Museum Ethnography IN THE Digital Age

Ethical Considerations

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century it is hard to imagine a museum that does not maintain a visible online presence or sustain a digital collection archive. Virtual museum spaces acquaint online "visitors" with museum collections and provide interactive environments for presentational, educational, entertainment, and communication purposes. Online museum spaces may include interactive digital galleries, virtual three-dimensional museum simulators, museum mobile and web 2.0 applications, blogs as well as social network profiles. Most of them allow audiences to interact with digital museum content or communicate with curators or managers through participation in museum blogs, writing comments, and rating posts in social media spaces. In some cases, online audiences are offered to enjoy more "participative" experiences through collecting, curating, or sharing digital objects in online galleries, purposefully designed to accommodate online participation. These audiences' activities create unlimited opportunities for museum ethnographers, who in the digital era can conduct their research beyond physical walls of museums. Whereas video and audio recordings are required to collect evidence of visitor behavior in a museum's physical space, an online environment can provide a perfect recording tool in itself. It instantly traces all of the activities of the users and displays all of the visible records that take form in comments, ratings, posts, uploaded video, audio, text, and image online contributions.

As a digital museum ethnographer, I would like to devote this chapter to sharing my personal experience in addressing ethical considerations while conducting research on museum visitors' behavior in online spaces. My research looks at online museums as important sites of cross-cultural communication. These sites project powerful political and cultural messages across borders and engage not only local but predominantly international audiences. Captivated by the diversity of online museum programs that connect people across the globe, opening up virtual spaces for cross-cultural learning, and immersing online visitors into educational experiences, I traveled the world to conduct a number of case studies. I researched digital spaces of large international museums in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore. My ethnographic research revealed that museum online communities as social interactive worlds can be powerful tools of cultural representation or mis-representation, sites of memory and identity construction, and building citizenry or political battlegrounds of resistance and social riots. Online museums can build unique "bridges" among communities for improving intercultural competence and tolerance or, in contrast, can invoke religious and cultural wars. These insights and findings were possible due to immersive ethnographic research within different digital museum spaces. I explored various online museum communities and collected and analyzed a large amount of textual and visual data demonstrating various behaviors of online "museum goers."

Indeed, digital ethnography provides an effective instrument to study and explore human behavior in online communities. It is as immersive, descriptive, and multilateral as the traditional ethnographic approach. Virtual ethnography utilizes similar methods for analyzing and interpreting data, requiring a researcher to become a member of virtual communities in order to observe participants' interactions and communication. Even though digital ethnography within museum online communities provides great insight and depth into a range of visitors' practices and opinions, it also brings many challenges. The majority of these challenges are concerned with various ethical considerations. Based on my extensive experiences, in this chapter I will identify important ethical issues that emerge around digital ethnographic research in online museum spaces. Specific examples from my research projects in different countries will serve as illustrations of various ethical considerations that I faced and addressed while making personal attempts in transferring museum ethnographic tradition into digital realm of museum communities.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF DIGITAL MUSEUM ETHNOGRAPHERS

In conventional ethnography, a researcher immerses oneself in the community of interest. Digital museum ethnography transfers the ethnographic tradition

of the researcher as an "embodied research instrument" to the social spaces of online museum communities. "In virtual ethnography the travel to a field site is itself virtual, consisting of experiential rather than physical displacement" (Hine, 2000, p. 45). In order to immerse oneself in this imaginary social world existing online around a particular museum content a researcher has to become a part of a museum online community. Even though the majority of online museum spaces are "public" and easily accessible for anyone who wishes to join and contribute, there are some private online communities. These "closed" sites require online registration and disclosure of ones' identity. This process makes a researcher address important ethical questions to avoid unauthorized uses of information that can be mined in these closed environments. The level of access to private online museum spaces can range from an automatic membership granted on the basis of online registration to an officially approved access. In the latter case the access has to be authorized by museum mangers who verify every application. In this situation the ethical concern is raised in regard to the question whether to present oneself as a mere participant or to reveal one's research purposes. Even though it is "easier" to go "covert" since you do not have to deal with numerous questions from museum mangers, it is important to be transparent about one's interests in order to conduct research in a manner that is in adherence with ethical considerations.

An example of this type of "private" online museum community is "Turbinegeneration," a global online network developed by Tate Gallery in 2009 (Tate, 2009). This is a unique program that connects schools, galleries, and artists from different countries to explore international cultures and to exchange artworks online. This collaboration and exchange is facilitated in the online social network created by Tate specifically for the project. The network provides an opportunity for members to create a partnership blog where they can share and develop artwork together. The site also makes it easy to upload photographs, videos, audio, and texts. To ensure better collaboration among partners Tate has developed a free downloadable project pack suggesting a range of activities to initiate and maintain dialogue between schools and artists. The "Turbinegeneration" community is not a publicly accessible platform, where online visitors can easily surf the network. A person must go through a proper registration process that requires disclosure of personal and professional data to get permission to access and interact in the online community. Interested in the powers of this network to connect schools and artists across different countries and collecting statistics on geographical distribution of involved participants I registered with the community as a researcher. In order to become a member of the site, I needed to explain my research objectives and methods to the network managers who eventually approved my access. Having clearly revealed my interests as an online museum ethnographer on my personal profile, I got a "silent" permission from the participants to be a part of their closed community and to collect my data. The network users did not bother

contacting me or initiating a dialogue, they simply ignored my profile. At the same time, I was safe to collect my statistics knowing that museum mangers had approved my activities and network users did not protest or express any concerns about my "presence" in their closed community.

Even though the ethical concern of privacy is more critical when a researcher becomes a part of a private museum space, observation in "open" online communities is also rather problematic from the perspective of other ethical questions. Hine (2000) has suggested that "the internet provides an ideal opportunity for covert ethnography, since it is possible to lurk in many online environments" (p. 262). Although this so called "non-obtrusive research" can grant unique opportunities to study online communities as more "natural" settings (Paccagnella, 1997), this research inquiry raises a lot of ethical problems and challenges. "Lurking" presupposes an invisible presence on a site, and many scholars argue that such conduct of research on human subjects is not acceptable since, in this one-way process, a researcher acquires a powerful position to gaze on others, "appropriating their actions for the purposes of research," (Heath, Koch, Ley, & Montoya, 1999, p. 451). On the other hand, the greatest advantage of such a method of data collection is that participants' behavior is not affected by the data collection procedure (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008). Being non-disruptive, this method allows digital researchers to investigate large numbers of online participants. As Hine (2000) reveals, non-obtrusive "lurking" has established itself as a major strand of social science research on the internet. However, if engaged in such a passive method of data collection, a digital ethnographer needs to make sure that the use of collected data on the "public" sites of online museums complies with the terms and conditions of these digital communities.

First, it is important to find out if online museums sites are publicly open spaces where online projects' participants are informed that all their contributions in the form of comments, posts, or visual materials are widely and freely accessible in the public domain of the internet. Many online museum spaces require participants to read and agree with their terms and conditions as a part of registration procedures. In these agreements it is usually specified that participants' contributions automatically become part of a larger internet community. For example, the Singapore Memory Project (SMP), developed by the National Library and Museum Board of Singapore in 2011 to preserve and provide access to the national culture, invites all online participants to agree on their Terms and Conditions before making their contributions to the site. The online memory portal aims to tell a true "Singapore Story" to the world and engages national community in sharing "recollections of historical events, documentation of recent events of significance, as well as personal memories of people, places and activities that resonate with the Singapore psyche" (Elaine, 2011). The Singapore Memory Project Terms and Conditions clearly inform:

> For all memories contributed to this Portal by any and all Parties, the Parties shall grant to the National Library Board (NLB), the perpetual, worldwide, non-exclusive license to digitize, make available to third party(s) and/or members of the public via the internet and/or successive technologies for downloading, printing and shall grant to the NLB and SMP the right to reproduce and republish this Portal's contents in any formats and platforms including print; electronic media; social media platforms; websites; publications; for both NLB's and SMP's internal and external uses and for non-commercial purposes. (SMP, 2011)

In this way, through the registration process on the SMP portal, online participants of the project are informed that their personal "memories," contributed to the site, belong to the public domain of the internet. Furthermore, SMP Terms and Conditions specify that by agreeing with the terms of use participants confirm that they are aware that the content they donate to the project can be used by third parties for non-commercial purposes, including research purposes:

> The afore stated licence grants the NLB the legal right to sub-licence for non-commercial use the contents of this Portal at NLB's sole discretion and on such terms as the NLB may impose on the users. Such non-commercial use includes but is not limited to, use for personal enjoyment, private study and research purposes and/or posting of all content item(s). (SMP, 2011)

Identifying and getting oneself familiarized with terms of use of museum online spaces is the first step in conducting ethnographic research in accordance with ethical norms. It is important to stay well informed about the use of collected data by making sure that one's research activities and further publications don't violate users' privacy rights.

Furthermore, in many cases, museum online communities emerge on third party social networks, like Facebook or YouTube, which offer their own terms and conditions to users. One of such projects that I researched as a digital museum ethnographer is the YouTube Play portal developed by the Guggenheim museum in collaboration with Google in 2010 (Guggenheim, 2010). This project was based on an international online creative video contest that celebrated the creativity, participation, and unique opportunities provided by YouTube, the largest global channel for video sharing. Throughout the project, the museum received more than 23,000 submissions from all corners of the world, out of which 125 were shortlisted and exhibited on the YouTube Play channel. This portal created an online community of fans and followers of the project who actively engaged in online discussions of the videos, shared their own video clips, and communicated with artists. Until today, YouTube Play remains a very popular channel among international online audiences with a constantly growing number of views of the featured videos, as well as an increasing number of online discussions about the video content. Interested in assessing the powerful impacts of global media campaigns upon international online audiences, I researched participants' activities on

the YouTube Play portal. Specifically, I focused on content analysis of online users' comments submitted to the videos of the channel.

As a part of the ethics research procedures I consulted the YouTube Terms of Use to ensure that my analysis of the channel's videos and comments does not violate the users' privacy rights. Specifically, the Google Terms of Service clarify for its users:

> When you upload or otherwise submit content to our Services, you give Google (and those we work with) a worldwide license to use, host, store, reproduce, modify, create derivative works (such as those resulting from translations, adaptations or other changes that we make so that your content works better with our Services), communicate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute such content. (Google, 2014)

These terms of use allow a digital ethnographer a nonreactive data collection, in which, even though online users are aware that their activities in the form of textual and video contributions can potentially be observed, collected and reused, they can't know for sure who is observing them and when. To address ethical concerns of such non-obtrusive "lurking," I took some specific measures to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' data that I used in my research publications. These measures included avoiding using personal information of online participants, such as their online names, age, nationality, profession, etc. Furthermore, I omitted a discussion of visual/textual user-generated content if it contained personal information on sensitive issues or if it could result in participants' shame or threats to material or psychological well-being.

Although, as Hine (2000) indicates, this "passive" method can appear to be a quite convenient way to collect reliable data based on simple unobtrusive observations, more active engagement with online communities can be very beneficial for online ethnographers (p. 257). Bell (2001) contrasts a covert online-observation methodology with truly ethnographic methods, which emphasize "dialogue with respondents – recasting research as collaboration rather than appropriation" (p. 26). He advocates implementing specific ethical procedures that oblige a researcher to explicitly disclose his or her research interests and goals to other participants within an online community. These ethical obligations have historically been incorporated in traditional ethnographic museum-research activities (such as focus groups and interviews) that comply with the internationally accepted Code of Ethics for Museums, established by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2013). However, because virtual ethnography in an online museum space is still a methodological innovation, the professional museum world is experimenting with this new field of research under the guidelines of traditional research practices.

In my research of the mentioned above YouTube Play project moving from non-obtrusive online "lurking" within the channel to conducting traditional

interviews with the projects' participants was really beneficial for my research. Specifically, I reached out to 125 finalist artists who participated in the YouTube Play contest and whose video clips were featured on the channel. I presented myself as a digital museum ethnographer, explained my research interests and goals, and requested participants' consent to use the data collected through interviews in my publications. These "open" research methods not only gave me a unique opportunity to gain in-depth insights into the artists' motivations but provided access to the YouTube statistics that I could not have obtained otherwise. For example, the online viewers' social demographics and geographic distribution statistics are not publicly available for YouTube video clips. This is personal data accessible only by the clips' owners. Interaction with artists of the YouTube Play channel in an ethically reflective manner and disclosing my professional identity as a museum scholar allowed me to access this statistical information. The data significantly enriched my research with important geographical and demographical details on the clips' international online audiences. Indeed, conducting research in a traditional ethically reflective manner pays dividends allowing a museum ethnographer to go deeper than a mere online observation of users' activities.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter started a very important conversation on ethical issues that emerge when conducting research in online museum communities. Even though this paper addressed some basic and critical ethical concerns in digital ethnographic research, it still could not embrace the complexities of ethical problems which are concerned with all the components of an ethnographic study, such as 1) research environment, 2) researcher and 3) research subjects. I was able to sketch some illustrative examples of ethical dilemmas in researching online museum communities mostly relevant to the first component, such as research environment. Online museums, indeed, can be understood as virtual "research laboratories", where users as research subjects can be under constant observation not only by museum managers but also by a great number of museum scholars and ethnographers (Grincheva, 2014). This situation raises a lot of ethical concerns, identified and discussed in this chapter based on my own research experience. It goes without saying that this is only a beginning of the conversation on ethical issues in online museum communities. More detailed and thorough work is required to illuminate the complexity of ethical dilemmas which bother the best minds of museum ethnographers in the age of digital communications. Specifically, it is essential to develop further a discussion on ethical problems with regard to two other research components: the researcher and research subjects. Important questions such as auto-ethnography, "participatory" research design, adequate self-representation in online museum

environments, as well as authenticity of online participants' data and interaction with online users require further academic enquiry. In the digital age new generations of museum ethnographers need to be well equipped with comprehensive guidelines on various ethical issues in order to conduct a reliable, but humanistic research online. This research should be respectful to the rights of people who create the social world of the internet.

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