

# Ethnography according to Christine Hine: naturalistic approach to digital environments

Adriana Braga

## Abstract

Christine Hine is an English scientist, who teaches and researches at the University of Surrey, England. She has a strong interdisciplinary approach (ranging from Biology to Information Science and Communications), focusing on research methodologies applied to online environments. In Brazil, she is best known for her books *Virtual Ethnography* (Sage, 2000) and *Virtual Methods* (Berg, 2005). In this interview, Christine Hine tells about her career and influences, as well as ethnographic methodologies applied to online environments and some of her current research subjects.

## Keywords

Ethnography. Methodology. Internet

**Hine, could you tell us a bit about your early steps on the academic career? How did you decide being a scholar, where did you study and who were your major influences?**

*Christine Hine: My early steps as an academic were taken in biology, rather than sociology. I studied Botany at Oxford University as an undergraduate, then took a Masters in Biological Computation at the University of York. After that I worked for a year on a project producing maps of species distribution, then decided to return to York to study for a DPhil. I became interested in the growing movement in biology to use databases to improve access to information on the naming and taxonomy of organisms, and made that the focus of my thesis. Over time I came to realise that I was more interested in the people initiating and using these innovative databases for biodiversity than I was in creating them myself. Many of the interesting and challenging problems in this field seemed to focus around how innovations could happen within the institutional environment and social arrangements of science. I discovered, thanks to some helpful advice from Mike Mulkey*

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*in Sociology at York, that sociology of science offered some fascinating theoretical resources for exploring just this kind of question. Gradually I moved from science to sociology of science and technology... and that's where I've been for the past 20+ years. My first job outside of biology was with Steve Woolgar in the Centre for Research into Innovation, Culture and Technology, which brought together a really inspiring group of people exploring diverse aspects of science and technology in society, and allowed me to find my feet in a new theoretical milieu. When the Internet became a mainstream phenomenon I followed the scientists that I was studying from the laboratory into online environments, and that in turn led to a long term interest in adapting social science methodologies to the challenges of the Internet. Now I work in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey, which provides a very natural and supportive home for me because of its breadth and depth of expertise in the range of sociological methodologies, as well as specific interests in new media, science and technology studies and the digital world.*

**Adriana Braga: During your transition from biology to sociology of science and methodological approaches such as virtual ethnography, which authors from sociology, communication or media do you regard as your main theoretical references?**

*Christine Hine: I've read quite widely across disciplines: possibly because I came originally from outside the social science I felt it possible to*

*roam around without sticking to specific social science traditions. Also, my first job at Brunel University prompted me to read widely, since the Centre for Research into Innovation, Culture and Technology was itself an interdisciplinary unit, and the associated teaching department of Human Sciences combined sociology, anthropology and psychology. Looking back I can see that a lot of the texts that I read were in some way about knowledge production. I read Steve Woolgar's *Science: The Very Idea*, his collection on *Knowledge and Reflexivity*, Bruno Latour's *Science in Action*, Karen Knorr Cetina's *Manufacture of Knowledge*, Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, Joshua Meyrowitz' *No Sense of Place*, James Clifford and George Marcus' *Writing Culture* all in a fairly short space of time. Mix all of those up together and you come out with a strong belief in information and communication technologies as significant phenomena to study, with an interest in knowledge production processes as they go on in and around electronic and real spaces, and a reflexive attitude towards your own knowledge production processes. Put all of that together and you start to come to the kind of approach that I tried to develop in *Virtual Ethnography*, inflected with science and technology studies, media studies, sociology and anthropology.*

**Adriana Braga: For decades, Communication Studies have conceived communicational phenomena under a mass media model, in which there is a clear hierarchy between**

**media corporations (or ‘the media’) and ordinary people (or ‘the audience’). How do you see the power balance between ‘the media’ and ‘the audience’ after the spread of social networking tools?**

*Christine Hine: This is a big question, and a short answer won't really suffice, but I'll make a few observations. For sure, the coming of social networking tools does mean that it's a lot easier to have a voice as an ordinary person, and some very interesting forms of new social movement can emerge as a result. Castells has written quite convincingly about new forms of power emerging from the new capacities for organization and collective action, sitting alongside and reworking conventional forms of power based on material, information and symbolic forms of capital. However, where we have seen significant instances of online collective action the outcomes often aren't entirely independent of the media corporations, or of other commercial interests. Social networking tools are, for example, generally owned by commercial interests, and I do find it somewhat troubling how much of our democratic discussion now goes via media channels that are corporately owned, and that these corporate interests in turn are not independent of government pressure. This is certainly not the free and independent cyberspace of the original John Perry Barlow declaration. Also, in a more pragmatic sense, whilst viral spread of ideas is possible via the Internet, in practice many ideas are spread by being picked up and promoted through the mass media.*

*Conventional media and Internet are thoroughly intertwined and reliant upon each other in many domains, such that it isn't possible readily to separate out the influences. The Internet is embedded in the mass media, and vice versa. To the extent that there is a “power balance” between media corporations and audiences I'd say it's emergent from very specific situations and is quite volatile.*

**Adriana Braga: The ethnographic technique was created and historically applied for observation of social groups in physical co-presence. The digital environments demand from the researchers an adaptation of the traditional techniques for the specificities of the Internet. Many scholars are dealing with those adaptations in different ways, many times changing basic principles of ethnography, such as taking the Internet as an independent phenomenon, ignoring everyday practices in which the digital activity is inserted; taking short time for observation; desconsidering “fresh talk” in interviews, since they are usually conducted by email; paying no attention on a field diary; etc. In your experience, what are the main cares to be taken in order to conduce an ethnography in digital environments? How to keep the advances of the methodological theory derived from the anthropological tradition when applied to digital settings?**

*Christine Hine: I agree with you that many versions of ethnography adapted for digital*

*environments do move quite a long way from the original ideals of the approach. I think, generally speaking, that it is OK when it fits the needs of a specific research question, but it is of course a risk, in that the researcher may not be asking in the first place the most useful question to gain the best insights. A more traditional approach to ethnography often involves a much longer, more intensive and more critical phase of finding out what questions the researcher is going to be answering. So, the first aspect of traditional ethnography that I find very useful for ethnography off/in/and digital environments is to spend a long time familiarising, looking around and exploring the phenomenon from all angles, trying to understand what it is, for whom it exists and how it is experienced. That process I think is very important for developing an idea of appropriate questions to ask, and for aligning the questions we ask with our notion of what the phenomenon is we are exploring. Stepping straight into, for example, doing an ethnography of a specific online discussion group, risks missing out on this important phase of developing an appropriate question to which that ethnography might be the answer (and considering whether that question is indeed a priority for anyone to have the answer to, in practical terms or as a part of developing particular theoretical directions). The second key aspect of ethnography that I hold on to is reflexivity. Digital phenomena are very complex. They exist in multiple spaces, they are fragmented, and they are often temporally complex. We can't hope to experience a phenomenon like*

*this by simply "being there" because we don't automatically know where "there" is, or how to "be". But we can contribute to understanding of digital phenomena by trying to gain our own authentic experience of them as embedded, embodied ethnographers, and reflecting constantly on what we know and how we know it. I think this aspect of reflexivity, reflecting on how it is we know what we know about a situation, is probably the most significant part of ethnography in digital environments. It's important to continually reflect on the way that our understanding is shaped by particular methodological approaches, by the subset of participants we happen to interact with and by the media we choose for those interactions. By thinking about the limits to our understanding we can also think more creatively about how all participants in digital phenomena deal with the uncertainties inherent in social interactions online. Perversely, by dwelling on the limits to our own understanding I think we can understand something deeper about the nature of online interactions. Reflexivity is the key, and that, for me, links to a long tradition of critical and reflexive ethnography that existed well before the Internet became a mainstream phenomenon. That does get lost in some of the more realist approaches to online ethnography which treat it simply as a way of finding out about a pre-existing, singular reality.*

**Adriana Braga: Considering that this interview will be published on a special issue dedicated to theory and methods, I would like to ask you to tell what do you mean by realist**

**approaches to online ethnography? Could you give some examples?**

*Christine Hine: Van Maanen (1988) uses the term realist ethnography to describe that style of writing that presents ethnographic observations as facts about cultures. Crudely speaking, a realist ethnography would proceed from the ideal that one could produce an objective account of the culture being studied, as if it existed as a singular entity out there in the world. This kind of approach puts the ethnographer, and their interpretations, very much in the background and focuses on documentable evidence. There are plenty of examples of this in online studies, looking, for example, at an online discussion group as if it represented a discrete, bounded culture – which is very tempting when the online group presents us with an apparently total, archived version of what these people did and said. I'm much more drawn to an approach which stresses the diverse interpretations that can be placed upon phenomena and that focuses on the ethnographer as an active constructor of the field site, and of the text. So, we might decide to focus on a specific bounded online site, but that shapes our conclusions in a particular way, and it's useful to acknowledge, and explore, how other choices might have given us a very different outcome. I'm very struck by John Law's recent writings on the way that research methods don't just document society, but more actively shape what counts as society.*

**Adriana Braga: Scientists and scholars are maybe one of the first professional categories to use PCs and the Internet as daily resources for everyday life, since the 1980s. At the same time, we have witnessed on the past decades the rise of an industrial conception of science, sometimes called 'academic productivism'. In anthropology, this general model of academic management has affected, among other things, the available time for doing ethnographic fieldwork - as the expression 'quick ethnography' shows. In times of 'publish or perish', how do you evaluate the prospect of producing a long-term, theoretically dense and creative ethnography?**

*Christine Hine: That's a tough question to ask someone who has just returned from a year-long sabbatical to the joys of teaching and administration! Seriously, I do think that research time of all kinds is under pressure, and it is vital, and at the same time very difficult, to defend the importance of "slow research" that takes time to explore complex situations in depth, and of disciplines in which the pace of publishing includes large works crafted over long periods of time. We need to make sure our funding regimes and institutional structures do have some place for that kind of work. Practically speaking, sometimes the advent of the Internet can facilitate long term engagement in the face of restrictions on research time – even if one cannot be in a physical field site all the time, one can often now keep in touch virtually and*



*fit some forms of ethnographic engagement into the gaps between other activities. I learnt a lot about this earlier this year when I met a group of anthropologists at Aarhus University (organized by Nanna Schneidermann and Elizabeth Williams Ørberg) who were using Facebook in various ways interwoven with face-to-face encounters in their fieldwork. We need to be a bit creative about our models of what ethnography is, to keep up with both the changing patterns of connection and engagement that we encounter and the constraints placed upon us... but I do agree we should still hold dear to the importance, sometimes, of taking a long period of time and engaging experience with theory in depth.*

**Adriana Braga: How do you consider the topic of the researcher's presence on the ethnographic setting in a virtual ethnography? Do you think it is possible to conceive a research exclusively based on online data as 'ethnographic'?**

*Christine Hine: I do think that research based only on online data can be ethnographic, as long as it focuses on the ethnographer's experience of navigating through that setting. Such research can become autoethnographic, and I think that's a useful model to apply to the Internet and tells us some interesting things about the way that we build Internet usage into meaningful social experiences. Most projects would, however, benefit from at some point engaging with other people's experiences, and exposing the ethnographer's*

*interpretations to being challenged by others. That could still happen via online communication, but it's not something that you could do just by gazing at an archive. I think ethnography generally implies some form of real-time engagement.*

**Adriana Braga: Can you tell us about your current research interests and projects?**

*Christine Hine: On the basis I've described above some things I've been doing recently have not been so ethnographic. I've been looking at online parenting discussions, seeing how they enact particular forms of expertise, and the kind of displays of good parenting that they construct. That's really just archival analysis, but I'm hoping in future to be able to do some more ethnographic research in everyday settings, looking at how people locate and consume online parenting advice. I also have an ongoing interest in networks such as Freecycle which allow people to exchange their unwanted goods with others in their local area. This is a very interesting field site because it constantly interweaves online and face-to-face interactions, and is very difficult to pin down methodologically speaking. Finally, I'm interested in the interweaving of mass media and online media, exploring how television and newspapers both represent the Internet and are represented on the Internet. Most of what I do can still be captured under a very general question "What do people think they're up to when they are using the Internet?"*

## Etnografia segundo Christine Hine: abordagem naturalista para ambientes digitais

### Resumo

Christine Hine é uma cientista inglesa, professora e pesquisadora na Universidade de Surrey, na Inglaterra. Com amplo trânsito interdisciplinar (da Biologia à Ciência da Informação e Comunicação), Christine é uma autora de referência na área de metodologia da pesquisa em ambientes *online*. Autora de vasta produção sobre o tema, seus trabalhos mais conhecidos no Brasil são os livros *Virtual Ethnography* (Sage, 2000) e *Virtual Methods* (Berg, 2005). Nesta entrevista, concedida com exclusividade, Hine fala de sua formação intelectual, de metodologias etnográficas aplicadas a ambientes digitais e de alguns de seus projetos de investigação atuais.

### Palavras-chave

Etnografia. Metodologia. Internet

## Etnografía según Christine Hine: abordaje naturalística para ambientes digitales

### Resumen

Christine Hine es una científica inglesa, profesora y investigadora en la Universidad de Surrey, Inglaterra. Ella tiene fuerte orientación interdisciplinar (de la Biología hasta las Ciencias de la Información y Comunicación), y es una autora de referencia en las metodologías de investigación en ambientes virtuales. En Brazil, ella es conocida por sus libros *Virtual Ethnography* (Sage, 2000) y *Virtual Methods* (Berg, 2005). En esta entrevista exclusiva, Hine habla de su carrera y influencias, de las metodologías etnográficas aplicadas a ambientes virtuales, bien como de sus proyectos actuales.

### Palabras-clave

Etnografía. Metodología. Internet

## Expediente

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