

## **'Live Sociology': Application made to the ESRC, April 2005**

### **Background**

While it is a cliché say that digital technologies and new media impact profoundly on our everyday lives, little attention has been paid to opportunities that digital photography, mobile sound technologies, CD Roms and on-line publishing opportunities might offer the social researcher and the practice of ethnographic research itself. It is still the case that most social scientists view the ethnographic research encounter as an interface between an observer and the observed producing either quantitative or qualitative data. Equally, the dissemination of research findings are confined to conventional paper forms of publishing and research excellence is measured and audited through such forms be it in monographs or academic journals. However, this proposal proceeds from the starting point that new media offer fresh opportunities to re-think both the conduct of ethnographic research and the forms social research writing take. Its offers a course of instruction in these opportunities for research students and established social researchers. The aim of the course is to re-think the gathering, analysis and presentation of research data and consider the future of ethnographic sociological representation.

The use of new media or 'hypermedia' in the context of ethnography is beginning to produce fascinating new kinds of social science texts. For example, Michael Wesch, at the University of Virginia has launched an innovative digital environment that focuses on an anthropological representation of the Nekalimin people of Papua New Guinea. The site harnesses the potential of new media "without sacrificing solid scholarly argument and analysis. Though there are currently over 300 pages of information on this site." (see <http://www.people.virginia.edu/%7Emlw5k/>). Equally, the ESRC sponsored Ethnography for a Digital Age project is another example of the potential for new and innovative ways of collecting, analysing and authoring ethnography. A new literature is emerging precisely addressing these themes (Williams, Mason and Renold, 2003, Mason and Dicks, 2001). This is not simply a matter of thinking through the relationship between on-line and off-line research but also the emergence of new kinds of forms of investigation and digitally mediated identities for researchers (Mason and Dicks 1999; Madge and O'Connor, 2002; Back 2002).

However, it remains the case that in social science the inclusion of audio or visual material in the context of ethnographic social research has been little more than 'eye candy' or 'background listening' to the main event on the page. The relatively inexpensive nature of these easy-to-use media offers researchers a new opportunity to develop innovative approaches to how we conduct and present sociology. The specific opportunities to enhance the scope, depth and rigour of qualitative research offered by the use of new media in ethnographic social research include: the development of new techniques to collect, analyse, archive, curate and exploit the many kinds of data employed in ethnographic social

research; the potential to use many media – sound, image and transcript - in the production of ethnographic sociological texts; the potential to bring sociology 'alive' by introducing interactivity and exploiting the possibilities of new media for iterative analysis; the potential to extend reflexivity in the conduct of research; and the potential to promote collaboration, integrative methods and secondary analysis. The course will combine theoretical and practical training. It will survey a whole range of new options in the use of new media: how PDF (Acrobat) formats can be used to make simple interactive CD Roms including sociological text and visual work, the possibilities for redesigning the relationship between the observer and observed using digital photography, using on-line interactivity to facilitate a relationship between researchers, research participants and users. It will contribute to the development of 'live' methods of social research and the presentation of sociological research in mixed and hypermedia, training social researchers in the use of these media, extending the media used to communicate research to users, and contributing to debates in the research community about new forms of sociological representation in ethnography.

### **Live Sociology: Practicing Social Research with New Media**

The nature of representation (in all its meanings) affects the way that social research is conducted, the kinds of materials that are recognised, collected and stored as data, the modes of analysis employed, and the criteria of validity accepted. This course considers the opportunities and implications of new media for how ethnographic social research is undertaken, managed and archived. It will provide participants with an understanding of the philosophical basis of understandings of sociological representation, and practical training in interactive research methods with the aim of developing researchers who can carry out 'live sociology' (<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/virtualmethods/vmesrc.htm>). It will provide a structured programme of activities in which researchers will be encouraged to collect data in a range of media, explore how relations between different media may be used as a way of conducting analysis (for example, participants will be trained to conduct analysis using hyper-linking), and re-present the data and argument in hyper- and/or multi-media form.

The course will be delivered over the course of a year through a series of five workshops open to up to twenty participants. Each workshop will be organised around a specific aspect of the research process from data observation and collection to dissemination and the form and distribution of sociological texts. The balance between practice and classroom discussion will vary according to the needs of each workshop theme. The course is principally aimed at established as well as young social researchers, but it will also accept social researchers outside the academy in market research, design, and commercial research and development. The intention is that each participant should develop a single piece of research work and develop this text over the course of the year with a view to publishing it in a website created specifically as an on-line resource and archive of course research texts. Through the process of on-line interactivity and annual review and monitoring the research training will be refined.

While the proposal emerges from Goldsmiths Sociology Department, London it is proposed that at least two of the workshops will take place outside of the capital. The details of exact venues are to be confirmed but we are committed to holding one session at Cardiff and hope to hold the other in the north of England (probably University of Manchester).

**Workshop One: Redesigning the observer (Goldsmiths College, London; one day)**

This first workshop will outline the structure and aims of the course as a whole. It will be facilitated by Professor Les Back and Paul Halliday (a filmmaker, digital artist and Convenor of Goldsmiths' MA Photography and Urban Cultures programme). This workshop will be largely practice-based but will also provide an introductory intellectual framework for thinking about qualitative research as representation.

It will:

- introduce the aims of the course as whole, locate in the context of on-line methods in qualitative social research (including questionnaires, interviews, virtual ethnographies and the use of data-bases) and introduce the project-based nature of the course;
- introduce the philosophical underpinnings of sociological representation, and outline how understandings of representation inform the epistemology of ethnographic social research;
- explore the opportunities that new media offer for research participants to become observers of their own lives;
- take participants through a series of practical exercises to develop the use of digital photography and sound recording in social research.

**Workshop Two: Redesigning the Analyser (University of Manchester; one day)**

This session will look at the opportunities that new media offer for the development of dialogue with research participants, and train participants in the possibilities this offers for shared sociological analysis. It will also explore the limits on dialogue within sociological analysis and the role of critical practice and the interplay between critical analysis and democratising the research encounter. It will look at specific case studies, in particular Mitchell Duneier's study of homelessness in New York (Duneier 1999). It will also examine the ways in which photography is being used to open up the possibilities of dialogic research and as a means to represent evidence and analysis. This workshop will be organised as a more conventional academic seminar facilitated by Professor Les Back and Dr Caroline Knowles. Issues to be addressed in the workshop include:

- reflexivity: whose reflexivity? (for example, the history of uses of diaries and other forms of self-reporting in social research, the uses and abuses of autobiography in research, as well as reflexivity in ethnography);
- the relationship between analysis and time;
- the uses of photography as an interactive resource;

- the ethics of 'interactive' research.

**Workshop Three: New forms of 'Writing' (Goldsmiths College; one day)**

Writing social research can have the result of flattening the texture of social experience and also the nuances of social analysis. This workshop will focus on the practical issues related to developing new multimedia forms of writing. It will combine classroom teaching and learning with practice-oriented sessions in the digital studio based in the Centre for Invention and Social Process, Goldsmiths College. It will be convened by Professor Les Back and Paul Halliday. The session will:

- explore the ways in which digital media offer an opportunity to represent society in motion;
- with reference to specific studies, explore tensions between balancing issues of accountability to the subjects and value to users of the research;
- address issues of data ownership, management and sharing;
- look at how journal articles and monographs can be framed and augmented using CD formats;
- explore the practicalities of using .pdf and CD Rom formats to represent research projects;
- assess the value of adopting the presentation of ethnographic social research in mixed media.

**Workshop Four: On-line Platforms for Research Dissemination (Goldsmiths College; one day)**

This workshop will look at the opportunities for building an on-line presence for researchers and research projects. It will look at the practicalities of creating websites, using .pdf formats and the use of DVDs to create new kinds of research texts. Following the structure of Workshop Three the session will combine classroom teaching and learning with practice-oriented sessions in the digital laboratory based in the Sociology Department and the Digital Studios recently established by the College. It will be convened by Professor Les Back and Paul Halliday. The workshop will:

- explore the opportunities afforded by new media to develop relations to users;
- address the implications of relating to users as co-producers of a 'live' research project';
- assess the implications of representation as acting with and on behalf of subjects of research;
- look at the possibilities for using on-line journals and on-line publications;
- consider how the use of new media may challenge social scientific understandings of representation.

**Workshop Five: The Future of Sociological Representation (University of Cardiff; two days)**

This final two-day workshop offers an opportunity to discuss the implications of the whole programme for re-thinking the future of sociological representation and ethnographic research practice. It will include a series of papers that will respond to the central question: how does the use of hypermedia transform the nature of ethnographic research practice and sociological representation? Alongside these papers, the participants will be given the opportunity to present and discuss the multi-media research texts they have developed through their involvement in the programme. The session will be convened by Professor Celia Lury and Professor Les Back, and will include presentations from the following experts in the field of hypermedia research:

- Dr Nina Wakeford, (Director of INCITE), University of Surrey
- Dr Amanda Coffey, (Ethnography for the Digital Age), University of Cardiff
- Dr Clare Madge, (Exploring Online Research Methods in a Virtual Training Environment), University of Leicester (to be confirmed).

### **On-line Materials and Developing an Ongoing Portfolio of Multi-Media Research**

The programme of five workshops will be repeated annually for three consecutive years. Integral to the workshop programme is the development of an on-line virtual learning environment and digital publication space. The LIVESOCIOLOGY website will serve two purposes: firstly, it will provide an interactive space to produce on-going resources for those interested in ethnographic multi-media research; secondly, it provide a digital publication space for members of the course and a medium for disseminating research texts.

#### *a) Virtual Learning Environment*

This on-line space will serve to create learning resources for participants in the scheme and it will also provide them with interactive spaces to dialogue with course participants and the convenors of the programme. Through LIVESOCIOLOGY the course team will provide course materials, bibliographies and web links while students will be able to create weblogs, work on exercises linked to the workshops and use the space to upload research texts as works in progress.

#### *b) Digital Publication Space*

LIVESOCIOLOGY will also provide course participants the opportunity to publish their work. At the end of each year participants will be invited to submit multi-media work for consideration for publication. An editorial board consisting of the course convenors and tutors will consider the work and coordinate peer review. The aim is to publish between five and ten pieces of work annually. Over the three-year period of the project we plan to create a varied and leading-edge collection of examples of ethnographic social research using multi an/or hypermedia.

The on-line materials will use the Goldsmiths College Virtual Learning environment as a host server. Links will be established with related sites including the proposed on-line portal to provide training in on-line research at

Leicester University. The LIVESOCIOLOGY website will be developed by a multi-media designer who will work alongside Professor Back and Paul Halliday.

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