



ETHNOGRAPHY, INTERNET AND FOLKLORE STUDIES

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Abstract:

In our days, Internet needs to be studied not only as a technological phenomenon but also as a social and cultural one with the aim to achieve the needed balance between humanity and technology. This exploration is possible in the context of Folklore studies despite the pessimistic predictions of its future, in a world which dominated by global economic integration - which is also a global market of ideas and values - science and high technology. Folklorists should integrate the internet into their field of research, particularly in the field of ethnographic research. The internet is offered to transfer the research from the traditional and real communities to virtual ones.

Keywords: Internet, virtual ethnography, folklore studies, cyberculture

During the last years internet is approached both as a cultural field and tool (Gasouka & Foulidi, 2012). Internet, as a cultural space, allows the emergence of new types of social formations such as virtual communities and it is offered for new type of ethnographic research. So a significant number of female and male researchers study the social, cultural and other formations they encounter on the internet. However, there are a lot of reservations about the use of the ethnographic research method on the internet. The main argument is that the aim of Ethnography is the study and promotion of real worlds, as real people perceives and expresses them and it cannot be implemented in technological environments. Despite the major objections that have been formulated and they focus mainly on issues of commitment and accountability, but also if they are really communities when their members are able to choose both to disconnect and shut

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down their computer, the views which support the validity of online Ethnography seem to prevail. In their context, there is an equal participation of female and male users in these new folk forms beyond class, gender, ethnic, sexual divisions and barriers. There are also new languages and codes based on animations, abbreviations, jokes, etc. All the above, they form wide communities with common practices, ideological coherence and intra communal linguistic communication. Thus, we are redrafting the term “society” which exceeds the physical limits, as well as the term “identity” whose liquidity is expanded and often mediated by the female or male user's imagination, her/his intimate wishes and the lies she/he can easily use in communicationⁱⁱ. It is no coincidence that we often refer in the internet to “fragmented identities”, which differ from those of the user's in real life. One or another way for several writers such as Poster (1995) or Jones (1997) communities are just one of the many different online transfers which are valid on the internet and the ethnographic narrative that related to them is one of the many online narratives.

The use of Internet Ethnography, apart from the specific interest which entails for the engagement process of people with technology, it raises questions about how somebody lives and works in new technology frameworks, whether she/he needs to be connected online 24 hours per day, or visits the community from time to time, etc. Correll (1995) argues that the ultimately ethnography is the ability to see reality through the subject of research. Consequently, a cold online ethnographic approach seeks to understand in depth the cultural background of the virtual community that is under studyⁱⁱⁱ. Correll insists (1995) that the use of different ways of online observation and communication forms a kind of triangulation that allows control of observations. However, the problem of the relationship between the experiences of virtual environments and the perception of real life continues to concern women and male ethnographers. There are also opposite views, such as the idea that if researches aim to explore online “scenes” as a context, they do not care about the non internet-based identities. Turkle (1995) informs us that in her own online Ethnography she could not report the on-line interactions if she had not met personally some of the members of the online community that she was studying, in order to get an idea for the identities of the other members. All these lead to the finding that there is no unique model of online

ⁱⁱ The case of MUD's is a typical example where the female and male user's description is done with physically criteria as is the case in other contexts that reproduce texts. However, we must pay attention to all of this: It is completely different the female and male internet users to play with their identities than to challenge technology that causes changes in our concepts of identity.

ⁱⁱⁱ One of the definitions of the term “virtual community” refers to that network collectivity whose members has a strong sense of permanence and distinguished by their repeated contact, intimacy and social interaction, which leads to the identification of the belonging to a particular collectivity.

Ethnography and that we go according to the female and male ethnographer's abilities and expectations. As the social environment of folk studies digitized, women and men folklorists realize that they can no longer ignore the Internet and other forms of mediation communications associated with New Technologies. Especially those who adopt Ethnography as a research method often choose to deal with Cyberethnography (Netnography), this special form of Ethnography, intended to operate in the context of the computer-mediator, which evolves today to examine the potential of our social and cultural worlds and our digital Selves.

It is a fact that, apart from any exceptions, the women and men folklorists appeared rather slow and reluctant to study the associated folk groups and the virtual communities^{iv}. However, as the technologies of information and communication have overwhelmed every aspect and expression of social life, the research engagement with the internet is a road without a return. Today, internet is used by women and men folklorists as a tool of cultural production that does not leave them out of their previous interests, which they carry on the internet. Many of them worry that the internet will undermine the credibility of their work or will negatively affect the subject of their investigations. The answer to them is that "*new technologies do not necessarily substitute or eliminate the previous. They just change their relationships and incorporate each other with wider implications*" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, Blank, 2009). In particular, folklorists who involved with Ethnography are helped from its electronic form to study not only the discourse that being articulated within groups and communities but also various blogs, existing audio-visual material, photos and podcasting societies, cultural/social sites and more. At the same time, the issue of communication becomes particularly important for the Internet. Women and male folklorists explore people who communicate using audio information (flisk) or audiovisual information (YouTube) and they explore simultaneously the exchange of semantic symbols and all digital symbolic systems. They take the affiliated communities as a set of ever-growing relationships and repeated active contacts. They understand that their limits are rather confused, but it is necessary for their research the confirmation of the self-identification of the participants as members of the group or the community, their mutual familiarity, the sharing of information related to rituals, habits, beliefs, etc.

^{iv} The question that often relates is: How much must be the population of groups and communities that folklorists study online? It is obvious that we refer to small groups that are involved in common pursuits and interact being aware of their collegiality. Several ethnographers on the internet consider enough a virtual community to have 120 members. Others set a maximum of 200 members (Dunbar, 2010). Of course, there are larger communities that tend to divide in order to maintain a strong sense of belonging to their members.

At the same time, folklorists come in contact with a new term that they must collaborate with other scientists in its significance as it is a key condition for their research. This term is the “cyber culture”. Many folklorists have attempted to define cyber culture differently. The point where everyone agrees is the fact that we face building and reconstruction processes, in which new technologies are based, which in their turn contribute to the further development of these processes. In any case, the modem and computer culture is here and the variety of social/cultural practices observed in online life is connected to a significant extent with the different traditions and developments in computer culture, which does not necessarily uniform in its manifestations^v. Finally, the virtual communities themselves, which folklorists are invited to study, they are nothing more than “places of activity” in the wide context of computer and modem culture (Gasouka and Foulidi, 2012). According to internet philosopher Denis Carter ethnically, cyber-ethnography is similar to conventional ethnography, because the four main ethical obligations to deal with the people involved in the survey are the same. They are the principles of non-harm, protection of anonymity, confidentiality of data and assurance of conscious consensus (Blank, 2008).

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^v Hakken (1999) says that the modem culture is new computer-based information processing methods seem to come with a new formation and that cyberspace is a distinct type of culture. Levy (2001) considers that “cyber culture” is a group of technologies (materials and intellectuals), practices, behaviors and ways of thinking and values that developed along with the development of cyberspace.

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