The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research

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Through the work of constructing a field site, researchers define the objects and subjects of their research. This article explores a variety of strategies devised by researchers to map social research onto spatial terrain. Virtual networked field sites are among the recent approaches that are challenging conventional thinking about field-based research. The benefits and consequences of one particular configuration, the field site as a network that incorporates physical, virtual, and imagined spaces, will be explored in detail through a case study. The author focuses in particular on the logistical issues involved and practical steps to constructing such a field site. This article includes suggestions for ways of studying social phenomena that take place on a vast terrain from a stationary position.

Keywords: *ethnography; spatiality; cyberspace; imagined spaces; logistics*

This article draws on theories about networks and ethnographies of the Internet to address issues of field site selection in ethnographic research. Interest in ethnography—a complex of epistemological framings, methodological techniques, and writing practices—has spread into many domains and disciplines beyond its roots in cultural anthropology. It has been directed increasingly toward pragmatic outcomes beyond academic knowledge production ranging from political action and the development of social programs (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003; Madison 2005) to product design (Lewis et al. 1996; Salvador, Bell, and Anderson 1999). It is now firmly entrenched within a range of disciplines, including sociology, media studies, education, science and technology studies, and more. It has long since branched out of academia and become incorporated (with varying degrees of acceptance) into the corporate world (Orr 1996; Suchman et al. 1999; Jordan and Dahl 2006)[1] and international development institutions (Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn 2003). Given the diverse set of research interests represented by these various spheres, ethnographic practice has been reconsidered and reconfigured at different times and in different

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domains. Some of the convenient fictions that facilitated ethnographic approaches in the past have been less applicable to the new issues, theoretical and pragmatic, undertaken by researchers.

The term *field site* refers to the spatial characteristics of a field-based research project, the stage on which the social processes under study take place. For ethnographers, defining this space is an important activity that traditionally takes place before and in the early stages of fieldwork. It involves identifying where the researcher should ideally be located as a participant observer. Once fieldwork concludes, an ethnography cannot be written without at some point defining this spatial terrain where the social phenomenon under study took place. This is both an act of exclusion and inclusion, indicating what the research does and does not cover. A realization that the field site is in certain ways constructed rather than discovered is crucial to contemporary practice. Yet the practical work of constructing a field site has not often been discussed. This article will review some of the field site configurations researchers have developed in recent years and will explore a promising one: the field site as a heterogeneous network. The advantages of this particular configuration and the on-the-ground practical and logistical concerns involved in constructing such a field site will be explored in detail.

Over the course of several decades of methodological reflection, ethnographers have called into question the traditional conception of the field site as a bounded space containing a whole culture (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In the anthropological tradition, fieldwork frequently took place in a village in some remote region. There were advantages to the construction of such a bounded and disconnected field site. It put anthropologists in a position to make strong arguments about cultural difference that unseated presumptions of the universal or biological basis of social practices. Reliance on a bounded field site did not extend as far as claiming complete disconnection from external forces, but the influence of what was "external" to the field site was treated as secondary. This particular way of configuring the field site also had consequences for the way ethnographers positioned themselves as participant observers. The ethnographer, on entering the field site, worked to transition himself or herself from outsider to insider, becoming accepted as a quasi member of the society under study on an equal footing to others of similar social standing. A measure of such acceptance and enculturation was the ethnographer's ability to receive and interpret experiences as an insider would. At the same time, it was recognized that the researcher should maintain the ability to analyze social processes as an external observer, avoiding a complete conversion. This critical distance was often effected by exiting the field to enforce the physical distance necessary for analysis.

As anthropologists moved to take on new social issues, they began to propose new configurations of the field site. In 1986, Marcus and Fischer, reflecting on neo-Marxist movements, most notably world-systems theory, pointed to an awakening interest among anthropologists in "how to represent the *embedding* of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:77; emphasis added). Such work examined how larger systems were registered and materialized at the local level. They pointed to macroscale social changes as prompting such methodological questioning. Changes in the structures and interconnections of late capitalism, they argued, had increased the scale and complexity of social processes. The approximate containment of a culture within a small bounded space such as a village, was, therefore, increasingly less accurate. In later years, ethnographers joined the debate to suggest that such a containment of culture did not necessarily even occur in traditional studies of an out-of-the-way place (Clifford 1992; Tsing 1993; Piot 1999). Such a challenge to ethnographic practice arose not simply from rapid, global social change but also from theoretical developments, the draw of new objects of anthropological inquiry, and (one can speculate) the incursion of disciplinary outsiders.

The perspective on ethnographic work as the study of global processes as they are experienced locally did not suggest that the global might somehow be studied directly. Marcus, in a later book, revised his earlier writing on "knowable communities in larger systems" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:77) that relied on notions of "embedding" in favor of studying the "larger system" itself through an "ethnography in/of the world system" (Marcus 1998a). He argues that such a system is indeed "knowable" and underlines the need to "efface the macro–micro dichotomy" (Marcus 1998b:35). Marcus joins a number of other scholars in shifting from a notion of culture as essentially stationary to culture (or the social) as constituted by intersection and flow (Clifford 1992; Hannerz 1992b; Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996; Ong and Nonini 1997).

In this newer conception, the movement of objects, of individuals, of ideas, of media, and of the fieldworker is attended to, uncovering insights and objects of inquiry that were not visible in studies that assumed culture was spatially fixed. Marcus (1998a:79) addresses directly the matter of field site configuration, suggesting several possible modes that lend a coherence to research projects without being spatially bounded. They include "follow the person," "follow the object, and "follow the metaphor," among other configurations, all lending an overarching cohesion to "multisited" ethnographies. These arguments highlight how movement is central to social practice but also that coherent cultural processes may take place across great distances, linking up disparate entities. They may also take place on the move.

Challenges to locating field sites are not limited to the understanding that social processes could take place over vast physical terrain. Hannerz, in a compatible argument, draws attention to the heterogeneity of culture. He notes that within contemporary societies cultural processes register in the lives of individuals to varying degrees. Exposure to a diversity of meanings in such societies produces members who are self-determining (Hannerz 1992a). Therefore, an attempt to describe the culture within a bounded space, whether a village or a nation–state, elides the inconstancies that exist within any heterogeneous population. The practical problem for researchers becomes the challenge of foregrounding—how to pull something coherent forward from such overlapping and intertwined social terrain.

These studies provide the foundation of a contemporary understanding of how culture is (and is not) located. However, with the exception of Marcus's proposal for multisited ethnography, they do not explain how *fieldwork* may consequently be located. Given the arguments for the vast terrain and complex intermingling of cultural spaces, it is clear that field site selection must become something that is done continually throughout the process of data gathering. It cannot be decided once and for all in the early stages. In deciding what to include and what to exclude, some difficult, strategic choices must be made. A further elaboration on Marcus's proposal to "follow" the objects of ethnographic research will be undertaken here in an effort to make these conceptual developments available to practitioners of ethnographic work.

LOCATING THE FIELD IN CYBERSPACE

The argument for an alternate configuration of the field site presented in this article is built on the new ground established by Marcus, Gupta and Ferguson, Hannerz, and others discussed above, but it also draws from new methodological approaches devised to study the Internet. As the Internet emerged in the early 1990s, a distinct set of debates arose around its status as an object of research. Concerns about how to define the field site and fieldwork—issues about the relationship between social phenomena and space—were again central.

Emerging online spaces of the Internet appeared to belong to an entirely new category of space. Online discussion groups and text-based virtual worlds[2] presented compelling new settings of social activity. The Net exhibited non-Cartesian properties, and the activities there did not conform to standard laws of physics. Mitchell (1996) described the Net as, "profoundly antispatial. . . . You cannot say where it is or describe its memorable

shape and proportions. . . . But you can find things in it without knowing where they are" (p. 8). The Net frequently produced (especially among new users) a profound sense of spatial disorientation. Researchers experimented with research practices in online realms, formulating the concept of a virtual ethnography (Hine 2000; Ruhleder 2000) or cyber-ethnography (Ward 1999). The technical properties and social practices in online spaces allowed for research explorations that straddled the physical and the imaginary.

Methodological debates around the Internet were complementary to the ongoing effort to treat global processes as the proper subject of ethnographic fieldwork.[3] Yet the case made for a virtual ethnography had certain strengths that were lacking in this other set of critiques. First and foremost, it was well grounded in empirical work. Through participation, close observation, and interviews, researchers showed how inhabitants experienced certain virtual sites and certain forms of engagement on the Internet as both profoundly spatial and social (Rheingold 1993; Baym 1995a, 1995b; Turkle 1995; Watson 1997). This was justification for ethnographic, site-based approaches to the study of what took place online.

Virtual ethnographies were able to show how individuals made sense of ambiguous, non-Cartesian social terrain in the course of lived experience. As Hine (2000) notes, this form of fieldwork did not require the corporeal displacement of the researcher but was rather a mental immersion and an engagement with the imagination. T. L. Taylor (1999) describes the "plural existence" of the researcher as simultaneously an online "avatar" and an offline body. Virtual ethnographies demonstrated the possibility of awareness and analysis of spaces beyond what can be physically inhabited. A break between physical presence and spatial experience is heavily utilized in the argument of this article. This insight makes it possible to conduct fieldwork on social phenomena that take place across vast distances and in unconventional spaces.

Despite the innovations around notions of space in virtual ethnographies, many early studies fell back on the notion of a conventionally bounded field site (albeit virtual) and proposed a sharp division between offline and online spaces (e.g., T. L. Taylor 1999; Sunden 2002). Bassett (1997) describes such a division unequivocally as a "technologically mediated rupture" (p. 550). Those who pursued this style of virtual ethnography rarely combined such explorations with sustained empirical study of spaces away from the computer. It would not be accurate to suggest that these studies neglected to consider users' offline lives, as many of these studies involved interviews and participant observation in other modalities (typically telephone or face-to-face) (e.g., Correll 1995; Turkle 1995). Yet the principal field site was typically conceived of as the discussion group or virtual

world, with offline engagements supplementing, supporting, or serving as a contrast to the online.

In recent years, the chorus of voices challenging an assumed division between online and offline has grown (Henriksen 2002; McLelland 2002; Leander and McKim 2003; Carter 2005; Wilson 2006). Miller and Slater (2000) suggest that alternately, "we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (p. 5). Their advice for an ethnographic approach to the Internet is to start from a site offline rather than within its virtual spaces. In their study of the Internet in Trinidad, Miller and Slater conducted household surveys and spent time observing sociability in Internet cafés and other spaces to understand norms of Trinidadian social life that extended into online spaces.[4]

A few researchers have taken a further step to propose structural concepts as heuristics to help overcome the exaggerated distinction between online and offline worlds. In a particularly sophisticated example, Wakeford (1999) studied an Internet café in London, looking at "landscapes of computing" defined as "the overlapping set of material and imaginary geographies which include, but are not restricted to, on-line experiences" (p. 180). In a study of knowledge production about genetic disorders, researchers sought "nodes" that served as points of intersection between online and offline worlds and worked back and forth between the online (i.e., Web sites) and offline (i.e., laboratories and support groups) to develop a more comprehensive picture of knowledge practices (Heath et al. 1999). The network form advocated in this article is another structural concept that, like landscapes and nodes, can guide thinking and shape methodological practice in ways that escape strong offline–online divisions.

Ethnographies of virtual spaces have implications beyond the study of the Internet. The principles and new possibilities proposed by this approach can be extended to the study of mass media spaces and imagined spaces. Extending fieldwork in this way raises some interesting questions. Should we define the field site by the movement and dwelling of the fieldworker or, alternately, as the space in which a social phenomenon takes place? These are no longer considered one and the same. As Marcus (1998b) notes, contemporary ethnography is often a study of parts rather than wholes. Researchers cycle in and out of the field, skip certain areas entirely, and may rely on the recollections of participants in interviews to map out the space. Fieldworkers' movements are no longer coextensive with the way the social phenomenon under study extends across space.

CONSTRUCTING A FIELD SITE: LESSONS LEARNED

The issue of logistics is a major concern in this movement toward mobile, multisited, and virtual ethnography. If sociocultural processes are taking place across vast terrain, how do we, as researchers, cope with the inevitable limits in time and funding? How do we gain deep knowledge through fleeting social encounters or interactions with the ambiguous inhabitants of ephemeral, virtual spaces and where these "sites" might disappear altogether? The acknowledgment that researchers now often study "parts" rather than whole cultural processes is one logistical accommodation. Additionally, there has been some discussion and reflection about the occasional failures of researchers to recruit participants because of the fleeting nature of social encounters (Couldry 2003) or the atypical subject matter and mode (such as e-mail) of the request (Hine 2000). In this section, logistics will be central. There are limits to what can reasonably be accomplished in a contemporary, boundaryless ethnography. To address this concern, I will include some suggestions about how spatially vast field sites may be understood where the researcher physically inhabits only certain parts of the space.

The case in question is a study of the social appropriation of the Internet in Accra, Ghana, that involved an 8-month period of fieldwork. This study presented a number of challenges to defining a field site. I was interested in particular in understanding how the Internet was described and spoken about among users. I hoped to better understand the process users went through to learn how to manipulate this complex technology. My intent was to relate this discussion to efforts in high-level international development agencies, such as the United Nations, that championed access to new technologies like the Internet for developing countries like Ghana. I selected Internet cafés in part because they were publicly accessible. I also expected that conducting observations and recruiting interviewees would be more effective in this type of setting. Furthermore, these cafés represented a model of shared access that some argue is particularly well suited for the developing world where the Western norm of personal computer ownership was out of reach for most. Therefore, by looking at Internet cafés, I was positioned to respond to debates in development and technology studies.

On a more general level, this project posed challenges similar to those faced by many researchers nowadays who do field-based studies. It was carried out in an urban environment. It included an examination of non-Cartesian virtual spaces. It was concerned with the relationship between global processes and situated experiences. 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 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.

The distinction between local and foreign goods and media is often blurred. Strategies of naming intentionally render the local more global and the global more local. For example, it is common for businesses and churches to include the prestigious term "international" in their names, although they have no branches abroad. In contrast, region-specific advertising (e.g., for soap or beer) purposefully erases an indication of the foreign source of many products, reinventing them as local through imagery and narratives about family, gender, work, and recreation. These ambiguities of origin may be intentional or accidental; either way, they thwart efforts to describe culture that use a dichotomy between local and global.

These examples illustrate how everyday life in Accra is oriented toward the external world but that local and global are not meaningful or discernable as distinct categories. What was once firmly external has been pulled into the city, incorporated, and hybridized into an infinite supply of new cultural forms in language, advertisements, music, clothing styles, and more.

Initially, the Internet café itself seemed promising as a stand-alone field site. I could select several of these small businesses and simply spend my days inside these air-conditioned oases observing activities, perhaps providing technical assistance, and gaining an understanding of social processes shaped by the café environment. Yet it became clear early on that I had overestimated the role of these spaces as a socialized place with any cohesive, communal sensibility. Customers came irregularly and often for only short periods of time. I could not count on encountering anyone on a regular basis aside from the operators who worked there. Internet café users similarly noted that they had made no friends or contacts (in face-to-face interactions) at these cafés.

Yet from observing people in these cafés sitting, attentively observing the computer screen, often deaf to any surrounding noise and activity, it appeared that many were engaged in deeply immersive, social experiences in a virtual space. Their physical presence in the café became muted and hollow. These social experiences were frustratingly difficult for me to observe as a researcher, materialized primarily as scrolling text in a small window. I could intervene in such a social engagement from only one side and thereby risk obliterating the interaction in a quest to understand it.

I found that observing the customer circulations through the Internet café alone was insufficient for my purpose: to better understand the role of

Internet use in the everyday lives of the urban inhabitants of Accra. The Internet cafés were encompassed within neighborhoods, the neighborhoods within the city. I began to follow people from the café, starting out by arranging an in-depth interview often staged at a nearby chop bar.[5] Ultimately following these Internet café users led me to homes, churches, schools, foreign countries, into the future (if only imagined), and back to the Internet café where I was ultimately able, in a few cases, to observe more closely the immersive social encounters of these Internet users.

In one sense, my field site broadened out to become the city of Accra, as all the Internet cafés I studied, homes I visited, and roads I traveled doing my fieldwork were within the city or its suburbs. However, the city was paradoxically both too complexly heterogeneous (too inclusive a field site) and simultaneously too geographically limited (too exclusive) as a unit of analysis.

It was too inclusive in the sense that it was composed of layer on layer of intersecting and overlapping activity. Most of this activity, however, had little relevance to my main research interests. It was necessary to more selectively define the field site, outlining its social and material shape within the city, making the social phenomenon visible within a complex social space.

The boundaries of the city were also too exclusive because a variety of locales, institutions, and people near and far have a direct bearing on the appropriation and use of the Internet in Accra. For example, the foreign chat partners of Internet café users, their family members living abroad, and the immigration regulations of countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom are among the many relevant constitutive forces that define Internet use in Accra. Therefore, the field site must be defined without relying on broad territorial boundaries that are too imprecise.

To reconcile these spatial complexities, I conceived of my field site as a network composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects. Hannerz (1992b) advocates for this form of "network analysis" as a way to conduct ethnographic inquiry in a disciplined way. The network as a concept is quite compatible with the aim of ethnographic work to escape the concepts, categories, hierarchies, and presumed relations that structure quantitative research methods and formal surveys. As Strathern (1996) notes, "a network is an apt image for describing the way one can link or enumerate disparate entities without making assumptions about level or hierarchy" (p. 522). Similarly, Hannerz (1992b) comments that "networks . . . can be seen to cut across more conventional units of analysis" (p. 40). Therefore, networks provide a way for developing an unconventional understanding of social processes. It is a structure that can be constructed from the observable connections performed by participants.

Another advantage of defining the field site as a network is that it is produced as a continuous space that does not presume proximity or even spatiality in a physical sense. Continuity does not imply homogeneity or unity; it implies connection. The continuity of a network is evident in the way that one point can (through one or more steps) connect to any other point.

In a "field site as network," the point of origin, the destination(s), the space between, and what moves or is carried along these paths is of interest. It is an approach, "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (Marcus 1998a:90). Defining the field site as a network is a strategy for drawing the social phenomenon into view by foregrounding it against the social complexity of its urban setting. To foreground is to draw the contours of the phenomenon, distinguishing it from the competing and intersecting activities also taking place within the spatial field that is defined more traditionally by the territorial boundaries of the city. The term *contour* best describes the outcome of this act of foregrounding by indicating that greater precision is achieved than would be obtained relying on the boundaries of the city, the country, and so forth. At the same time, this term preserves the quality of irregularity and the notion that the social phenomenon is outlined rather than detached from its context.

In translating the many theoretical arguments for mobile and multisited ethnography into a practical reality, I arrived at several strategies that I will detail here. These strategies draw, in part, on some practices that are well established in ethnographic research but are here reframed, related to the demands of contemporary practice, and connected to some novel techniques. This is an attempt to extend and render concrete some of Marcus's suggestions for multisited ethnography. The following are some proposed steps (roughly sequential) for field site construction in contemporary ethnographic practice:

1. Seek entry points rather than sites. To study the field site as a network, the researcher must also make a strategic decision about what position(s) to take within the network. I found that this was a matter of searching for entry points rather than bounded locations (Green 1999; Couldry 2003). Hine (2000) similarly suggests that ethnographers "might still start from a particular place, but would be encouraged to follow connections made meaningful from that setting" (p. 60). In this study, I sought to trace out a field site using Internet cafés as a starting point. One way I did this was by tracing paths through the city defined by Internet users to get a sense of their everyday

lives. For example, I followed a young woman from the Internet café where she chats with her foreign husband, to the market where she is apprenticing with a hair dresser in preparation for her move abroad, to the Western Union office where she receives money from her husband earmarked for the purchase of a flashy, new cell phone. This approach provided a rich sense of the interconnections between Internet use and other aspects of Internet users' lives. A well-selected entry point can generate a broad spatial mapping that maintains a concentrated engagement with the research topic. The Internet café, with its frequent circulation of users and digital objects, had great potential for spinning out these broad webs across urban and virtual terrain.

2. Consider multiple types of networks. Marcus encourages fieldworkers to follow people, objects, and stories but does not describe the pathways that are traversed. Existing infrastructures for transporting people, goods, and digital objects come in a number of overlapping forms, some that are already understood as networks. These include phone networks, other telecommunications networks (such as the Internet), transportation networks (such as airlines), road networks, and social networks. By identifying these various networks, they, too, become foregrounded in the field site and can be understood as constraining and facilitating particular movements. By considering this multitude of networks up front, the many possible directions that could be followed are laid out for the researcher to consider. In traversing these networks, the field site becomes a *heterogeneous network*. It is distinct from what Olwig and Hastrup (1997) promote as "field work sites [that] have been defined by the human relations that were the subject of study" (p. 8) as well as Howard's (2002) ethnographic approach incorporating social network analysis. The field site as heterogeneous network incorporates mapping out the social relations of research participants and their connections to material and digital objects and physical sites. Hannerz (1992b) notes that such a network analysis will engage with the way meaning flows through other relationships, such as the state, market, and media. Accepting heterogeneity preserves the possibility that the social phenomenon under study may be defined not only by social networks but by material flows and other modes of connection.

3. Follow, but also intercept. Another issue is that of more distant locales and of spaces more geographically ambiguous than the city, where activities of following and inhabiting are less feasible. This is where notions of following as a physical act must be revisited and revised. One approach would be to follow messages from their origins in the Internet café to their destinations at the points of Internet access for chat partners in

various countries. I took, instead, a second approach, as advocated by Marcus (1998a), to study a single site with an *awareness* of its multisite context. I interpreted this to mean that the Internet café could be treated as a point of intersection where an understanding of the Internet was produced in part by the conversations and circulation of data through these computers. Doing this from a stationary position was a way to avoid the unwieldiness of expanding the field site into multiple countries.

Internet cafés experience constant circulation. Studying the café as a point of intersection meant attending to the connections from this site to other distant sites as well as tracking the movement of material and digital objects and people circulating through the café. The origins or circulation record of these objects, if available, is also of interest, although as I have previously acknowledged, this is often ambiguous. Using this perspective, I found that Ghanaian Internet café users exchanged messages with an extraordinarily wide range of chat partners online, including people not only from the United States and Europe but also from Pakistan, India, Israel, Hong Kong, and many other locations. They sought out mass media imagery of major news events (like the 2005 tsunami and the war in Iraq). They also acquired American hip-hop and rap music and videos. The result was a vision of both a chaotic, destructive, and glamorous world outside of the African continent.

4. Attend to what is indexed in interviews. Language can be instrumental in providing clues about things to follow and sites to visit. Through language, speakers often construct associations to and between spaces. In terms of methodological practice, distinguishing and attending to what is indexed in speech is generally treated as part of a later analysis phase (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). However, paying close attention to references to space and place in speech (or texts) earlier on can also be a guide to the further movement of the researcher. These references map out how the social phenomenon is perceived spatially. For example, in the course of interviews on Internet café use with young people, I heard stories about the school yard and the classroom as spaces where students discussed their forays on the Net. Without necessarily visiting these schools, I came to understand how the school, a space where similarly aged young people met and socialized, played an important role in how the Internet was collectively understood. References to places also served as suggestions for new locales to physically visit.

Interviews with Internet users in one neighborhood yielded references to "bases," informally organized groups of youth who created hangouts on roadsides and in unfinished buildings in the surrounding neighborhood. These informal organizations turned out to be significant sites where technical

knowledge about the Internet and cell phones was passed along. Following from these interviews, I was able to spend time at a base and at a more formally organized youth club that alternately met in an Islamic school or on the back patio of a local nongovernmental organization. Through speech, these spaces were brought forward out of the complexity of the urban neighborhood as sites of technology appropriation. They would otherwise likely have gone unnoticed.

5. *Incorporate uninhabitable spaces.* Studies of virtual worlds highlight how the spaces constructed by people through social interactions may not be physically inhabitable. The study of these spaces as dimensions of the field site will require some alternative approach. Use of the Internet frequently involves an engagement with the imagination and the production of imagined spaces because there is much that this medium conceals.

Imagined spaces are "social imaginaries" (Anderson 1983; C. Taylor 2002) conceived of in spatial terms. For example, Ghanaians constructed a notion of cyberspace and who was in it from their experiences and other sources of information. From conversations, it became clear that many Internet users conceived of chat rooms, dating Web sites, and other online spaces designed for mixing and mingling as providing access to philanthropists, potential business partners, and wealthy older people. Yet these expectations did not mesh with their experiences. Internet users tended to encounter teenagers and 20-somethings in these spaces. The particular technical configuration of chat rooms where the bodies of participants were concealed, where ambiguous screen names were used, and where an unknown number of individuals could be "lurking" without speaking facilitated such speculative imagination.

Besides cyberspace, geographic territories such as foreign countries were also imagined by Internet café users. Their fantasies were constructed partly from what they encountered in mediated form through Internet chat partners, Web sites, the news media, music videos, TV shows, movies, stories told by Ghanaians returned from abroad, encounters with foreigners in Accra, and rumors. The United States had an impact on the appropriation of the Internet in Ghana in other ways, most tangibly as the material source for many of the technologies that make up the Internet but also in terms of government regulations on foreign immigration that constrained the mobility of most Ghanaians. However, the United States was also a space that was constructed in the social imagination of Internet users in Accra as a desirable destination for education and employment and a source of enormous wealth. Appadurai (1996) argues for greater consideration of the fantasies people construct through engagements with mass media because they shape aspirations and real-world activities. In Ghana, there was a consequential

impact of these imagined spaces, as they were frequently treated as real and correspondingly acted on.

Imagined spaces can be documented primarily through interviews and are found in the repetition of themes between multiple sources, demonstrating a social reality beyond the individual. There is no clear way to participate in or observe these spaces. Participant observation can take place in the sites where the consequences of such imaginations play out. Particularly intriguing are sites where such imagined realities intersect and are contradicted by harsher alternative realities (such as the U.S. Embassy where Ghanaians sought travel visas and were often denied them). Imagined spaces constituted an important source of meaning that could be related to the experiences and activities of Internet users on a nonimaginary plane of existence.

6. Know when and where to stop. The potentially infinite size of the network and the lack of a natural stopping point presents problems for researchers (Strathern 1996). Practically speaking, one simple way of determining when to stop is when time runs out. As Hine (2000) points out, if one embraces the notion that ethnographic work is no longer about studying cultural wholes, then the question of completeness becomes unproblematic; one stops when one must. The dilemma becomes how to strategically construct the selected part in a way that produces something coherent, and some approaches to this have been detailed above. Meaning saturation is one well-established approach that does not rely on spatial boundaries to define the ending point of research.[6] When interviews with new people and observations in new locales yield a repetition of themes, this may indicate that the research process has come to a natural conclusion. Additionally, research that follows connections may move into a site where there are less and less frequent encounters with the topics of interest. This may not mean stopping the research entirely but rather that the researcher ought to return to the field site's starting point to pursue another set of connections and move in another direction.

CONSEQUENCES TO THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE

One consequence of defining the field site as a network is that it creates an alternate and indefinite role for the researcher. The network form reorganizes the relationship between the foreign researcher and the group under study. Entering the field site is no longer a process of crossing the boundary from outside to inside. There are a multitude of possible ways to define the connection between researcher and researched.

In the classic notion of fieldwork, where the object of study is a remote village that is treated as a whole culture, there could be few connotations attached to the arrival of a foreign researcher. He or she is merely a curiosity. Nigel Barley's (1983) fieldwork account in *The Innocent Anthropologist* is an example of this way of rendering the foreign researcher. He explains how among the Dowayo people of northern Cameroon his presence was tolerated because his bumbling attempts to master the language and fit into the community were such a source of amusement (Barley 1983). There was no sense of portent or promise attached to his arrival in the village. Yet few ethnographers arrive at their field sites so innocently and so unmarked anymore. Media exposure is one way foreigners are marked before their arrival. In contrast to Barley's account, Diane Nelson notes that on her arrival in Nebaj, Guatemala, when she gives her name, crowds of children begin chanting, "Diana, queen of the lizards!" She soon learns that Diana, queen of the lizards, was a character in an imported science fiction show they had watched on television (Nelson 1996:288). Similarly, my arrival in Accra was met in short order with shouts of "obruni, obruni" (meaning white person/foreigner), a term that was also imbued with many meanings. I discovered that much was presumed about me by virtue of my being foreign, American in particular. This meant that I was not entirely a mystery, and to an extent, I had already been "figured out" before I even spoke.

The connotations of foreignness interfere with the researchers' attempts to become members of the community. Entering the field site, ethnographers find that they are already part of it. They have been given their own position in the network but in a role that is often quite different from the people they are studying. In my own experience, I found that it was worthwhile to try to understand what it meant to be a foreigner moving about an urban setting in Ghana rather than to necessarily attempt community membership. In general, examining the role(s) assigned to the researchers by those they study is one route to understanding the highly connected lives and global orientations of people and societies in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

By defining the field site as a network in accordance with the guidelines described above, the field site transitions from a bounded space that the researcher dwells within to something that more closely tracks the social phenomenon under study. This site is constructed in terms of how such a phenomenon is perceived and acted on by participants. Ultimately, this approach is in keeping with the *emic* ideal of ethnographic practice. The

field site comes to be defined by the physical movements, places indexed in speech and text, and social imaginings produced by research participants. The researcher still, of course, plays a role in the siting of research interests, and the resulting field site is a collaboration between researcher and researched groups. Through an openness to following participants through space as well as in language, there is potential for empirical surprises and novel insights.

In my own fieldwork experience, Internet cafés served as an especially productive entry point for research into the appropriation and use of the Internet in Accra. Strategically, they served as an accessible public space where people could be recruited for interviews. The cafés were focal points of circulation and intersection from which I was able to expand outward, tracing the contours of the social phenomenon of Internet use. This was accomplished by both following the movement of Internet users through the city and by intercepting the flow of media through the Internet as it arrived in the Internet café. This made it possible to narrow the scope of the field site considerably, while still acknowledging how forces from various locales near and far were incorporated into the setting.

Logistics are an often inadequately acknowledged dimension of field-based research. I referred to a number of accommodations in my own fieldwork experience. I advocated staying in place to "intercept" circulations of data, people, and goods rather than following them. I suggested that a spatial mapping could be drawn out, in part, through references to place in language (in interviews and conversations) without visiting each and every one of these locales. The strategic selection of a site (the Internet café) where several networks converged, where people and objects came to me (rather than the other way around) also aided this effort. The work of "efficiently" defining a field site as a network involved conserving movement while switching between directions and objects of interest. Although not applicable to all field-based research, this approach is likely to be particularly useful to certain topics of social research, including migration, new communication technologies, broadcast media, transnationalism, and global institutions, among many others.

NOTES

1. See also the proceedings of the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (Lovejoy and Anderson 2006; Cefkin and Anderson 2007).

2. Text-based virtual worlds called MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and MOOs (MUD object oriented) have dwindled as the capabilities of the Net have progressed rapidly. However, new shared computing environments that facilitate identity play with richly visual environments have

become quite popular. These include Second Life and a host of MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-playing games), including EverQuest. Social research continues in these spaces (Williams 2007), and new interests are developing on the economics of virtual objects.

3. For an extensive and thorough analysis of the connections between the methodological debates in mainstream anthropology and those generated by virtual ethnographies, see Hine (2000).

4. Hampton and Wellman (2003) also pursued an offline ethnography to understand how Internet connectivity facilitated neighborhood interactions and activities in a wired suburb. They use this position to argue against claims that the use of the Internet was isolating people.

5. A *chop bar* is a place that serves local fast food.

6. See Charmaz (2006:113–14) for a nuanced discussion of what saturation is and what it entails in a grounded theory approach.

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