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### RETHINKING RESEARCH ETHICS FOR MEDIATED SETTINGS

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# Anne Beaulieu & Adolfo Estalella

## RETHINKING RESEARCH ETHICS FOR MEDIATED SETTINGS

*An important feature of e-research is the increased mediation of research practices, which changes not only the objects and tools of research, but also the relation between researcher and object, between researchers, and between researchers and their constituencies and stakeholders. This article focuses on the ethical aspects of e-research by analysing the implications of these changing relationships in the case of ethnography in mediated settings. It makes a specific contribution to the discussions about research ethics that are currently pursued and that tend to be catalysed by institutional review boards. The authors aim to link ethical discussions with the actual practices and conditions of qualitative social research. To do so, they review how researchers have used principles and ethical guides of traditional disciplines in ethnography, and show that several of concepts and categories on which these guidelines rely (personhood, privacy, harm, alienation, power) are otherwise enacted in mediated settings. The authors also analyze the ethical issues that have arisen in our own research. On the basis of these discussions, they specify two of the underlying dynamics of research in mediated settings, contiguity and traceability, in order to understand why traditional research ethics are challenged by these settings. The article specifies how mediated contexts can shape ethical issues; it provides a concise yet illustrative elaboration of a number of these issues; and proposes a vocabulary to further discuss this aspect of ethnographic work. Together, these elements amount to a contribution for the elaboration of new ethical research practices for social research in mediated settings.*

**Keywords** ethics; e-research; accountability; research relationships; privacy; IRB

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E-science has often been characterized in terms of the infrastructures that are deployed to support the computation of large amounts of data (Wouters & Beaulieu 2006). Increasingly, this definition is broadening (Halfpenny *et al.* 2008) and collaboration and communication are considered as important

constituents of e-science (Spencer & Jirotko 2008). As a broader and more reflexive approach to the use of digital technology, 'e-research' has been defined from the start as multi-layered endeavour, including critical reflection on changing research practices as well as new methodologies and new infrastructures (Wouters 2006). This definition, and the body of work it has inspired, constitutes the frame of reference for this article. In addition, an important feature of collaboration and communication in e-science and especially in e-research is the increased (re-)mediation (Bolters & Grusin 2002) of research practices. This feature means that not only the objects and tools of research change, but that the relation between researcher and object, between researchers, and between researchers and their constituencies and stakeholders are also transformed through being highly mediated. This article focuses on the ethical aspects of e-research by analysing the implications of these changing relationships in mediated settings.

This article is meant as a specific contribution to the discussions about research ethics that are currently pursued – at times in very intense and urgent tones – by researchers involved in social research. These discussions follow a number of lines. From a US, UK and Canadian context, they tend to be catalysed by the development of institutional review board (IRB) procedures and other formal regulation of research on human subjects, predominantly within an instrumentalist framework (Ess 2002). The issue in these discussions often comes down to the autonomy of the researcher in the face of bureaucratic requirements – requirements that may furthermore be considered maladapted to the practices of the humanities and interpretive social sciences (van den Hoonaard 2001; Dingwall 2006; Richardson & McMullan 2007; Hedgcock 2008). Another dominant line of discussion we have encountered seems to divide researchers whose empirical terrains are Internet-based (more often than not, web-based) (Frankel & Siang 1999; Ess 2002; NESH 2003). This discussion revolves around the issue of whether activities and exchanges fall unilaterally within the public sphere, or whether the picture might be more subtle than that, with different understandings of privacy and consent (Jacobson 1999; Stern 2009). In this latter case, the dominant issue is the extent to which researchers should consider certain interactions to be private though they are conducted on the Internet (which for some is public, by definition). These are important discussions, in which we have ourselves participated.

Our present contribution, however, is somewhat orthogonal to these issues and aims to link ethical discussions with methodological concerns in social research. From the standpoint that methodological decisions are entwined with ethical assumptions (Olivero & Lunt 2004; Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Markham 2006; Buchanan & Ess 2008), we make explicit ethical issues that arise in doing empirical work in mediated settings – in our case, participant-observation. Like Carusi (2008) and Markham (2004), we seek to broaden the discussion of ethics beyond IRBs, privacy

and anonymity. The feeling that consent forms are not quite covering all ethical issues in research, and that other ways of ‘doing ethics’ are needed is widespread among scholars of ethics and researchers. Yet, we find little articulation of these issues and of ways of dealing with them in the published literature. At present, it seems that the predominant role of IRBs is difficult to overestimate: a reviewer of this article requested that we make explicit how our IRB had responded to our research, that we give examples from our ‘protocol’, and that we suggest sample alternatives for IRB language. Even for this sympathetic reviewer of an article that tries to denaturalize the equation of ethics and IRBs, it is unlikely that research and debate might proceed or be discussed outside that specific regulatory framework. We therefore hope that our attempt to provide a vocabulary for an alternative framing of an ethics discussion can contribute to broadening the debate.

The context of ‘new media’ and ‘new modes of research’ in which we are working make these issues all the more urgent because, as we will show, they challenge some of the existing conventions of ethnography that served to address these dilemmas of fieldwork. The result is a climate in which a seeming ethical gap threatens to be filled by some of the more instrumental approaches to research ethics – sometimes for good reasons, but, sometimes because of the strength of institutional routine or for the sake of expediency. Furthermore, as we will demonstrate, certain assumptions embedded in ethics guidelines do not address some of the conditions that are particular to e-research. This makes the articulation of such ethical issues all the more pressing. This article, therefore, pursues an ethical discussion that is oriented to practice, in two senses. First, we show how ethical issues become visible in the course of our ethnographic practices. Second, we document how we perform practical judgments (in the sense of *phronesis*) to determine which frameworks to apply to the situations encountered, drawing on (and at times challenging) ethnographic traditions and conventions.

By opening up this discussion, we wish to signal the variety of ethical issues, beyond privacy, and ways of addressing them that exist in social research. We specify some of the important ways in which mediated contexts can shape ethical issues, and provide a concise yet illustrative elaboration of a number of these issues, and suggest a vocabulary for discussing this aspect of research. Ideally, this material will be useful to intervene in discussions about appropriate ways to regulate and support ethical considerations in social research.

## Codes and conventions

This article does not aim to critique IRB procedures and ethical guidelines. We do set out to show that ethical issues arise beyond what formal framework can

legislate, and to demonstrate how ethical issues are part of unfolding relationships, beyond the orchestration of moments of ‘informed consent’.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as IRB approval does very often function as a gate-keeping mechanism to research, we do deplore the way it tends to focus attention to that particular instantiation of ethics (Stern 2009).

We therefore seek to show that ethical issues are present not only at particular moments when we approach informants, but also in the course of making decisions about how to approach them, in building relationships, in the kinds of presence we establish in the field, and in the course of developing insights and disseminating these. Across these activities, other elements besides IRB guidelines inform the decisions we make. These too, whether they be traditions, methodological precepts, values, professional norms, etc., are also deserving of attention as valuable ways of ensuring that research proceeds ethically.

Conventions of fieldwork and of academic research are important elements in shaping the way we deal with the ethical dimensions of these activities. As Bruckman (2002) notes, a lot of the time, we rely on what ‘seems reasonable’. Metaphors used to conceptualize our field of research also shape ethical decisions: seeing the web as a ‘forum’, or as a ‘diary’, will affect how we conceive of the ethical valence attributed to empirical material, and; seeing participants as authors or subjects will involve a different ethical decisions on the part of the researcher (Bassett & O’Riordan 2002; Walther 2002).

Another resource we have to deal with ethical questions is the set of values or ‘virtues’ we get taught in methodological seminars (ideally) and to which we are meant to aspire as scholars and professionals (cf. Fine 1993; Faubion & Marcus 2009). Such virtues and values are always actualized in particular ways, and common sense also leaves room for exceptions and deviations. But reflecting on why they exist, and on how different kinds of research challenge or reinforce them is a useful exercise, since they probably have a greater reach than most IRB prescriptions. In other words, rather than seek ethical guidance solely in the formalizing and procedural logic of IRB procedures, we propose to examine where anxieties about ethical issues come from, and to consider how conventions about how to do research might also serve as mechanisms to address these ethical dilemmas.

We use our own experiences in doing ethnographic research to ground our analysis. These experiences can inform other areas of social research not only because participant-observation is used in a wide range of fields (communication, science and technology studies, sociology, human–computer interaction research, organizational studies, etc.), but more fundamentally, because changing relations between researcher and research subjects, and between researchers and the field as context of research are also key aspects of e-research – even if they are not fore-grounded in publications.

## Research settings

In the settings in which we have done fieldwork most recently, the majority of social and cultural phenomena of interest and our participant-observation activities were mediated – although other kinds of interactions were also part of our fields and of how we approached them.

Internet ethnographers in particular have felt prompted to reflect on the diverse implications of engaging with technologies in their fieldwork practice, insisting that technology is not a mere tool (Dicks & Mason 1998). Incorporating technology in fieldwork involves changes in the modes of presence of the ethnographers, in the way they construct their identities and the manner in which they establish and maintain their relations in the field (Hine 2000, 2006, 2008; Beaulieu 2010).

As we engage with technology, we not only act but are acted upon, and our fieldwork experience is shaped by our engagement with technology. It is therefore not a question of ‘accessing’ an existing object through potentially better or more powerful tools, but of understanding the particular mediation involved, when working in digital and networked settings.

In what follows, we specify two of the underlying dynamics of research in mediated settings, in order to understand why traditional research ethics are challenged by these settings. First, we show how, when doing research in a mediated setting, the contiguity of settings challenges distinctions between the field (where research takes place), the place of other scholarly activity (where analysis takes place) and the place of dissemination and communication (publication, etc) with consequences for ethical practice, such as anonymization.

Traceability is a second related but distinct dynamic that arises when dealing with field data from mediated field sites. We mean by traceability the property of inscriptions to be located on the Internet using search engines, but also through other mechanisms enabled by digital platforms (log files, user profiles, etc). The ethical import of traces on the Internet has been noted (NESH 2003), and we show how traces can be involved in a dynamic of traceability, making issues like exposure, ownership and authorship especially prominent. We then reflect on the core ethical values that need to be sustained and on the practices and procedures available to researchers to sustain them.

We have both recently studied social and cultural forms in which mediated communication is a main aspect of the activities in the field site and of our research topics. Estalella’s recent fieldwork consisted of following blogs, writing his own blog, and posting nearly every day. Most of his informants were people intensively involved in the practice of blogging and the construction of the Blogosphere in Spain, the main topic of the research. Besides blogging, fieldwork involved maintaining other types of interactions through email, chat and phone, and attending face-to-face meetings. For Beaulieu, recent fieldwork consisted of participating in the activities of a

group of academic researchers based in an Arts faculty in a university in the Netherlands. The main research topic was novel practices around information and communication technology by this group of researchers. The fieldwork involved following and participating in mailing lists, websites, wikis, seminars, lectures, PhD examinations, inaugural lectures, book launches and some classroom instruction. Fieldwork also involved interviews and meetings, face-to-face, by email or telephone. These experiences inform our awareness of the dynamics of field relations and our sense that ethnographic relationships and our relation to our work also change over time.

### **Presence and accountability in the field: a vignette**

For the sake of conciseness, we take one particular episode of Estalella's fieldwork as the focus for our discussion. We draw out the particular conventions (and lack thereof) which shape expectations and relationships, and reflect on the ethical dimensions of these. For Estalella, blogging was a methodological strategy and part of his research design. It was aimed at experiencing the technology under study, constructing rapport with bloggers and, importantly for this discussion, it also aimed to alleviate an ethical concern for Estalella. However, the way the blog served these multiple functions also meant that this approach to blogging activities rendered various aspects of research contiguous, as we will see.

Because of his concern to become and remain visible, Estalella made a big effort at the beginning of his fieldwork to introduce himself to potential research subjects. A webpage detailing his affiliation and project might have been enough to counter accusations that he was doing covert research. But Estalella wanted to be more accountable than this and made a conscious effort to become highly visible in the 'Blogosphere', while being aware that reaching everyone was not a feasible goal.

In terms of the desire to be visible in the field and avoid doing (or being perceived to be doing) covert fieldwork, the blog served as a way of presenting the research and researcher. As such, it was a successful strategy to be in the field in an enduring and visible way, something that is notoriously difficult to achieve in mediated settings (Sharf 1999; Baker 2009; Robinson & Schulz 2009). So far, this is not so different from ethnographers being called 'doctor' or 'nurse' (depending on their gender) in the course of fieldwork on a hospital ward in physically co-located ethnography. However, some elements of Estalella's strategy to configure the presence of the researcher had important consequences. Instead of writing an email to bloggers to introduce himself (Hine 2000, p. 74; Fay 2007), Estalella decided to use a different strategy – one which, while indirect, was very close to bloggers' own practices. To make certain bloggers aware that the ethnographer was interested in them, he linked his blog to theirs, and



occasionally left comments on their blogs. He also engaged in debates with certain bloggers via his blog, at times tailoring his posts to topics that were of interest to the bloggers he was following. The 'ping-backs', comments, traffic and blogrolls where Estalella's blog appeared testified to the success of this strategy for making his research visible. On the one hand, these elements were evidence of his desire for openness about his research, while also further increasing its visibility because of the way blogging platforms use these kinds of traces in the presentation and ordering of information.

In terms of the ethical concerns for which it was set up, this strategy to be visibly present and to be reachable for informants was working. On the other hand, as a consequence of this blogging strategy, much more happened than solely making the researcher's presence visible to his informants. Many others, besides the 'bloggers of interest' also found their way to Estalella's blog. Researchers whom Estalella had already met read his blog during his fieldwork (including colleagues at his university department), commented on it, and discussed his articles. As a result, he was faced with the comments of some of these researchers on his own blog. The fieldwork setting and academic discussions about this fieldwork, therefore, converged on the blog. Estalella experienced that it was at times quite difficult to properly put those discussions in context, and felt that both his blogger/fieldworker identity in the field and his research identity could have been damaged through this high visibility. This is an instance and the vulnerability of researchers (Carusi & Jirotko 2009) being further exacerbated by this particular research setting.

Besides increasing the visibility of a range of his activities, the blog and the setting of fieldwork also had consequences for his relations to his informants. Sometimes, certain bloggers used Estalella's surname as a tag to mark contents (photos, articles, bookmarks, etc.). At other times, they linked his blog, or uploaded photos of him in web-based databases. As Estalella became highly visible in the field, so did the informants and bloggers in his field; making the ethnographer visible meant exposing informants. The comments they exchanged in public sites, the conversations they maintained and the identity of their informants were all traceable.

Two kinds of tensions arose, and each of these has an ethical dimension. First, there was a tension between ethnographic practices: that of informing research subjects about the presence of the ethnographer and the research that is undertaken, and that of protecting informants by anonymizing their contributions. Second, the way the field was articulated meant that the boundaries between kinds of scholarly activities were blurred, creating tension between fieldwork and analysis, and between discussions with informants and discussions with academic colleagues. These tensions can be characterized using the terms *traceability* and *contiguity*.

## Bringing research closer to home, mixing, and mingling

Contiguity of settings, as we just illustrated, seems to challenge many assumptions about boundaries and distinct places in the ethnographic tradition. In the nineties, the idea of skipping travel to do fieldwork was a much discussed feature of doing fieldwork on the Internet. But even if close to home, an ethnography of the Internet is neither necessarily nor usually an 'ethnography at home' (Hess 2001), though mediated ethnographers have to face similar issues to those encountered by researchers doing 'anthropology at home' (Jackson 1987; Norman 2000). Ethnographic work in which mediated interaction plays an important role shows signs of an even messier process, in which various aspects of research may be in closer relation to each other. But 'closer' than what? What are the conventions that seem challenged by this approach to doing fieldwork?

A reasonably fixed chronology and geography has typically marked ethnographic research: travel to the field, return, analysis and writing up, and publication. In this framework, field and home are distinguished on the basis of place. The first is the place where fieldwork is carried out and the empirical data are produced, often a far away location. Home is the place where analysis, writing and dissemination take place, at a later time. The dissolution of the geographical distinction between field and home complicates the situation for the ethnographer: drawing clear boundaries between personal and professional spaces and identities become more difficult (Burrell 2009). Leaving the field cannot be understood anymore as a trip 'back home' but as a process of breaking with the routines and practices of fieldwork. Geographical and temporal distinctions between the field (be it at home or away) as the locus and time for producing data, and academia as the locus and time for producing and disseminating knowledge blur to a greater extent when doing networked-mediated ethnographies.

Home and field intermingle as research practices become contiguous with other settings. Interviewees 'look up your site' and gather information about your professional and even non-professional identity; friends and family are aware of what you are doing and can jump at any time into your field (leaving a comment in your blog); informants can be found at any moment in the everyday life of the researcher. These moves increasingly seem banal, necessary steps to getting the work done, yet they are not insignificant. Contiguity may indeed be one of the results of the decoupling of time/space brought about by the use of virtual technologies and data archiving. If relative distance to the research setting has a particular tradition in ethnography, the 'closing of distance' is also highly relevant for scholars in e-research who increasingly find themselves studying their peers, (Dutton & Meyers 2009) and pursuing research as interventions (Beaulieu & Wouters 2009; Dormans 2009; Waterton 2010).

## Dealing with contiguity

Our point is that the usual conventions for separating these kinds of activities are challenged by contiguity. Of course, researchers are not without recourse: Hine's (2000) account of her first virtual fieldwork contains remarks about being aware that informants would check her webpage, and taking that audience into account when composing her webpage. Others have noted that different email addresses, with or without institutional affiliation, were also part of their resources for modulating their Internet identity. But we insist here that many new conventions must be developed, articulated and debated by researchers. For ethnographers, persistent contiguity in time and space means that analysis and data production get intermingled, so that it is difficult to demarcate clearly the end of the fieldwork or the place of different conversations and evaluation of activities pursued, and that many of the conventions about separating various activities in the course of fieldwork get pushed to breaking point.

Contiguity of settings even turns some conventions on their head, making them ethical liabilities rather than protective measures. In the vignette above, dynamics of greater visibility in an unclearly defined context felt at times like a resource, and at times like a constraint for the ethnographer, with the ethnographer risking the always fragile identity of a fieldworker. While fieldwork is never easy, both of us in our respective fieldwork felt at times exposed, surveilled and even, on occasion, that actors in the field or colleagues from 'home' were foreclosing on our research. This can also happen while doing fieldwork in non-mediated settings, but the contiguity of these exchanges with our other work makes it more difficult to take distance from such pronouncements and to proceed with the next steps in our research. For us, this raises the issue of the kind of freedom and space that is needed in order to explore, to try things out, to learn. For Beaulieu, not being a PhD student meant relatively greater immunity from the judgement of peers, but for Estalella, this experience also raises the issue of the space that one needs as a student. What is at stake in having your hand forced? If one does not want to engage in theoretical discussions in the middle of fieldwork and in full view of the field, does one risk losing face with academic colleagues? Furthermore, interpretations and views change over the course of fieldwork, and being pinned down early on may not be the most thoughtful way to proceed with ethnographic analysis. Yet such exchanges might also enrich one's fieldwork, by making clear to others in the field what is at stake in the project. These are also issues that can arise in other approaches to research, for example, in the case where a web-based questionnaire becomes the object of a web-based discussion.

Research in mediated settings raises ethical dilemmas about what it means to learn to do research, to operate in different modes in different settings, and to be aware that different aspects of research involve different kinds of accountability.

We propose the term contiguity as a label. Contiguity points to the reconsideration of the nature and context of the epistemic practice of the ethnographer: where is the ethnographer producing knowledge? If the field is so visible, so accessible, so contiguous, should we maintain the same norms of identity protection? Is the field not only the place for producing data but also the site for producing knowledge? Those issues push us to rethink the differences between these activities, and the value placed on each. It is also an opportunity to question the distinctions between fieldwork/analysis/dissemination that were constructed by relying on geographical distance between the field site and the ivory tower, or on the social and cultural distance between the life world of the fieldworker and that of the academic. When academic home and field are contiguous, we may feel at a loss as to how to articulate these distinct roles and voices. Yet, as we have shown, these are not shortcomings of researchers, but rather, the result of encountering features of the research settings without a sufficient set of accepted practices and conventions to deal with them. Identifying these dynamics is a first step in being able to think about the ethical consequences for our research – a point to which we return in the conclusion.

## Traceability

Traceability is a second key concern when dealing with data from mediated field sites. We mean by traceability the possibility of locating digital data on the Internet using search engines or any other mechanisms enabled by digital platforms (log files, user profiles, etc). Being traceable, digital data holds the possibility of locating and identifying participants, sites, social interactions and the ethnographer herself, and makes particular issues such as anonymity, visibility, exposure, ownership and authorship especially prominent. In this section, we reflect on the core ethical values that are challenged by traceability and on the mechanisms and procedures available to researchers to sustain them.

Early on, social researchers studying the Internet found that guidelines for dealing with ‘data’ or with subject protection did not provide enough orientation for many questions they had to face (Ess 2009). Internet researchers have found that some of the principles and categories used in the ethical guides of traditional disciplines are of limited usefulness, especially insofar as one of the main axes used to organize ethical decisions in ethnographies is the dualism between the private and the public (Estalella & Ardévol 2007). In spite of the analytical and historical importance of these categories, their limits and inadequacies have been repeatedly pointed out by empirical studies and given way to more subtle approaches. The idea that accessibility of mediated spaces equates with publicness of interactions (Frankel & Siang 1999), for instance, is not always endorsed by participants in these spaces (Quan-Hasse & Collins 2008), with the consequence that they may very well claim their right to be informed and

consulted if anybody tries to use this information. Departing from this idea, some authors have started to make more elaborated arguments, proposing concepts that try to overcome the limits of these categories, like ‘contextual integrity’ and ‘privacy in public’ (Nissenbaum 1998), for instance, or ‘dialogical ethics’ that take into account expectations of privacy (Cavanagh 1999) or perceived privacy (King 1996) of individuals.

While these debates have helped articulate more subtle views of the Internet as a space of modulated private and public character, we put forth that traceability is the key issue – one that urgently needs attention and that better describes the core of the fundamental ethical issues around mediated ethnography. In doing this, we follow the path pointed out by Bakardjieva *et al.* (2003), who have signalled that bigger questions may be underlying discussions of privacy/publicness. We propose that traceability may have even deeper implications.

Mediation of research practices changes the relative significance and meaning of ethnographic writing. Writing is at the core of ethnography, as the name says. But ‘writing up’ is also a key activity of other forms of research, and indeed, considered so important that research is increasingly assessed in terms of written output in the form of publications. As such, the ethical issues raised by changes in the place of writing in research go beyond the rights of individuals, and reach into questions about the value of knowledge and the accountability of researchers.

The practice of the ethnographer has been described as making inscriptions in which they try to convey the inter-subjective flow of their field experience. These inscriptions (field notes, photos, documents, recordings and transcriptions, etc.) will later be included in the ethnographer’s accounts: quoting informants, publishing their photos, etc. One of the main ethical issues ethnographers usually faces when writing up their material is avoiding any possible link from their accounts that allows one to identify the people, institutions or places of her field. A common mechanism for achieving this is using pseudonyms for participants and places, and removing identifying details. The ethnographer is then ‘free’ to quote anything or anybody. The ‘ethical’ move for the ethnographer is therefore to establish a break between the field and her or his accounts.

However, there are remarkable differences between the inscriptions produced by the ethnographer in the transcription of a face to face conversation, for instance, and the inscriptions produced when quoting a text from a blog or a website. While the first are more ephemeral and endure mainly because of the ethnographer recorded or wrote them down, a blog article or a text from a website are relatively more persistent – they are often public and may be traceable. If the ethnographer quotes material from the web, it can be traced back to its source, using a search engine, examining log files, looking into indices, etc. In this case, it is not enough to conceal names of people, places and institutions to protect their identity. The very practice of using or referring to mediated material pose particular problems: first in relation to

the protection of privacy of participants in the research; and second in relation to the exposure of the ethnographer's fieldwork. Traceability not only makes it more difficult to protect subjects' identity, but the very fieldwork practice of the ethnographer is exposed as a consequence of the visibility and traceability of mediated interactions. Recall that Estalella had set up links to the blogs of interest, as a way of signalling that he was paying attention to them. Through this practice, both subjects' and the ethnographer's interactions on the web are visible and traceable.

The issue the ethnographer faces in mediated field sites is therefore slightly different from that posed by more conventional field sites. It is not a case of when or under what circumstances it is possible to produce or circulate inscriptions (and whether to do this anonymously). Nor is it a case of whether one can take a photo, or record a conversation, etc. Traceability means that the ethical implications of gathering material go beyond asking whether it is appropriate to capture a piece of empirical data at a given time.

While the ethical values that one chooses to uphold may be similar, the questions that the researcher faces are shaped by the properties and meanings attributed to the inscriptions and traces produced in mediated interactions. In the case at hand, it is nearly impossible to create a break between the fieldwork material and the ethnographic writing of Estalella. Bloggers may welcome this traceability (Walker 2006) and experience greater visibility of their writing and of their presence on the web as an enhancement of their authorship – an extension of their 'power of inscription' (Bakardjieva *et al.* 2003). While they may not experience traceability and its effects as a burden, other groups may not feel the same. Traceability is, in and of itself, neither a positive nor negative dynamic. It does, however, characterize a new way in which ethical concerns arise. These novel concerns are signalled by Robinson and Schulz (2009), but not placed explicitly in the context of research ethics. In our view, the implications of traceability require further analysis.

One of the fundamental implications of traceability is that decisions about ethical practices such as anonymization may not be in the hands of ethnographers, with the result that they may no longer be in a key position to offer any subject protection, as conventionally understood. This is, especially, evident when mediated settings are highly embedded in infrastructures (such as Facebook or Flickr) and much beyond the control of the fieldworker. Traceability involves a loss of control on the part of the ethnographer over the protection of their research subjects. This can also apply to other approaches, for example when using web-based questionnaires or using a public forum for a focus group.

Whereas we wanted to be accountable by presenting ourselves in continuity with our usual academic identities, it would seem that we can now have too much visibility in relation to our fieldwork. This results in reducing our room for manoeuvre, and makes it difficult to even imagine it might be possible to

anonymize our sources. Of course, the identity of the researcher, and the way she is perceived have never been entirely in the hands of the researcher, but mediation of field interaction and the resulting traceability certainly changes the options open to the researcher.

In the spirit of informing our research subjects, both of us constructed our field sites using our academic identities. This means that our email accounts, our websites, and our blogs used in doing fieldwork were not disconnected from our other manifestations as researchers. For us, this approach was in line with our desire to establish relations with our informants that did not try to evade the fact that we were pursuing research. At times, our academic identities were also a useful resource. Because of traceability, however, this means that covering our traces and providing anonymity to our informants are not achievable aims. If one looks up the authors, she will find the field, the exchanges, and the respondents. One possible way to deal with this might be for us to publish under pseudonyms. This would perhaps further the likelihood of maintaining anonymity, by making it more difficult to trace the researcher and the work. But because the use of pseudonyms would make it more difficult for us to show our research track record, this would come at a rather high cost to us as researchers with the greater part of our academic careers ahead of us. Furthermore, many other aspects of fieldwork besides our names can lead to the field—quotations, nicknames, names of servers, etc., are all so many traces that figure in articles and that can be easily be plugged into Google. And the possibility would always remain that participants, by commenting or linking the publications back to the field, could be ‘outing’ the researcher.

A further point has to do with how third parties can be affected by the traceability of data. When researching network-mediated collectives, it is very difficult to completely excluded subjects who refuse to participate (Hudson & Bruckman 2004). Because mediation is not in the hands of researchers, any link, any comment, etc. could lead to them. The very act of interacting to solicit permission could compromise people, no matter how many precautionary measures the researcher takes later. We see traceability as challenging assumptions about the importance of anonymization, and as destabilizing the centrality of the researcher in linking research outcomes and ‘the field’. This is particularly relevant in the face of so many infrastructural developments focused on providing ‘access’, making the settings of e-research ever more traceable. Traceability therefore fundamentally challenges the very possibility of anonymization – let alone the researcher’s prerogative in deciding on this. This is especially problematic in the face of the insistence on anonymization as key ethical mechanism, and one that tends to be systematically required by IRBs. While anonymization effectively disconnected public scholarly discussion from field activities and interactions with informants, traceability undermines such disconnections.

## Conclusion

Our aim is not to be critical of IRBs, but to show how many aspects of research have a changing ethical dimension, and to stress that, potentially, these can be effectively modulated by institutional conventions or by disciplinary expectations. We have shown how particular kinds of ethnographic practice as a form of e-research might raise ethical issues for which conventions and self-regulation mechanisms are not yet well-developed. It has not been our argument that the web or digital media as settings lead to the impossibility of formulating and fulfilling ethical obligations. On the contrary, these new problems may be just the occasion to raise important questions about things like accountability, and to revisit the answers to questions like ‘what do the participants get out of the research?’ (Bakardjieva *et al.* 2003).

Our discussion leads us to posit that the most urgent ethical issues faced by e-researchers are neither about categorizing particular kinds of interactions as public or private, nor about obtaining informed consent from informants. Rather, there is much to be gained in rethinking the ways in which conventions of fieldwork have supported ethical ways of doing research, and considering how these conventions and practices might need to be adapted or reformulated. We have illustrated and reflected on the possibilities and impossibilities of providing anonymity in the course of the fieldwork we pursued as a consequence of traceability of field data. Being traceable, however, is not simply a loss of anonymity as a potential ‘protection’ for our subjects. Being traceable could actually mean greater, and more diverse accountability. Informants, colleagues, funders can all find traces of our activities online. Indeed, we raise, in relation to research, issues that are usually addressed in discussions of surveillance (Lyon 2002). This potential for publicness of our activities may also provide some protection for subjects. In our view, it would be valuable to weight these possibilities, rather than deplore (or demand) that anonymity always be a gold standard of proper research ethics. As such, our analysis points in the same direction as the recommendation to discuss trade-offs in doing research (Bowes *et al.* 2011), and to seek avenues other than blanket avoidance, as a way to reduce risk (Staksrud & Livingstone 2009). Such a shift may be difficult to operate for IRBs functioning in a straightjacket. But it remains our conviction that the kind of social research that needs to be pursued to understand meaningful activities in mediated settings will demand a more subtle and modulated approach to human subject protection. Our contribution to such an approach has been to contextualize the arising tensions, and to provide a vocabulary to discuss the challenges of such settings by characterizing contiguity and traceability as important aspects of e-research.

We therefore seek to open up an ethical discussion about what it means to negotiate different kinds of accountability simultaneously, when different settings



in which we work become contiguous. Should we expect colleagues to stay out of the field? Should we embrace their visits to the field, as opportunities to further share aspects of our work with informants? Do we need new models of authorship that leave more room for the work of informants, and credit this work? How are we to deal with the blurring of personal and professional life? Do we embrace it or on the contrary, find ways to re-establish boundaries? Should we give further thought to the strategy of anonymizing the researcher? Could covert research, if it is to reduce the traceability of the field and of informants, actually be an ethical form of research?

Contiguity and traceability of the field also means that our 'empirical material' becomes more easily available to others. This opens up issues about the ethics of fieldwork in relation not only to the 'present' of fieldwork, but also to an unforeseeable future as well. Given a relative persistence of traces, what are the responsibilities of the ethnographer, in relation to future implications of field material? This may lead to more iterative kinds of research, where conversations are ongoing, and objects of knowledge can more easily come across as dynamic. This may also be the opportunity to rethink the future of digital material and the responsibilities for archiving of this material.

To end this paper, we would like to return to the relevance of this discussion for other methodological approaches in e-research. We have focused on ethnography in order to make a solid, historically grounded and empirical case about the changing ethical terrain when doing research in mediated settings. To what extent does this analysis apply to other areas of e-research? Insofar as other forms of e-research seek to make links, to connect kinds of data, and to foster new representations of information, traceability and contiguity will also be important dynamics. In most e-research approaches, the investigator is not so present as a 'personae' as in ethnography, yet, even when not at the forefront of accounts, it remains that the researcher–subjects relations are at the core of social research. Furthermore, the researcher is still eminently embedded in infrastructural practices and cannot easily cut her or his links to this context when discussing findings – therefore raising the issue of traceability. With regard to contiguity, many e-research projects seek to pull together diverse kinds of data, making data sets contiguous that were previously studied separately. Furthermore, calls for user-focused studies are increasingly heard in various e-research initiatives. The precise shape of these dynamics, and of other novel ones, remains to be investigated for these other approaches in e-research. It is also urgent to pose the question whether traditional ethical guidelines that prescribe anonymization through stripping information of 'identifying characteristics' will be sufficient to ensure ethical research, or whether new ethical practices will be needed. Such future investigations could draw on our approach, remaining close to the disciplinary traditions and contexts, in order to make concrete and grounded contributions to ethical debates.

## Note

- 1 As such, our argument rejoins efforts to problematize the notion of individual consent as the main locus of ethical research (Smith-Morris 2007).

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