attention to the ways in which connections available in principle are cut in practice to limit the infinite extension of networks. Whether the online is separate from the

rather than a prior assumption. Connective ethnography turns the attention from 'being there' to 'getting there' (Clifford, 1992). We can ask what people are doing in their web pages and newsgroup postings: what does their traversal of space mean to them, and what does it achieve? Abandoning the offline/online boundary as a principled barrier to the analysis allows for it to be traversed (or created and sustained) through the ways in which connections are assembled.

To take a connective approach is not to suggest that no bounded locations exist on the Internet, or that the 'being there' is never important on the Internet. As Clifford (1992) and Featherstone (1995) suggest, diverting attention to travel does not mean assuming that everyone is a traveller and nobody dwells any more. This kind of connective ethnography remains agnostic about the 'real' existence of places and categories. Rather than cataloguing the characteristics of Internet communication, the virtual ethnographer asks, not what is the Internet, but when, where and how is the Internet (Moerman, 1974)? A connective ethnography could be a useful adjunct to space-based approaches. The World Wide Web, as a mixture of varyingly interlinked cultural sites and cultural connections, could form a model for a new way of orienting an ethnography to the field. This is not to say that web surfing is going to be used to stand in for ethnographic engagement. Following hypertextual links may be part of the strategy, but connectivity is also performed in the borrowing of material and images from other sites and other media, by the authorship and readership of sites, by the portrayals of the Internet in other media, and in myriad other ways. Connection could as well be the juxtaposition of elements in a narrative, the array of pages thrown up by a search engine, or a set of hyperlinks on a web page as an instance of communication between two people. The goal of the ethnography becomes to explore what those links are, how they are performed and what transformations occur *en route* in a snowballing approach (Bijker, 1995) that is sensitive to heterogeneity. Each performance of a connection becomes an invitation to the ethnographer to move on. This suggests an active engagement through exploration and interaction rather than a disengaged textual analysis.

Accepting a multi-sited or connective notion of ethnography opens up many different ways of designing and conducting an ethnographic project. Choices and movements are made on the basis of strategic and often arbitrary decisions, which dictate the shape and boundaries of the resulting ethnographic object. We end up with a multitude of different sites and sources for studying the Internet, even if we rely only on those most obviously and intuitively relevant. A first attempt at cataloguing sites in which the Internet is enacted and interpreted produces the following non-exhaustive list:

- web pages
- accounts of making web pages

- programs to help in making web pages
- reviews of web pages
- media reports on Internet events
- magazines and newspaper supplements devoted to the Internet
- fictionalized accounts of Internet-like technologies
- computer equipment retailers
- software developers
- stock markets
- newsgroups
- MUDs
- IRC
- video conferences
- accounts of the purpose of newsgroups
- Internet service providers' advertising and introductory materials
- Internet gateways and search engines
- homes and workplaces where the Internet is used, and the practices we find there
- training courses
- conversations between friends, families and work colleagues
- academic Internet studies like this one.

A holistic understanding of the Internet seems a futile undertaking in the face of this list. However hard the ethnographer works, she or he will only ever partially experience the Internet (Thornton, 1988). The challenge addressed in Chapter 4 is to incorporate as many of these sites and sources as practicable while retaining a coherent but explicitly partial ethnographic project. What follows is the story of one journey through which an Internet was made, by following connections motivated by the foreshadowed problems in Chapter 1.

The principles of virtual ethnography

This chapter and the preceding one have reviewed literature on ethnographic methodology to develop an approach to the Internet which embraces the complexity offered by this form of mediated interaction. In the next three chapters I attempt to flesh out the conclusions reached in this literature review by discussing a project designed to put this approach into action. First, however, it is worth reiterating the principles for virtual ethnography which form the foundations for the experiment in ethnography described here.

1 The sustained presence of an ethnographer in the field setting, combined with intensive engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants

ethnographic. The ethnographer is able to use this sustained interaction to 'reduce the puzzlement' (Geertz, 1993: 16) which other people's ways of life can evoke. At the same time, ethnography can be a device for inducing that same puzzlement by 'displacing the dulling sense of familiarity with which the mysteriousness of our own ability to relate perceptively to one another is concealed from us' (1993: 14). Virtual ethnography is used as a device to render the use of the Internet as problematic: rather than being inherently sensible, the Internet acquires its sensibility in use. The status of the Internet as a way of communicating, as an object within people's lives and as a site for community-like formations is achieved and sustained in the ways in which it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted.

2 Interactive media provide a challenge and an opportunity for ethnography, by bringing into question the notion of a site of interaction. Cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to 'real life' and face-to-face interaction. It has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used. It also depends on technologies which are used and understood differently in different contexts, and which have to be acquired, learnt, interpreted and incorporated into context. These technologies show a high degree of interpretive flexibility. Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact. To concentrate on either aspect to the exclusion of the other leads to an impoverished view.
3 The growth of mediated interaction renders it unnecessary for ethnography to be thought of as located in particular places, or even as multi-sited. The investigation of the making and remaking of space through mediated interactions is a major opportunity for the ethnographic approach. We can usefully think of the ethnography of mediated interaction as mobile rather than multi-sited.
4 As a consequence, the concept of the field site is brought into question. If culture and community are not self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography. The object of ethnographic enquiry can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle.
5 Boundaries are not assumed *a priori* but explored through the course of the ethnography. The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the 'virtual' and the 'real'. Along with this goes the problem of knowing when to stop. If the concept of ethnography (and/or culture) as having natural boundaries is abandoned for analytic purposes, we can also abandon the idea of a whole ethnography of a given object. Stopping the ethnography becomes a pragmatic decision. The ethnographic object itself can be reformulated with each decision to either follow yet another connection or retrace steps to a previous point. Practically it is limited by the embodied ethnographer's constraints in

6 Along with spatial dislocation comes temporal dislocation. Engagement with mediated contexts is interspersed with interactions in other spheres and with other media. Virtual ethnography is interstitial, in that it fits into the other activities of both ethnographer and subjects. Immersion in the setting is only intermittently achieved.
7 Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. A holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve. The notion of pre-existing, isolable and describable informants, locales and cultures is set aside. Our accounts can be based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities.
8 Virtual ethnography involves intensive engagement with mediated interaction. This kind of engagement adds a new dimension to the exploration of the use of the medium in context. The ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight. Virtual ethnography can usefully draw on ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension. The shaping of interactions with informants by the technology is part of the ethnography, as are the ethnographer's interactions with the technology.
9 New technologies of interaction make it possible both for informants to be absent and to render them present within the ethnography. In the same way, the ethnographer is both absent from and present with informants. The technology enables these relationships to be fleeting or sustained and to be carried out across temporal and spatial divides. All forms of interaction are ethnographically valid, not just the face-to-face. The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies *is* the ethnography. This is ethnography *in*, *of* and *through* the virtual.
10 Virtual ethnography is not only virtual in the sense of being disembodied. Virtuality also carries a connotation of 'not quite', adequate for practical purposes even if not strictly the real thing (although this definition of virtuality is often suppressed in favour of its trendier alternative). Virtual ethnography is adequate for the practical purpose of exploring the relations of mediated interaction, even if not quite the real thing in methodologically purist terms. It is an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.

Principles 1 to 9 should follow fairly self-evidently from the discussions of this chapter and the previous one, and follow on from some of the main currents in ethnographic thinking discussed in those chapters. Principle 10, however, probably needs further explanation. Ethnography always has been adaptive to the conditions in which it finds itself. This may help to explain the traditional reluctance of ethnographers to give advice to those about to start fieldwork. There are no sets of rules to follow in order to conduct the perfect ethnography, and defining the fundamental compo-

on dwelling within a culture demands adaptation and the possibility of overturning prior assumptions. In virtual ethnography the adaptation of methodology to circumstance raises the issues which principles 1 to 9 address.

There seems to be a contradiction here. If we adhere to principle 10 then it would seem that we undermine the other nine principles, since to be adaptive and adequate to the purpose would seem to make adherence to principles in itself problematic. There is a temporal shift here. Most readers of ethnography will recognize the written product of an ethnography as being an after-the-event construction, the product of an overlapping but largely linear process of planning, data collection, analysis and writing. The written product rarely reflects this sequence of events, and methodological considerations which arose during the data collection phase may be presented as preceding and even justifying the decisions which gave rise to them. This text is no different in the liberties it takes with the temporal sequence. The methodological principles detailed here arose through the conduct of the ethnography itself, as it became clear what an adaptive ethnography might look like in the context of the Internet. In this sense principle 10, although it is presented last, is the fundamental principle which underlies the rest and makes them possible. Adapting and interrogating ethnography keeps it alive, contextual and relevant. After all, if we are happy enough that technologies are appropriated and interpreted differently in different contexts, why should we not be happy for ethnography to be similarly sensitive to its contexts of use? It is no more a sacred and unchanging text than the technologies which it is used to study. In the following chapter I describe the ethnographic project which forms the basis for this book. In describing the case, I will also attempt to retrieve some of the decisions which gave rise to the methodological principles listed above.

4 The Making of a Virtual Ethnography

The Louise Woodward case

In line with the principles of virtual ethnography established in Chapter 3, the object of this virtual ethnography is a topic and not a location. The topic concerns a media event which gained high levels of attention in both the US and the UK and some coverage in other parts of the world, and was accompanied by large amounts of activity on the Internet. The Internet was used in some innovative ways in the case and it received prominent media coverage. These phenomena were both reflective of and constitutive of the status of the Internet as culture and cultural object at the time, making this a rich setting in which to explore what the Internet has come to mean. The case which I chose to explore was that of Louise Woodward, a teenage British nanny tried in Boston for the murder of the child who had been in her care. It is not the aim of this book to give a definitive account of the Louise Woodward case. The book is not intended to be about Louise, and I am not setting out to discuss the case, the evidence or the outcomes in any depth. Rather, the aim is to use the Internet events surrounding the case as a site for exploring some of the meanings of the Internet at the time. First, however, I need to map the basic facts of the case. The progress of the case provides the context within which the various media and Internet representations came about (and which they helped to create).

Matthew Eappen, the 8-month-old child of Deborah and Sunil Eappen, died on 9 February 1997. Matthew had suffered a brain haemorrhage and 'shaken baby syndrome' was diagnosed, suggesting that someone had treated him roughly enough to cause damage inside his skull. The Eappens had been employing 18-year-old Louise Woodward as an au pair and she had been responsible for minding their two children for long periods. The Eappens were American and were living in the Boston area. Louise was British and came from a small town called Elton in Cheshire. Louise was interviewed by police and arrested shortly after Matthew's admission to hospital, and when he died was charged with his murder.

The trial opened on 7 October 1997, amid intense media interest in both the US and the UK. Courtroom proceedings were televised on cable and satellite channels and there was heavy coverage on television news bulletins and in newspapers throughout the trial. What had seemed a watertight case for the prosecution was brought into question by the defence and by the production of new medical interpretations of Matthew's injuries. Deborah