Mutuality between Researchers and Respondents in Virtual Ethnography

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Reflexivity has been considered as a central element in ethnographic research. An trained ethnographer is encouraged to reflect upon her/himself and her/his work, be self-aware and self-critical. The notion of reflexivity that sees researchers not as an 'unbiased, impartial' observer has challenged 'the ideology of objectivity [and] distance' in ethnographic research. While such sensibility bearing rich ethical and practical implications has been theorised and practised in ethnography in physical real life environments, I argue that a new meaning and notion, namely 'mutuality' is coming to light as reflexivity is extended to the field of virtual ethnography. Being able to collect data in virtual environments symmetrically denotes that researchers are obliged to commit to a profound responsibility of engaging mutuality with respondents on-line, interacting with them, making them aware of the research and inviting them to participate in the research process. Interpreting, managing, analysing, revisiting ethnographic data collected from virtual environments, in other words, should be completed through collective efforts of both researchers and respondents.

This argument derives from my research into free/libre open source software (FLOSS) communities. Virtual environment is one of the most prominent places for observing FLOSS development given the nature of FLOSS work. Communications between FLOSS users and developers on mailing lists, wiki, blogs, web forums, IRCs and ICQs serve as rich data for understanding FLOSS research. Collecting the data may be easy: the researchers can subscribe to mailing lists, visit wikis, blogs and web forums, and record IRC or ICQ logs. The main challenge is how to analyse these data since it requires a certain level of expertise and software literacy to decode narratives that are often full of techy terminology. Getting respondents involved in the research process thus is important for helping ethnographers to decode their technological activities and languages.

Apart from helping ethnographers to better interpret data, creating and enhancing mutuality between researchers and respondents can also announce the appearance of ethnographers in the field. It is of great concern whether participants in a virtual field are informed of the existence of ethnographers and aware of they are being watched. Creating and enhancing mutuality between researchers and respondents in this case can minimise the uneasiness of respondents of being studied because they can participate in research processes, Being allowed to reflect their activities, to present their own views of the data, and to interact with the researchers, creating and enhancing such mutuality between researchers and respondents opens up a profoundly democratic way of conducting and validating research.

Mutuality between researchers and respondents in virtual ethnography implicates in a new form of responsibility and research ethics particularly at this critical moment when a large amount of digital narratives to be produced, shared and publicly available on-line. New ICT tools enable researchers to network with respondents and collect digital narratives more easily, but also request researchers to disseminate their research more widely and interact with their readers and respondents in the wild. Drawing on my research experiences on FLOSS communities of interacting respondents and readers at several occasions (online and offline), engaging them in my research processes, this paper aims to conceptualise mutuality in virtual ethnography. My reflection also raises some questions

concerning grounding and realising mutuality, such as 1) how do researchers and respondents mutually inform each other of their activities and outcomes 2) how can such mutuality be managed and maintained? 3) can such mutual engagement be legitimised as a novel ethical code? 4) how does this kind of participatory research including both researchers and respondents in a research process challenge the way scientific knowledge is produced?