INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is an immersive method, using the ethnographer's participation to build a multi-faceted portrayal of the research setting. Participation by the ethnographer is an important aspect of the ethnographic knowledge generation process, because it allows the ethnographer to observe in minute detail exactly how activities happen, rather than relying only on selective retrospective accounts from participants. Where practical and ethical considerations allow the ethnographer actually to learn to do what participants are doing, this deeper level of participation offers the ethnographer an emotional and embodied understanding of how activities feel, beyond the verbal accounts that participants can give. It is also important for ethnographers to be immersed within research settings because this places them in direct contact with the participants in the setting, as much visible to them as they are to the ethnographer. This prolonged exposure makes the ethnographer publicly accountable to participants for their actions: “getting it wrong” becomes a public event, and the ethnographer learns from the experience of fitting in, or not, as events unfold. Overt participation also allows for emerging themes and interpretations to be discussed with participants and for hunches and predictions to be tested out. An extended timeframe is significant in ethnography, because it allows for the ethnographer to do serious thinking about what the observations he is making might mean whilst he is still in the field. The extended period of fieldwork which the ethnographer carries out both means that he has some security that he has been exposed to a wide range issues of significance in participants’ lives and that he has had the opportunity whilst still in the field to revise assumptions, revisit categories that do not quite work, and refine frames of analysis. The reflection that happens after having left the field is important in crafting a
theoretically sophisticated and robust argument, but it does not substitute for this opportunity to reflect and revise whilst in the field.

These qualities of ethnography as a process of knowledge generation are, I would argue, as relevant to an ethnography of an embedded, embodied, everyday Internet as they are to any other setting. However, in order to realize the process of ethnographic knowledge generation in such a setting, some unusual strategies may be needed. Ethnographies conducted in diffuse, unpredictable field settings, which move between face-to-face and mediated forms of interaction may look, on the face of it, quite different from ethnographies in more conventional bounded field sites. In order to work out what strategies might be useful and appropriate, some revision of what we mean by key terms may be helpful. For example, the notion of prolonged immersion that features so heavily in the description above may need to be revisited, for it is difficult, when a field site is multi-sited and diffuse, to be sure what immersion means, and how to achieve it for prolonged periods of time. It might seem that an ethnographer studying activities in and around the Internet as embedded in everyday life will have difficulty living in their field site for a long period of time. However, rather than saying that we therefore cannot do ethnography of this kind of phenomenon, it may instead be useful to remember what the epistemic gain from prolonged immersion was intended to be. If we do so, we may be able to find ways of achieving that aspect of the method through alternative means, rather than rejecting certain kinds of setting as inappropriate for ethnographic study altogether.

If the epistemic gain from prolonged immersion is about having the time to formulate and reject emergent theories in the face of ongoing engagement with the field, and about having a clear sense of the normal and the unusual for this setting, then this can be achieved even where a setting is not one in which one can plausibly "live" for a long period of time. The notion of prolonged immersion simply needs to be rearticulated to encompass the experience of mediated forms of engagement and to involve following connections rather than assuming physical co-presence in geographic space.

Other aspects of the ethnographic tradition translate relatively well to mediated settings. In field sites which involve both online and offline modes of communication, an ethnographer can usefully aim to participate in whatever activities the participants in question carry out, being led by them, and engaging in interactions according to whatever medium participants deem appropriate. A part of the learning that the ethnographer engages in focuses precisely on this question of working out which medium is deemed appropriate for different activities, with the goal of being able to make choices as participants would make them, and to be able to articulate the
grounds and consequences of those choices. In some of these media the ethnographer and participants will be mutually visible to one another, and the ethnographer will benefit from the same epistemic gains as a conventional ethnographer in a face-to-face setting, being held accountable by participants for their actions, and being able to ask participants for accounts of their actions in turn.

Some media readily lend themselves to a sense of awareness of co-presence, and in fact many social networking sites demand it, in that privacy settings are under the direct control of participants who must actively accept friends’ requests. In such settings it is difficult for an ethnographer to lurk unnoticed. In other settings it may not be as easy for the ethnographer to sustain mutual visibility with participants. In an online discussion group, for example, it may be quite normal to lurk without posting, and thus to remain invisible to other participants. As an ethnographer one can choose to post messages to the group, but to do so repeatedly without offering contributions to the group themes or goals would usually be a breach of group etiquette and could make the ethnographer unpopular. In this circumstance, it is important to remember that the group itself need not necessarily be treated as a bounded field site in its own right: group members may well have other means of communicating and other settings where they meet, and the ethnographer could engage with these instead and as well. Mutual visibility for ethnographic purposes may not, therefore, have to happen solely through the medium of the online discussion group itself, and can be achieved through direct email contact, through participation in face-to-face meetings, through blogging, or in whatever additional means are deemed sensible and appropriate by that group. Ethnographers need to be active participants in order to build up a robust, well-rounded account, and this will probably involve being visible in some form to participants but not necessarily all the time, in every medium that participants use. It will be important to reflect on the conventions of co-presence and reciprocity within each medium as deployed by participants, and to keep account of when and where members become visible to one another (and how they themselves deal with lack of mutual visibility in certain media).

The rest of this chapter focuses on developing a set of strategies that may be helpful in carrying out ethnography for the embedded, embodied, everyday Internet, based upon this notion of finding new ways to achieve the fundamental principles of the ethnographic knowledge generation process. The chapter draws on examples derived from a wide range of ethnographic studies focused around the Internet, including some of my own studies, but also extending beyond, in order to cover examples ranging from wholly
online ethnographic studies in virtual worlds to cross-platform approaches and studies of mobile Internet experiences mediated by smartphone apps. The first section of the chapter explores the forms of field site that emerge through exploration of various frames of meaning-making that ethnographers might explore in and around the Internet. Following on from this discussion of field sites, the next section explores the application of a standard ethnographic repertoire of participation, reflective and descriptive field notes, interviews, and questionnaires as they apply in this kind of field site and also considers the use of various means of mapping and visualizing digital data as aids to fieldwork. The section after this turns to the question of reflexive and autoethnographic insight as particularly useful in exploring the embodied experience of Internet use. Finally, the chapter draws to a close with a summary of some core ethnographic principles for the embedded, embodied, everyday Internet.

FIELD SITES FOR THE EMBEDDED INTERNET

Thus far I have referred in general terms to “the setting” or “the field” without specifying very clearly how we might define these concepts in practice. It is certainly important to have some conception of what the field of interest might be, since a clear corollary of conceiving of ethnography as immersive and participatory is that we must have a sense of a location in which to immerse ourselves and an understanding of the nature of the activities in which we are to participate. As already discussed in Chapter 2, however, thinking of the Internet as embedded, embodied, and everyday complicates our sense of place, and puts in question where the appropriate activities in which the ethnographer will participate may be found. In this section I will therefore explore some guiding principles for identifying an appropriate focus for ethnographic engagement and for specifying what, exactly the object of study might be. I will discuss some relevant debates in anthropology and in sociology in turn, before turning to the specific issue of Internet-focused studies, and examining some strategies for identifying appropriate field sites for the embedded Internet.

Although we routinely speak of “the field site” in the singular, the object of study in ethnographic tradition has, in practice, rarely been a tightly bounded geographic space or cultural unit. Even where the original guiding focus might be specified as a particular place, for purposes of convenient shorthand, this is in practice only a provisional specification. As the ethnographer works with participants to find out how their practices make sense, new locations
and connections with other groups of people come into view as relevant to understanding the original focus of inquiry. A conception of group boundaries as fluid and situated, brought into being for specific purposes or symbolically constructed (Cohen 1985: 209) rather than existing in an objective, transcendental sense, is often the upshot of this form of inquiry. Because ethnography is an exploratory and adaptive method that sets out to find out how things make sense, and because boundaries themselves may not objectively pre-exist the particular circumstances in which they are referenced, it is generally not thought possible to specify in advance exactly what the boundaries of the study will be.

The focus of the ethnography, provisional though it may be, is often chosen because it appears on the face of it to offer the chance to explore a theoretically interesting point or significant issue for the ethnographer’s home discipline. Ethnography is not simply empirically descriptive, but develops instead a theoretically enriched form of description through which ethnographers hope to make an intervention in the ongoing debates within the academic field, or policy domain, to which they orient themselves. The choice of field, and the decisions about where to go, are often therefore made with a conception of what may be interesting to the discipline in mind. As Schatzman and Strauss describe it, this urge to find interesting things to discuss and theoretical contributions to make can in fact override the urge to produce a definitive and comprehensive description:

More important to him than “nailing it down” is “linking it up” logically, theoretically, and empirically to other findings or discoveries of his own and others.” (Schatzman and Strauss 1973: 8)

This understanding of any individual ethnography as a contribution to a corpus, and of ethnographic writing as more than the sum of multiple individual descriptions, frames the ethnographer’s understanding of some directions as particularly interesting to pursue. Anthropological ethnography is often overtly comparative, deploying common concepts across field sites in order to illuminate differences in cultural formations. In other fields, a pressing policy question, or a need to explore a specific theoretical question focused on the implications of particular practices, may motivate the ethnographer’s interest. A field site may therefore be strategically chosen, and once in the field, the ethnographer may choose particular aspects to explore over others because of this set of interests that transcend the specific study in question.

In recent years a strand of anthropological debate has focused specifically on the question of how a field site should be conceptualized, and what form
it should take. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997b) discussion of the definition of the field site was, for many years, neglected within anthropology:

But what of “the field” itself, the place where the distinctive work of “fieldwork” may be done, that taken-for-granted space in which an “Other” culture or society lies waiting to be observed and written? This mysterious space—not the “what” of anthropology by the “where”—has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity. (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b: 2)

Gupta and Ferguson then open up for critical discussion the means by which ethnographers define the places where they do their work, and in particular they explore the question of whether different notions of field are required for a contemporary world that seems more mobile and more connected than has been the case previously. They do, however, note that stretching the notion of the field introduces some tensions for anthropology in particular, as the discipline has often defined itself around the distinctive nature of the immersive fieldwork that it holds dear. Gupta and Ferguson (1997b) advocate a close examination of the epistemic purchase that the notion of the field has offered, alongside a more pragmatic recognition of the role of the linked notions of fieldwork and field site in sustaining both the identity of the discipline, and the identity of individual anthropologists. The role of the field in constructing the identity of the anthropologist arises since careers in anthropology are often defined around a specialization in ethnography of a particular, often geographically defined, region. Not having a regional specialization potentially makes it harder for an anthropologist to pinpoint what distinctive form of expertise they offer in situations such as job applications where such issues matter. An understanding of definitions of the field as consequential for individual and disciplinary identity needs to be kept in mind in all that follows: some ethnographers, depending on disciplinary affiliation, may be freer to explore alternative conceptualizations of the field than others. All, however, need to keep in mind the question of the specific epistemic purchase offered by the notion of immersive fieldwork, and the potential threat to the ethnographic knowledge generation process if new formulations of the field do not allow for this aspect of ethnographic engagement.

Despite the tensions attendant on redefining the field, it has increasingly been recognized that the field site is an artful construction rather than something one simply “finds” (Amit 1999). This recognition opens up a space for discussion of the extent to which the ethnographer exerts agency over the nature of the field she chooses to explore. Constructions of the field, as the papers collected in the volume edited by Amit (1999) exemplify, are not
necessarily focused on a specific place in which the ethnographer becomes
immersed for a long period of time separated from the ethnographer’s usual
way of life. Ethnography sometimes takes place much closer to home, and
sometimes uncomfortably entwines the ethnographer’s personal and profes-
sional identities (Dyck 2000). Ethnographers have also increasingly explored
field sites that are defined in non-spatial terms, for example crossing national
boundaries (Hannerz 2003) or exploring the experiences of migrants (Olwig
2003). The object of the ethnography for Olwig (2003) is a group of people,
deﬁned as a group in so far as they conceive of themselves as an intercon-
ected entity, and thus neither focused in advance on a particular place
nor on a pre-deﬁned set of people whom the ethnographer determines in
advance as a bounded group. The object of the ethnography emerges through
ﬁeldwork, as the signiﬁcant identities and locations unfold.

The idea of artfully constructed, non-spatially deﬁned ﬁeld sites received
a particular boost from Marcus’s (1995, 1998) discussions of multi-sited
ﬁeldwork. Marcus (1995) explored different deﬁning concepts for a form of
ethnographic ﬁeldwork that took as its focus objects of study not conﬁned to
geo- graphic space. He suggested that for some strategic purposes it would be
useful for ethnographers to move around, using as their organizing principle
for movement a non-spatial or transgeographic concept such as a conﬂict,
a circulation of objects, or even a metaphor. The idea of multi-sited ethnog-
raphy in Marcus’s formulation is that sometimes the strategically interesting
aspect of contemporary life to be explored is characterized by connection
and mobility rather than static location, and that in such circumstances the
ethnographer should be willing to move.

Subsequently there has been considerable discussion of the extent to
which ethnography can usefully be construed as a multi-sited practice,
highlighting the beneﬁts and drawbacks of such an approach in terms of
epistemology and disciplinary identity. A volume of papers collected by Falzon
(2009b) captures many different aspects of the discussion which ensued
from Marcus’s (1995) original intervention, including Candea’s (2007)
defense of the strategic choice to focus on an arbitrarily chosen bounded
site even in the face of an inter-connected world, and Cook et al.’s (2009)
discussion of the purchase offered by conceiving of ﬁeld sites as unsited,
rejecting even the notion of a network of interconnected discrete sites which
some have taken from the term “multi-sited.” Marcus himself has revisited
the debate, to clarify and extend the extent to which multi-sited ﬁeldwork
practice should be seen as distinct from more conventional single-sited
studies. He suggests that there is a potential for a radical departure from
conventional notions of the ﬁeld site:
The past habit of Malinowskian ethnography has been to take subjects as you find them in natural units of difference—cultures, communities; the habit or impulse of multi-sited research is to see subjects as differently constituted, as not products of essential unity of difference only, but to see them in development—displaced, recombined, hybrid in the once popular idiom, alternatively imagined. Such research pushes beyond the situated subject of ethnography towards the system of relations which define them. (Marcus 2012: 19)

In this work Marcus (2012) suggests that while we could think of a multi-sited field as merely a mapping out of already understood processes, it would also be possible to think of a multi-sited field as an alternative, more radical reconstruction of the field, in which the multi-sited field only emerges through the process of ethnographic engagement. The shape of the field is the upshot rather than the starting point, and is the product of an active ethnographer strategically engaging with the field, rather than a passive mapping of a pre-existing territory or cultural unit.

Such debates are very timely, and very productive, for informing development of ethnographic strategies for the embedded, embodied, everyday Internet. When the object of interest is an embedded Internet, which connects with and finds meaning within diverse and unpredictable aspects of contemporary existence, it can help to have an open and imaginative approach to where the field might be found, as long as we do not present the upshot as a definitive description of an objectively existing entity. Part of the challenge of exploring the embedded, embodied, everyday Internet is that it is often not most useful, analytically, theoretically, or practically, to conceive of the Internet as a singular object contained within one site. Internet content may circulate far beyond the initial online setting in which it was generated, and the Internet, as a technology, may acquire quite different meanings and identities in different settings of use (De Laet and Mol 2000; Mol 2002). Even if we choose to follow the Internet (or rather, some aspect of the Internet) as the object of study across different sites, it would be a mistake to expect it to be a stable and identifiable object in different settings. Some judgments will always be required about what constitutes a relevant connection, which connections to follow, and which aspects of the Internet are going to be productive and interesting to study in depth. We will often be unsure about which aspects to follow, and there will be many uncertainties that the ethnographer needs to address by making overt choices, exerting agency over the shape of the field. This, then, looks more like the radical reconstruction of the field as the product of the ethnographer's agency as described by Marcus (2012), rather than a straightforward mapping of pre-existing interconnected sites.
Whilst anthropological debates have focused on the notion of the field and the possibility of multi-sited objects of study, developments in sociology have focused on the notion of mobility, and the extent to which new methods could allow for objects of inquiry that are not assumed to have a static existence in a single location. Buscher and Urry (2009) suggest that mobile methods are important to allow sociologists to move away from a spatially located notion of society, and to enable them to explore the extent to which movement and immobility, between them, constitute society. Under the banner of mobile methods (Buscher and Urry 2009) a call is made for studies that specialize in understanding the movement of people, things, and ideas, encompassing forms of mobility that include: the bodily travel of people; the physical movement of objects; imaginative travel conjured up as we anticipate actions in distant places; virtual travel across networks of mediated communications; and communicative travel as people are connected in interactions face-to-face and via mediated communications. Each form of mobility is underpinned by its own infrastructures, and the various forms of mobility mutually reinforce and entwine with one another to produce complex structures of meaning-making. Mobility is as much a sensory experience as it is a practical effect of taking a thing elsewhere, and as such, a multi-faceted ethnographic approach is among the methods proposed as suitable to grasp these entwined aspects of mobility. In particular, Buscher and Urry (2009) suggest that traveling with participants, and participating in the various patterns of movement and experience that emerge, is a powerful means to explore the sensory and constitutive nature of mobility. Alongside the embodied engagement of the ethnographer, Buscher and Urry (2009) also suggest creative use of a variety of approaches to observing and recording mobility, including video records, time-use diaries, tagging and tracking objects, engaging with creative writing and works of imagination, and studying key transit points. They also suggest various strategic devices that the ethnographer can use in order to move with participants:

Inquiries on the move—like the shadowing, stalking, walk alongs, ride alongs, participatory interventions and cultural biographies we have described—enable questions about sensory experience, embodiment, emplacement, about what changes and what stays the same, and about the configuration and re-configuration of assemblies of objects, spaces, people, ideas and information. (Buscher and Urry 2009: 110)

The authors recognize that this form of mobile study demands that the ethnographer focus very carefully on coordinating her own moves in
appropriate fashion in order to accompany and learn from participants. There is thus a strong focus on developing a reflexive insight into the experience of mobility and developing expertise at making moves in ways sanctioned by participants. As with the multi-sited ethnography described by Marcus (2012), the field as an object of study is emergent, impossible to specify in advance, and the product of a creative engagement between ethnographer and participants.

This set of sociological developments in mobile methods has some direct application to ethnography for the Internet. One of the forms of mobility that Buscher and Urry (2009) discuss involves virtual travel via the Internet, and as such they find it appropriate for ethnographers to engage with participants as they use the Internet, to explore the constitution of sites on the Internet, and to contemplate use of the Internet as an imaginative and sensory experience as much as a practical exchange of information. The usefulness of the mobile methods that they describe for the purposes of ethnography for the Internet is not, however, confined to a recognition that ethnographers can usefully travel on to the Internet with participants. Instead, the mobilities approach can be inspirational in a broader sense for Internet ethnographers wanting to find appropriate ways to cast the field. By focusing on the mobility of the analyst alongside that of participants, the proponents of mobile methods allow for the emergence of objects of study that are not confined to single sites, whether those be online or offline, but allow for exploration of diverse forms of connection and circulation between them. The mobilities approach allows for non-spatially located objects of study that are focused on patterns of connection and circulation, and this is particularly appropriate for an embedded, embodied Internet.

Mobile and multi-sited conceptualizations of the field translate particularly well to study of the Internet, as an embedded, embodied, everyday phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter 2, ethnographic studies of discrete online settings were highly influential in establishing that there was something culturally significant to take seriously on the Internet, when the Internet first began to become a mainstream phenomenon. Subsequently, however, in parallel with, if not always directly influenced by, ongoing debates in anthropology and sociology, many Internet ethnographers have taken on the challenge of exploring more spatially complex field sites. Leander and McKim (2003), for example, explored the online practices of teenagers, by conceptualizing online and offline as mutually elaborative, and moving their focus back and forth between online and offline modes of engagement. Similarly, Aouragh (2011) traversed online and offline spaces in an ethnographic study of Palestinian mobility as realized through Internet spaces. Aouragh explored
the meanings that Internet activities acquired for differently located participants, and critically examined the extent to which Internet mobility overcomes other forms of immobility imposed upon participants.

Ethnographers have, therefore, found it fruitful to move between online and offline, and this mobility makes it difficult to conceptualize of the field as a bounded entity. Ethnographers may start out with a specified focus of interest that potentially spans both online and offline, but remain agnostic about how, precisely, online and offline activities will turn out to matter to one another. Taking this approach, one alternative way of conceptualizing the field that can seem quite natural to ethnographers studying connections between online and offline spaces is the notion of the field as network. Burrell (2009), for example, studied the social appropriation of the Internet in Accra, Ghana, and found that conceptualizing the field as a network, rather than a bounded location, proved to offer a suitable organizing principle:

The impossibility of drawing a boundary around such a social phenomenon arose from two conditions. First, the subject matter was the Internet, a global network of machines, information, and people; yet the Internet is too vast to be studied as a whole. Second, it was also a study of everyday life in Accra that, beyond the Internet, is lived in the broader context of daily interaction with a material and media culture that has ambiguous and/or multiple origins. (Burrell 2009: 187)

Burrell (2009) carved out a networked field of enquiry by following heterogeneous forms of connection between Internet cafés in Accra, specific online sites and the broader notions of the Internet as a technology and a system. Connections to explain arose from following the movements of interviewees from those cafés across the city and online, and yet this was not a passive following, but arose from some strategic choices that Burrell (2009) made, according to theoretical interests in the localization of the Internet in a specific geographical place. Her Internet was embedded in place, and she considered connections between the mundane details of the everyday Internet in this place, and the prevailing rhetoric of a topologized, globalized Internet. The resulting ethnographic account was highly dependent upon the specific entry points that Burrell (2009) chose and the moves that were considered both practical and interesting to make: it also, however, aspired to describe something of a more transcendent significance in documenting a certain kind of connection that characterizes a contemporary way of life.

The starting point for a connective, or networked ethnography need not be a geographic place, as it was for Burrell (2009). Fields and Kafai (2009), for example, develop a connective ethnography that explores the practices of a
group of children using an online gaming environment. They start from the
classroom, and set out to understand learning practices through a combination 
of video recording, interviews, log files of activity on the site and observa-
tional field notes. Farnsworth and Austrin (2010) also take a networked 
approach to ethnographic study of the Internet, but again, unlike Burrell 
(2009) they do not begin from a notion of geographic place to orient their 
focus. Nor do they focus on a discrete group as Fields and Kafai (2009) did. 
Instead they concentrate on a spatially distributed phenomenon, global poker, 
and explore poker’s changing nature and significance as it is manifested in 
new televised and online spaces. Farnsworth and Austrin (2010) understand 
their field as constituted through actor-networks comprised of technological 
and human mediators. They engage with poker as manifested in diverse 
sites and different technological platforms, and consider how different 
actors and locations are brought into play as the technology which mediates 
poker for players and observers changes. The resulting ethnographic field 
is conceived as an actor-network that they explore through various forms 
of participation and observation. The field encompasses both the everyday 
mundanities of poker as practiced in various sites, and the various structures 
of regulation and governance that seek to control it. Farnsworth and Austrin 
(2010) experience an overwhelming amount of potential sites and aspects 
to explore, and they note that their field is inherently unstable, and poten-
tially proliferating and extending all of the time. Their organizing principle 
of the actor-network allows for this kind of indeterminacy in the field. The field, 
as such, is bounded by their own strategic choice to explore a strand of 
questions that they develop around the difference which various mediators 
make to the practices of poker.

Another example of a networked field of exploration is offered by Larsen 
(2008) in a study of digital photography. Whilst it is possible, and more 
conventional, to study photographs as a representational form, Larsen 
chooses to understand photography as a practice, and in particular to 
explore the networked circulation of photographs that becomes feasible 
through virtual space. This approach suggests a selection of different sites 
to explore, including the tourist sites where many photographs are taken, the 
online sites where they are accumulated, juxtaposed, tagged, and catego-
rized, and the home locations where photographs develop what Larsen 
(2008) calls an “afterlife” as they are viewed and displayed in new settings. 
Ethnographic practices thus focus on observing and interviewing participants 
in the various locations, highlighting their understandings of what is going 
on, and exploring the resulting patterns of mobility of photographs as they 
move sites and change meanings in different circumstances. Larsen’s (2008)
approach suggests the importance of taking account of photographs as they travel through time, developing a sensitivity to the different meanings that they acquire: since photographs prove to be mobile, the ethnographer can learn from accompanying them on their journeys.

An alternative approach to defining the field is taken by Lin (2011) in her study of OpenStreetMap making. She draws on her own embodied experiences of participating in mapping, together with attendance at local community mapping events and an international conference. This conference provided both an opportunity to participate in a key event for the international mapping community, and the chance to recruit interviewees who could talk about their involvement from a variety of perspectives. Lin was able to focus on the "various emotional, cognitive and social repertoires involved in open source mapping" (2011: 67), and rather than conceiving of her field as a network she considered it a system of connecting and overlapping social worlds. This social worlds framework enabled her to focus on a single object of inquiry, in OpenStreetMap, but to conceptualize it as a socio-technically complex system that acquires diverse meanings in the different social worlds in which it is embedded. Lin (2011) combines a deep embodied knowledge of the phenomenon from her own participation with an appreciation of diversity derived from participation in public events and engagement with interviewees.

Ethnographers who explore phenomena that are not bounded by single sites, whether their organizing principle be tracing networks, identifying social worlds, or following phenomena across multiple sites, need some way of identifying the connections they will follow. A wide variety of techniques is available to ethnographers looking to find relevant connections to pursue. In some cases, the ethnographer will be led to specific online spaces by the practices of participants as explained in interviews: participants may talk about the discussion groups that they frequent, the Facebook groups they belong to, or the sites to which they upload their photographs. In other cases, the technologies of the Internet themselves suggest connections to pursue. For example, Beaulieu (2005) discusses how following hyperlinks can be an ethnographic strategy, and Beaulieu and Simakova (2006) developed a complex understanding of hyperlinks as located in time and in the space of websites, and as both bearing practical significance in linking sites together and carrying a symbolic meaning. For Beaulieu and Simakova (2006), following hyperlinks is an ethnographic practice in its own right, but the ethnographer does far more than simply click and go: this ethnographic use of hyperlinks involves a much more contemplative practice.

This approach to ethnographic understanding of hyperlinks as a form of cultural connection can be broadened out to other forms of document. Geiger
and Ribes (2011) focus on techniques for following connections through documentary practices in their discussion of trace ethnography. They are motivated by an interest in ethnography of distributed organizations, spanning wide geographic distance, in which various forms of document are generated by participants and used by them to co-ordinate and understand collective activity. The traces of activity preserved in log files, such as records of edits made to a document, make participants in distributed systems visible to one another. It is thus very important for the ethnographer to engage with these traces and explore both what they might mean to participants and how they constitute participants as visible actors to one another. The traces left in a log file might be frustratingly thin or incomplete, and seem thus not amenable to ethnographic insight. However, by engaging with them, the ethnographer is able to gain valuable experiential insight precisely into how it feels to operate in a distributed organization where this is the kind of information on other participants that is available to one. Each software platform will have its own conventions about which log files are kept and for how long, what they record and to whom they are made available. These “memory practices” (Bowker 2005) provide a resource for participants to develop a sense of identity and relationship to the group. They also provide a resource for the ethnographer to follow in mapping out the group, although as before, not as a passive form of following, but rather as an active process of interpretation and reflection on the meaning of various forms of trace for identity and practice. The embodied experience of the ethnographer in attempting to make sense of these traces can be an important source of insight into the opportunities and constraints that participants encounter and the emotions that accompany them.

Unlike the documents used by Geiger and Ribes, the traces for ethnographers to follow are not always readily observable without some more direct intervention. Traces may, instead, need to be captured by use of recording devices introduced by the ethnographer. Voilmy et al. (2008), for example, take a very fine-grained approach to observation of the mobile communication practices of just one commuter, combining different forms of observation to build a multi-faceted understanding. They deploy a combination of direct observation by an accompanying researcher, geo-location to track movements through space, and video-recording of use of mobile devices via video glasses worn by the participant. This approach loses something in the conventional ethnographic terms of immersion and participation, and restricts the frames of meaning-making to be pursued quite arbitrarily. Nonetheless, it contains some stimulating ideas for development of ethnographic approaches to engage with the challenges of keeping up with mobile participants. Here the connections followed are those forged by one participant kept under
observation by the ethnographer. The connections are made available for exploration through creative use of recording technologies which allow the ethnographer, to a limited extent, to see the experience through the eyes of the participant.

Another situation in which connections to follow may be frustratingly out-of-reach for the ethnographer, and may require some creative jumps of imagination to pursue, is provided by smartphone apps, which, via GPS, have a connection with geographic location and potentially reshape the experience of local spaces. The experience of use is highly individualized, and an observer may find it difficult to work out what is going on, or what it means to the participant. Stempfhuber and Liegl (2012), for example, described their attempts to gain ethnographic insight into the use of the smartphone app Grindr, popular among gay men, which allows users to search for potential like-minded contacts in the local area. Whilst it is possibly to use it simply by browsing the website, the app thrives on being used while out in public, as participants switch between orientation to screen and to local surroundings, building anticipation through the potential for a face-to-face meeting with someone nearby as yet unmet. The ethnographic challenge is to understand the experience of this switching. Stempfhuber and Liegl (2012) observed practices within a bar, watching participants switching their attention between screen and bar, and building use of the app into their evening out. The researchers also conducted one-to-one interviews with users, to find out more about their experience of using the app. However, the researchers were conscious that this set of observational techniques only scratched the surface of the spatial layering and complexity that is going on as users engage with the app, and that observation from within a bar setting, or on the Grindr app itself, leaves them without a direct access into the most important aspect of the app, which is the contingent connections being forged between virtual and physical space. Autoethnography provides an alternative route into understanding such situations, as will be explored later in this chapter.

Each situation is different in the nature of the connections that it offers up for the ethnographer to follow and the moves that are easy and difficult to make. In constituting the field through following up on the connections that are available, the ethnographer can benefit from being imaginative about the form that connections might take and what they might mean, and also being sensitive to when they are moving with or against the grain of culturally sanctioned moves. Fieldwork entails following connections whilst reflecting on the circumstances and actors that bring these connections into being. The ethnographer takes on a lot of responsibility for making moves and exploring connections that help to answer strategically significant questions. This
does not mean that the ethnographer has to develop a god-like overview of everything that is going on. The ethnographer also benefits greatly, in experiential terms, from being immersed in the same conditions of uncertainty. As documentary traces are often too thin to give participants themselves certainty about what is going on and who they are dealing with, it is useful for the ethnographer to learn from immersion in these same conditions of uncertainty. Nonetheless, it is important that the exploration does not focus only on the ethnographer’s journey and thus neglect the experience of the various participants in the phenomenon being explored. It is useful, when finding connections to follow, to consider the extent to which the kind of following that the ethnographer is doing mirrors anything that the participants in these settings might be doing.

The idea of a connective, itinerant, or networked ethnography, divorced from a necessary connection to a specific location and open to exploring connections as they present themselves, is fundamental to conducting ethnography for an embedded Internet that may mean quite different things in different settings. The connection between online and offline space is not a once-and-for-all issue to be settled, but an ongoing question for both participants and ethnographer. The understanding of the field is built on the ethnographer’s embodied experiences, reflecting on moves that are easy and difficult to make, and on the experience of following connections that mirror those that participants themselves might make. The field also encompasses both everyday and topological Internet, exploring the contingent connections between these two experiences of the Internet that are forged in the practices of participants and being alert to frictions that may arise between specific experiences and the universalized notion of “the Internet,” as Tsing (2005) counsels. The form that the field site takes is thus highly unique to each ethnographic project, reflecting the huge variability in potential meanings and practices woven through and around the Internet.

**STANDARD ETHNOGRAPHIC REPERTOIRES IN EMERGENT INTERNET FIELD SITES**

Having mapped out some strategies for defining and exploring a field, and having talked in abstract terms about the ethnographer “following connections” and “reflecting on experiences,” it is now time to turn to a more concrete consideration of what the ethnographer actually does when in the field. This section therefore focuses on exploring the role of the ethnographer in the field, discussing the transfer of conventional modes of fieldwork such
as observation, making field notes, and interviewing into a non-spatially defined field site, which involves at least some mediated interaction.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, ethnographers place considerable emphasis on immersion in the setting as a means of knowledge generation. For an ethnographer in a face-to-face setting, “being there” may entail at the outset a fairly straightforward matter of physical displacement into the right place. It will also, however, depend on some more subtle but nonetheless crucial issues involving negotiating access with key gatekeepers and making oneself socially acceptable to the relevant people in the setting. “Being there,” in order to maintain an effective ethnographic presence, is thus about more than simply being physically present in a setting. For the ethnographer in a virtual setting, similar issues arise: an effective presence as an ethnographer is not achieved simply by logging into whatever the setting might be. Ethnographers in virtual environments need to make themselves effectively present by getting to a point where they are accepted within that setting, and able to both observe events and interact with other participants as the features of the setting allow. The process through which this is achieved will vary between platforms. In some cases there will be official gatekeepers and a formal process of negotiating access. In other instances, becoming acceptable is a more diffuse process of building whatever form of presence the platform allows and then gradually developing connections with an array of appropriate informants. An ethnographer in Facebook, for example, will become present by signing up for a personal Facebook page, and then make choices about aspects of his identity to signal, photographs to upload, people to friend, and status updates to make. An ethnographer on Twitter will need to make choices about the name to adopt, the personal features to reveal in a profile, and the nature of any tweets and retweets they wish to make. In each case, effective presence requires some initial active choices from the ethnographer about how to portray an identity and an ongoing attention to being socially acceptable within the setting.

The choices ethnographers make about how to portray themselves and their projects in various media can be highly consequential for relationships with informants. To some extent, ethnographic presence in social media is built one medium at a time as we make choices about building profiles for each platform in turn. However, as we carry out studies that cross between different platforms, and as our informants habitually check us, and one another, out across different platforms, ethnographers also have to think about the extent to which they are building a coherent and consistent persona across various sites that participants may access. Informants may not stick to accessing only those aspects of our online presence that we have
built specifically for ethnographic purposes, and so it may not be possible to maintain a strict separation between one's ethnographic persona and one's wider personal and professional life. To some extent this may always have been true: the immersive nature of ethnography means that boundaries between the ethnography and other aspects of the ethnographer's life were always potentially hard to maintain, particularly where the ethnography takes place geographically and socially close to one's home (Dyck 2000). Latterly, however, the advent of social media means that many ethnographers will have a readily accessible digital presence that far exceeds that which they have built for ethnographic purposes, and thus to some extent all ethnography potentially takes place uncomfortably close to home. Being co-present with one's research site on social media may entail giving off more information about oneself than feels comfortable. It may also be the occasion for having to give accounts of one's actions and interpretations beyond the field site to informants, as the searchability of the Internet and the increasing culture of open access in academic writing gives them the opportunity to read words produced for other audiences. Informants do not necessarily stay tidily within the field sites that we have mapped out for them, and this in itself can be a source of ethnographic insight.

Social media sites such as Facebook can become embedded into many different forms of fieldwork, as they offer a way to connect and keep up with informants even when we have defined the group not specifically because of their participation in a social media platform per se, but because of some other quality or connection that they share. Schneidermann (2014), for example, conducted an ethnographic study of hip hop in Uganda, which involved face-to-face participant observation in Kampala. Social media were, however, vital to the practices of the group and formed an integral part of the meaning of hip hop in their lives. It was essential, therefore, that Schneidermann (2014) also be co-present with her informants on Facebook, enabling her to participate in the interplay between social media spaces and geographic spaces and to understand the various forms of connection and mobility that resulted. The social media connection gave an ongoing sense of co-presence with the field when back at home, facilitated periodic fieldwork visits to Uganda, and helped to build an experiential understanding of a globally interconnected hip hop movement. Another example of fieldwork making use of, but not subsumed by, social media is offered by Baker (2013), who used Facebook in a research project following the literary practices of young adults in the transition from school to university. Facebook acted as a means to communicate with research participants, as a source of data on their literary practices and as a space for observation in its own right.
Facebook here facilitated a longitudinal dimension to the research through its ability to sustain a connection between researcher and participants even when the participants moved to living in a different place. The negotiation of informed consent with participants involved exploring with them the extent to which aspects of their Facebook activities could be made private from the researcher, and also the extent to which their participation in the project and some of their activities would become visible to other participants.

The Internet, and particularly social media, therefore offer means of establishing co-presence with research participants and extending a field site in time and space beyond a notion of a specific bounded online or offline site. The ethnographer’s presence is achieved by learning how to use the relevant technologies, both in a technical sense and in terms of building socially acceptable profiles and behaviors within each platform. Developing appropriate presence is thus an opportunity for learning-by-doing, as the ethnographer has to engage in the same process of becoming present that any of the participants in the setting being studied will have gone through. Learning-by-doing is an important component of the ethnographer’s repertoire. When one is doing things for the first time, and particularly when being taught, aspects of everyday life that are often tacit or routine are brought into the foreground. Learning how to do something, whether that be a particular technical skill, or simply how to conform with the social etiquette of a new setting, enables the ethnographer to think about what skilled practitioners are taking for granted. By reading manuals, following instructions, conforming to guidance on what newcomers should do, and taking word-of-mouth recommendation, the ethnographer is trying to work out both how, practically speaking, an activity is done, and how, socially speaking, it is learned, and what it means. In some settings the technical aspect may come relatively easily, and the ethnographer may need to focus more carefully on the social aspects of appropriate behavior. In other cases, a considerable acquisition of skill may be required: in order to study an online role-playing game, for example, the ethnographer may have to play for a considerable time in order to develop the necessary skill levels to be able to interact with participants and avoid getting in their way or being killed for long enough to conduct an effective observation or interview (Sveinsdottir 2008).

Whatever the balance of social and technical skill required to enter the field, and the technical and financial resources required to do so, it is important for the ethnographer to reflect on what is required in order to be effectively present in each setting, and to what extent these same factors also shape and constrain the participation of the various people encountered in the setting. This kind of reflection is an important part of interrogating and
rendering visible the infrastructures that make certain kinds of interaction, and certain kinds of field site, possible, exposing the taken-for-granted everydayness of the Internet to inquiry. At the point of first becoming accustomed to a new field experience the ethnographer may be particularly sensitized to aspects of the infrastructure that would otherwise be taken for granted.

When entering the field, and throughout the period of fieldwork, it is conventional for the ethnographer to record impressions and developing ideas as they go along, and this is as true of a multi-sited or multi-modal project as it is of a more conventionally geographically-sited study. Field notes allow the ethnographer to keep a record of what happens and how it feels, and enable the ethnographer to capture her provisional thoughts about what these observations may mean, her ideas about what to look at next, and her concerns about aspects that puzzle or frustrate her. In part a cathartic diary, the field notes also provoke reflection on meaning, and encourage an active interpretation that guards against the ethnographer slipping into a passive form of presence. This can be particularly important in online contexts, where the sheer volume of potential data can become overwhelming, and the temptation is simply to download and archive documents to review later. Similarly, the advent of cheap and effective recording technologies means that it can be all too tempting for the ethnographer to store data away rather than actively collecting it and reflecting on what it means, moment by moment. Keeping field notes encourages an active reflection on decisions about what is and is not to be counted as data, focuses the mind on the present moment of experience, and avoids deferring analysis to some solitary future moment away from the field. As Hirschauer (2006) discusses, ethnographic description aspires to a form of interpretation that puts the social into words in a way that straightforward recording cannot. We cannot see “the social” directly in any recordings we make, and so ethnographic description involves attempting to put into words something otherwise silent. The field notes are the first opportunity for the ethnographer to put this into practice.

Field notes were traditionally the ethnographer’s private space, where thoughts could be recorded frankly without concern about what participants might make of them. Latterly, social media has occasioned development of some practices of communicating the ethnographer’s emerging findings and interpretations during the research itself, which involves relinquishing the privacy of at least some of the field notes. Ethnographers can choose to blog about research as it goes along, tweet snippets of research insight, or post pictures to Flickr, Instagram, and the like (see, for example, Mortensen and Walker 2002; Gregg 2006; Halavais 2006; Ward 2006; Wakeford and Cohen 2008; Efimova 2009; Bukvova et al. 2010). For many of the new generation
of ethnographers it is natural, indeed, to make one’s activities public via social media. Ethnographers who engage in this practice have some potentially tricky decisions to make on how public to make emerging thoughts, and how far to censor the raw field notes. Kitchin et al. (2013) discuss the prospects of using social media technologies to forge connections across potential divides between academic and public, opening up new possibilities for debate. We still need, however, to be aware that there may be unanticipated outcomes, as the results of our work enter into the data circulation (Beer 2013). There is a risk of ethnographers over-sharing (Agger 2012) or excessively pre-empting in-depth analysis with half-baked thoughts: the ongoing social media version of field notes is not the ethnography in itself, but a step along the way, and it also might not depict all of the raw work of provisional interpretation going on in a more private version of the field notes.

Field notes are an important site of early interpretive work, in which the ethnographer begins actively to construct what will count as data for the study in progress. Ethnography in any environment is thus not about mere recording, even though digital environments may seduce us with easily recorded, archived, and searchable data. This having been said, ethnographers will want to record aspects of field experience for later perusal and in-depth analysis. Many discussion groups are archived for the purposes of their own members, and an ethnographer can make use of the same archives as members do to trawl through for answers to specific questions, or to carry out more systematic analysis of significant themes. The Wayback Machine (http://archive.org/web/) records past versions of websites, and offers a ready-to-hand tool that can encourage ethnographic reflection on the specificity of the present. There is a pleasing symmetry to the use of the same memory devices and practices (Bowker 2005) as are available to participants, and an ethnographer may well wish to reflect on the extent to which the analysis that he carries out may mirror or diverge from the practices of participants who are themselves attempting to understand the environment that they inhabit. There are numerous tools available for recording and analyzing social media data. I make specific recommendations with caution, because solutions in this domain may rapidly become obsolete, and because this is a heavily commercialized domain: currently, Scraperwiki and Hootsuite are popular sources of data scraped from social media, and provide some useful analytics for an online ethnographer, but by the time you read this there may be other alternatives, and free services might have turned into commercial products, or vice versa. Google Trends offers the possibility of insight, on a large scale, into what interests Internet users, and can potentially be used to infer social trends more broadly (Ellery et al. 2008), although with some
serious caveats concerning the extent to which Google search data reflects wider society in any straightforward fashion. These readily available tools have a volatility that may be disconcerting for a researcher wishing to build a study around them. In addition, as Marres and Weltevrede (2013) argue, it can be problematic to repurpose such tools for social research, given their development in environments with different values and preoccupations. Marres and Weltevrede (2013) question whether the researcher may wish to adopt the values and assumptions embedded within these tools about what is interesting and significant: instead, they argue for a reflexive attention to the values that shape what counts as data, and a recognition that an understanding of these values counts as useful data in its own right.

In addition to publicly available social media analytics, there are also some activity logging tools, developed largely for use in software evaluation and research into Human Computer Interaction, that could be of use in more broadly conceived ethnographic projects. Keystroke logging software for desktop computers has existed for some time, but more recently researchers have developed means to log use of apps across multiple mobile devices (Bell et al. 2013), opening up the possibility of ethnographic projects that juxtapose participant observation and interview accounts with detailed data about the actual apps being used. As with data scraped from social media, data from automatic logging of activity will require considerable interpretation. Whilst logged data apparently represents exactly what participants did, it only portrays that particular stream of technologically mediated activity, and it may be difficult to reconstruct other non-technologically mediated activities that went on alongside the logged activities. In other words, because certain activities can be logged, they may come to dominate our sense of what counts as data. All forms of recording carry a danger of distracting the ethnographer from thinking on the spot, and encouraging them to defer analysis to some later date. Recording therefore potentially disembeds the ethnographer from the setting, when we are usually striving for quite the reverse.

If scraping of social media and logging of app use raise some problematic issues for an ethnographer in the extent to which they shape the definition of data, then aggregative approaches such as sentiment analysis will be even more troubling. Sentiment analysis (Prabowo and Thelwall 2009; Cheong and Lee 2011) automates the process of working out what is going on in social media activity, aggregating large streams of data into assessments of the “mood” relating to a particular topic. This type of analysis is a long way from what we would generally think of as an ethnographic approach, in the extent to which it strips away the rich context of data and makes assumptions about interpretation. However, there may be some merit to an ethnographer engaging
with sentiment analysis: first as a tool which participants may be employing themselves, and which it is therefore important to understand; and, second, as a device to raise questions about developments and trends and to identify topics for a closer, more qualitative inspection. This latter approach to quantitative and aggregative analysis to guide and inform fieldwork has been used to good effect in mixed methods studies such as Howard's (2002) networked ethnography and the study that Dirksen et al. (2010) conducted of online communications within an organization. There is a burgeoning field of digital sociology that explores the forms of society being made in and through the Internet, and in doing so tries out the potential of various forms of social media and "born digital" data for exploring sociological questions (Marres 2012; Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013). Such approaches will prove increasingly fruitful for ethnographers seeking to explore the Internet via mixed methods research designs, but ethnographers will often be unsatisfied with any reliance on "big data" not complemented by more in-depth or small scale studies of meaning-making processes (Boyd and Crawford 2012).

It can certainly be useful for an ethnographer trying to characterize a population to develop some form of visualization which portrays locations and connections. The most obvious form of visualization in a conventional ethnography based on a single geographic location would be a map showing the spatial proximities and movements of the population, but schematic representations such as social network diagrams or kinship diagrams are also useful. These representations may be developed from data collected through systematic surveys, but they can also be generated by informants, and provide a means of talking through their own understandings of spatial and social connections. Visualizations do not speak for themselves in ethnography. They need to be situated: we need to work out what they mean, how they are produced and generated, what they leave by the wayside as they offer up a cleaned-up representation of how things are, and how they circulate. The everyday Internet offers a wide diversity of experiences and an overwhelming array of information and interaction, which is an issue for the everyday Internet user as well as a methodological challenge for the ethnographer. To some extent, the same tools that are provided to help the everyday Internet user cope with this vast and diverse information ecology, offering various forms of visualization, summary, search, and analysis, also provide ready-to-hand tools for the ethnographer, provided due attention is given to the extent to which these technologies shape experiences through hidden assumptions. Many of the existing approaches to aggregation and visualization of "big data" derived from the Internet tend to use homogeneous data drawn from a single platform. It can be useful for an ethnographer, therefore,
to employ different methods and compare perspectives, using each to interrogate the assumptions and omissions of the other. The Internet also makes many archives of past activities available, both to ordinary participants and to ethnographers. Whilst often ethnographers will want to take part in real-time interactions in order to develop an experiential, moment-by-moment engagement with the setting, archives can also be useful, particularly to interrogate the present with insights into how things were in the past.

Whilst the ethnographer can get a long way in understanding by observing and participating, and by exploring interactions both in the raw and in aggregated and visualized summaries, it is still often very useful to ask direct questions. Ethnographers often use interviews as a means of having an in-depth one-to-one conversation about the topic that most concerns them at the time. As Spradley (1979) describes, there exists a continuum between friendly conversations and formal interview. While ethnographers learn a lot from unstructured friendly conversations, they will also often want to engage in some more formal encounters that cover a set of issues of particular interest to the ethnographer with an interviewee who has been chosen for his or her cultural competence in the field in question. The interview will be a way of delving into a specific informant's experiences and understandings. Although it may home in on a specific area of interest, an ethnographic interview is often conducted with quite an open schedule in mind, allowing for unanticipated avenues to be explored. The interview will also often be an opportunity for the ethnographer to try out their developing interpretations, as they offer informants the chance to comment on the ethnographer's version of what is going on in the setting. Ethnographic interviews often arise in the context of an ongoing relationship with an informant, rather than representing an isolated one-off encounter. This allows for a longitudinal aspect to emerge, and provides space for emerging issues to be explored, for points to be revisited, and for interpretations to be checked. Many of these aspects of the ethnographic interview transfer directly to studies involving the Internet. The notion of the ethnographic interview as situated within an ongoing relationship with an informant may, however, not be easy to achieve in more diffuse research settings. Instead, different modes of engagement emerge as useful, such as conducting several asynchronous email interviews with different informants simultaneously, developing insights, and exploring their significance for different interviewees in parallel rather than in sequence.

In field sites that move across different media, the ethnographer will be faced with making a choice of the medium in which to conduct interviews. There is a burgeoning literature on the benefits and drawbacks of online
interviews, and the practices that lead to successful online interviews (notable examples include Bampton and Cowton 2002; Kivits 2005; James and Busher 2006; McCoyd and Kerson 2006; Kazmer and Xie 2008; James and Busher 2009; Salmons 2009; Salmons 2011; Malta 2012). In an ethnographic context it may sometimes be deemed important that interviews be carried out face-to-face, particularly where the notion of embedding being explored involves aspects of material culture, domestic location, or institutional context. It may be very useful, in such circumstances, to encounter the interviewee in that context, allowing the ethnographer to observe the interviewee in that setting, and enabling the interviewee to draw aspects that they see as relevant to the ethnographer’s interest. It can also be very useful for the interviewees to have objects around them that they might want to show the ethnographer to explain points. However, it may be just as natural for an interviewee responding by email to embed links to documents and refer to other materials that they want to show to the ethnographer: the relevant context that they wish to invoke might just as likely be digital as material. Any mode of interviewing needs to be chosen to be comfortable and convenient for the interviewee, to enable exploration of aspects of context that interviewee and ethnographer wish to invoke, and to enable a free-ranging and open interaction. The ethnographer also needs to be aware of the possible connotations of different choices of medium for the interview, as this may shape the responses that interviewees give. It can be very useful to draw on observation of how participants use various media to offer some insight into their expectations of the encounter in that medium. In an ethnography for the Internet, the interview medium is not just chosen according to how interviewees will respond “best,” but as a component of building ethnographic understanding in itself and as a part of inhabiting the field.

In order to carry out interviews, one has first to identify potential interviewees who have the cultural competences one wants to find out about. This may not be straightforward in diffuse research settings where participants may only be partially visible to the ethnographer and to one another. Where a discussion forum or a focus of inquiry, for example, it may be difficult to recruit interviewees who fulfill the ethnographer’s desire to find out what is going on as far as participants are concerned. A general appeal to the group often produces a limited number of volunteers, many of whom may be moved to respond by their own personal agenda, and thus not represent in any plausible way how “typical” members act. In these circumstances, more targeted approaches involving direct email contact with potential interviewees explaining specific reasons why their input may be helpful can be more effective than general appeals. Members who actively post to discussion
forums may be much more likely that non-posting "lurkers" to respond to appeals for interviewees. To recruit these less active participants more creative means of recruitment may be needed. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss strategies that I used to recruit interviewees in circumstances where even the initial identification of potential interviewees was not straightforward. In each case, the strategies are different: whether or not interviewees are identifiable and easy to contact is itself a characteristic of the field. In an ethnographic study, the interview is an important moment of data generation, but so is the process of deciding who might be interesting to interview and finding some way to forge a connection with them.

Interviews are a useful way for the ethnographer to drill down on a specific issue in depth and focus on emergent themes. There are also circumstances in which an ethnographer aims for a breadth of understanding, and an overview of the territory. Whilst standardized research instruments are often thought to be anathema to ethnographers, the questionnaire is thus not without its uses in an ethnographic study. It can be very helpful for an ethnographer to be able to succinctly characterize a population according to variables of particular interest in the study, and a standardized questionnaire can be a very useful way to collect the necessary data. Baym (2000), for example, focused much of her ethnographic study of the rec.arts.tv.soaps newsgroup on viewers of one specific soap opera, but a wider questionnaire study allowed her to explore how far this specific group was typical of the viewers of other soaps using the discussion group. It can be useful to be able to specify exactly in what ways the few people who have participated in the in-depth aspects of the study are typical or distinctive. In some ethnographic studies, a survey of a wider population may be useful in developing analysis of the social networks or patterns of kinship across the population. However, it is often difficult to characterize a questionnaire conducted through online recruitment as representative, since the underlying population is often unknown. Even when the full subscriber list of a mailing list is known, it will often provide only scanty information, possibly confined only to email addresses which give an imperfect guide to country of origin, rarely indicate gender, and lack other kinds of demographic information. People who choose to respond to a survey may well be uncharacteristic in some way, or, as with interview volunteers, have a particular agenda relating to the declared topic of the research. Where field sites are diffuse, and distributed across different media, it can be problematic to gain a sense of how large the target population might be, let alone whether the sample who answer a questionnaire are in any way representative. Questionnaires employed by ethnographers in Internet-saturated field sites are thus rarely able to achieve
a representative sample, but still the questionnaire can be a useful way of capturing a snapshot of a population and exploring how far any sample group within that overall population may be distinctive.

**REFLEXIVITY, AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE INDIVIDUALIZED EXPERIENCE**

Whilst the ethnographer may use various strategies to produce data and record aspects of the research setting, the immersion of the ethnographer’s embodied self in the setting remains a very significant part of the ethnographic approach. A reflexive dimension to ethnography is therefore widely acknowledged as an important corrective to an erroneous impression that ethnographers somehow produce objective accounts of pre-existing reality. The “representational crisis” in ethnography entailed a widespread recognition that ethnographers to some extent construct the object that they purport to represent (as notably captured by Clifford and Marcus 1986), and the subjectivity of the ethnographer is acknowledged as key in shaping relations with the field and constructing knowledge of the setting (Coffey 1999). This reflexive dimension acquires a particular significance in ethnography for the E² Internet. Everything that I have said about the construction of the field site, and the choices that the ethnographer has to make about how to move through the field and which connections to follow, emphasizes that the ethnographer has an agency that will be reflected in the accounts that he produces. A reflexive attention to the choices being made by the ethnographer in such circumstances is therefore key, considering the nature of the circumstances under which a particular account was produced, and exploring how it could have been otherwise. Whilst we strive to let the field speak for itself, at the same time it is important to acknowledge the agency of the ethnographer that brings that particular field into being, and the role of the ethnographer’s subjectivity in shaping a relationship to the setting.

Internet ethnographers have often made a point of discussing their relationship to the field, and exploring the consequences of particular aspects of their status and positioning for the accounts that they produce. Baym (2000), for example, underwent a shift from participant in the group she studied to observer, allowing her to retain a sympathetic understanding of the setting whilst shifting to a different register of analysis and a different set of relationships with participants. Kendall (2002) took a consciously outsider status in the group that she studied, and notes the points at which her overt differences from the group, as brought into visibility by members
of the group, constitute moments of ethnographic insight. Markham (1998) most notably develops a reflexive online ethnography as she dwells on considerations of her own subjectivity and relationships with participants as constituted through the medium as a core focus of her account. In each of these cases, positions shift and relationships progress throughout the study. This is all the more likely in a multi-sited and multi-modal study that passes through different settings and exploits different media for engagement with participants, involving the ethnographer in reworking an identity for each setting and bringing to light different aspects of commonality and difference in interactions with participants.

The reflexive dimension does not have an identifiable singular impact on the ethnographic account but suffuses the story. As Finlay (2002) suggests, reflexivity does not necessarily lead to clear answers, but instead provides “muddy ambiguity and multiple trails.” This muddiness and ambiguity can, paradoxically, be illuminating in its symmetry with the conditions experienced by participants in the setting in question. In ethnography for the E Internet, the reflexive dimension brings a helpful perspective on the conditions of knowledge and uncertainty that prevail in the diffuse and contingently connected fields of action that characterize many contemporary phenomena. Because the ethnographer, in the situations we are discussing, uses the same media as participants, and because those very media are at the same time the object of inquiry and the medium of inquiry, the ethnographer has an authentic insight into the conditions of existence as lived through those media. The difficulties of getting in touch with relevant people and uncertainties about what is really going on in their lives are practical frustrations for the ethnographer, but are also significant in so far as this is how the setting is: complex and imperfectly knowable, with absolute certainty always out of reach. There is a symmetry here, in that the frustrations that the ethnographer encounters on the way to finding out about the object of inquiry are a source of insight into the object. The ethnographer can usefully reflect on this symmetry, asking “how far do any of us know what is going on here?”

This point echoes an argument I have made previously (Hine 2000) that the ethnographer should not rush too quickly to triangulate observations from an online setting by arranging to meet up with participants face-to-face, where this is something that participants would not normally do. The urge to triangulate risks jeopardizing the development of a reflexive insight into the conditions of knowledge that prevail within the situation. The ethnographer can usefully draw on their own experiences as a source of insight into the irresolvable uncertainties and tensions that can be a part of the Internet experience. It is important to embrace the same kind of uncertainty that
participants experience, since, as Falzon (2009a: 9) points out, “understanding the shallow may itself be a form of depth.” Falzon links this point with Bloch’s (1991) discussion of the kind of deep ethnographic understanding that is developed by immersion within a setting and that evades linguistic expression. A deeper understanding of uncertainty comes from immersion within these conditions of knowledge, beyond the second-hand accounts participants may give of their experiences. This links also with Hirschauer’s (2006) observations about the silence of the social: ethnographers are putting into words what was previously unspoken, and their reflexive insights into what they themselves can know become an important part of accounting what is distinctive about that setting.

When we acknowledge the agency of the ethnographer in constructing the field and finding ways to navigate contingent connections we imply that the experience is to some extent unique to that ethnographer. The ethnographer aims for an authentic account of a reality, which to some extent pre-exists their engagement with it, in that they identify common threads and patterns, explore prevailing discourses, and analyze emergent structures, but these are navigated according to a highly individual, embodied agenda. In fact, the experience of a contemporary media-saturated world is potentially to be characterized as an increasingly individualized terrain (Wellman 2001), as each subject constructs a networked reality out of diverse sources of connection and influence. At this point an autoethnographic (Reed-Danahay 1997a; Ellis 2004) sensitivity may become particularly useful: because the experience of navigating the contemporary world is so individualized, an account “from the inside” of the embodied self that navigates this territory is very informative. An autoethnographic stance on ethnography for the Internet focuses on considering how connections present themselves and what choices are available for building meaning out of these diverse influences. The ethnographer as autoethnographer can attend to the generalized tropes and commonly available discourses that inform actions and shape expectations, thinking about where pressures to conform come from and how they are mediated. An autoethnography for the Internet emphasizes the embodied and emotional experience of engagement with diverse media, attending to the influences that shape and constrain the experience, and the opportunities and restrictions that emerge.

There have been concerns that autoethnographic narratives may stray into self-indulgence or narcissism, lending undue importance to the author’s experience and neglecting to draw on other sources of evidence (Coffey 1999; Sparkes 2002). A universal criticism of autoethnography as self-indulgence neglects, however, a more nuanced understanding of the extent
to which writing about the self always, necessarily, involves writing about relationships and contexts (Sparkes 2002). The universal rejection of autoethnography also neglects the diversity of writing which goes on under this banner: as Reed-Danahay (1997b) describes, the term autoethnography covers a diverse array of practices within an overall focus on the telling of personal experiences and emotions and in a sense all ethnographic writing is to some extent autoethnographic. It seems more reasonable then, rather than writing off all autoethnography as somehow flawed, to examine what purchase is offered in each individual instance of autoethnographic writing.

In the case of ethnography for the Internet, an autoethnographic perspective allows the very individualized nature of engagement with a reality constituted through various forms of mediated and localized face-to-face interaction and material context to be explored in a far greater degree of depth than can be achieved by asking other participants for retrospective accounts alone or from simply observing what they do.

The autoethnographic approach is an answer to the concerns expressed by Crabtree et al. (2006) in their discussion of the problems attendant on carrying out ethnographic studies of ubiquitous computing “in the wild.” They note that various means of logging activity and recording actions are available, producing multiple streams of data which the researcher needs to align. A log of activity may, however, give a spurious appearance of accuracy, if it records the times when messages arrived at a central server, but fails to depict when participants actually read, or were typing these messages. The researcher faces a considerable technical difficulty in aligning the various streams of data and reconstructing what the experience of participation might have been for those involved. An autoethnographic perspective offers an alternative route out of this difficulty: it loses the completeness and overview provided by the various data logs, but offered a hugely enhanced insight into how it might feel to be embedded within their emergence in real-time, making sense of the various forms of media that constitute the immersive event. Neither the autoethnographic approach nor the alignment of log file data are perfect in their portrayal of events. Each reveals a different facet of the phenomenon (Mason 2011). The autoethnographic account would not necessarily be left to stand alone, but would be interpreted alongside the accounts of other participants and the portrayal of activities as represented in log files. The autoethnographic account would be far from self-indulgent: it would, instead, be an appropriate strategic response to a very distinct gap in understanding left by the other available methods.

Whether or not self-consciously autoethnographic, ethnographic research that is carried out in and of and through mediated communications is always
to some extent “insider research,” since the ethnographer is using the very means of communication that are also the object of study. Being an insider presents some problems in developing an appropriate positioning and retaining the ability to question the taken-for-granted: ethnographers working in familiar territories find themselves trying to balance insider positioning and stranger perspective in search of insights (Dyck 2000). It is important, however, not to over-essentialize this insider status: identifications shift over the course of a project, and attributions of insiderness are made strategically in context. Voloder (2008) suggests that it is important not to assume either strangeness or difference, but to focus instead on processes and moments of differentiation:

I argue that the insight gained from “insider” research need not rely on assumptions of shared experiences and identifications between oneself and participants, but rather that it is in the exploration of the convergences and divergences in these experiences and identifications that the researcher’s experiential self can be used as a key heuristic resource. (Voloder 2008: 28)

An ethnographer may thus be claimed by participants as “one of us” as part of accounting common experiences, but may also be “othered” as someone who can never understand. An authoethnographer may claim a commonality of experience with some wider constituency whom they claim to represent. Such identifications are, however, not stable. To draw on autoethnographic insights the goal need not be to produce an account which is wholly about the ethnographer’s experience. Nor should it be to position the ethnographer as able to speak for the position of all participants, as if they could unproblematically inhabit that space. Instead, an autoethnographer ideally needs to maintain a reflexive and critical orientation to his own relationship with the constituency for whom he claims to speak.

THE PRINCIPLES OF ETHNOGRAPHY FOR THE E3 INTERNET

Having discussed specific strategies for locating field sites, positioning oneself within the field, collecting data, and developing insights, this final section of the chapter returns to some broader methodological statements, in order to summarize what, in general, might characterize the orientation of ethnography for the E3 Internet. A number of years ago, when the Internet was very different in scope and experience, I produced a set of methodological principles for a virtual ethnography that conducted its studies in, of, and
through the Internet (Hine 2000). The Internet now is in many ways radically different from the territory that I navigated back then: it was restricted then to a much narrower social group of users than is now the case, and whilst newsgroups and other discussion forums gave it a participatory feel, the breadth of participation and sense of dynamism produced by social media had yet to emerge. Nonetheless, many of the strategies that I have advocated here, and the principles which underpin them, are recognizably continuous with those developed for the Internet in its prior incarnation. I have continued to stress the agency of the ethnographer in constructing the field, and the significance of a reflexive and autoethnographic insight into exploring not just what mediated communication does, but how it feels and what it enables us to know, although developments in methodological thinking more generally have offered new ways to think about conceptions of the field and the purchase offered by autoethnography. I have continued to stress the contingency of notions of the field, and the active role of the ethnographer in deciding what is to count as the field. Another continuity is the ongoing importance of consciousness of the significance of the Internet as both culture and cultural artefact, which I identified in 2000. The Internet as a place where things just simply get done exists alongside the Internet which exists in popular commentary as an agent of change and source of opportunity and risk. These complementary aspects of the Internet mutually inform one another, and thus present another level of complexity that continues to challenge the ethnographer as she navigates between Internet as culture and Internet as cultural artefact and questions how these mutually inform one another.

The key difference between the approach I advocated then and the approach I develop here stems from an increased consciousness of the diverse forms of embedding that give meaning to the Internet. As the Internet has become embedded in more aspects of everyday existence, and as the entwining of material and digital practices has deepened, so the potential form of field sites has diversified and the potential connections for the ethnographer to pursue have multiplied. As the Internet has become embedded in more devices, and taken on a new guise as a mobile technology, and as a component of intelligent devices sensing their environment and making decisions on our behalf, so fieldwork decisions have become more contingent and more consequential. The ethnographer is faced with a more complex array of potential sites and sources of data, and an increasing challenge in tying together disparate insights into the form and meaning of activities of interest. This diversification and amplification of embedding impacts upon our fieldwork strategies, emphasizing the importance of reflexive and
autoethnographic strategies as it becomes apparent just how individualized the experience of the field may be, and how diverse the potential ways of understanding and illuminating what goes on there.

There is, therefore, considerable continuity with the form of virtual ethnography outlined in 2000, although I have dispensed with the epithet “virtual” as no longer helpful in the face of this multiply embedded Internet and as a distraction from the important task of understanding what this Internet, which is very real in its experience and consequences, means for our contemporary modes of existence. The epithet “virtual” was in fact always meant not to denote a study only confined to online domains, but to index that the new approaches to ethnography occasioned by the Internet were “virtually ethnography” in the old-fashioned sense, possibly not quite the real thing but good enough for the circumstances which we found ourselves facing. This proved to be misleading, and so in the current version I talk of ethnography for the Internet without giving it the epithet, although the connotations of an adaptive approach, sufficing for circumstance, remains a core concern. Some key components of this adaptive approach for an Internet which is embedded, embodied, everyday, and above all emergent, are as follows:

1. A holistic approach to ethnography need not imply that there is a pre-existing field site to be comprehensively known. Instead, the holistic approach produces the ethnographer’s openness to unanticipated aspects of meaning-making, and to the emergence of forms of connection and boundary not anticipated at the outset of the study. A holistic approach entails the ethnographer taking an exploratory attitude to understanding how activities make sense to those engaged in them.

2. The field is a fluid and emergent construct. Field sites are rarely contained wholly within either online or offline space, and also build in a consciousness of what might be thought of as different scales of analysis, encompassing both “the Internet” as a notable and topical cultural object and as it is manifested in disaggregated form in specific local instances of use which might, or might not be labelled as “the Internet.”

3. The Internet can be taken as multiply embedded in diverse frames of activity and meaning-making. Taking this multiple embedding seriously encourages an open approach to the identification of field sites, focused on exploring connections and discontinuities as they emerge rather than assuming the existence of boundaries, and adopting various means of visualizing and moving through the field.

4. The Internet is an embodied experience. This aspect of the Internet emphasizes the significance of reflexive and autoethnographic approaches, and
of imaginatively observing the significance of actions, making a critically
reflective use of ready-to-hand tools for recording and interpreting actions
with due consciousness of the varied social textures that emerge and
an awareness of the possibility of learning from all forms and stages of
engagement with the field.

5 The Internet is both a mundane and a topicalized everyday experience:
ethnography for the Internet can usefully consider both forms of discourse,
exploring connections and disconnects between policy and practices,
mass media portrayals, and everyday experiences. Ethnographers can use
the everyday Internet to interrogate the topicalized Internet and vice versa,
and make use of the archived past to interrogate the present, adopting
a stranger perspective that considers how current conditions could be
otherwise.

6 Ethnographers should expect multiplicity: there is not just one Internet,
not just one experience of online phenomena. Instead, we will find diverse
practices of meaning-making around a fragmented Internet which is device
dependent, culturally embedded, constantly developing, and consists of
multiple platforms. We will therefore need multiple ethnographies for the
Internet and multiple ways of forging research objects from fragmented
phenomena.

7 Ethnographers should expect uncertainty: without the prospect of a
comprehensive account of a singular reality, we will be faced with
constructing accounts that are not necessarily verifiable in standard
terms of objectivity. Just as participants live with uncertainty about how
various aspects of existence ultimately line up and inform one another, so
must ethnographers.

8 Ethnographers must take responsibility for their own agency, attempting
to build authentic accounts that transcend a self-indulgent reporting of a
personal itinerary yet are demonstrably conscious of the extent to which
the ethnographer creates an ethnography out of an array of possible
cultural strands that could have been followed.