

Blogging field notes: participatory innovation or methodological dead end?

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Abstract

As part of an ongoing PhD anthropology thesis on the monetisation of blogs in Malaysia, the researcher has used a blog (www.julianhopkins.net) as a means of establishing a presence in the field, to record fieldwork observations and to elicit participation from the bloggers themselves.

The public and dialogical context of the blogosphere presents novel methodological and ethical challenges for the anthropologist. Using the blog to record observations offers the possibility for further input from those being studied, improving the qualitative data and reducing the tendency of the researcher to inscribe his own interpretations on observed practices.

As part of the participant observation, the researcher draws upon a range of performative practices that develop cultural literacy and accumulate cultural capital relevant to the field of blogging – the ‘blogosphere’. However, if s/he is successful, this will result in a higher readership and thus increase the risk of inducing an observer effect that may recursively influence the bloggers who read the researcher’s blog. This is particularly possible in a rapidly changing context where attitudes and practices are less firmly established, and monetising blogs is still a contentious issue.

Key terms: blogs, participant observation, dialogics, ethics, methodology, anthropology

Introduction

This paper describes the use of a blog as part of a long term ethnography of Malaysian bloggers. The blog is used as a medium to participate in the activities of the bloggers, and also to elicit a dialogue with the bloggers by posting fieldnotes in the form of observations and analysis of what is often called the Malaysian ‘blogosphere’, but will be referred to here as the Malaysian field of blogging.

There are parallels with ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus 1995), analytical autoethnography (Anderson 2006), and the “creative observation” method used by Forte (2005, p.98). Some other examples of online ethnographies are briefly discussed, as well as a previous discussion of the use of blogs as fieldnotes by Erkan Saka (2008). Following that, five examples of different ways in which the fieldwork has been blogged about are presented and discussed briefly.

The online performance is argued to be key to effective participation within the blogging field, and authenticity is singled out as a vital aspect of this performance. There exists a tension between the

authentic performance and the valuing of large audiences as significant cultural capital; for the researcher there exists an additional tension that bloggers do not have – the larger the audience, the more likelihood he has of influencing the field which he is seeking to observe. The researcher has to conform to normative practices derived from the academic practice of ethnography, which are sometimes in contradiction to those in the field of blogging.

This paradox suggests that a complete immersion and authentic performance is not possible for the researcher, implying that he is always negotiating the boundaries between the fields of blogging and academia. This may allow more understanding of these fields, but there is a recursive circularity in the reflexive performance that remains uncomfortable.

Online ethnography

The use of ethnographic methodologies to study online social formations is established, and although there are many debates relating to putative existence of online ‘communities’ (e.g. Kollock & Smith 1999), the basic ethnographic method – of sustained participation, collection of empirical data, and reflexive analysis is usually recognised as an effective means of exploring the emergence and development of online social formations. As Guimarães argues, the

“conception of culture as process, a flux of facts embedded in a web of meanings that flow through time simultaneously supporting and creating social relations... makes the study of the everyday performance of social practices an appropriate empirical element in the reading and interpretation of the local cultures established by the different groups that inhabit cyberspace.” (2005, pp.144-5).

Online ethnography can also be conceived of as a form of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ wherein one may try to “trace the social correlates and groundings of associations that are most clearly alive in language use and print or visual media.” (Marcus 1995, p.108).

Guimarães immersed himself for five months in an online virtual world and, being concerned only with understanding the formation of online social relationships, argued that meeting his informants offline was therefore not necessary. This approach is acceptable with this limited objective, but ethnographies such as that by Miller & Slater (2000) have convincingly argued that online activities are better understood as embedded in offline contexts. Rutter & Smith (2005) engaged with an online newsgroup, but also attended offline meetings and did face-to-face interviews and found these additional interactions complemented the online fieldwork (2005, pp.85-8); in his early study of bloggers in the UK Reed (2005; 2008) also supplemented online participation and observation with offline meetings and interviews.

My research of the Malaysian blogging field follows both of the logics espoused above: I created a blog called ‘*anthroblogia*’¹ in order to participate as fully as possible in the online social practices and relationships, and I also join as many offline ‘blogmeets’ as possible, compile fieldnotes, and carry out formal and informal interviews.

¹ <http://julianhopkins.net>

In addition to keeping a blog that corresponds to the 'personal' or 'diary' type (see e.g. McNeill 2003) – i.e. I post more or less regular thoughts and observations based on personal life experiences, I seek to create a dialogue with bloggers about my research by posting 'Fieldnotes'; these are thoughts and analyses of blogging practices and I often directly ask the readers for their opinion on what I am proposing. This resembles to a certain extent Forte's method of "online creative observation, [where] one is providing a set of research data that then itself generates further online data that one may study" (2005, p.98).

Many of the principles involved in using the blog as part of the research are reflected in the arguments by Leon Anderson (2006) regarding "analytical autoethnography", which he identifies as having "five key features... that... include (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis." (2006, p.378).

As a blogger I find myself a member of a loose group of bloggers centred in Malaysia, involved in daily practices of reading and commenting on blog posts, and publishing my own posts; when posting fieldnotes I am often explicitly reflexive, questioning my own practices – sometimes in relation to others; I seek dialogue through the medium of the blog and in other settings; and explicitly formulate tentative analyses that are shared with others in an attempt to engage in dialogue – reflecting how the "autoethnographer's understandings, both as a member and as a researcher, emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue." (Anderson 2006, p.382)

In addition, although the third point, the "narrative visibility of the researcher's self" (*ibid*) relates more to the post-field analysis in Anderson's paper – for the autoethnographic blogger, the researcher-self, the persona of the researcher is available through the posts in 'real time' so to speak, always after the fact in effect, but closer to the moment in the field than is usual in most ethnographic work. It is a reflexive, and perhaps recursive, practice that all bloggers experience; it requires them to consciously think about how their performance will be perceived online and afterwards to experience their mediation and others' reactions to it.

The latter point highlights one of the innovations that blogging fieldnotes can offer the anthropologist. Erkan Saka (2008) has also written about the use of a blog in fieldwork, and notes that not only did it encourage him to update regularly, but also can encourage a non-linearity that responds to the different directions the fieldwork can take the researcher – as opposed the final write up which may "lose their actuality" (*ibid*). I would echo many of the points that Saka makes in relation to the usefulness of a blog in fieldwork: that it can generate dialogue with respondents; it can serve as a repository of ideas (like a diary); act as an ice-breaker for introductions; and reduces the power of anthropologists to define those they study in spheres beyond their reach.

The focus of his research is on journalists and media representations of international relations, which may explain why he did not raise a question that I need to address. By opening a dialogue with bloggers, I may raise questions and issues that they may not otherwise have thought about – i.e. the possibility of the 'observer effect' is present, and this increases proportionately with the audience of *anthroblogia*. Although social systems are always fluid and, as argued by Bakhtin,

change is the norm (e.g. Morson & Emerson 1990, p.30), 'cyberculture' environments can be seen as even more prone to such centrifugal forces and constitute a "yet-to-be-normalized social domain" (Denegri-Knott & Taylor 2005, p.97). In this context, norms can be developed 'on the fly' so to speak – i.e. "group members must first negotiate norms of behavior before determining if deviance has occurred." (Birchmeier et al. 2005, p.109), this can happen via "*inductive categorisation*... [where] group norms are inferred from the aggregate qualities of all members" and/or individuals identify "a modal or prototypical member whose reaction may provide clues about a how a member of the group "ought" to act (Turner, 1982)" (*ibid*). Thus, the observer effect may be more of a concern within the nascent Malaysian blogging field – depending on how visible my blog is.

Saka also discusses how some political commentary was part of his blog, and he attracted some negative attention although he made "incredible [efforts] to be neutral" (*op. cit.*). The different foci of our research perhaps means that he does not develop this point much in relation to the opinionated style which is often seen as a feature of journalistic blogging (see e.g. Singer 2005), but for my research – which focuses on blogging *per se* – this is where a fundamental paradox in relation to participating and performing as a blogger in the field arises, where the competing poles of 'observer neutrality' and blogging 'authenticity' challenge the ethnographer.

Authenticity and performance

In order to successfully integrate myself into the field of blogging, I needed to develop cultural literacies that express themselves in a range of performative practices, and also to accumulate relevant cultural capital. Some of these are more functional, and are similar to the six elements that Forte outlines as useful for building such an "online creative observation" site (*op. cit.*): "usability" – having material people want, and a functioning site; "validity" – having credible, balanced, information; "institutionality" – "effective visual design; trading in some of the offline currency of prestige and authority"; "incorporationism" – achieving "pre-eminence in a particular field"; "mutuality" – in that there is a mutual interest for the visitors to return, that they receive something from the site; and, "linkage" – being linked from and linking to other sites as a symbolic and practical expression of reciprocal interest (Forte 2005, pp.99-100). I was able to do most of these to a greater or lesser extent by using a familiar blog format with a clear layout; associating myself with a respectable university; laying claim (perhaps not very successfully) to being a unique observer of the 'blogosphere'; regularly returning visits and comments; and, mentioning and linking to other blogs.

These practices are the minimum for any blogger, but to achieve greater prominence I believe that there are two major factors that establish a blogger in the blogging field – the 'authenticity' of the blogger (or at least her successful performance thereof), and the number of visitors. The latter would in theory depend upon the former, but there is also clearly a point beyond which a blogger with a large audience will attract readers purely because she is popular with so many other readers.

In "My Blog is Me" Reed notes how the rise of 'blog celebrities' led to accusations of bloggers "of using strategies cynically conceived to attract traffic" (2005, p.237) and deviating from "the conventional ethos of journal blogging ('I blog for me')"
(*ibid.*); such bloggers may also be disparaged as a "hitslut" (Clark 2002), 'publicity whore', or some such similar term. Much of the tension in the relationship between the blogger and the audience derives from this fundamental rule of blogging,

and this kind of criticism points us to the 'authenticity' of the blogger, in the way that Bourdieu describes artists in 19th century France: he talks of the "*fundamental* law of the [writing] field, i.e. the theory of art for art's sake" (1993, p.63, original emphasis), and how this is represented by the artist who has "the appropriate dispositions, such as disinterestedness and daring" (1993, pp.62-3). Similarly, authenticity in the blogging field has three main components: a stable pseudonym embodied in a blog; a rhetorical style that incorporates language, multimedia use and visual design; and a paradoxical position of disinterest regarding the audience. These are enhanced by the practice of answering commenters in the comment space and/or in adjusting to commenters by adapting aspects of the blog or posts. In addition, revealing explicit offline aspects (photos, real name) usually enhance the performative stability of the online authentic identity.

Although the authentic blog is ostensibly a direct product of the blogger, I would argue that it is better understood as being a result of the dialogical interaction between the blogger and commenters – a position implied by Nardi *et al.* who argue that "blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog" (2004, p.224). An example of this would be when a blogger is criticised for deleting or censoring comments – in these cases commenters claim the right to comment, and to have those comments remain unaltered. Conversely, a blogger may be complimented for leaving in comments that criticise him. By keeping the verbal interchange 'raw', the authenticity of the blog/blogger is upheld; however, this does need the comments in the first place, as a simultaneous index of both the relevance of the blog and the existence of an audience. Paradoxically, the individualism and centrality of the sovereign self² means that there is a simultaneous belief that the blogger can do what they want with their blog. In this case, the audience is held to be the ultimate arbiter (measured through visitor statistics and comments), as they will not patronise an inauthentic blog. The tension in the relationship between the blogger and the audience (e.g. Lenhart 2005, pp.71-102) derives from this fundamental value – the blogger is valued for his/her independent and original stance, but at the same time the successful blog is usually measured by its popularity, something that requires pleasing a certain audience.

Therefore, in order to both 'be a blogger' and to elicit responses from as many people in the Malaysian blogging field, I need to successfully perform authenticity, and build an audience, so that the dual role of the blog as symbolic badge of belonging and dialogical fieldwork tool is effective. The former comes up against one of the weaknesses of analytic autoethnography which "will always be based in some variation of the 'professional stranger' (Agar 1980)" (Anderson 2006, p.390); for ethical purposes, I need to make it clear that I am doing research – which immediately marks me out as potentially 'inauthentic' – and the analytical tenor of the posts around which I most desire a dialogue to occur are the most obviously the product of a 'stranger'.

In addition, as I move between the sites of interaction – from online to offline – I come up against a more conventional social barrier: most of the bloggers I follow are young Chinese Malaysians between 18-30 years old, whereas I am a 40-year old '*ang-moh*'. When most of these bloggers probably want to socialise with other bloggers in the occasional face-to-face meets, following up on online interactions and engaging in small talk and banter, I most likely do not fit in with their

² "Just like a paper diary, weblogs are structured around 'I' narratives. They present the life of a sovereign subject who has a continuous identity and a coherent history" (Reed 2005, p.226)

intended plans. These barriers are common to most ethnographers, and require “a constantly mobile, recalibrating practice of positioning in terms of the ethnographer's shifting affinities for, affiliations with, as well as alienations from, those with whom he or she interacts at different sites” (Marcus 1995, p.113). In practice, I have been able to establish relations with various bloggers, following up offline casual meetings with communications via email, instant messenger, blogs, and Twitter; but this has not always been easy and some bloggers have not responded to me.

Blogging fieldnotes

In this section I will present five different ways in which I have presented results of my fieldwork on my blog and discuss their contributions to a dialogue that would inform my research.

Disclosure statement

A key ethical requirement of research is that one's role is made clear to any potential respondent; although I previously had an anonymous blog, when I started the fieldwork I created a new blog (which was originally called '*julianhopkins.net*' and provide information about myself and my research. On *anthroblogia*, the first post is a 'sticky post'³, and is entitled “Anthroblogology - Monetisation in the Malaysian Blogosphere”; it tries to attract attention by saying “If you're a Malaysian blogger, or a blogger living in Malaysia, my research is about YOU!”, if the reader clicks to expand the post, they can read more about the research and I also ask them their opinion on some questions:

- “• Will a blogger mind if s/he finds out I've been storing all his/her posts for a month or more, and doing analyses on the topics covered and the way s/he interacts with commenters?
- Should I ask permission to 'observe' a blog in detail? And if the answer is yes, why? I mean, if a blogger wants to keep his/her blog private, why not just password-protect it? :-|
- Do Malaysian bloggers see themselves as helping a more democratic society, even if they don't blog about politics?
- Do bloggers feel that blogging is getting commercialised? Does it matter if it is?” (Hopkins 2009a)

According to the visitor counter, the post has been looked at about 1700 times in fourteen months; however, only 15 comments have been left. Most comments do address the questions and they have helped in providing some data about at least one particular ethical issue: in relation to whether or not I should ask permission to track a blogger, most of them say yes. One might say that there has been a successful dialogue of sorts, but one big question remains – what did the other 1600+ readers think? The reasons for the overwhelming silence of hundreds of readers are essentially unknowable, and therefore the dialogue can only be described as marginal to the great majority of readers.

A typology of commenters

In this example I specifically set out to categorise types of commenters “in relation to [the] position they take to the post and/or the blogger, and also their 'Identifiability' - i.e. how much information they leave about themselves” (Hopkins 2009b). This is one example where there is the possibility of

³ Blogs are characterised by posts appearing in reverse chronological order, however one can also make a post 'sticky', meaning it always stays on top.

the observer effect; a reader may see the commenters, or themselves, in a new light and react accordingly – perhaps actualising practices that I imagined and articulated. As Rutter & Smith argue, "researchers may find themselves not only studying but also participating in the development of new and emergent methods of constructing identity, community and interaction." (Rutter & Smith 2005, p.91).

There have been almost 500 readers in the last five months, and three comments were left. Two of them agreed with the categories, and the third left an appreciative note saying "Literally LOLed as I was reading this. One of the things that just made my day. J" (Anonymous, cited in Hopkins 2009b).

A difficulty with online research and ethical considerations is demonstrated here: although I had paraphrased all the comments and developed them based on all the blogs I had seen, one commenter made a savvy guess at the blog which had inspired. For ethical purposes, I have decided to anonymise all data that I use, and when I do analysis I never refer to a specific blog: however, there is always the strong possibility that someone familiar with the Malaysian blogging field will recognise who I am talking about – and I may therefore bring unwanted attention to the blogger. However, by definition, the popular bloggers are not publicity shy and – like Rutter & Smith (though not with reference to bloggers for them) – most of those I interviewed so far have "expressed disappointment that they [will] not be personally identified" (2005, p.90) in my blog or eventual publications. In addition, not being able to mention that I have interviewed them deprives me of an important source of status in the blogging field – direct contact with 'blogebrities', which would usually be represented by a photo and a hyperlink; of which the latter would be a usual method of reciprocating to some degree their time spent with me.

Thus, due to the ethical requirements incumbent upon an ethnographer I am prevented from accumulating some important symbolic capital in relation to my audience in general, and also social capital in relationship to the interviewee, not to mention not being able to express my appreciation on a personal level of the blogger – in effect concretising my status as 'stranger' to some degree.

Blogmeet report

Giving an account of a blogmeet is more of a 'native practice' than the two examples above and, probably not coincidentally, these posts usually get the most attention in terms of comments, inlinks, and visitors. The typical format of this type of post is a narrative that describes going to the blogmeet venue, who you met, what you ate and drank, what else you did, and any notable bloggers and/or celebrities you met; all of this is normally accompanied by photos and hyperlinks to most or all of the blogs whose authors you met. The latter may be one of the reasons such a post attracts more readers, bloggers are able to track incoming hyperlinks and it is common to visit their source. They are then also likely to leave phatic comments along the lines of 'Nice to meet you!' or 'Thanks for the link!'; in addition, I will also visit their blogs and follow up the offline encounter and do the same on their blog.

I have twenty-one posts of this type: the first one was highly 'technical' in that I analysed the other posts statistically (Hopkins 2009c), but most of them are more conventional; however, I usually try to make some observations from the anthropological point of view rather than just doing a conventional post. An interesting example is one where I attracted a lot of attention by winning the

first prize in a fancy dress competition at a blogmeet (Hopkins 2009d); there were about 22 comments and the number of visits quite rapidly reached a few hundred, and there was a spike in incoming traffic over the next week as various blogs linked to me while doing their accounts of the same blogmeet.

For me this was a successful 'field-event' – I was accorded status and, more importantly, mentioned by many bloggers who have many more regular readers than me; in some ways, it concretised me as a blogger-amongst-bloggers. Many bloggers took photos with me and mentioned me in their blog. At the time I was also doing an online survey, and this extra attention may have resulted in more people responding to it.

Appearing in the mainstream media

Following the success in the contest, and the interest generated by the survey, I was interviewed by a leading national newspaper and a full page spread about me appeared in the Saturday 'You' [i.e. 'Youth'] section (Mohamed 2009). The newspaper also asked me to name my 'Top 10' blogs: this posed a dilemma for me, as I didn't want to be seen to prefer one blog over another, so I tried to name a range of the more obvious ones, and also to reciprocate some of the help I had been given in publicising my survey.

Appearing in the mainstream media (MSM) is usually a source of symbolic capital, and the article generated interest amongst bloggers. One interesting reaction was that I was cast as an authority by some commenters: in one blog which I had put in my 'Top Ten', a commenter complimented the host blogger for having been ranked before another blogger acknowledged by all to be the 'top blogger' in Malaysia. Actually, the commenter was mistaken because I had put them in alphabetical order.

Over this period, with winning the contest and then appearing in the newspaper, I received many more visitors than usual, with a peak of more than 600 in one day. I believe I did burnish my credentials as a blogger, but overall there was still little dialogue occurring in terms of analysis of blogs, and the number of visitors gradually went down to previous levels (about 100 a day) over the following weeks.

myBlogS 2009 – Malaysian Blog Survey

Part of my research involves an online survey which ran for one month. I publicised it by a mass email to about 300 bloggers, personalised emails to leading bloggers, handing out flyers and putting up posters; I also got some publicity from other bloggers who mentioned it in their blogs, and a small mention in a newspaper. It attracted a relatively good response, with 553 completed responses. When I had compiled the results, I posted some analysis online and made a pdf of the results available for download; I also invited questions by posting the following:

"I'll be happy to respond to any questions and requests for analysis on particular angles. For example, looking at the summarised results you can see that 54.2% of the bloggers that responded were female, and that 51.4% of the respondents are trying to make money from their blog; but you may want to know how many females were trying to make money compared to males. You can't tell that from the summary, but if you ask me I'll do my best to do the analysis for you and then put the results online." (Hopkins 2009e)

Although a large amount had displayed an interest in seeing the results of the survey – 310 left their email to be sent the results, and there were 645 visitors to the post – there were only four comments, of which two attempted to engage with the results of the survey. None asked for any customised analysis as was offered. One day later I posted a second, more detailed post, (Hopkins 2009f) and repeated my offer of customised analysis; it had 200 visits and two comments, but no real engagement either.

Discussion

Overall the level of online dialogue has been disappointing to me, but perhaps the reflecting on the reasons for it may be useful anyway. The most popular posts, about blogmeets, encourage the most responses probably because it's a common practice in the Malaysian field of blogging and therefore visitors are more familiar with the format; the second, related, reason would be that the post will mention other bloggers, have links to them and photos of them, and therefore invites the others to reciprocate the social interest displayed. It speaks to the social aspect of blogging, and to already established modes of interaction.

In relation to the post that categorised commenters (Hopkins 2009b), it's not uncommon for bloggers to pass opinions on other blogs and blogging practices, but this is usually done in a normative manner – typically declaring their dislike of those practices or that blogger. These posts are often more popular and attract more comments too, as people with their own strongly held opinions. For me, however, I choose not to be too opinionated, in order not to appear to be taking sides and to avoid alienating bloggers with whom I wish to maintain productive relations. In addition, ethical considerations would preclude being overly critical of any blogger's creative output.

When I am at my most 'authentic' as an anthropologist, I am probably also being quite boring for many of the bloggers I wish to attract; an example of this can be seen in the response to a presentation that I put online⁴ (Hopkins 2009g)

“Pardon my ignorance for I have never written or presented any kind of "papers" in my miserable life, but do all these "papers" need to be written with such intellectually bombastic words that are hardly comprehensible for normal reading or listening that by the end of the 30 minutes, I don't even have the slightest idea, hint or clue relating to what have or had been presented?” (Costa, cited in Hopkins 2009g)

That presentation was probably overly academic for a general audience, but usually I endeavour to use laypersons' terms in my blog as much as possible. However, the feedback does not seem to change much. It is likely that many are not really interested in the anthropological questions, and even if they are, they may not feel qualified to answer and would worry about saying something perceived as ignorant⁵.

⁴ a screencast of the presentation with a voiceover

⁵ I would like to thank Owen Wiltshire for pertinent questions that led to some of these thoughts (<http://openanthcoop.ning.com/forum/topics/ethnographic-blogging?>)

Paradoxically, the way I got the most (ostensible, at least) acceptance was by disguising myself in an offline context; this resulted in much attention and tacit endorsement by leading bloggers. This is an interesting episode that may speak to performativity in ways that could be further developed. Another successful way was being mentioned in the newspaper, though it was only after other bloggers mentioned that I had been in the newspaper that the traffic to my blog increased – i.e. the interest was only indirectly produced by the newspaper.

#say something about Guimarães' 'social space' thing, and can relate this to Amit's field thing?
#“the idea of ‘*social environment*’, a symbolic space created in cyberspace through programs which allow communication between two or more users. These environments are created and inhabited by social groups and can consist of different places (servers) and different software platforms.”
(Guimarães 2005, p.149), time also a factor for some groups [in synchronous platform]

Conclusions

The blog is an integral part of the online ethnography, and also helps to satisfy ethical requirements in terms of disclosure and sharing the information gathered from the field. The bloggers I engage with typically have good writing skills and enjoy expressing themselves online and therefore, in a way that is not common in anthropological research, there is very little barrier to the agents in my research field understanding and responding to what I say online. These are distinct advantages to using a blog in this research.

However, in spite of the dialogical nature of a blog, I have had qualified results in terms of eliciting a dialogue via my blog. In terms of the feared observer effect, the apparently low levels of interest could be beneficial, but the vast majority of readers remain invisible and they may or may not be affected by what is posted on *anthroblogia*.

The two goals – of creating a dialogue, but of avoiding undue influence – may be in conflict with each other: the more interest I generate in my analysis, the more likely I am to influence the situation I observe; but the less feedback I get, the more likely it is that my analysis remains divorced from the actual situation and becomes confined to the academic field which has its own discourse and imperatives. My experience so far has taught me that the most useful interactions have been face-to-face formal and informal interviews and casual conversations. Like in Forte's (*op. cit.*) example, *anthroblogia* is a relatively autonomous online presence sitting at the confluence of a range of online performative practices; but it is also an important symbolic index of my eligibility to attend offline blogmeets. It is probable that having a blog, and being familiar with the Malaysian blogging field, enables me to claim membership of the loose group and deploy relevant literacies that mark me out as an insider more than an outsider. This helps me to establish trust and get the most out of those interactions.

The basic dilemma presented here is not new – anthropologists have always had to worry about the limits of honesty while working in (and out of) the 'field', and in fact I do keep a separate, 'diary for other observations and thoughts. For the fieldwork described here, the possibility of sharing the research with the bloggers is both a novel opportunity and an ethical imperative. It also requires

reflexivity on various levels that engage in novel ways with both the field of fieldwork, and the field of academia.

While I stand here performing for academics, I wonder whether I will post this paper online too. Those bloggers who care to read it will be able to see how I question my own authenticity in relation to them, leaving them, and me, wondering about who I am really am – a blogger, an academic, an Irish, a Malaysian? My 'authenticity' can become subject to a recursive reflexivity – is it a spiral into meaninglessness, a dead end, or a spiral out into expanding networks and the entanglement of fields with emergent properties yet to be divined?

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