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Review: Researching the Internet

Reviewed Work(s): Coming of age in Second Life: an anthropologist explores the virtually human by Tom Boellstorff; Strategien zur digitalen Integration von Migranten: Ethnographische Fallstudien in Esslingen und Hannover by Oliver Hinkelbein; Two bits: the cultural significance of Free Software by Chris Kelty; Cap al cinema col. laboratiu: pràctiques culturals i formes de producció participatives by Antoni Roig

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# Review article

## Researching the Internet

BOELLSTORFF, TOM. *Coming of age in Second Life: an anthropologist explores the virtually human*. xiii, 316 pp., illus., bibliogr. Princeton: Univ. Press, 2008. \$29.06 (cloth), \$17.90 (paper)

HINKELBEIN, OLIVER. *Strategien zur digitalen Integration von Migranten: Ethnographische Fallstudien in Esslingen und Hannover*. vii, 295 pp., illus., bibliogr. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Bremen, 2008.

KELTY, CHRIS. *Two bits: the cultural significance of Free Software*. xvi, 347 pp., illus., bibliogr. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008. \$89.95 (cloth), \$21.55 (paper)

ROIG, ANTONI. *Cap al cinema col.laboratiu: pràctiques culturals i formes de producció participatives*. 825 pp., tables, illus., bibliogr. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2008.

The turn of the millennium saw the publication of four important Internet ethnographies: Hakken's *Cyborgs@cyberspace?* (1999), Zurawski's *Virtuelle Ethnizität* (2000), Hine's *Virtual ethnography* (2000), and Miller and Slater's (2000) *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*. The authors of those pioneering studies grappled with difficult questions that still occupy Internet researchers today, such as interaction and identity in cyberspace, the virtual vs the actual, technological appropriation and

obsolescence, the digital divide, and the prospects and limitations of on-line ethnography.

Of the four monographs, it is arguably Miller and Slater's that best foreshadows the studies reviewed in the present article. These authors investigated the late 1990s uses of the Internet by Trinidadians both at home and abroad. Distancing themselves from the information and communication technology (ICT) domestication literature (see Silverstone & Hirsch 1994), they argue that Trinidadians are not merely 'appropriating' the Internet; rather they are putting themselves on the global stage via the Internet just as much as users in metropolitan centres. Miller and Slater take issue with much of the earlier Internet literature for its postmodern celebration of fluid/blurred on-line identities, which they found had little bearing on Trinidadian uses of the Internet, and for its assumption that 'cyberspace' is a placeless 'virtual' domain divorced from actual physical places. Instead they urge Internet scholars to start from the opposite assumption, namely that online domains are *part of* – not apart from – everyday off-line contexts. To these ethnographers, the Internet involves 'many different technologies, practices, contexts: it is no one thing, and our study encompassed a wide range of contexts, from ways of doing business to socializing in cybercafes' (Miller & Slater 2000: 3). One key finding was Trinidadians' seemingly 'natural' affinity with the Internet, even in low-income areas where many people's access was mediated by friends or family. This finding complicated their pre-fieldwork expectations of a vast 'digital divide' separating rich and poor Trinidadians – and indeed Trinidadians from Westerners (2000: 27).

The studies reviewed here were all completed or published in 2008 following research trajectories that differ notably from those of Miller and Slater. First, they were conducted largely in metropolitan areas of the global North and among mostly white

middle-class Internet innovators. Second, rather than being about 'the Internet' they each focus on a single Internet platform or field of practice (Second Life, Free Software, Internet filmmaking, digital integration). Third, many of the Internet technologies and practices described in these studies were either not in existence or still in their infancy at the time of Miller and Slater's research. Finally, two of the four texts are in languages other than English (i.e. German and Catalan) – no small matter given the overwhelming dominance of anglophone scholarship to date.

Yet in spite of these contrasts, Miller and Slater's discussion of the main challenges facing late 1990s Internet ethnographers is still highly pertinent to all four studies, as we shall see shortly. I shall argue that the studies' chief contributions to the field are the strong case made for the existence of virtual places, detailed accounts of a wide range of new and old Internet practices, and the rigorous conceptual work around key notions such as 'third place', 'recursive public', 'collaborative filmmaking', and 'digital integration'. Like their precursors, these studies provide further evidence that we are not at the dawn of a new planetary era in which a totalizing 'techno-logic' (of networks, information, knowledge, *techne*, or some other kind) will impose itself on all other cultural logics. Instead, their greatest virtue is that they confirm the ongoing *differentiation* of the Internet into an expanding universe of 'technologies, practices, contexts' – to use Miller and Slater's apt formulation.

## A virtual place

Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of age in Second Life* is an ethnographic account of the 3D online environment Second Life. The rationale of the project was both methodological and pedagogical (Kelty 2009): Boellstorff wished to explore what ethnography can teach us about 'virtual worlds' such as Second Life. With this aim in mind, from June 2004 to January 2007 he 'took up residence' in Second Life as the avatar Tom Bukowski. *Coming of age* describes in fascinating detail the everyday lives and social relations of the Second Life 'residents' encountered by Bukowski during his stay there. Tackling Miller and Slater's challenge head-on (p. 62), Boellstorff does not see the need to embed on-line sociality in the 'actual world', setting out instead to explain 'inworld' practices in their own terms, not as a pale reflection or simulation of off-line practices. These inworld practices include weaving, building, trading, chatting, dancing, making love, flying, and many others.

The most intriguing part of Boellstorff's argument is his extended discussion of Second Life as a place. Questioning the media studies habit of regarding virtual worlds as the antithesis of place-making, he argues that Second Life is a 'new kind of place', or, more precisely, a 'set of locations' where new forms of human sociality and craft (*techne*) are flourishing (p. 91). This is the fortuitous result of two separate 1970s breakthroughs. The first was Krueger's invention of Videoplace, a rudimentary machine that allowed two or more people to interact virtually in a 'third place'. This constituted a break from existing forms of telecommunication in that multiple people experienced a *place* simultaneously as not being the actual world. 'People interacted within the virtual world and also with the virtual world itself' (p. 47). The second innovation was the development of first-person perspective in videogames. Together, these two technical affordances allow Second Life avatars to interact with other inworld objects – including other avatars – not in a cyberspatial void but in specific virtual locations such as rooms, corridors, paths, gardens, or hot-air balloons.

Nowhere is the contrast between Boellstorff's position and that of Miller and Slater starker than on the issue of virtuality and mediation. Citing Anderson's (1983) famous example of how newspapers convey the idea of the modern nation as an 'imagined' or virtual community, Miller and Slater conclude that 'virtuality – as the capacity of communicative technologies to constitute rather than mediate realities and to constitute relatively bounded spheres of interaction – is neither new nor specific to the Internet. Indeed, it is probably intrinsic to the process of mediation as such' (2000: 6). For Boellstorff, in contradistinction, although humans have always crafted themselves through culture (*homo faber*), what is new about Internet sites such as Second Life is that 'human craft ... can now create new worlds for human sociality' *from within those worlds*: 'I cannot meet a lover inside a novel and invite friends for a wedding ceremony there, nor can I and a group of like-minded persons buy joint property inside a television program' (p. 237). This does not mean, though, that all Internet sites can support virtual forms of sociality and craft, says Boellstorff. For example, social network sites such as MySpace or Facebook do not qualify as virtual worlds as their significance derives – like the Trinidadian websites and chat rooms described by Miller and Slater – from 'a direct relationship to the actual world' (p. 238). Boellstorff concludes with the cogent assertion that virtual worlds are 'distinct domains of human being' that deserve being studied on their own terms, not on those of actual worlds (p. 238). Like Hine (2000) before him, he regards on-line ethnography as a strategy suited to certain research projects but not necessarily to others.<sup>1</sup>

## Internet practices (and practitioners)

One remarkable feature of the development of the Internet is the sheer proliferation and diversification of its practices. All four studies further our understanding of this practical explosion by documenting and discussing actual practices in great detail. However, they do so in rather different ways and with uneven success when it comes to their theorization.

If Boellstorff's *Coming of age* is firmly anchored in the synchronous practices of Bukowski and his fellow avatars, Chris Kelty's *Two bits* is a historical reconstruction of the emergence and stabilization of the five key 'geeky' practices that make up the field of Free Software. Kelty distinguishes between four basic practices (sharing source code, conceptualizing openness, applying copyright licences, and co-ordinating and collaborating) and what we might call a 'meta-practice' (Peterson 2010): the practice of arguing and discussing about the other four practices, which he terms 'the movement'.

Kelty regards Free Software as constituting a 'recursive public' – that uniquely twenty-first-century public sphere or commons in which geeks modify and maintain the very technological conditions (or infrastructure) of their own terms of discourse and existence. The recursive public is a manner of social imaginary (Taylor), a moral-technical understanding of social order that is partly imagined, partly concrete (as it entails computers, wires, waves, electrons, etc.).

For Kelty, Free Software is not an isolated phenomenon but part of an ongoing global reorientation of power/knowledge. This point is pursued in the final part of the book, where he discusses two related non-software projects based on Free Software templates: Connexions and Creative Commons. Kelty was deeply involved with the former initiative as a mediator between the worlds of academia, software, and copyright law. The aim was to produce academic textbooks in a manner similar to that of Free Software. Kelty found that his geeky 'imagination of openness ... and social order' stood him in better stead than his anthropological training. He found that Connexions managed to adapt or 'modulate' all basic Free Software practices save for the meta-practice of movement – no Free Textbook movement ensued. One major hurdle for the project's code-minded geeks was the prevalence of non-codified academic custom. In trying to 'figure out' what they were doing, project members struggled to define the *finality* of a scholarly work. How do such works attain identity, stability, completion? Connexions sought to redefine finality in an open, public way, with modifiability being integral to how knowledge is stabilized, but many scholars resisted this idea.

This very same question of the uneven spread and appropriation of Free Software practices into other fields of cultural production surfaces in Antoni Roig's Ph.D. thesis, 'Towards collaborative filmmaking' (my translation). The thesis investigates to what extent we may be moving towards more collaborative forms of filmmaking linked to the rise of Internet and other digital technologies as well as to developments such as Free Software. The case studies consist of the making of two Internet 'fan films' (by X-ILE Pictures in the United States and Energia Productions in Finland) and a Free Software-inspired film (*A swarm of angels* in Britain). Roig's claim to originality rests on his novel use of a practice-theoretical approach in an emerging area of Internet research (see Bräuchler & Postill 2010; Couldry 2004) to propose a typology of collaborative practices that shows great comparative potential. This 'family of practices' includes practices of production, distribution, organization, and self-promotion as well as their (meta-pragmatic?) interrelations.

Thematically, Oliver Hinkelbein's dissertation, 'Strategies towards the digital integration of immigrants' (my translation), takes an altogether different direction, bringing us back to one of Miller and Slater's main preoccupations: the so-called 'digital divide'. Yet Hinkelbein also pays careful attention to actual practices, in his case the practices (*Praktiken*) that make up the emergent field of 'digital integration' in Germany. His aim is to understand some of the strategies whereby both public and civic organizations seek to bridge the digital divide that reportedly separates native Germans from foreign immigrants. He does so through a multi-sited, comparative ethnographic account based on participant observation within Internet initiatives aimed at immigrants in Esslingen (public) and Hanover (civic) as well as at a number of 'expert' meetings in other locations. Although ostensibly committed to actor-network theory, the dissertation's spotlight follows the human rather than non-human agents (computers, software, networks, printers, etc.), particularly those humans who – not unlike Chris Kelty in the Connexions project – act as go-betweens across sites, technologies, and constituencies.

Hinkelbein takes us through the main characteristics of each set of actors and their socio-political contexts, stressing the importance of close personal ties as well as the 'blackboxed' processes of inclusion and exclusion into networks of digital integration expertise. One crucial finding was the existence of such invisible networks and their concretization through computer clubs, mentoring sessions, seminars, and so on. It is precisely the focus on the practices of these 'new mediators' that constitutes the study's main contribution to a strangely neglected area of research: Internet

technologies and grassroots leadership in contexts of socio-economic development (Postill in press). New mediators face the challenge of having to recruit and mobilize other social actors in pursuit of their goals whilst surviving financially in the fiercely competitive market of grassroots ICT initiatives. The upshot is a relentless drive for creative innovation.

## Conceptual gains

In a relatively new interdisciplinary field such as Internet studies in which conceptual muddles are common (Postill 2008), the rigorous conceptual work undertaken in all four studies stands out. These conceptual efforts take two main forms: (a) clearing the conceptual ground around the study's main Internet formation (especially in Boellstorff and Kelty) and (b) broadening the existing conceptual lexicon around the chosen Internet research area (more noticeably in Roig and Hinkelbein).

Both Kelty and Boellstorff are at pains to clarify what their respective objects of Internet study are *not* so that they can proceed to elucidate what they actually are. Thus Kelty explains that Free Software is *not* a collective, an informal organization, a crowd, or even a *social* movement. Rather, as said earlier, it is an Internet-mediated 'recursive public', a new kind of public sphere in which operative systems and social systems are inextricably entwined. Similarly, Boellstorff explains that although Second Life may approximate some elements of reality for purposes of immersion, it is most emphatically *not* a simulation (i.e. it is not 'virtual reality'); nor is it a social network site comparable to Facebook or MySpace but rather it is *a place*; nor is it a posthuman realm (in fact, it makes us more human) or a sensational world of wild cybersex and rampant consumerism, as portrayed by the news media (instead, mundane daily practices are the norm).

For their part, both Roig and Hinkelbein guide their readers with great aplomb through a number of semantic minefields that lie at the heart of contemporary Internet studies. Roig carefully unpacks important but often muddled notions such as 'new media', 'cultural producers', 'digital filmmaking' and 'audiences'. He successfully manages to develop a set of working definitions of key terms in the first half of the thesis that he then applies to the empirical materials in the second half. Likewise, Hinkelbein expends considerable energy sharpening a set of conceptual tools that he helpfully lists in a glossary ('blackboxing', 'digital integration', 'new mediator', 'translation', etc.).

## Epochal claims

In the final part of *Coming of age*, Tom Boellstorff makes an epochal forecast. He believes that Second

Life and other virtual worlds may be heralding the advent of a new age driven not by information or knowledge (as technology authors have told us for half a century) but by craft or *techné*, as exemplified by Second Life's residents' keen dedication to crafting their own world and its virtual artefacts. Instead of the promised Information Age or Knowledge Society, suggests Boellstorff, we may be heading towards the Age of *Techné*.

This is a questionable prognosis. In fact, the evidence and arguments presented in *Coming of age* demonstrate that Second Life is a highly specific Internet environment that is markedly distinct from sites devoted to on-line games, social networking, (micro-)blogging, bookmarking, discussing, and so on, where crafting is not a salient feature. To return to Miller and Slater's Trinidad argument, what all four studies capture is not a totalizing epochal 'logic' but rather ever more differentiated Internet 'technologies, practices, contexts' (2000: 3). The evidence provided in the reviewed texts strongly suggests that the Internet – and indeed the world – is becoming ever more plural and that no universal 'logic of practice' (not even the logic of *techné*) is gaining ascendancy at the expense of all other logics. Second Life has found its own niche within an Internet ecology that is expanding dramatically as millions of new users join and myriad new tools and practices are fashioned every year. This is an Internet niche that attracts, like all niches, certain kinds of people but not others. As someone who suffers from acute time poverty, I for one could only become an active Second Life resident if I turned such participation into a research project. Even Internet users with time on their hands and valid credit cards may find no compelling reason to join, opting instead for other platforms. Such refusenik stances point to yet another Internet question worthy of further investigation.

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## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Boellstorff's insistence that Second Life is a place echoes Howard Rheingold's (1993) earlier argument about the WELL, a pioneering 'virtual community' built in the San Francisco Bay area. For Rheingold, the WELL was a virtual – albeit text-based – 'third place' in Oldenburg's (1989) sense of the term: that is, a place of suburban conviviality that is neither the home nor the workplace. Both studies raise fascinating questions for anthropologists working on Internet issues about what constitutes an on-line place, particularly in view of the current rethinking of notions such as 'place' and 'space' in anthropology and neighbouring fields (see Casey 2001; Ingold 2008; Massey 2005; Pink 2009; Thrift 2006). Unfortunately these questions are beyond the scope of the present article. For methodological debates around on-line ethnographic research online, see the EASA

Media Anthropology e-seminar 'Researching the Internet', 27 September to 4 October 2005 ([http://www.media-anthropology.net/braeuchler\\_eseminar.pdf](http://www.media-anthropology.net/braeuchler_eseminar.pdf)) and a discussion of *Coming of age* with its author on the blog *Savage Minds* entitled 'Ethnography of the virtual', 12 June 2008 (<http://savageminds.org/2008/06/12/ethnography-of-the-virtual/>).

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John Postill has conducted fieldwork on media among the Iban of Sarawak (East Malaysia) and on Internet activism in suburban Kuala Lumpur (Peninsular Malaysia). He is the author of *Media and nation building* (2006) and *Localizing the Internet* (in press), and the co-editor, with Birgit Bräuchler, of *Theorising media and practice* (2010), all published by Berghahn. He is currently preparing for research into social media activism in Barcelona.

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