

## QUESTION FIVE:

### **How can qualitative researchers produce work that is meaningful across time, space, and culture?**

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**Responding Essays by Elaine Lally (p. xx) and Ramesh Srinivasan (p. xx)**

What we understand to be ‘global’ is itself constituted within the local; it emanates from very specific agencies, institutions and organizations whose processes can be observed first-hand. (Michael Burawoy, 2001, p 151)

Mutual understanding [cannot] be accounted for in terms of either unequivocally shared knowledge of the world or linguistically mediated literal meaning. It becomes . . . actual and reciprocal assumed control of what is meant by what is said and, in some sense, a self-fulfilling faith in a shared world (Ragnar Rommetveit, 1980, p. 109, emphasis in original).

A few years ago, I moved from Chicago to the U.S. Virgin Islands to take a post at the university there. I found myself having visions of swimming in the coral reef during lunch hour, contemplating new research topics while sitting in the shade of the palm trees lining the beach on campus. I would be teaching and researching in paradise. Although I had traveled extensively before, I had never before worked in a second world environment. I learned a lot in the first few weeks of being on the island, but perhaps the most surprising moment was when I realized I had completely forgotten about electricity.

I lived just above the sea cliffs on the remote northern side of the island, where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean. One day during hurricane season the power went out for several hours. A major storm was brewing; in the eerily dark afternoon, I had my cordless phone, a mobile phone with no service signal, a laptop, and several email addresses. None of these, including the URL addresses to streaming online radio, helped me figure out how bad the storm was or how long the power outage would last. All my tools required an external power that was no longer available.

That afternoon, looking past the pile of useless gadgets toward the swiftly darkening storm clouds, I realized three important things about myself and my research: My everyday behaviors were developed in a cultural context of ready access to basic goods and services, my modes of communication were overly dependent on electronic technologies, and my working theories about new technologies for communication were embedded in invisible infrastructures of privilege. As a middle class white mainlander American academic, I enjoyed the luxury of forgetting about the existence of such a mundane thing as electricity.

This was going to really mess up the tidy categories of my academic and social life.

I had to rethink everything.

How could I have forgotten?

My only exposure to internet use in the Caribbean had been Miller and Slater's (2000) study of Trinidad. As an internet researcher in the Virgin Islands, I soon realized that I cared about and was attached to the internet far more than anyone else. Here, the internet is useful but not indispensable. Radio is much more ubiquitous and central to everyday life, because its transmission survives when the power --or the money-- is gone.

These islands have the highest cost of living as well as the lowest average income in the United States. Those with money can afford to pay the high monopoly prices for connectivity. For the vast majority of people however, broadband (much less internet), is not even tenth on the list of needs.

When the technologies fail economically or physically (and the question on island is when, not if), the very palpable struggle to survive continues. For many, life is lived close to the bone.

In 1995, when Hurricane Marilyn hit St. Thomas, USVI, it wasn't the biggest news on the mainland U.S but to the local population it was devastating. Beyond the immediate physical destruction of property, the infrastructure crumbled. Although some people had electricity and running water in a matter of weeks (not unexpectedly, those with money and connections), others waited more than nine months (read: Nine months?!). Certainly, life without running water, refrigeration, or adequate communication systems might describe everyday life in many places around the world, but surely not here, in this U.S. Protectorate, proclaimed to be "Paradise" and acknowledged as the #1 cruise ship destination in the Caribbean.

The same year, but worlds away, I was learning that all academic inquiry necessarily involves abstraction. Almost immediately upon turning our analytical gaze to examine a phenomenon, we extract it from its context. We study phenomena (and in qualitative inquiry, this is often *in situ*), we capture particular moments as snapshots, we package and present our findings in a mode suitable to our target audiences. The product of our research is several times removed from experience.

Scholars have long discussed the concept of being “situated,” though Feminist scholars brought this concept to the foreground of social inquiry in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Laying out powerful critiques of the ethnocentric, patriarchal, and colonialist traditions in the practice of science and the production of knowledge, scholars across disciplines called for more direct attention to the identification and/or interrogation of the frames delimiting the processes of inquiry as well as the social, economic, geographic, cultural, racial, and gendered position of the researcher.

What I didn’t comprehend at the time I was first exploring this historical context for qualitative inquiry was the extent to which each of us is situated in a particular locale as well as point of view. Our theories about how the world works are bounded by invisible frames, built partially from our disciplinary training, but also our position, as described above. I had thought that I was conducting interdisciplinary, multi-sited, even “global” qualitative research of the internet. I had been well trained in the methods of interpretive sociology, negotiating my own voice within multiple perspectives, and situating my work. Yet all of my premises, all my reactions to stimuli in the field, all my interpretations of discursive behaviors, and even my frames for writing seemed still locked within some powerful and more importantly, invisible structures for sensemaking.

No matter how much I strived to reveal the frames influencing my life and work over the years, I had still forgotten about electricity. There is often, if not always, a disconnect between the idyllic paradises of brochures and the realities of third world living.

Likewise, there are disconnects between our imagined lives as reflexive researchers and the extent to which we are one of the “Others” of our research projects.

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<sup>3</sup> Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) provides excellent exemplars of this sort of thinking within feminist studies. Also see Sandra Harding’s work (1991, 1992)

I glibly entered into a new cultural context in 2004, dreaming of white sand beaches and snorkeling during my lunch hour. Each day brought a new definition to and sobering reality about where I really had chosen to live. But I only identified the cultural presuppositions I had used to conduct internet research when I faced my useless technologies in a storm and bemoaned my inability to *do* much of anything except hope that my accidental supplies of peanut butter would allow me to ride it out.<sup>4</sup>

This example may seem tangential to the topic of qualitative internet research, but it speaks to what, for me as an interpretive ethnographer, lies at the heart of the question of this chapter: Is it possible to make one's research more global, meaningful across time and cultural boundaries? Even if it was possible, and I argue it is not, the issue is also whether or not this is even a useful goal. This dire sounding response to the question of the chapter is not meant to deter us from our efforts, but is intended rather to emphasize that our research theories, methods, and interpretations are bounded by particular and situated rationalities. We live, conduct research, and find meaning from particular positions. As researchers, our understanding of others is limited by unnoticed frames of reference. Thus, when it comes to the global phenomenon of the internet, social researchers must remain cognizant that global scale does not inherently yield shared understanding. The best we can hope for is a shared faith that our experiences have common ground or our research findings can be comparable. Featherstone and Venn note that because of digitalization and globalization, "we have to abandon many of the

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<sup>4</sup> Two notes here: First, this moment calls to mind Goffman's useful notion of a "frame break," an anomaly that jars the normally transparent frame of reference into visibility. Second, to explain peanut butter to those of us who don't live in storm regions: Peanut butter is a good source of protein that does not need refrigeration and has a long shelf life, thus makes it a popular food choice for "hurricane closets," those larders that should be stocked annually with food, water, batteries, radios, and so forth. Another lesson I learned.

[Western] universalistic assumptions, for example about linear temporality and progress, and instead start from a perspective which emphasizes global *variability*, global *connectivity*, and global *inter-communication*” (2006, p. 2, emphasis in original). Even so, as Burawoy notes in the quote beginning this chapter, all of this is constituted within the local and as qualitative researchers, that is fundamentally where we are situated.

In this remainder of this chapter, I focus on the concept “global” and discuss the ways in which building reflexivity into one’s research design can help situate one’s work, internally and externally. By “research” I mean both the process and product of inquiry. By “situated” I mean located in a particular historical, local, and political place. By “internally and externally,” I mean to include those factors influencing the design, process and writeup of the study as well as those elements that link the specific study to larger contexts of meaning, whether physical, theoretical, or cultural. By “reflexive processes” I mean the method of looking recursively and critically at the self in relation to the object, context, and process of inquiry. In a crass sense, this is less like looking in a mirror and more like trying to look at yourself looking in the mirror (for more elegant treatments of this concept, see Lynch, 2000; Ashmore, 1989, or Woolgar, 1988).

### **Qualitative internet research: A local and global activity**

At least in the United States, new communication technologies--including the internet--are decidedly among the hottest areas of study in the social sciences and humanities disciplines. Even after a decade of exponential growth of these areas of research, there is still the alluring opportunity to study something that nobody has studied before, to develop new theories, and to access and use amazing technologies in one’s research.

In this environment of swift, global transformations and marked shifts in disciplinary attentions, it is vital to remain firmly rooted in and aware of the local, not just because all objects of inquiry are localized, but because it is only by examining one's local premises, situated in a physical locale and saturated with certain particularities, that one can hope to recognize how one's work is situated in larger contexts.

I take communication and information technologies to be subsumed within the concept of the global, because it is the means by which we are more able to conceptualize and concern ourselves with "the global." Arguably, all internet use is local, but unless it happens within the same room among members of the same kinship group, it occurs within and constitutes the global. It behooves us to consider, then, what the term might entail. I find myself asking three questions:

What does the term "global" mean, anyway?

How can qualitative methods be used to address global concerns?

How can qualitative researchers produce research that is meaningful and relevant to a global audience?

It may be risky to perpetuate a binary distinction between the terms local and global, because lived experience in a media saturated world seems to meld together into a hybrid of the 'glocal' (see Kraidy, 1999, for a clear articulation). However, it is useful to retain the distinction for purposes of focusing less on how people in general experience this hybrid existence and more on how qualitative researchers have approached social phenomenon, using particular (situated) procedures to define the parameters of the field, collect information, apply theoretical and analytical lenses in the interpretive process, and write research reports.

For example, globalizing trends as well as media attention to the term “global” urge researchers to conduct studies based on global data sets, utilize global frameworks, or speak to a global audience. Yet, social problems themselves, which help us identify topics for research, always occur at the local level. This is where qualitative research contributes a wealth of possibilities, because it is uniquely developed to grapple with in depth study of the individual case.

Given this, one might ask: Can qualitative research be global? This question is interesting because it immediately raise the a priori questions of whether or not qualitative research can be conducted on a global scale or in a global manner, questions that lead us in decidedly different directions. Another way to get at the difference is to ask: Does the term “global” refer to the dataset collected, the author’s mindset, the applicability or generalizability of findings, or the audience of the work? These are key questions to address, individually and in tandem.

A related but less explored way to approach this issue is to look at the other side of the same coin: What does it mean to be local? Does the term “local” refer to the physical location of the object of study or the proximity of the researcher to this object, the theoretical situation (standpoint and/or historicity) of the researcher, or the closeness of connection or fit between the researcher and the researched?

Exploring each of the multiple definitional delimiters mentioned in the previous two paragraphs is a useful exercise, recalling that in practice, these elements are intertwined. This in turn can remind us of the complexity of process of conducting internet research in and of global contexts.

## **Operationalizing the term global**

Considerable caution should be used when tossing the term “global” around. As has been remarked about general systems theory: It encompasses everything, therefore explains nothing. “Global” and other related terms such as “globalizing” or “globalization” encompass so much that they have little definitional value alone, without significant qualification. Below, I complicate the term to demonstrate the value of exploration.

The internet is certainly globally distributed, which without clarification can seem to imply that it is a universal or monolithic technology available everywhere to everyone. Naïve application of this premise leads to oversimplification of technologies that are, in actuality, differentially distributed and have different meanings in different global contexts. Even as this premise is laid out, it assumes what it seeks to critique, the unproblematized use of the phrase “global contexts.” What is a global context? The term is terribly vague, based on a presumed but unclarified understanding of “global.” Is it a verb, noun, adverb, adjective? An object, subject, or predicate? Process, product, or epoch? Or just a broader categorical code-word for ‘Other,’ used mostly by Westerners? Of course it can be any of these things, but if it remains undefined in published accounts using the term, the term loses power, even as it enables, often usefully, the illusion of shared understanding through its ambiguity.<sup>5</sup>

Before one can consider how to be “more global” in one’s research, one must determine what that term actually means in the specific context of one’s research project. I have laid out some possible operational definitions below, but the researcher should look beyond these definitions. A simple Google search for “define: global” yields a

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<sup>5</sup> See Eisenberg, 1988 for explanation of the concept of strategic ambiguity. As applied to emerging disciplinary practices in Internet Studies, see Markham, 2005.

dizzying array of meanings, all of which are legitimate, each of which, in practice, should be operationalized carefully, continuously problematized in the course of research, and spelled out for readers.<sup>6</sup>

Global can provide a shorthand way of describing anything beyond the local, anything other than the singular, anything beyond one's own scope of knowing.

Global can be a generalization of or to the whole (planet, typically), generalized to include not just all noted locations but those unnoted as well, in much the same way sampling techniques are used to generalize to entire population groups.

Global can be a unit of measure, whether it seeks to encompass the entirety described above or not. In this way, researchers can discuss the global nature of their data.

Global, when used in relationship to "Globalization" can usefully be conceptualized as an effort or, from another perspective, as an effect.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, there are many efforts toward large scale (global) homogenization or unification on some front. One can note such entities as the WTO, such companies as McDonalds, or even the operation of such concepts as Democracy to begin to think about this notion (these topics have been well developed by a range of scholars too numerous to mention here). Shifting one's vantage point from production to consumption or mainstream to margins, these same examples can be used to illustrate Globalization as an effect.

When discussed in the context of the internet as an information network, one might focus on 'global' as a capacity. From one angle in the prism (as Kendall discusses in this

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, I offer these definitions from the perspective of the researcher interrogating research design. These concepts would be framed differently if detailed from the perspective of lived experience.

<sup>7</sup> see Burawoy, 2001, for an excellent explanation of this distinction, as well as a more general discussion of the concept of globalization as it is linked to the practice of 'global ethnography.' For an intriguing take on globalization and rethinking the production of knowledge, see the special 2006 issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* entitled: *Problematizing global knowledge* (edited by Mike Featherstone and Couze Venn).

volume), the internet provides people with access to the same information resources from many points on the planet, or multiple information resources from a single point.

Shifting the prism slightly enables another operationalization of the concept: the seemingly limitless and more importantly, all encompassing capacity of the internet promotes the illusion that access to this *entirety* of information yields knowledge and sometimes even power, an illusion founded on the faulty notions that access equals use and transmission equals understanding.

When discussed in the context of the internet as a place, “global” can mean, among other things, distributed (not physically centralized) cultural units, unified and homogenous (as implied in the colloquial English usage of McLuhan’s term “global village”) or independent and isolated nodes of special interest.

The definitions of the term ‘global’ are endless. Identifying one’s predispositions and frames, whether in relation to this term or others, is an essential methodological move; enabling one to reflexively choose what is relevant and meaningful to the specific study, as well as what is equally plausible but not chosen as a frame or path.

If one is not explicitly studying global internet issues, or conducting inquiry from a ‘global’ perspective, why would it be important to engage in reflexivity about the term? Arguably, it is increasingly necessary as one’s network of study participants, colleagues and readers become more widespread and diverse because of internet-based communication technologies, crossing occupational, disciplinary, national, and, clearly, cultural boundaries.

To inject a note of caution; it is important to remember that in the iterative, non-linear process of qualitative research, questions about the global character of one’s

inquiry might be more satisfactorily addressed retrospectively, rather than a priori. This is not always the case, of course, but dwelling on the global can lead one too swiftly away from the concrete into the abstract. Qualitative inquiry enables us to focus on the detailed local level, shifting from the forest to the trees in an iterative fashion. Any study of communication and information technology will be simultaneously local and global, but the power of qualitative approaches is most aptly realized at the local level.

### **Global as the manner versus scope of research**

Returning to questions posed earlier in this response: When does one's work become global? At the beginning of the project, when the research is being designed? In the conduct of the study, which is at a global scale? In the analysis, which may be utilizing global rather than local frameworks? Or in the conclusions of the study, when the local and the global are compared or otherwise connected? Arguably, these are not the most useful questions. Although the term global might imply a planet-wide field site for research, or the application of universal principles in the interpretation of social behavior, qualitative research methods are designed and best suited for close analysis of the local. The term global gains more usability when applied as a guide for one's sensibilities rather than one's scope.

Whether one follows the people, the object, the metaphor, the conflict or the storyline, the use, influence, production and effects of the internet are not homogeneous and ubiquitous but specific and concrete. Local experience is always the object of analysis. How one makes sense of it, on the other hand, is a situated act that can enact more global sensibilities. For instance, Michael Burawoy's multi-authored collection

“Global Ethnography” (2000) illustrates excellent comparative interpretations across population groups or shifting locales. In some cases, data were collected in more than one context, which means those studies were multi-sited, but they are not global in the sense of encompassing the entire globe. In other cases, researchers apply multiple perspectives from different cultural understandings to interpret data. I take this to mean (and I believe Dr. Burawoy and the other writers of this collection would agree) that the interpretation is multi or poly-vocal, but not that there was some sort of universal, global perspective. Miller and Slater’s *Internet Ethnography* (2000), is often categorized as an illustration of global ethnography, when in fact, it is an intensively localized study of the use of globally accessible media (albeit in two primary locales; London and Trinidad). Likewise, George Marcus’ writings on “multi-sited ethnography” (e.g., 1998) are often interpreted as discussions of global inquiry, but when read closely, are more reflective of the need, in an era of globalizing media, to connect the local to the global and to allow boundaries of the field to be emergent and fluid rather than predetermined and unnecessarily restricted as was natural in traditional ethnographies.

I oversimplify these works not because they are simple but to point out that upon close inspection, key advocates of global ethnography are actually advocating close, local work that incorporates global sensibilities, not work that is global in scale. This is not a simple task for most of us. The notion of “having global sensibilities” may be difficult to comprehend, much less enact. Our interpretive lenses generally focus at the close level of discourse. Although we may be trained to shift our lens from the empirical to the abstract or theoretical, our gaze to the extant edges of the forest stops at the limits of our own situated, local imaginations. So, although the local context is never disconnected

from larger contexts, it is impossible to think at global scales. The interpretive frame of the researcher is trained to work inductively. This requires sensitivity not only to the context we're studying but sensitivity to ourselves as foreign objects to the world around us, both in the context we're studying and outside it, in the rest of the world.

Being global, then, is not a matter of developing a larger range or scale; this goal is incommensurate with the general principle of qualitative inquiry that seeks depth within case, rather than generalization across cases. Given the primary strength of qualitative research to study human social behavior using close, inductive interpretive methods, it is appropriate to strive to approach research in a more global manner.

**Reflexivity: a method of finding the local(e) so as to place it within the global**

How do we understand ourselves beyond our personal experience, in order to understand our orientation to the world? How can we become, as Bauman (2005) describes, nomads making homes at the crossroads of culture? Being saturated with global stimuli does not necessarily allow us to truly know some sort of 'Otherness' outside our local context, nor will it grant us a global orientation. Even if it did, this saturation is not an equal transfer, as privilege, politics, and even media habits determine the extent to which one has access to multiple perspectives and can reflexively incorporate these into one's research practice.

To even begin to think 'outside the box,' it is necessary to grapple with the notion that because we live and work from invisible frameworks, we are to a certain extent foreign to ourselves. For most researchers (indeed for most people), these frameworks are not easily identified, much less acknowledged. Yet in order to adopt more global sensibilities, this inwardly directed reflexive inquiry is necessary. This is partly a matter

of recognizing that the self, the phenomenon, and the research project are all located in particular, small arenas, yet must be woven with or contextualized within other encompassing ecologies which themselves cannot be comprehended or encapsulated. It's a matter of "placing" oneself, which requires the practice of "othering" one's own premises, actions, and interpretive tendencies.

Logistically, reflexivity is a method of gaining greater sensitivity to the local and global contexts, identifying one's own location, and establishing a sense of rigor in one's research.<sup>8</sup> Reflexivity can be practiced in all stages of research.

### **Reflexivity as an analytical and rhetorical method**

Whether one strives to be global or not, one's research will be read globally, by audiences who have varying experiences with and attitudes toward the technologies discussed or used in one's research. So while one should remain closely focused locally, one should be prepared to deal with a global, technologically -- as well as otherwise -- diverse audience for research reports.<sup>9</sup> I take this to be initially a *reflexive* and, later, a *rhetorical* challenge. How can I help guide my readers so that they understand my work?

My first challenge is to interrogate my cultural and conceptual frameworks to situate my object of analysis as well as method of inquiry in relation to other people, places, and things. Later, as I try to convey my interpretations to the world of readers, my challenge is to try to make my work sensible and meaningful to people situated elsewhere, while

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of 'rigor' brings up yet another conundrum in qualitative approaches. Useful distinction is made between rigor in application of methods and rigor in interpretation, the latter of which is crucial, but much less discussed in qualitative methods texts (Guba 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The term 'glocal,' may apply to this state, which, while a useful amalgam of terms, doesn't provide much in the way of practical advice as to how this can be accomplished in one's study.

understanding that “shared understanding” is ultimately impossible in an intercultural or even interpersonal sense. At this impossible juncture, one can only interrogate one’s own research premises to a certain degree. Then, one’s challenge is to find rhetorically sensitive strategies to help locate these for readers. It may involve guiding the reader through one’s reasoning process, or providing links from context to theory as a way of mapping the path of one’s unique, situated interpretations. Stepping back to the basics, one might begin by considering how one’s basic terms might be understood—or not—by someone from a vastly different set of experiences.

Consider these different opportunities for situated reflexivity throughout the research project:

- Situate the research question into larger frameworks.
- Situate the local context into larger contexts.

- Situate the research approach within other approaches and research ‘camps.’
- Situate specific procedures within larger sets of assumptions and practices.
- Situate decisions among other, alternate choices and paths.

- Situate the gendered, racial, classed, affiliated, disciplined self.

- Situate the study, as a whole and in its component parts, among larger conversations.

Even if this list is collapsed into a seemingly simpler guideline, such as: “Situate the Self and Other (Other as an all encompassing term involving everything outside the self),” this still constitutes a fairly massive requirement that, if tackled fully, would be laughable in its impossibility.

Attention to this list, at various critical junctures over the course of the study, lends strength to the global quality of one’s interpretation. Reflexivity allows one to maintain focus not only on the details of the study but also on the puzzle of how one is making

decisions that influence the evolving design of the study. This sort of reflexivity also enables the researcher to situate the lens, the context, and the findings so the work remains relevant even as the technologies change. In this way, research can sustain meaning over time to more global audiences far beyond the local.

Engaging in reflexive self analysis won't yield some all encompassing, global, capital T truth, but it is extremely productive along with other strategies to build rigor into one's research. Reflexive self analysis is a part of every phase of the study, from the design to the data collection to the editing and sorting of information, the interpretation process, and the writing.

### **Reflexivity in action: focus on the object of research**

Situating the object or context within the larger picture is again a matter of understanding how the locale of the researcher and the researched is placed inside larger and larger systems of meaning as well as geographies. Here, reflexivity can be thought of as a method of meta-analysis, whereby a researcher can analyze his or her working hypotheses (stated or more importantly, unconscious), analytical processes, and ongoing conclusions. This process shifts both naturally and deliberately from the empirical to the theoretical and back again in such a way as to include room for an analytical gaze upon the self doing the analysis.

A practical method of beginning is through writing, using research journals, making sure to date all entries or modifications. Rather than erasing one's previous thoughts, one simply notes new additions or modifications. With dates, this can help illustrate how the

researcher is changing through the course of the study. During this process, it is useful to ask questions of oneself such as:

*How do I know that?*  
*So what?*  
*Why did I conclude that?*  
*What led me to that perception?*

In the process of attempting to answer these questions, a researcher is constituting the self as an subject of study along with the other objects. This ‘data’ is interrogated through a critical reflexive lens. This process can help one determine how one’s research questions are shifting, how one’s perceptions are changing, how this influences concordant shifts in research questions, etc. One can see that this focus on method is less about “application of procedure” and more about the “rigor of interpretation.” Both fall under the category of “method,” but are often thought to occur at different stages of research. The latter is far less discussed in methods texts, partly because interpretation is often considered a subjective, individual act of discussing implications or drawing conclusions. Labels like these can be misleading; the interpretive process begins even before the first research question is formulated. Because the process rarely appears in the final research report, its procedural elements remain elusive.<sup>10</sup>

Here, I do not address this issue fully, but provide a sample of iterative reflexivity in process. During a collaborative study of Dominican newsgroups with a student, several moments of self analysis enabled us to refine our analytical lens and identify some of our own foreignness to each other and the context.

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, even in Lori Kendall’s explicitly reflexive reanalysis of her BlueSky study (this volume), the outcome of her reflexivity is far more visible than the process. As she and other interpretive ethnographers have aptly noted, this is a tricky dilemma; how much of the interpretive process does one lay out in the finished report? How much can this process be taught versus simply enacted and refined through practice and time?

*Lesson 1: Even the simplest descriptive details are filtered through the researchers' localized understandings*

In a very early written description of the Dominican newsgroup, the student described the various topics available for conversation. Rather than list all the topics separately, she elected to create categories. She did not consider this an interpretive move but a practical way of creating an example in the written report of something that otherwise would either remain a too-vague mention of “various topics” or, on the other extreme, a long list of hundreds of topics.

This choice was sensible in that it served to organize her thoughts. But in the process, she was formulating categories and themes before having any systematic intent to do so. In this early description, for example, she listed “gay marriage” under the category of “social discussion” and “politics” under “entertainment discussion.” When asked about her categorization, she noted that her categories were based on her opinion of how people use these discussion boards.

I asked “Do you think it makes a difference how you’re grouping these topics into these categories?” After reflection, she realized that it made a significant difference, particularly to people outside the Dominican culture who might not understand the specific context within which she was talking.

I asked her, “Why did you select these categories for these two topics?” She began to talk about political discussion in Dominica in general, speaking as a Dominican familiar with this environment. She remarked that political discussions in Dominica or among Dominicans were very different than her experience of political discussions in the U.S.

I asked, “How are you defining entertainment?” She provided a much different definition than I would have expected to hear, in my own American ears. Among other things, she said, “Because Dominicans talk about politics more frequently, as part of social encounters, we consider it a form of entertainment.”

“Well, then, how is that different from social discussion?” I asked, and again, received an unusual answer. She was surprised when I mentioned that these definitions didn’t match my own.

The dialogue helped us recognize the ways that a seemingly practical action of simplifying data into categories was in fact an interpretive act, revealing but also constructing a complex schema of social interaction. Reflexive dialogue helped her identify some invisible aspects of her own perceptions that were influencing the way she characterized other’s interactions in her study.

*Lesson 2: Our cultural assumptions will influence our interpretation*

At a different juncture in the research project, the student began using gender specific labels for participants, a move that didn’t seem to make sense to me. I asked how she could identify the gender (biological) of the user. She replied that it was “very straightforward,” because “a voice emerged” such that the reader/listener could discern if the user was male or female. Her reasoning for this, upon questioning, was that the gender roles in Dominican culture are stabilized and people adhere to traditional gender roles. I mentioned an opposing viewpoint: that this internet forum might actually provide one of the few anonymous venues to reject or interrogate pre-assigned gender roles. As she reflected further on her gender assignments, she realized that she was perhaps making hasty decisions based on her own comfort zones and cultural assumptions of uniformity.

*Lesson 3: Culturally specific understandings of power and authority influence the interpretive lens.*

As we continued to converse over the next two days, the student began to shift her understanding of the environment. Without reading any previous literature about gender in online environments, she modified her interpretation, switching from the original perspective to the new perspective I had mentioned in passing as an alternate explanation.

When we discussed this sudden switch in interpretive lens, she acknowledged that she had allowed my own comment to override her initial, instinctive interpretation.

I asked, “Why did you give up your initial interpretation so readily?”

She replied “I feel like I need to follow your advice and that I’m not in a position to argue with you.” She elaborated that the shift was almost automatic, because of my expertise in internet studies and my position of power.

“This may be indeed true,” I said, “but what if I’m wrong?”

As she paused to consider this question, I added that in both her original interpretations and my counterpoint, we were guessing. We decided, eventually and with a great deal of self-directed irony, that it might be useful to ask the members themselves.

During this conversation, the student expressed discomfort with the idea that I might be wrong, and continued to pursue my own line of analysis rather than following her own instincts, even though she was closer to the context and far more familiar with the data. Her reaction made sense to me only because I had been living in the Caribbean for awhile. There, students are taught that to disagree with a teacher is to show great disrespect. The respect for authority and hierarchy made it very difficult for her to disregard a comment that for me was made in an offhand manner.

Notably, the focus of the study narrowed solely because we were attending to this “gender role” detail of social life more than other, potentially equally interesting, viable or relevant details. The research questions changed. A seemingly small point got bigger and more relevant while other plausible paths faded away. It became an object for further data collection and analysis (which points to the issue of constructing boundaries developed by Hine elsewhere in this volume).

Although these lessons may seem tangential to the issue of making one’s qualitative internet research more globally meaningful, they actually lie at the heart of the matter. Once we begin the process of interrogating our own premises and interpretations as foreign, we can begin to find ways of connecting these with other contexts for understanding.

This reflexive exercise was conducted as a practice session in oral form with my student. I find that it is also productive if conducted (with or without help from a colleague) in writing, to produce a documented trail of perception and a chronological record of the related shifts in the shape of the study, which might include such things as shifts in the shape of the field site and focus of study.

Clearly, these shifts in research focus can and do happen naturally. One’s perceptions change as one becomes more familiar with the field, one meets and talks with people, or as one studies the data. This is characteristic of qualitative research and attempting to actually avoid this tendency marks a more positivist/modernist orientation to research, where accuracy is pre-determined by the method of measurement rather than inductively derived through introspection and modification of method. The power of qualitative methods can be actually limited if one uses criteria for quality and rigor

intended for other approaches, or if one too rigidly sticks to the study's design as initially planned.

To sustain internal consistency and a good fit between epistemology and method, it is vital to understand and embrace qualitative induction and flexibility, understanding that research is an ambiguous, messy process that changes constantly until the researcher determines he or she has reached an end point. Far from diminishing quality, this reflexive and messy process lends rigor to the qualitative project. Iterative self-critical writing in research journals is one means of developing reflexive rigor.

### **Reflexivity in action: focus on the self**

To make one's work readable by a potentially global audience of people is an impossibility, but if one does not even attempt to connect the local to the global, one's work can remain isolated and foreign to readers. If readers have no signposts to orient themselves within your work, they won't know where you are. This is a matter for any writer, but particularly important in a global community of internet scholars, each of whom ostensibly studies in the same general arena but comes from a particular standpoint and limitations. As members of that academic community, it is part of our responsibility to provide contextualization for our work.

Locating myself is a process of trying to figure out:

... *where I stand*  
... *where I'm coming from*  
... *where I can move from, given where I am,*

(which helps me understand more about)

... *where I'm not*

*... and where others have been that I'm not going but might be relevant to helping me understand where I am.*

Qualitative approaches assist in this process because they are marked by iterative, reflexive processes. Much can be gained by attending closely to those moments when the analytical gaze shifts from the empirical details to the theoretical big picture. As inquiry cycles through observation, analysis, and interpretation, critical turning points provide opportunities to engage in reflexive analysis about the fit between the questions and the phenomenon, the fit between method and question, the ways in which answers are emerging, and the context in which the interpretation is taking place. As this process of reflexive inquiry is sustained, arguably one's research becomes more accessible and comprehensible to audiences outside the self, the context of the study, and the discipline within which the study occurs. Hence, becomes more global (using global here as a manner or attitude of research rather than a scale or unit of measure).

Extricating one's own history is a specific part of this process. In a sense, one is creating data for further analysis within the context of the study in progress. Far from being self indulgent, it is a valuable means of identifying one's frames and boundaries and through reflexive analysis, considering the connections and disconnections that first inform and later, situate the study.

Self-reflexive writing exercises can be conducted in any number of ways. The activity of laying out one's premises, standpoints, and so forth should be a part of one's research process (and is a formal part of some methods such as phenomenology or grounded theory). Having said that, I also maintain that there are varying degrees to which this stuff shows up in the final report. Even when advocated or supported by the general philosophical approach, weaving this information into the research may not be

warranted or advisable.<sup>11</sup> If not understood and therefore handled properly as a method, it can be easily judged as solipsistic.

Still, one might pursue the question: How does this sort of reflexive exercise aid in the process of making research conducted in Finland relevant to people reading it in Japan? Or a study of Dutch community networking relevant to community networking research in any location?

As an exercise within the course of conducting a study, it is aimed at revealing some of the hidden intersections of the self, the local experience of the participants, history, culture, and scientific inquiry. The outcome of such exercise is not illustrated above because the example only reflects an initial, externally demonstrable phase of reflexive analysis. This level of detail is often missing in general qualitative method textbooks because it is arduous, messy, and lengthy. The best insights happen outside the texts one might produce in these exercises, so the benefits may not be transmitted in writing.

Another sample of this sort of exercise illustrates one way I might begin the process of analyzing the connection (or lack thereof) between my methods of inquiry and possible readers. The exercise helps me identify several possible disconnection points, which through further analysis I can attempt to bridge by applying various persuasive strategies. I begin by addressing a series of questions:

*Why might my work be incomprehensible to someone else?*

My perspective is unique to me and not accepted by everyone--or possibly anyone--else. I have mashed together such a mess of methods, I'm not sure my

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<sup>11</sup> Such inclusions are more familiar in certain academic arenas, including but certainly not limited to autoethnography (as illustrated by Alta Mira Press's *Ethnographic Alternatives* series by Bochner and Ellis) confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988), feminist narratives (as illustrated by Wolf, 1992) fragmented narrative (Markham, 2005) layered accounts (Rambo-Ronai, 1994) and other forms found significantly in postmodern, feminist, postcolonial, and contemporary ethnography arenas.

work would be seen as 'reliable' or 'valid' to others. Further, though I may not like or believe in those terms, they're used all the time to assess my work.

*What is my perspective?*

I'm an ethnographer conducting research on how users feel about technologies. My activities in the field are informed by my use and familiarity with interpretive qualitative methods, rhetorical criticism, feminism, and critical theory. I believe that interpretations must be derived from and be supported by discourse collected in situ.

*What methods do I tend to use in collecting data?*

Interview and participant observation, directly, but research journals, indirectly. I write a constant research journal, in which I record both my direct observations and my thoughts about my observations. My bad habits in research journal writing: I tend to spin in reflexive circles until I lose focus on the phenomenon. I can second guess myself endlessly.

*What methods do I use in analyzing data?*

As someone who calls herself an ethnographer, I'm sometimes baffled by the fact that the one tool I don't use is ethnography. From my perspective, this term describes a mindset or epistemological approach more than a specific set of interpretive procedures. I find it lacks the procedural specificity required to systematically analyze actual field data.

So what do I use? Initially, I just dump my toolbox upside down and try different approaches. Everything that can be considered as data is at some level "text." Whether it's an interview, an observation, visual or verbal, it can be read and analyzed as text, sometimes more literally than other times.

I borrow heavily from rhetorical criticism methods, because the systematic procedures help organize the data early in the process. I might conduct a metaphor analysis, narrative analysis, or pentadic analysis. I find these methods particularly useful in breaking down the structure of text into thematic categories that can be then further studied, using still other sensemaking lenses.

Later in the process I use deconstruction methods, mostly in the way they've been applied in organizational analyses. I pay attention to how stories, arguments, or websites might be rewritten, how binaries are being displayed, how my own binaries are operating on my analysis.

I generally try to follow grounded theory procedures as these have evolved from original conception, looking for themes and categories, but end up being less systematic than I believe the method warrants.

Sometimes in the back of my mind, I think about conversational analysis, but I am not rigorous in my application of this method as it is practiced in the United States. Rather, I think about the premises of this approach as I pore through interview transcripts and conversations.

I use the idea of genealogy offered by Foucault, looking backward to find a difference that makes a difference. I find Foucault's work to enable a mindset rather than provide specific procedures, so I tend to use this as a macro level of interpretation, rather than in early stages of close analysis of texts.

After I conduct rough analyses using a range of methods, I settle into a more refined analysis that utilizes a narrower set of tools.

*What else might make my work incomprehensible to someone else?*

I mix methods from interpretive, postmodern, and critical schools of research. I have potentially inconsistent theoretical grounding if I think there is such a thing as a logical 'argument' but also believe in the postmodern premises that reject binary thinking or 'one right answer.'

I also differentiate between methods for framing the study, methods for collecting data, methods for analyzing data, methods for interpreting, and methods of writing. This can appear messy or incommensurate to others when it actually is not, because I borrow from multiple schools of thought.

Even my definitions of "Qualitative Internet Research" may be completely bizarre to someone else.

Obviously, as mentioned above, this 'data' will not make my work immediately comprehensible to the audience. This is just an initial exercise to interrogate the self.

The objective of reflexivity as a method is to attempt to understand one's own framework in relation to other choices one could make, so that one can make well founded decisions and articulate these to others. Understanding the fit between one's subject, one's theoretical frameworks, one's methods, and other phenomena in other places constitutes a continual, iterative process in the qualitative project, not a beginning or end point.

Notably, reflexivity is often an unconscious process, especially if one is not trained to pay attention to this phase of research. In laying out some of the more visible procedures

associated with reflexive writing, I seek not to simplify or standardize, but simply to exemplify one way this activity can occur.

## **Conclusion**

I have described one aspect of interpretive methodologies, reflexive situating, as a useful way to better understand where the self and research stands and therefore, how it fits into the larger pattern. This can help facilitate more globally sensitive research, but it is also a keen rhetorical strategy for producing and sharing knowledge. We don't have the opportunity to engage in one-on-one conversation with all the readers of our research, so we cannot anticipate the innumerable questions posed by a potentially global (unit of measure, here) audience. Yet, we can articulate findings more clearly by preempting some of the questions these unknown readers might ask.

When it comes to pragmatic thinking about how to address the question of this chapter, I advocate going back to the basics; the adroit management of contingencies in the ever-changing internet contexts relies on solid grounding in the practices and principles of social inquiry. As any seasoned qualitative researcher will attest, good qualitative research takes time, trial, and error, regardless of how easy and swift the technologies seem or how quickly research papers seem to flood the market after the release of some new technology for communication.

How well will our studies fit within the larger conversations? The interdisciplinary quality of the field of inquiry means that most researchers will fall short of someone else's expectations for adequacy in reviewing previous literatures (excellent criticisms of ahistorical or atheoretical trends are written by Sterne, 2005; Sterne and Leach, 2005; and

Carey, (2005). The task of covering one's bases is monumental: required reading can potentially include all previous studies of internet related phenomena across multiple disciplines, studies of communication technologies in general (historical and contemporary), as well as attention to discipline specific literatures. Additionally, to really use the right tool for the job, we ought to have comprehensive knowledge of those methods and practices housed under the increasingly unwieldy and perhaps inappropriate term, "qualitative" (see, e.g., Hine, 2005).

It requires no great leap to realize that one's research will more often than not fail to satisfactorily address even a fraction of those issues, theories, and previous studies relevant to individual readers. This is a situation that requires a keen sensibility to rhetorical strategies, whereby the researcher is able to situate the self and the study. Part of one's methods, then, must include the goal to convey meaning at the crossroads of culture, providing maps and guides for an audience who potentially knows nothing of the method or the criteria used to evaluate quality.

The question of this chapter is interesting because it challenges us to think about our research beyond the narrow confines often encouraged if not required by our disciplines. At the same time, because qualitative approaches are most applicable and appropriate to local, detailed study of human social behavior in specific contexts, the question must be critically interrogated. Early in this chapter, I stated that it is impossible to carry meaning across cultural boundaries. This statement is not intended to stymie cross cultural, globally-sensitive research. It is only to remind us that research will always be an abstraction from lived experience; at any level.

Situating one's research is a way of enacting global sensibilities. More specifically, reflexive analysis of one's own boundaries is an ethically powerful way of identifying for the self and for others those limitations and factors influencing one's research choices. Even such an invisible (for me) thing as electricity, for example, influences everyday conceptualizations and uses of the internet, not just for those people in locations where electricity is not guaranteed, but for researchers in privileged and insulated environments.

Thus, beyond the impossibility of operating at a truly global level of scale, there remains the problem that no matter how global you think your work is, someone else will find a flaw in your thinking, or you might realize these flaws long after the research report is completed. Such is the nature of the larger academic conversation. It's something to accept and embrace, acknowledging as Clifford Geertz did, that understanding any social setting is like trying to translate a manuscript that is faded and torn. The outcome will always be partial and incomplete.<sup>12</sup> In this way, reflexivity becomes an essential component of inquiry, not to provide a bird's eye map of the terrain within which knowledge production occurs, but to provide a glimpse of one local position for others, whose local positions inform our own.

### **Recommended Readings:**

For good introduction and overview of the interpretive turn in qualitative approaches, which grounds and promotes a situated, reflexive stance for researchers, I recommend the collection edited by James Clifford & George Marcus entitled *Writing Culture* (University of California Press, 1986). To problematize the concepts further and to approach the issue from a feminist perspective, I recommend the collection: *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar & Deborah Gordon (1995, University of

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<sup>12</sup> Since this is actually a strong foundation of interpretive qualitative approaches, it may relieve some pressure, if one is taking this approach, to know one's work is neither all encompassing nor, for that matter, the final word.

California Press). Further addressing this issue in ethnography, I recommend Robin Patric Clair's edited volume, *Expressions of Ethnography* (2003, SUNY Press).

For specific methodological advice within this general interpretive framework, I often return to the several works by Harry Wolcott (1994, 1999, 2005) and the three (very different) editions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Norm Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln (Sage, 1994, 2000, and 2005).

To understand some of the complexities associated with the concept of 'global' in relation to qualitative internet research methods, I recommend Michael Burawoy (2000, 2001), George Marcus (1998, 2005); Marwan Kraidy (1999) and Zygmunt Bauman (2005).

Reflexivity is a huge topic. Michael Lynch (2000) lays out a very useful inventory of reflexive positions with reference to associated disciplines/authors/proponents. The specific connection of reflexivity with epistemological standpoint positioning is well developed by Sandra Harding (1991, 1992). Steve Woolgar (1988) offers another useful place to begin. To see reflexivity built into a discussion of reflexivity as a concept, I often return tot Malcom Ashmore's *The reflexive thesis* (1989). To explore how reflexivity has been applied in contemporary ethnographic research, see various studies published in the *Ethnographic Alternatives* series, published by AltaMira Press and edited by Art Bochner & Carolyn Ellis.



## **Response to Annette Markham**

**Elaine Lally**

As Annette Markham argues in her chapter, ‘we all exist in places that shape our perspectives on the world’. In particular, the modes of our situatedness that are relevant to our work as researchers include (at least) our disciplinarity and place-specificities. In this response I would like to focus more closely on important issues from my own situated perspective as a technology researcher based in Australia:

- The location you do research from is as important to any consideration of the local and the global as the location you do research in.
- Definitions of ‘global’ may be quite different for people who are differently positioned with respect to mainstream western modes, and a focus on globalization, as a process with attendant political and economic structures of privilege, can be more useful than looking at the global in terms of unifying perspectives through comparative research.
- Our situatedness gives us a sense of feeling at home in particular places and times, but as researchers we have a responsibility to research practices that are dialogical and creative and which stretch our comfort zones.

As Donna Haraway points out in her influential essay ‘Situated Knowledges,’ there is an ethical dimension to the situated nature of a research practice that is aware of its own situated and embodied nature. Arguing “against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (1991, p. 191), Haraway suggests that the unlocatable

fantasy of infinite vision “is an illusion, a god-trick” (1991, p. 189). We need to have “a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a non-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness’ (1991, p. 187). For Haraway, such a research practice necessarily “privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformative systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (1991, p. 191).

As Markham points out, we inevitably privilege our own situated perspectives, since they are the centre of our world-view, but that by “examining one’s local premises, situated in a physical locale and saturated with certain particularities,” we may come to “recognize how one’s work is situated in larger contexts.” This generally involves, in my own experience as a qualitative researcher, the ongoing development of a willingness and commitment to stretching the bounds of one’s personal comfort zone. It’s not always easy to do this, since it involves living with a sense of intellectual uncertainty and self-questioning, and there are certainly times when, not infrequently, one wonders whether the effort is worthwhile.

My own situatedness certainly has had a significant impact on the research I’ve conducted and published. My physical location, based at a university in the western suburbs of Sydney, Australia, is one dimension of this specificity. Here in Australia, the scholarly community is highly aware of the ‘tyranny of distance’ manifested in the expense and time needed to travel outside the country to conferences and for face-to-face collaboration. While information and communications technologies have transformed the

possibilities for feeling connected with our academic networks, it is still the case that time-zone differences, particularly between Australia and Europe and the US, intervene in the flow of communication, slowing down the dynamic pace of communication that is possible with more synchrony.

The question posed by this book's chapter interrogates the notions of the 'global' in relation to studies of new digital technologies. What does the 'global' mean? How can we use qualitative methods to address global concerns? How can we produce research that is meaningful and relevant to a global audience?

From the point of view of the 'antipodes' (literally the points diametrically opposite their points of reference on the globe) these questions seem much more ambitious and less readily achievable than concerns about processes of globalisation, or transnational aspects of life in a relatively isolated locale. Terms such as 'globalizing' or 'globalization' seem more useful than the 'global' as a thing-in-itself, because they can be defined in terms of processes that impact across all ranges of geographic scale.

An important strand in the literature on ICTs (information and communication technologies) deals directly with the issue of the relationship between the local and the global (see for example Miller and Slater's (2000) ethnographic study based in Trinidad and the UK; Holloway and Valentine's (2003) study of the cybergeographies of children's online and offline worlds; or Hine's (2000) study of the way the internet is made meaningful in local contexts). But is it important to include the global as a dimension in our research? Perhaps not. From the geographic periphery of the globe, in English-speaking population terms, if not in terms of centrality to academic cultural networks, the urge to 'be global' seems less urgent than the need to understand one's

neighbours. Following Bauman, Markham suggests that to understand our place in the global we must become 'a nomad who makes a home at the crossroads of culture'. For pragmatic as well as intellectual reasons, many Australian scholars are increasingly developing an orientation towards academic networks in Asia and the Pacific. Scholars from the global South continue to point out that much research written in English continues to be Western- or Euro-centric. Language is certainly a barrier, as English-speaking scholars generally don't have access to the writing of scholars in languages other than English.

Markham asks how one can be more global in one's research. One could question the desirability of a more global focus in the research we undertake. Even within what seem like very local contexts, say the western suburbs of Sydney with its population of less than 2 million, heterogeneities proliferate at all levels of scale. Diversities of social formation mean that, in practice, things seem to become more rich and interesting as one focuses closer into the local. Arguably, there is now no place in the world where transnational (rather than global) connections are not fundamental to the processes which are producing local specificities. Perhaps by becoming 'more local' in one's research we can dig down to gain greater insights about the specific connections between disparate dimensions of local contexts, and gain greater understanding of their dynamics and processes.

What is needed is better understanding of the local, lived experience of people who may be geographically near but culturally far. Qualitative research, at its best, conveys not just factual observations but generates empathy in its readers for the subjects of the research. In Local Knowledge, anthropologist Clifford Geertz elaborates the relationship

between 'experience-near' and 'experience-far' concepts (1983, p. 57). The challenge in qualitative research is "to grasp concepts that, for other people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned." This is a task "at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin" (p. 58). The massive popularity of reality television over the past few years provides good indication of the receptivity of mass audiences to media forms which approach the 'ethnographic' in their depictions of what they observe, no matter how constructed the representations may be to conform to traditional narrative forms and conventions (e.g., the genre of soap opera).

### **Researching technology**

How well do our studies fit within the larger conversations? This is a key question. What value will our work have in five years, 15 years, 150 years? The findings of research must be useful to other scholars, and to the wider society. Our research must provide insights that are 'generalisable,' in the sense that other scholars will find them applicable to the (situated) fields that they study. The application of sound, tried and tested methodologies for data collection and analysis, that is, those for which there is a widespread consensus about their utility, ensures a level of quality control in the process. When we speak of soundness or 'rigour' in our research processes, we mean, because research is a social activity, that we are speaking within frameworks of discourse and action that are accepted by a community of scholars.

In my own work on home computers (Lally 2002), my concern to relate the particular and local observations I was making of the people in my study, in combination

with the disciplinary background outlined above, led me to discuss domestic ICTs from the point of view of several different contexts. I related home computers to other domestic appliances and consumer goods, and drew connections to more general concerns expressed in academic literatures on consumption and mass production of material culture. I related home computers to trends in technological development, via the history of computers as business and educational technologies and the changes entailed by incorporating them into homes, including transformations in their marketing. Finally, I considered computers from the point of view of how we make ourselves ‘at home’ in our domestic environments (and elsewhere), to the point that an affective and practical relationship of *ownership* is enabled. From the point of view of this final context, although I was dealing with a technology that was outmoded (in terms of contemporary culture) by the time I had finished writing about it, this particular case study had contributed to my own developing understanding of how we construct and maintain our sense of being ‘at home’ in the world.

Our sense of belonging to and feeling at home in the spaces and times we inhabit in our everyday lives is:

inextricably linked with practices and practical knowledges because it involves being able to marshal a set of narratives, ... appropriate segments of the object world (almost inevitably including nowadays all manner of consumer goods), a repertoire of bodily stances, and so on. Together, these resources generate a ‘sense of belonging’, a feeling that the agent does not have to qualify as a member of a network, being already competent in its spaces and times. (Glennie and Thrift 1996, p. 41)

It is the everyday practices and practical knowledges of the participants that we are attempting to understand in our qualitative studies. But it is also the case that, as researchers, our sense of belonging to academic networks and fields of study is based on a sense of being competent in these particular spaces and times. We can think of this sense of at-homeness in the everyday social and cultural environments we inhabit as academics/researchers as a kind of ‘comfort zone’.

There is a lot at stake in maintaining a comfort zone as a stable zone of everyday living. Giddens uses the term ‘ontological security’ to refer to “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (1990, p. 92). Ontological security, as Markham found out in the US Virgin Islands, is only ever a fragile illusion, maintained by our trust in the continuity of our material, social and technological environments.

The sense of intellectual uncertainty I mentioned above in discussing the situatedness of our knowledge production as researchers, is always, I believe, a reliable indicator of a comfort zone that is indeed being stretched as we attempt to come to terms with the complexities of research sites and materials, endeavour to achieve new insights into their structures and dynamics, and hope for a favourable reaction to the written results given to others to review.

### **Reflexivity and creativity as part of the research process**

To what extent is it possible to achieve reflexivity as a researcher? Markham describes it as “like trying to look at yourself looking in the mirror.” Reflexivity necessitates a commitment to sticking with uncertainties and recognising that one’s own perspective

might be skewed. Research participants<sup>13</sup> are themselves the experts in their own life-world. We need to find ways of challenging our preconceptions about what they may tell us, but, importantly, reflexivity is only one part of this process. We need to find ‘tricks’ to bring what we may be taking for granted to the fore, and often these are part of our methods. Focus groups, for example, by putting participants in dialogue with each other, can tell us things that an in-depth interview might not reveal.

Indeed, Markham gives an illuminating example of her discussion with the student studying Dominican newsgroups. The mutual surprise stood out for me as a diagnostic indicator of the disjuncture between the frames of reference and taken for granted ‘common sense’ of both teacher and student. By trying to open up the student’s thinking through questioning, Markham exemplifies a pedagogic style which has been referred to as *maieutic* inquiry (Dimitrov and Hodge 2002, p. 15). Originally developed by Socrates, *maieutic* inquiry (from the Greek work for ‘midwifery’) proceeds by asking questions in a way that brings about the birth of new ideas in the student (hence Socrates’ use of this term). It draws out of students a knowledge which is already latent within them, in potential if not actual form. While this mode of interaction is common in research pedagogy, it is also a critical component, to success in the field, as we utilize the qualitative methods of in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Maieutic inquiry takes the form of dialogue, and is a process which reveals the limits of available knowledge and facilitates the emergence of new insights. “If such an emergence occurs, the inquirer and respondent move together beyond the limits of what was considered known by them before initiating the process of inquiry” (Dimitrov and

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<sup>13</sup> I prefer the term ‘participants’ to ‘informants’ because the latter seems to imply a level of privilege on the part of the researcher.

Hodge 2002, p. 15). It is important that the questioner admits the possibility that her knowledge is limited, and that the student or interviewee has independent expertise.

Participants often surprise us in interviews, and one of the most fulfilling experiences in qualitative research is this sense of surprise and wonder. Participants are the experts in their own reality and our qualitative research methods are often designed facilitate their own reflexivity – sometimes to the point of them becoming co-researchers, as in the methodology of participatory or action research (see overviews of these methods in Denzin’s and Lincoln’s *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2000, 2005). When participants say something surprising, it often feels like being given a precious gem, or nugget of gold.

In my home computer study, for example, a retired schoolteacher referred to her PC and the skills it had allowed her to develop as giving her “a handle on the future.” As she used this phrase, I knew immediately that it was both a wonderful turn of phrase (which became a chapter heading in the writing and part of a conference paper title), but also that it was like the tip of the iceberg, indicating the existence of a much larger truth (Lally 2002, chapter 4). As I told other older participants about this phrase, it emerged that they could all identify to some extent with this sense that computing could give them control over their lives and futures, and I found that it resonated for many other study participants too, especially those who had encountered computing as adults, and who had a sense that it was important to keep up with technological developments or risk being “left behind.”

It’s important, I feel, to follow your instincts as an interlocutor with study participants. Another indicator that something very interesting is going on, I have argued, is laughter in the interview context. Laughter can often be read as an indication that there

are underlying contradictions or paradoxes that we tacitly agree not to try to resolve, such as a contradiction between what we say we believe and what we actually do. Examples from my own work include attitudes towards software piracy (Lally 2002, p. 90), a child's exploitation of a parent's goodwill (p.140) and game playing and mothers' roles within the family (Mitchell, 1985, p. 124; Lally, 2002, p. 160).

What we take for granted is just that, and perhaps no amount of reflexivity is going to give us the 'aha' moment that the storm gave Annette through the sudden loss of power. An undermining shock to ontological security, as Markham experienced it, is certainly something which can cause a total rethink, in order to incorporate a new perspective into a world-view. But it's really the reflexive thinking and investigation that we engage in *after* such an 'aha' moment that counts, and which can give us profound insights into our situation in the world.

Importantly, research is a creative process. As Negus and Pickering point out, creative activity is not just about designing and manufacturing artworks or commodities, but is about making collective meaning, and communicating our shared experience: "Creativity is a process which brings experience into meaning and significance, and helps it attain communicative value" (2004, p. vii). Through creative activity we combine and recombine symbolic resources in novel ways, so that they tell us something we haven't heard before, or had only dimly recognised. Further, partial and situated perspectives are no barrier to the creative process: "Creativity often builds on the shards and fragments of different understandings. ... we don't just collaborate with people; we also collaborate with the patterns and symbols people create" (Schrage, 1990, p. 41). By actively engaging with new contexts of our social, cultural and technological lives, as researchers

we achieve new ways for creating and sharing our ideas, our view of the world, and our unique experiences.

### **Recommended reading**

For classic works of ethnographic writing, any of Clifford Geertz's work can be recommended: *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (2003, Basic Books) is a beautifully written and engaging collection of essays on how to study and write about local cultures in broader context. For ethnographic approaches to the internet see Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000, Sage Publications) and Miller and Slater's *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000, Berg).

For empirically-based studies of information technologies in family and domestic contexts, see Lally's *At Home with Computers* (2002, Berg), and Bakardjieva's *Internet Society: the Internet in Everyday Life* (2005, Berg). Livingstone's *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment* (2002, Sage) provides an excellent mapping of children and young people's use of a variety of media, both old and new. Holloway and Valentine (*Cyberkids: Children in the Information Age*, 2003, RoutledgeFalmer) draw on extensive empirical research to explore children's engagement with ICTs from a cultural geographic perspective.

Moore's *Media and Everyday Life in Modern Society* (2000, Edinburgh University Press) situates ICTs within the context of older media forms, including television, radio and telephones, and investigates the position these media play in everyday life and relationships. For recent Australian perspectives on this issue, see the collections edited by Cunningham and Turner (*The Media and Communications in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2006) and Goggin (*Virtual Nation: The Internet in Australia*, 2004, University of New South Wales Press).

Situating academic debates around the impact of ICTs on society in long-term perspective, Robins & Webster's *Times of the Technoculture: From the Information Society to the Virtual Life* (1999, Routledge), charts a shift in emphasis from political-economic to cultural. Diverse theoretical approaches to the internet are explored in the edited volume *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory* (Herman & Swiss 2000, Routledge). Bringing together diverse interdisciplinary findings from a UK-based large-scale research program, Woolgar's edited collection *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality* (2002, Oxford), focuses discussion around the question of the relationship between the virtual and the real.



## **Response to Annette Markham**

**Ramesh Srinivasan**

Global and local, often separated in scholarly research, are more intertwined today than ever. Annette Markham has problematized this issue persuasively. Opening with a personal anecdote regarding infrastructures that vary across different regions of the world, she has highlighted the importance for the researcher to question his or her assumptions when working globally. This type of reflexivity, an unpacking of the self relative to the environment to be studied, enables qualitative researchers to overcome their own biases.

Reflexivity is an important and honest paradigm in ethnographic research. It considers the intersections between the observer and observed, and admits that the researcher impacts the cultural environment he or she observes. Deconstructing our assumptions can help us all question our own power as researchers, and provide us with fresh perspectives. Internet research can integrate ethnographic methods with participatory approaches to engage the former subject of a study to evolve into the author, critic, and designer of new media. To truly embody reflexivity, we as researchers must acknowledge the power inequities we carry with us into field environs, particularly in remote and rural regions of the world. These visible inequities structure the interaction researchers have with communities and NGOs. The ethnographer may be seen as a source of funding and publicity, westernization, and modernity, and possibly as a vehicle for international or urban mobility. Reflexivity involves an understanding that the researcher can be framed as a symbol of that which the community is not, and perhaps what communities believe they aspire to be. Deep reflexivity involves an honest disclosure by

the researcher, and the conveyance of his or her life on a level that exposes its positives and negatives. In that regard, it helps the researcher escape objectification, as a symbol of modernity and westernization.

Ethnography can be utilized to understand and acknowledge local realities, and then stimulate participatory forms of research. This approach motivates my own research as an illustration. I supervise a number of field-based projects that follow reflexive methods and also involve assembling teams of community members to design their own digital media systems. For example, the Tribal Peace project, conducted in collaboration with members of 19 Native American reservations spread across San Diego County, studied the ability to engage community members to create and share digital content (video, audio, and image) within a system based around their own local ontologies (e.g.; cultural categories). Engaging local communities to author and design their own Internet systems considers the specifics of situated ethnomethodological practices, the “grounds” that connect the social group to its particular environment (Suchman, 1987; Garfinkel, 1967). Systems can therefore acknowledge context and transcend simplistic user studies.

In providing power to communities to author and design their own Internet systems, the potential for engaging in more culturally sustainable and meaningful initiatives increase (Srinivasan, 2007 and 2006; Srinivasan and Huang, 2005). In this regard, integrating reflexive and participatory approaches empowers researchers to answer questions of how a digital system fosters culturally and indigenously sustainable activities. As the Internet has become a global technology it has also become a cultural technology, a technology that raises the classic question of homogeneity (erosion of cultural difference) vs. heterogeneity (information spaces where diverse discourses are

presented and shared with an ethic of equity and social justice).

Emerging from this is the dilemma of making such research global in impact. One important issue is to consider that Internet research must directly consider transnational networks of communication, authorship, and movement. Given this, are reflexive, locally isolated ethnographies satisfactory? While approaches toward cultural and phenomenological description are important, the Internet must be grasped for what it has become – multi-sited, multi-authored, and multiply received and acted upon. Therefore, global Internet research must consider its transnational elements without sacrificing local reflexivity.

Moreover, it has become clear, similar to its ‘older media’ analogues, Internet policy and movements are framed by the scalability of the research finding. The recent World Summit on the Information Society proceedings state as much, that standardized, transformative policies toward Internet must be broadly applied across the global south. The mantra of scale implies that locally derived observations hold global applicability only if they can interact and communicate seamlessly with other social and technical systems. As Castells (2000) and others have argued, the diffusion of one’s idea, and its ability to survive and master the complexity of networks, ultimately is a statement of the power of the research. Researchers can no longer afford to overly privilege the local without considering networks, scale, and socioeconomic agendas that emerge from commercial and political institutions.

One way of accomplishing this aim is to consider the globe itself as a potential field-site, considering multi-sited ethnographies and the nature of how technologies and information flow between different geographical locations. I invoke the writings of Arjun

Appadurai (1996), who argues that globalization can be understood in terms of the uneven movements of persons, finances, images, technologies, and so on. Globalization is a product of these motions, what Appadurai describes as –scapes. This manifestation is more relevant than ever, argues Appadurai, as physical place is best understood in terms of its placement within a network, in relation to a set of other places. Globalization is therefore best understood by looking at the movements within the network.

For example, Appadurai points to the nationalism movement in the 1980s for an independent Sikh homeland, Khalistan, within India. A local analysis would imply that ethnographic work should simply be situated within India, and focus on the points of particular points of local resistance, such as where protests take place, etc. . However, this would ignore the fact that this movement itself gathers finance, imagination, and membership from transnational sources. Without the transnational focus, researchers would misunderstand the reality of this social movement.

I believe this argument applies when considering the Internet as the basis for qualitative research. The Internet is the ultimate constellation of networks, integrating actors that are human and non-human (Callon, 1999; Bowker and Star, 1999). Therefore, I believe that locally-focused ethnographic research is of utmost importance, yet must be balanced by research that considers:

- (a) Transnational “third spaces” which acknowledge the reality of an immigrant group by its “cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space” (Bhabha, 1994, p.36). This model challenges an understanding of a culture or a community as a homogenized entity that can be directly correlated to a single

- social factor, such as ethnicity (e.g.; the experiences and realities for all those of Indian-descent are common).
- (b) Social Networks: These are methods to generate structural mappings of how the Internet impacts the diffusion of social connections and flows of resources in manners that exceeds the bounds physical and local place. Wellman (n.d) has argued that both the small-box model of merely considering local place, and the networked individualism model of considering the Internet connecting spatially distributed individuals, should be discarded. Instead, researchers must consider the “glocal” qualities of the Internet, their dual local and global manifestations.
- (c) Virtual Worlds: These are digital spaces that represent a different type of locality that is not physical but still plays a significant role in forming identity. Research has uncovered how identities can be formed and social movements can be imagined via these spaces that would otherwise be impossible given physical realities. For example, Second Life has become an important system/environment to consider for ethnographers.

How can these approaches be reconciled in a field-based effort? Ajit Pyati and I have argued that internet ethnographies must maintain this duality of considering local and global, and in the context of our e-diaspora research proposed a Diasporic Information Environment Model (Srinivasan and Pyati, 2007). Understanding immigrant information behavior through the lens of diaspora expands the terrain for analyzing immigrant information behavior and raises a new set of research questions. For example, much of the work on immigrants and information is based on the proposition that immigrants have certain needs that are not met. While this approach provides a useful lens for information

behavior research and information service delivery, the focus on “lacking” negates discussion about the agency of immigrant groups in contributing to the work of building information environments that remain invisible to researchers who only consider local, place-defined domains. The topic of e-diaspora is one relevant internet research theme, and shows the potential of research that triangulates multiple methods. More generally, the questions and answers together gathered by a variety of research methods should be closely scrutinized, and researchers and communities alike must engage in sense-making exercises (Dervin, 1998) to recognize patterns and inconsistencies in the data they gather. Given this example, how would one conduct internet-related qualitative research?

We have begun collaborations with the South Asian network, a local grassroots organization dedicated to serving the South Asian Diaspora of Los Angeles. And to understand the potential role of a cultural information system for this community, we have engaged in the following strategies so as to conduct global internet research:

A use of ethnographic methods to identify the diverse realities and experiences faced by community members. Using field notes from participant observation efforts, we can recognize that community is not a homogenous entity, and indeed, that certain sub-cultural groups must be worked with to develop a meaningful information resource.

From the ethnographic work, identifying focus groups of participants that reflect the diversity of these subcultures of South Asian. For example, in our initial outreach, we have identified that class, gender, age group, and language spoken are important ‘social variables’ within the community.

Working with these focus groups to identify existing public spaces, informational behaviors, and connections with information sources, including web sites that may be of relevance.

Engaging these focus groups in techniques of participatory design to assist with modeling a social network system. These techniques will ask community members to sketch out the topics, categories, and interfaces that would be appropriate for such a system.

As the system is created, interviewing and engaging in ethnographic observations with users vs. non-users, yet also running social network surveys with users vs. non-users. This will allow researchers to identify the global scope of a community member's social network connections, yet also understand how these social networks may be changing over time and differentially between system users vs. non-users.

This approach combines globally derived social network surveys with multisited local ethnographies. Through the local immigrant community, the study extends out to access global factors, and attempts to create and study the impact of a digital system in this context.

One mechanism by which local cultures can share knowledge globally, may involve the use of folksonomies (Vanderwal, n.d). These spaces not only allow users to author and share information but also to add their own local "tags" to digital objects being shared. Perhaps a key to an internet that collaboratively shares diverse and multiplied local knowledge would involve considering how databases and systems can enable incommensurable categories and ontologies to be presented along with the contributed information object. David Turnbull has argued that such an approach would be key to re-thinking diversity and locality in the global net:

How can differing knowledge traditions, differing ways of mapping be enabled to work together without subsumption into one common or universal ontology?. . . It is argued that one way in which differing knowledge traditions can interact and be interrogated is by creating a database structured as distributed knowledge emulating a complex adaptive system. Through focusing on the encounters, tensions, and cooperations between traditions utilizing the concept of cognitive trails – the creation of knowledge by movement through the natural and intellectual environment, the socially distributed performative dimensions of differing modes of spatially

organized knowledge can then be held in a dialogical tension that enables emergent mapping. (Turnbull, 2007)

The global internet can connect multiple, local, and diverse cultures. Without this perspective, technologies could homogenize and disable the sharing of diverse knowledges. For example, a collapsing of all global health systems into a single database organized by the hierarchies of Western science would erode the power of Ayurveda or Chinese medicine, which is uniquely tied to the semantic means by which it reconsiders categories (e.g; plants as medicine, etc.). Such an initiative is underway in a collaboration with Cambridge University (UK) and the Zuni Nation of New Mexico (USA), focused on developing a digital museum around the ontologies contributed by diverse stakeholders, including indigenous groups, archaeologists, and museum curators (Boast, Bravo, and Srinivasan, 2007). As we open up the semantic terms by which objects in this digital museum are described, so too may emerge further projects focused around the possibility of developing information societies and systems that are not just global in user demographics but in voice and authorship. And we must continue to consider and build on foundational studies in structural and cognitive anthropology (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Atran et. al, in press, for example), reveal the power of categories in cultural cognition and difference.

Global internet research enables the tension between different knowledges to be present, yet also enabled to mutually interact. The significant shifts enabled by the Web 2.0 allows us to re-negotiate what global means in an internet that has replaced personal websites with blogging, the encyclopedia online with Wikipedia, and taxonomical

directories with folksonomies (O'Reilly, 2006). The pattern here is a movement from closed, homogenizing internet systems to a 'social' web that enables sharing, collaboration, and global membership. Qualitative researchers must critique, design, and evaluate these spaces reflexively.

Therefore, in summary, I applaud Markham's urge for researchers to consider their reflexivity in conducting cultural research and argue for a focus toward:

- a) Using transnational methods that allow focus on the movements, flows, and socially distinct uses of information, multi-sited ethnographies, and textual analyses of virtual worlds.
- b) Considering scalability of results through multi-method triangulation and sense-making.
- c) Focusing on the networks: Glocal (Wellman, n.d) social network studies.
- d) Building collaborative digital spaces for knowledge: Focusing on Web 2.0 technologies that integrate diverse knowledge traditions and systems.

To close by re-visiting the reference at the end of Markham's chapter, while Clifford Geertz has suggested that a comprehension of any social setting will always be incomplete perhaps researchers can better understand a social setting by triangulating their focuses – balancing the depth-based focus of a particular case by looking at the contextual, transnational, and network-oriented factors that shape today's internet and society.

### **Recommended Readings**

For a further focus on the nature of how sociological research can engage with situated, embodied practices, see Harold Garfinkel's foundational (1967) book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

Appadurai's (1996) *Modernity at Large*, and Bhabha's (1994) *The Location of Culture* are foundational texts that trace uneven and often immaterial characteristics that tie local and global cultural studies together.

For insightful descriptions of the nature of how objects maintain social lives, yet are often constrained by their immutability according to scientific standardizations, see Bruno Latour's (1990). *Drawing Things Together*. Lynch, M., Woolgar, S. (Eds.) *Representation in Scientific Practice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Another highly relevant text in this vein would be Geoff Bowker and S.L. Star's (1999) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Eng. MIT Press.

