

Virtual Dasein: Ethnography in Cyberspace

Daniel Martin Varisco

Abstract:

The cyberculture created by individuals who enter cyberspace is a fieldsite only recently visited by anthropologists. In this essay I argue that one way of approaching the ethnography of cyberspace is to treat it as virtual Dasein, in which the issue becomes being there in something-like-a-world yet still being in the world. Ethnographers now need to consider the impact of the Internet on the people they study, even in the remotest villages. The promise and potential peril of virtual reality calls for critical assessment of the economic and political consequences of cyberspace development. Finally, our own involvement with the Internet demands a reflexivity that goes beyond musing over the mutant prospect of becoming cyborgs to assessing a new combination of humans, technology and information.

Keywords:

social aspects, ethnography, information and communication technology, sociology

Introduction

“Tens of millions of Americans are online every day and are doing a variety of things. The Internet has become a part of everyday life rather than a separate place to be.” (Howard et al. 2001:385)

“The Internet is a unique creature, sharing some attributes with print publishing, others with telephones and mail, still more with television – and in other respects it is unlike any system that has preceded it.” (Moschovitis et al. (1999:vii)

The Internet is here to stay. It is not just that most scholars routinely capitalize the concept, but we are all involved. For most Americans under the age of eighteen the idea of life without Internet access is tantamount to living without electricity. It is virtually taken for granted. Coming-of-age adult cybernauts, having grown up on neuromanced cyberpunk and MUD-dled through video nirvana, cruise cyberspace with a virtual cybermania in search of the heterotopian cyborg and in the process create something which is potentially everywhere and in a real sense nowhere: cyberculture. Over half of Americans use the Internet in some way, while only twen-

ty-four percent have no experience at all with being online (Pew Internet Project April, 2003). Hotmail and Yahoo have millions of e-mailers, who can stay connected just about anywhere they go. Online shopping goes well beyond Amazon.com. Every day thousands of horny men dole out their credit card numbers on insecure sites to view naked housewives, the Zapatistas resist in the full light of online (<http://www.ezln.org.mx/index.html>) recognition and Microsoft seemingly always has the last Word. Forget the postcolonial era; we are now across the digital divide into a domain of Internetalia where El Dorado and Erewhon share space with E-bay and your neighbor's AOL home page.

Meanwhile cybersociologists, who are becoming digital authors, compete with cyberpsychologists to cyberpsychoanalyze cybersex, poly-sci[ber]scientists look for signs of cyberocracy and cyberphilosophical Luddites cut and paste Adorno, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Habermas and Heidegger, among others. In analyzing the Internet, historian Mark Poster turned to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger for a kind of cyberontology of the virtual space enabled by computer technology. The culture encountered online is indeed a kind of being "there," although the kind of there that does not require a physical going there. Like the telephone, wireless and television, the internet seemingly brings "there" to where we are at, if we have the right technology. But, of course, it is an an imagined there that goes beyond print culture since it is dynamically and simultaneously interactive between real people somewhere. If, as Marshall McLuhan phrased it several decades ago, the medium is the message, then those of us who study culture "got" mail.

Anthropologists, however, have been slow to answer this e-mail. As Wilson and Peterson (2002:450), "anthropology's interest in Internet-based social and communciative practices is relatively new, and a coherent anthropological focus or approach has yet to emerge." Academic interest in the Internet is, of course, new for all disciplines and a "coherent anthropological focus" is often hard to find for any topic, but the point is well taken. Anthropological study of cyberculture has been virtually absent. Why have anthropologists trained to encounter "exotic" others in the field not looked deeply into the mirror of their own computer screens? In part this is a continuation of the prime directive set by the pioneering fieldwork of Bronislaw Malinowski: the ethnographer going to and living in a geographically distinct field. A

decade and a half ago, the same lack of involvement by the heirs of Malinowski was cited for the study of modern mass media in general (Spitulnik 1993).

As an ethnographer whose being there has always been over there, I now observe the Internet as a critical site for fieldwork, not just as a tool I use to communicate with colleagues and students. The critical difference is that cyberspace is hardly a virgin territory where no modern scholar has gone before. The crowd that studies culture, especially the interface between technology and culture, is already there. If my next fieldwork, or indeed a substantial portion of all my future fieldwork, is directed at cyberculture on the Web, the existing tools of ethnographic research will have to be refined and redirected. There is no isolated Trobriand.org for me to explore or set up my tent in. Language is far less of a problem given the predominance of English as the translation of choice from digital bits, but only if one ignores the increasing orality potential in electronic communication. The aura of ethnographic authority, tarnished as it has become in the past quarter century, will certainly suffer in the classroom and over beers at conference reunion parties. But, if anthropologists do not recognize the Internet as a necessary part of current and future research, the discipline is in danger of becoming as marginal as the “primitive” tribes it slowly archives into the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF). The point of this essay is to reflect on ways ethnographers might approach cyberculture ethnographically.

Getting There to Be There

“More distinctive to the medium are what I would call cybernauts, or that class or group of cyberspace travelers, who, like the Greek originals and Malinowski’s subsequently, as much explore what to be in cyberspace as they move through it.” (Anderson 1997)

In 1978 I arrived in a highland valley of Yemen, on the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, for an extended period of anthropological research in a tribal farming community. Having digested three years of graduate training and classical Arabic, I was theoretically prepared to enter the field. This was the participant-observation style of fieldwork inaugurated by Malinowski about ninety years ago. At the time of my graduate study the very idea of “being there” was being challenged. “As graduate students we

are told that ‘anthropology equals experience’; you are not an anthropologist until you have the experience of doing it,” reflected Paul Rabinow (1977:4) a few years after returning from Morocco. It is hard to imagine how modern anthropology differs from other disciplined approach to the study of culture apart from the emphasis on going to a different culture, learning the language and writing up something called an “ethnography.” But in the last quarter of the twentieth century the ideas of Western anthropologists going “back” to former colonized or exploited areas as well as the seemingly objective expertise of the outside observer were put under critical scrutiny, usually at the expense of the methodological contribution anthropology does best (Varisco 2006). The discomfort was not just with what ethnographic documentation did to “alien” others. Increasingly anthropologists started observing others close to home, including at times themselves.

Ethnography remains today both the boon and bane of anthropologists, at least those trained in America. In remapping the boundaries of anthropology as a field science, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997:1) note that “the single most significant factor determining whether a piece of research will be accepted as (that magical word) ‘anthropological’ is the extent to which it depends on experience ‘in the field.’” To be blunt, library dissertations in cultural anthropology are assumed to be reserved for wimps or those who are unable to cope in the field. Not just any “field,” it is important to note. Asking about ritual cannibalism in the New Guinea highlands or watching an ax fight in an Amazon shabono scores higher on the prestige scale than living among the Neapolitan working class. Studying waitresses in New Jersey might as well be sociology. The irony is that going to exotic fields has in some ways become more difficult for anthropology students even as the physical means of getting there has vastly improved. Evans-Pritchard (1969:9-10) took several weeks to travel from Oxford to the Nuer in the rural Sudan of the 1930s. Of course, he could go there because the British were officially in control of the region. But at least he could go there and we are richer for it with the results of his first-hand observations.

The reflexivist turn and postmodern critique of the negative “positivist” aura underlying the legitimation of ethnographic authority have forced anthropologists to question the most fundamental practice that defines the discipline. It is clear, however, that consensus among practitioners has not thrown out the methodological baby with the post-colonial bathwa-

ter. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with observing human behavior in context and communicating with people in their own language, unless one succumbs to the mantra of “knowledge is power” to the point of paralysis. But anthropology has come a long way since the publication of Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Napoleon Chagnon’s *The Fierce People*. Experimentation with dialogical interaction between ethnographer and informants, activism for indigenous people’s rights and a continuing professional concern with the ethics of fieldwork have reoriented the field. I think it is safe to admit, at least I hope it is, that anthropology is now more about the way we study and represent others rather than the necessity to do so in an exotic, untouched-by-civilization location.

To this point ethnography has had three main outlets for returning field anthropologists. First and foremost is the written genre: dissertations, formal ethnographies, journal articles, conference papers, even the ambitious HRAF files. “Writing culture” is not the only way of communicating the results of anthropological field research. Ethnographic films have come of age, moving beyond the earlier photographic documentation of ethnic others in the field. Most introductory anthropology courses use a combination of text and film to communicate the discipline. In the process a third form of representing ethnographic fieldwork takes place: professor’s lectures invariably draw from personal fieldwork and spin a sense of what it was like to “be there.” In less than a decade a new form of ethnographic presentation is emerging online. Websites allow for an inexpensive and potentially widespread multisited dissemination of ethnographic writing, photographs and, more recently, film. Internet technology also holds promise for a kind of interactive ethnography in which the far-off field can be brought close to home. My introductory anthropology students have been reading about the Trobriand Islands kula ring trade and watching Tim Asch’s *The Ax Fight* year after year. I wonder which ethnographies of cyberspace students will be reading or simulating online, whatever that will mean, in the future?

Being There as Virtual Dasein

“Thus Dasein’s understanding of Being pertains with equal primordially both to an understanding of something like a ‘world’, and to the understanding of the Being of those entities which become accessible within the world.” Martin Heidegger (1962:33), *Being and Time*

“The question of technology is not about technology per se but about modern humanity’s way of being. Technology is fundamental to modern ‘culture,’ a term I will use for Heidegger’s Dasein.” Mark Poster (2001:29), *What’s the Matter with the Internet?*

Having been there and done that – that being ethnography – I am curious what it means to be there in cyberspace, not just as a user but as an anthropologist bent on participant webservation. How should an ethnographer approach virtual reality? Like Mark Poster, I wish to return to the philosophy of Heidegger, more for his germane neologistics than his trenchant concerns about technology. In attempting to move the study of “being” beyond the shadowy essences of Plato and the *res cogitans* of Descartes, Heidegger proposed a hermeneutic of “Being-in-the-world,” which he called “Dasein.” To the extent Dasein is a call to understand being beyond the abstract and the rhetorical seduction of discourse, the issue of being can be approached with far more potential. Unfortunately, the study of what it means to be a human is still locked into battles over how much is wired and how much is learned. Seemingly, there should be less mystery to understanding what it means to be online. But Donna Haraway’s manifesto-ization of the fictional cyborg complicates matters. Consider her warning that “... we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism,” and that now the “cyborg is our ontology” (Haraway 2000:70). The individuals clicking mouses at home or in Internet cafes are not visibly turning into bionic people, except on the screen, but there is a pragmatic difference in being with others online from simply and complexly being in the world as living and cultural organisms. I suggest that the “something like a ‘world’” created out of cyberspace be approached as a virtual Dasein.

The advantage of starting with a concept like virtual Dasein is apparent if we follow Poster’s gloss of Heidegger’s Dasein as another term for culture. The Culture Wars have been raging across disciplines for several decades now. Anthropologists, who have tried to move deeper into Edward Tylor’s nineteenth century common denomination of culture as a whole, have lost academic control of the culture concept to scholars across disciplines, most notably with the emergence of Cultural Studies. Ontological treatment of the culture concept has diminished to the point where it has become more fashionable to write against culture than about it. Research on other primates and genetic decoding have blurred the classification of “human” and

postmodern deconstruction of humanist metatheories has further blurred the very idea of classification. Just about everyone agrees that something like culture is important, but there is no consensus on what exactly culture means.

Definitions of culture abound, many of which were articulated after Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn's thesaurus of culture definitions half a century ago. Eight decades ago, Kroeber offered some useful advice: "What culture is can be better understood from knowledge of what forms it takes and how it works than by a definition." As Kroeber noted, it is hard to imagine culture without society, but in a post-Darwinian world there is space for many kinds of biological societies without something humans like to call culture. Likewise, it is impossible to imagine cyberculture without the human society that produces and maintains the enabling technology, but there are communities and individuals who do not directly participate in cyberspace. Kroeber is most famous, perhaps infamous, for insisting that culture was "superorganic." He was well aware of the metaphysical warning lights such a term implied, arguing that culture should not be approached the way theologians detach a "soul" from the body. What made the working of culture something more than the individual organisms who lived it was the crucial fact of sustainable learning. Writing well before Jane Goodall began her primate ethnography in Tanzania, Kroeber was still aware that humans are not the only animals that learn. The distinct and "superorganic" aspect of human culture was for him the cumulative result of that learning, the shared knowledge that could be perpetuated beyond individual lifespans. One need not subscribe to a Durkheimian collective unconscious to note that humans can draw on a history of prior knowledge in a way no other species can. This is even moreso the hallmark of cyberculture, which is by definition a shared digital archive of the imagination.

It is possible to live a full and meaningful life without ever defining a culture concept or fretting over whether such a term is useful or not. Because culture is something we all participate in and cannot escape, it must be an issue at some level of awareness. Could there be a human society that does not discuss "Why am I here" or "How can I take advantage of the others here"? The situation is different for cyberculture, because it involves a choice. As integrated as Internet technology has become in our daily lives, individuals in wired societies can just say no; nor is every village on every continent

likely to be wired soon. By its virtual nature, cyberculture is necessarily an imagined space, the illusion of a society of individuals. When I log on to my email or a chat room, I can communicate with friends and encounter new people, but the potential community created is ephemeral. I can not clone myself into a cyborg, except by metaphor. My presence in virtual reality simply opens up the potential to be what I can imagine myself to be. I may act on what I say or hear via the web, but what ultimately matters is when I do so in the real social world where I am situated in categories such as male, “white,” husband, father, part-Italian or professor. While my being-in-the-world should be, as Heidegger would say, an issue for me, my being on the Internet need not be. I do not intend “virtual Dasein” as a projection of ontology onto a form of technology but rather to draw attention to the fact that being in cyberspace is really about being there and still being here. That is certainly an unusual situation worth pondering, an issue for those of us who study culture.

Where exactly is the “there” of cyberspace? Anthropologists entering this field are beset with a technical jargon every bit as confusing as their own. The term “cyberspace” surfaced in 1984, when the idea of being online was still in the Jules Verne stage. One of the chroniclers of this recent technological phenomenon, Pierre Lévy (2001:xvi), notes that the term “refers not only to the material infrastructure of digital communications but to the oceanic universe of information it holds, as well as the human beings who navigate and nourish that infrastructure.” Humans, technology and information: these are necessary ingredients for understanding culture. For Lévy, the more targeted term “cyberculture” stands for “the set of technologies (material and intellectual), practices, attitudes, modes of thought, and values that developed along with the growth of cyberspace.” I see here an echo of Tyler’s famous initiatory definition of culture, mediated by anthropology’s semantic genealogy of cultural materialism (Marvin Harris, for example) and linguistic modeling of culture as a grammar for behavior (Ward Goodenough, among others). For Lévy, the baggage of an elitist “best of the best” view of culture, à la Matthew Arnold, does not seem to have tarnished the culture created as virtual reality over the Internet.

Altering the common sense of space and culture with “cyber” is somewhat akin to a penchant several decades ago among anthropologists to “ethno” everything from archaeology to poetics. The key cypher, in several nuances

of the term, behind cyber is its neologistic presumption. Unlike the original Greek prefixing for “ethno,” the idea of “cyber” is a modern machine-age musing, stemming back to the coining of “cybernetics” in 1947 by Norbert Wiener, followed by the lexical spinoff of “cybernation” in 1962. The overwrought use of cyber, as I intentionally parody in my second paragraph above, threatens to reify the technological innovation into a metaphysical metaphor. There are few common terms that have not been cyberized in tabloid style. For example, the first ten of 6,950,000 hits for “cyber” on Google in July, 2003, yielded titles with the following: CyberPatrol, Cybersitter, the Cyber Hymnal, CyberAtlas, Cyber Cyclery, Cyberdiet, CyberAngels, Cyberkids, Cyber-Kitchen and Cyber Weather. Linguistically the digital divide is more like the bottomless pit.

The technical environment maintaining cyberspace goes by several terms. “Internet” seems to be the mainstream choice, often shortened to the “Net.” In computerist dialect the Internet defines a “worldwide network of networks that all use the TCP/IP communications protocol and share a common address space” (Netdictionary 2000). The medium is very much the message for the programmers who created cyberspace. TCP refers to Transition Control Protocol, a term more military in nuance than socially scientific. The first TCP message surged through cyberspace in 1977, exactly a century after Edison scratched “Mary had a little lamb” onto the first phonograph record. The acronyms cycling through cyberspace invariably supersede the lengthier technical descriptions. The somewhat wordy World Wide Web is more easily handled as WWW, an abbreviation that appears on most website urls after the enigmatic http://, or simply as the “Web.” Most net users are probably unaware that MUDs come from multi-user dungeons (domains or dimensions) and content-edited MOOs evolved from multi-user object-oriented environments. Then there is VR for “virtual reality,” a term introduced in 1989 by a software company named Autodesk. Within months the *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone* diffused this highly suggestive word to public culture at large (Chesher 1994).

The technical language is only one of the argots useful for studying cyberspace. With the embedding of instant messaging on popular browsers, our web-savvy children are growing up with a streamlined dialect of abbreviations (lol, for example), video game slang and smiley faces. Although I purchased my first personal computer before my son started elementary

school, his e-vocabulary soon surpassed my own. An added dimension with electronic communication is a return to orality. “Voice activated” is challenging the post-Gutenberg hegemony of print culture. As computers and phones merge into single-cell telecyborgs, it may soon be that written text will be routinely created without keyboards or mice, just the human voice. Such technological innovation is no longer confined to the Western societies that create anthropologists, but is increasingly evident in remote fieldsites. What will it mean, down the information highway, when webcam evolution and Star Trek variety communication access allow a returning ethnographer to remain virtually in a traditional fieldsite while writing up a dissertation or teaching a class?

Virtual Dasein by Design

“Ethnology compels us to strive after more self-consciously shared intellectual weavings. To do ethnography in cyberspace, one should first clear rhetorics like these from one’s conceptual space by defining a more precise set of research questions. Which approach to the design of a general cyberspace problematic is best?” David Hakken (1999:6) CYBORGS@CYBERSPACE?

I suspect this is not unusual for my generation, but I entered the field without having taken a formal class in ethnographic research methods. Part of the required reading in my four-field core curriculum at the University of Pennsylvania was the 1300-page Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology. The fieldwork article, written by Pertti Pelto and Gretel Pelto, described the early history of participant observation, the benefits of extended fieldwork, specific case-study methods and even the psychological aspects of being away from home. But apart from a few specific guidelines on how others had collected data in the field, the bottom line was that “successful fieldworkers have been those who were able to meet the research community on the basis of face-to-face, human universals – although these are hard to define” (Pelto and Pelto 1973:251). The “essence of successful ethnography,” they added, was “a form of behavior that makes the fieldworker a ‘friend’ of the community he [regretably still ‘he’ at the time] studies” (Pelto and Pelto 1973:257). Although I had a rather specific research agenda, I assumed that making friends in the field was as unteachable and seat-of-the-pants as it would be anywhere else. One might as well read Dale Carnegie as take a methods class.

Approaching the ethnography of cyberspace needs to go beyond making friends. Given that virtual reality is a product of human technology, it is perhaps better to think about it first as an archaeologist or cultural materialist would before exploring the symbolic and political significance. As David Hakken (1999:44) suggests from experience, the anthropologist's reading must "range broadly" through the literature of Computer Science and STS. Like an archaeologist who is aided by detailed knowledge of soil science and geology, the kind of cyberspace ethnography conducted by Hakken virtually demanded that he have technical expertise in computing and IT. In Hakken's Norway case, the twist was that the computer programmers he studied ethnographically tended to take him seriously only if he could demonstrate technical competence. It is, of course, possible to study online communities without knowing the technology, as though interviewing through email, instant messenger or chat rooms could be like sitting in a village headman's house. The informants may be as ignorant of the technical process as the anthropologist, so such participant webservation can still yield results. Unlike the traditional field, which is simply another cultural setting, making friends and a learn-as-you-go approach are not likely to result in an explicitly "anthropological" study online. Personal skills may compensate for lack of adequate research design in the kind of ethnographic fieldwork done by Malinowski, but cyberculture is not simply the puzzle of observable human behavior in another human society; it is distinctly a superorganic mode of relating to the imagined selves of other people. To be blunt, there is no behavior to "observe" online and the cyberethnographer enters the field without leaving the comforts of home.

Anthropologists and sociologists have already approached cyberculture ethnographically, although not in great numbers. Studies are available on the makers (Green 1999), the shakers (Hakken 1999, Uimonen 2001) and the users (Blank 2001, Miller and Slater, Mizrach 1999). Not surprisingly, anthropological attraction to the Internet has been strong among those who study indigenous peoples and societies in so-called "Developing Countries." The journal *Cultural Survival Quarterly* dedicated an entire issue in 1998 to "The Internet and Indigenous Groups" (<<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/index.cfm?id=21.4>>). "Currently, it seems that indigenous peoples are eagerly using the Internet when they have the opportunity to do so," observes David Maybury-Lewis (1998). Steven Mizrach (1999) found

this to be the case among the Lakota, who see Internet technology as a means for cultural revitalization and reassertion of identity. In their ethnographic study, Miller and Slater (2000) argue that “Trinidadians have a ‘natural affinity’ for the Internet.” For indigenous advocates cyberspace is now a part of the development process; anthropologists can hardly afford to ignore this.

Ethnography is always about communities, usually along the lines of Robert Redfield long ago called the “little tradition.” Individuals may come and go in a particular society or take up residence in diaspora. But how does one get from “online interactions of dispersed groups of people with shared interests” (Wilson and Peterson 2002:449) to a valid concept of online community, especially when web users also remain in their own societies? One useful approach is to view cyberspace as an advanced case of creolization. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s modeling of the rise of print capitalism, anthropologist Jon Anderson (1999:44) views the new web-based interpreters of Islam as akin to the alternative voices that rose with early printing presses. In the process it is the public sphere itself that is being redefined through creation of a shared cyberculture. Regardless of the ways formal Islamic organizations are at last taking to the net, the stage has been set by a wide range of interpreters outside the mainstream. The potential impact on observable behavior will occupy ethnographers for years to come.

Anthropologists, like Jon Anderson, have been drawn into cyberspace by the people they study. But there is also the issue of cuberculture as a global phenomenon, a field without geographical borders. The closest thing to a how-to manual for what might be called e-ethnography is David Hakken’s (1999) *Cyborgs @ Cyberspace*. Hakken lays out an agenda for “doing ethnography in cyberspace.” The hurdles he faced include framing the “problem” behind the research, mastering the skills and language, conceptualizing the field site, multi-siting the field, protecting the research from sabotage, talking “cybertalk” and sampling issues. As Hakken observes, the epistemological issues raised about traditional fieldwork and representation are just as relevant for cyberspace research. Ethical issues about dealing with humans as subjects do not disappear when others are screened through computers. Nor is it clear how to evaluate online conversation minus the cues of nonverbal behavior and voice tone. After wrongly assuming a chat

in an online interview was a sexual proposition, Hamman (1999) warns that “misinterpretations of language are frequent in the narrow bandwidth of text based cyberspaces.”

I can illustrate the ethical and communication issue with reference to an exploratory e-ethnography I conducted in 2000 (Varisco 2000). My focus was on the representation of Islam and Muslims on websites, in particular those sites that attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity or claim that Islam is a “false” religion compared to Islamic sites set up to convert Christians and counter anti-Islamic stereotypes about Islam. My limited participant webobservation focused on a sample of about 120 Muslim-to-Christian testimonials, which take on the aura of biographical statements from informants and offer opportunity for feedback through e-mail, and Muslim webmasters. I began, confessions up front, by surfing through AltaVista, a popular search engine at the time. Like a good fieldworker, I tried mapping out the range of potential sites I came across, including Islamic megasite gateways, Muslim Student Association pages and various types of organizational and individual advocacy pages. In addition to analysis of the site content, I responded to the email of thirteen former Muslims, who had posted their conversion-to-Christianity messages on a site called answeringislam.org. As an experiment in e-interviewing, I sent an email message under a hot-mail pseudonym:

“I read your testimony on a website and wanted to ask you a question. I never know whether real people write these things or are they made up. I see that converting from Islam to Christianity caused hardship. I don’t know any Muslims who have left their religion without suffering for it? If the things you say about Isa are true, why do so few Muslims accept them? Are you saying Muhammad was not a prophet either? I have always been taught to respect Isa, but Christians don’t seem to have respect for Muhammad. If you have time to respond, I would really appreciate it. Abu Jihan.”

Within 24 hours I received three responses from the eight males, while two of the email addresses were returned as undeliverable. A week later I had not received any other response, nor a follow-up to my original query.

The ethno-email was an afterthought, not the main point of the research. I was mainly curious if the individual testimonies were archival or active.

Thus, I had not identified myself as a researcher or explained why I was sending a query. Clearly, this would not be a good practice for building a relationship with potential interviewees, on or offline. Ironically, the only response I have received in the two years the article has been posted online is from one of the creators of an anti-Islamic site that I critiqued sarcastically. Since I chose to upload the paper it is thus theoretically and almost instantaneously available to the very people whose websites I criticize. This is quite different from “normal” fieldwork, where a formal ethnography might not be available (either physically or in the appropriate language) for years. I can only imagine what would have been the result if Samoan readers of a wired *Coming of Age* could have emailed complaints to Margaret Mead or if Mead herself had the opportunity to instant messenger the local taupau and check on fuzzy points in her ethnographic fieldnotes. What if a central part of future fieldwork involves a webcam, so that an academic advisor can interact during the process and so that informants could watch the writing of an ethnography in a graduate student’s dorm room?

Summing Up: Ethnographers@Cyberculture

“The anthropology of cyberculture similarly holds that we can assume a priori neither the existence of a new era nor the need for a new branch of anthropology. Indeed, the discipline is in principle well suited to what must start as a rather traditional ethnographic project: to describe, in the manner of an initial cultural diagnosis, what is happening in terms of the emerging practices and transformations associated with rising technoscientific developments” Escobar (1994:216).

No individual can escape the culture that defines being human: body, soul and spirit or however our being in the world is divided up. This is what makes Heidegger’s *Dasein* such an intriguing concept and at the same time such an elusive quest. Thanks to sexual reproduction and our evolutionary trajectory, humanity is social by definition. Being-there is necessarily being-with. John Donne, the poet, made that clear four centuries ago, even with his debatable theological spin. Interacting over the Internet is still, although perhaps not for all, a choice to be made. No one is actually born online; death in cyberspace is simply going offline. The difference between heaven and hell depends on the ISP. Flesh-and-blood bodies can feel pain

and inflict physical harm, but online personalities are merely constructed and inevitably ephemeral. Except for the demonstrable ways in which interaction on the Internet or in virtual reality games affects human social behavior, cyberculture only exists as a simulation.

The concept of virtual Dasein does not avoid the problems inherent in trying to understand the nature of human culture and variation in social behavior across time and space. But it may allow for a temporary truce in the ongoing Culture Wars that have challenged long-standing notions of objectivity and being. Cyberculture as an imagined space escapes the philosophical stalemate in the representation of reality problem, because it is obviously a recognizable byproduct of technology. Americans still debate whether we descend from a created Adam or australopithecines, but no one (post-van Daniken) challenges the material origin of computer technology. Online is representation and, at least to this point, nothing but representation. The enemies blasted in “Unreal Tournament” don’t really die. Cybersex kept online – one might say in line – will never produce any unwanted children. Even the most radical posthumanist would never deny that cyberspace is made possible by computer language rather than God, society or genetic wiring. If sci-fi writers are right that our species is destined to become bionic cyborgs in the future, we are more likely to be like the machines that enable cyberspace than be merged into the digital code that provides the illusion of material existence.

My point is that as ethnographers we should enter virtual reality to be there in the sense of Dasein, in which our being online is an issue for us, but without the worry that we might or might not be “there” in the sense of Sein. I am not arguing that anthropologists approach cyberculture the way critics approach literature and film. There is no fixed text, no director’s cut to be studied as such. Websites and web communication evolve too fast to allow for text-driven exegesis. Certainly studying the logic of html is of technical interest, on a par with the type of font and lines to a page in a book or frames per second in a film. The crucial difference with the Internet, as currently positioned, is that reality can be simulated on a new and open scale. Conversing with instant messenger, surfing websites and playing online games are extensions of what can be done face-to-face in real life, but without the same constraints of real time and physical space.

Ethnography needs to be more than a game. There are three serious issues that anthropologists can approach with an ethnographic mindset. The first is observing the use of the Internet by people we study. It will obviously help to be web-literate before going to the field, just as knowing something about medicine is important for the medical anthropologist. Yet, part of the process is learning the native point of e-view. A second concern is the impact of the Internet and associated technology on the local economic and political contexts. As a Western invention driven by global capitalism, it remains to be seen if this new technology bears within it the seeds of resistance or an operating system for greater centralized control. If we are still reeling from the effects of print capitalism, imagine the possibilities of digitally popped up consumerism. Will the notion of distinct “cultures”, in the HRAF sense, soon become extinct? The third focus is on our own participation as users of a tool that has become essential to academic research and communication. The Internet is more than a tool, since it creates a space for cyberphilosophical reflection in the steps of Heidegger, Foucault and so many others. Machines have always been clearly demarcated as extensions of humanity, clothing rather than skin. Our becoming cyborgs, by way of metaphor, brings us back to Heidegger’s view that the way we become like the machine we create, or the environment we alter, is invisible to us. Our goal should not be to return to a pure nature, anymore than an adult can re-enter the womb or an Amazonian tribe be preserved in a human zoo, but to probe what Heidegger (1962:286) calls the “not-yet” along with the learned experience. In terms of cyberanthropology, we are not yet there. But perhaps we are only a few proper clicks away.

Works Cited

Anderson, Jon. 1999. The Internet and Islam’s New Interpreters. In *New Media in the Muslim World*, pp. 41-56. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, editors. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Anderson, Jon. 1997. *Cybernauts of the Arab Diaspora: Electronic Mediation in Transnational Cultural Identities*. In *Couch-Stone Symposium: POSTMODERN CULTURE, GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRATIC ACTION*, University of Maryland <<http://www.georgetown.edu/research/arabtech/anders97.htm>> (26 July, 2003).

Anderson, Jon. 1995. ‘Cybarites’, Knowledge Workers and New Creoles on the Superhighway. *Anthropology Today* 11:4:13-15.

Brown, Leslie, editor. 1993. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Chesher, Chris. 1994. *Colonizing Virtual Reality: Construction of the Discourse of Virtual Reality, 1984-1992*. *Cultronix* 1:1. <<http://eserver.org/cultronix/chesher/>> (26 July, 2003).

Coyne, Richard. 1998. *Cyberspace and Heidegger's Pragmatics*. *Information Technology & People*, Vol 11 Issue 4. <<http://is.lse.ac.uk/staff/whitley/resources/heidegger/coyne.pdf>> (26 July, 2003).

Escobar, Arturo. 1994. *Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture*. *Current Anthropology* 35/3:211-231.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1969. *The Nuer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forte, Maximillian C. 2000. *Anthropology Uncanned*. *Anthropology News* 41/3:9-10.

Green, Nicola. 1999. *Disrupting the Field: Virtual Reality Technologies and "Multisited" Ethnographic Methods*. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43:3:409-421.

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. 1997. *Discipline and Practice: "The Field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology*. In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Edited by A. Gupta and J. Ferguson. 1-46. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hakken, David. 1999. *Cyborgs@Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.

Hamman, Robin. 1999. *"The Application of Ethnographic Methodology in the Study of Cybersex"*. *Cybersociology* #1. <<http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/magazine/1/plummer.html>> (21 July, 2003).

Haraway, Donna. 2000. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. In *Posthumanism*. Edited by Neil Badmington. 69-84. New York: Palgrave.

Howard, Philip E. N., Lee Rainie, Steve Jones. 2001. *Days and Nights on the Internet: The Impact of a Diffusing Technology*. *American Behavioral Scientist* 45:3:383-404.

Kroeber, Alfred L. 1963. *Anthropology: Culture Patterns & Processes*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Kroeber, Alfred L. and Clyde Kluckhohn. 1963 *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. New York: Vintage Books. [original, 1952]

Lévy, Pierre. 2001. *Cyberculture*. Translated by Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Maybury-Lewis, David. 1998. The Interent and Indigenous Groups. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 21(4). <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/csq_article.cfm?id=B9C5F9AB-9717-4C35-9A55-96D4E650BBBB®ion_id=10&subregion_id=32&issue_id=19> (21 July 2003).

Miller, Daniel and Don Slater. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg. [See <<http://ethnonet.gold.ac.uk/index.htm>>] (22 July, 2003)

Mizrach, Steven. 1999. *Natives on the Electronic Frontier: Technology and Cultural Change on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Florida, Anthropology . <<http://www.fiu.edu/~mizrachs/index.html>> (22 July, 2003).

Moschovitis, Christos J. P. et al. 1999. *History of the Internet: A Chronology, 1843 to the Present*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2002. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity of the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Netdictionary, 2000. <<http://www.netdictionary.com/html/index.html>> (20 June 2003).

Pelto, Pertti J. and Gretel H. 1973. Ethnography: The Fieldwork Enterprise. *In Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Edited by John J. Honigmann. 241-288. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company.

Pew Internet Project. "The Ever-Shifting Internet Population: A New Look at Internet access and the Digital Divide. Pew Internet Project, April 16, 2003, <<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=88>> (20 June 2003).

Poster, Mark. 2001. *What's the Matter with the Internet?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rabinow, Paul. 1977. *Reflections of Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Read, Dwight W. and Nicholas Gessler. 1996. CYBERCULTURE. *In Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. Edited by David Levinson and Melvin Ember. Hen-

ry Holt & Co., New York. 1:306-308. <<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/geog/gessler/cv-pubs/96cyber.htm>> (21 July, 2003)

Rheingold, Howard. 1998. *The Virtual Community*. Online Version. <<http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/>> (26 July, 2003) [Original print edition, 1993].

Rickert, Anne and Anya Sacharow. August 2000. It's a Woman's World Wide Web. Media Metrix and Jupiter Analysts. See: <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?id=199>. (21 July, 2003)

Schwimmer, Brian. 1996 *Anthropology on the Internet: A Review and Evaluation of Networked Resources*. *Current Anthropology* Volume 37, Number 3:562.

Silver, David. 2000. Looking Backwards, Looking Forward: Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000. In *Web.studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*. Edited by David Gauntlett. 19-30. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spitulnik, Debra. 1993. Anthropology and Mass Media. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22:293-315.

Uimonen, Paula. 2001. *Transnational.Dynamics@Development.Nef* This e-mail address is being protected from spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it Internet, Modernization and Globalization. Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2002. September 11: Participant Webservation of the "War on Terrorism". *American Anthropologist* 104:3:934-938.

Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2000. Slamming Islam: Participant Webservation with a Web of Meanings to Boot. Working Papers from the MES. <<http://www.aaanet.org/mes/lectvar1.htm>> (21 July, 2003)

Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2000. E-ethnography: On Line but Not Out of Sight. *Anthropology News* 41:7:5.

Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2006. Reflections on Fieldwork in Yemen: The Genealogy of a Diary in Response to Rabinow's Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco. *Anthropology of the Middle East* 1(2):36-52.

Wilson, Samuel and Leighton C. Peterson. 2002. Anthropology of Online Communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:449-467

Author's Note.

I thank Jon Anderson for his advice and comments on this draft and a long-standing dialogue on the issues in studying cyberculture.