Identity on the Net: Should We Talk Methodology Here?¹

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**Abstrak**


In November 2001, I wrote a paper about Internet use in Indonesia’s chaotic period (around May 1998) that was presented at the 100th meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington DC. I ended the paper by musing:

‘Within the methodological understandings of Anthropology, it is an accepted standard that the clear and distinctive identity of an informant or a subject is imperative. Nevertheless, the informants and subjects found on the Internet have, frequently, anonymous identities.

It may be argued, therefore, that the Internet is not a proper sphere for anthropological study. If so, then, what is the role of identity in our appraisal, evaluation or understanding of information and communication?’ (Soeharto 2001).

The paper was grounded on research which was ongoing at that time, and the argument reflected the ambiguous underdeveloped states of anthropological studies of the Internet, at least in Indonesia, where virtual life had been rarely taken as a legitimate topic for study.

In July 2002, I completed writing up my research. I found myself up against other Indonesian scholars’ questions. I could sum them up in similar terms to the question I posed in Washington: ‘…what is the role of identity in our appraisal, evaluation or understanding of information and communication?’

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¹ This article is based on the paper presented at the panel on: ‘Questions of Identity on the Internet: Research “Software” Towards a New Indonesia’ at the 3rd International Symposium of the Journal ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA: ‘Rebuilding Indonesia, a Nation of “Unity in Diversity”: Towards a Multicultural Society’, Udayana University, Denpasar, Bali, 16–19 July 2002.
In this paper I draw upon my research to reflect upon the methodological issues raised by identity on the Internet, or cyberspace as it is often termed. Like Hine (2000:10), I believe that we need an opportunity for rethinking the shaping of the ethnographic object and reformulating the grounds for ethnographic engagement with the field.

**Background**

My AAA paper examined the perception of credibility of the Internet’s content before and after May 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1998, when Soeharto resigned as President of the Republic of Indonesia. The ‘before’ part was entitled, ‘The Net Makes It Work,’ while the ‘after’ part was under the title, ‘The Net Makes It Worse.’

**The net makes it work**

During the reign of Soeharto, the core problem of Indonesian media was government control over the press, both print and broadcast. Soeharto’s family and colleagues owned the major media companies. They monopolized newsprint and restricted issue of licenses for operation of media companies. They curbed content and editorial opinions. The Internet, however, away from the eyes of the armed-government, was allowed to be used as the main platform for dissent. It became the weapon against state censorship.

The anonymity of senders on the Net served as a catalyst to publish free thought. However, the flow of information went primarily to one goal: to oust Soeharto. After thirty-two years of life under the pressure of Soeharto, the incidents in 1997 and 1998 (the lack of food, the currency’s fall, the killing of students by government troops, plundering in riots, etc.) created a huge sense of unity and mutual trust. On the Net, no matter who the writer was, as long as the information was about Soeharto’s lack of leadership, people would believe it.

**The net makes it worse**

On the contrary, when Soeharto did resign, the flow of information divisibly broke up. People went back to their own agendas. They became concerned only about their own needs. The media freed themselves from their corrupted owners. And on the Net, the reputation for truthfulness crumbled. No body knew the identity of the poster and whether they could trust the information in the message body. Collapse of net credibility happened not only because of the anonymity of senders, but also because interpretation upon interpretation continued to be posted. Senders claimed to tell only facts, but, as my previous findings showed me:

As the same views are expressed and expressed again by diverse parties, … original statement is lost in the deluge of comment that follows and it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to establish the veracity of a statement. As Roland Barthes puts it, text has no beginning and no end when the reader becomes the producer of text as well as its consumer. (Soeharto: 2001).

**The research**

My research was about humans’ relations to computers, and how this connects to civil action. My site was ‘speed-space’\textsuperscript{2} a space in which virtual and actual worlds co-exist, and which creating an urgency of things. A whole lot of information that came within seconds made everything look important. This affect reinforced the sense of unity in a depressed country and the goal that then drove its citizens to a huge civil action.

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\textsuperscript{2}Term used by Paul Virilio—a French culturalist—who believes that we no longer live in space-time—a space where man’s time is manipulated. What we are manipulating now is no longer man’s time, but machine’s time.
This site led me to consider the underlying infrastructure in communication. Within and between words there was now emerging the space of interaction where human revealing their behavior in cyberspace. I analyzed the norms and values of communication here via a case study.

The case studied was Apakabar, a mailing-list that became a phenomenon during the era of President Soeharto (Gatra 1995; 1999) when mainstream media had been restricted in its content. John A. MacDougall—owner and moderator of the list—said that the participants came from a wide range of society, from government employees to NGO activists, from military people to college students.³

Postings in Apakabar appeared to be prominent in speed and content. The electromagnetic wave allowed politically sensitive articles written by inside officers or activists to run at the speed of light on its superhighway digital space. Due to the need for participants’ anonymity, in Apakabar MacDougall implemented security mechanisms that eliminated the opportunity to learn how many people had access to Apakabar. However, messages posted around an incident in the Headquarter of Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (Indonesian Democratic Party-PDI) in 1996 gave him an approximate number of about 13,000 (thirteen thousand).

Interaction with informants


I found my first informant via his article in Cybersociology, an e-magazine. He put his e-address at the end of his article and I emailed him for further discussion with regards to what he wrote. The reply was very interesting. Written in the message body was, ‘my husband wants you to call him at this number.’ It was a local number and so I made the call. The man at the other line invited me to meet in his office, which I recognized as the place for those who struggled underground, blending politics with arts and media. It was the place where I used to hang out for art events. I met him the next day. He said that it was he who had written the ‘female’ message, anticipating unexpected incidents. This man thus became a friend to chat with, face to face, not online.

The second informant was one from the list. I sent my introduction and he replied soon afterwards, saying he would be glad to help me. Geographically, he lived in another continent, but his replies were always only twelve hours away. However, after a while, I noticed that his messages never came into my e-mailbox during the weekends. Wondering why, I sent him messages with questions that touched on his daily life. And this was his reply: ‘It’s getting too personal. It’s not worth it anymore.’

The third one was a man who was in charge of a local TV news program. He and I had known each other since we were in campus press activities years ago. From the alumni mailing-list that I moderated, I found his email address and contacted him for the research. He welcomed me and sent a CV as a reply to my questions regarding his life after getting off campus. Communication with him worked well over the net. A print media journalist was my fourth informant. Again, this one was a friend I knew long ago. He was eager to help me meet my research needs. I emailed him my questions, and he replied by asking me to call him at home.

³ By personal email.
or the office. I had not gotten a chance to make the call when he needed to go to East Timor (now Timor Lorosae) for an assignment. When he came back, I reminded him—by email—of his promise to be my informant, and still he asked me to call. After a while, getting busy with my own work, I wrote him another message—ready to use the phone, too—and this time he replied by answering my questions online.

These interactions allowed me to see the following things:

My first informant was definitely very cautious on who he dealt with. Meeting face to face (f2f—or should I say ‘flesh to flesh’ since ‘face to face’ now can be done by a web-camera?) allowed him more comfort to decide whether to continue the interaction or not. This attitude perhaps appeared from his experience in his political activities before, which were against the ‘powerful’ government.

Offering an online friendship to my second informant didn’t mean I was allowed to have access to his personal life. He detached himself when the question brushed against his daily routine. He replied only to the subjects that I first posted on my introduction messages. I then remembered Mann (2000:28) saying, ‘some people did not enjoy electronic talk, experienced new contacts with outsiders as threatening and time consuming, and were afraid that “creating permanent written text exposed them to criticism or perhaps ridicule”’.

The urge to meet f2f that I experienced with my first informant arose with my fourth informant, too. He preferred to call and see the person he talked to. As time went by, he realized that he (and I) were too busy to arrange some specific time to talk and meet f2f. This consideration of time, I think, was also the reason for my third informant wanting to reply directly online. He could answer my questions on his relaxing time. It was an advantage for me too as his replies always came from a clear mind, not from a rushed one.

**The basic trust**

We learn as a basic of tenets of anthropology that qualitative research relies on the development of rapport, mutual respect between researcher and informants. ‘In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationship, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating in those processes. The aim is to make explicit the taken-for-granted and often tacit ways in which people make sense of their lives. The ethnographer inhabits a kind of in-between world, simultaneously native and stranger. They must become close enough to the culture being studied to understand how it works, and yet be able to detach from it sufficiently to be able to report on it’ (Hine 2000:4–5).

It is common to see an ethnographer becoming a friend to an informant after living closely with him/her for a few months or years. The ethnographer knows almost every detail of the life of his/her informant. When another ethnographer poses a question to a fieldworker about who the informant is, he/she expects a long list of self-descriptions.

In this kind of relationship, there is an understanding between the ethnographer and his/her informants that grounds the ethnographer’s writing about what he/she has gathered from the informants. This understanding is actually based on the ethnographer’s responsibility to informants, about which The American Anthropological Association has written in its Code of Ethics.\(^4\)

In the web of related people in the field (academic colleagues, students, sponsors, subjects, government, other group of studies who collaborate in the same field, etc.), an ethnographer has to put the interest of his/her informants first, above the others. He/she should protect their rights, their interests, and even their sensitivity. An ethnographer has the responsibility to anticipate problems that could arise in such complex involvement. He/she needs to come out with solutions that would neither harm the society (including the informants) under study nor the academic community. If it seems like the ethnographer will not be able to do both, then it is advisable not to continue the study. An ethnographer should also not use personal knowledge of his/her informant to exploit the informant. He/she should respect the comfort of his/her informant and be responsibly ‘trade’ with his/her informant. (Spradley 1997:47–53)

In line with the cyberspace topic I am discussing here, the most important point is that an ethnographer should bear in mind that an informant also has the right to anonymity. This holds for data gathering on camera, via tape-recorder, or with any other tool—in a face to face interview or by participant observation. The informant could accept or refuse the use of any tool and the ethnographer should respect the informant’s decision. The ethnographer should know that protection should cover more than just changing the name, location, and other sign in the final report, but also provide protection were the report to become evidence for the court.

In a specifically dangerous case, the ethnographer should know what to do to protect his/her informants. Spradley (1997:51–52) discussed an example of a student who recorded a long interview with a drug dealer. When the dealer’s contact in the black market was arrested, this student realized that his informant was in danger and his field-notes and interview records would be considered as evidence. Eliminating all the names and initials was not enough. He needed to burn them all, even though that meant destroying evidence of illegal activities.

Spradley went on to describe the situations and conditions when information gathered would be considered valid. In short, the pieces should be fit into the puzzle. The researcher needs to picture the whole area in the ways seen by the local eyes.

On the net

In cyberspace, we should work the same principles, although we need to ‘see’ an informant with different eyes, as anonymity already exists. As we reach into the virtual world, we don’t know whether the person we chat with is an old man or a schoolgirl, or as Hakken put it (2002) ‘…On the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.’

In a forum where anonymity and free speech spread fast without any barrier, a researcher will easily validate information. At this stage, the argument that ‘The Internet is not a proper sphere for anthropological study’ (Soeharto 2001) has a strong basis. As my previous study found, interpretation upon interpretation is not uncommon in the world of cyberspace. This situation occurs when there is no shared goal among its users. Researchers need to have self-filters, to re-validate the data.

On the other hand, when and where conditions allow, ‘…we could say that it is not pertinent to the discussion, for most purposes, whether or not someone is who they say they are. Identity … [is] taken as given where trusting does not imply any risk or stake. This is not

5 Capital use as per the original text.
a naïve trust, but a situated trust that depends on what the stakes are in taking a statement of identity at face value’ (Hine 2000:143).

Condition like those Hine describes occurred in my study, when the country’s political situation was very heated and informants were involved in a high-risk activity. Therefore, the trust existed, not because I believed in who they were but because what they said was in line with the situation as a whole.

For instance, my second informant pulled himself out when he saw my personal questions. I looked at this act as self-preservation, for Internet technology these days allows tracking him down at his definite location in the ‘real’ world. Being unsure about my personal aim in asking such questions (although I explained it in my very first introductory messages), he refused not only to reply but also to continue the ‘conversation’. This tells me that, while I trusted him (and his claims) because context of the situation was supportive, he didn’t trust me because his political experiences warned him that person with too many personal questions could be dangerous.

The other 2 (two) informants checked on me also, to see that I did have a ‘pure’ goal on researches only, and would not harm them for they were connected to civil action. Their decision, of course, was based on their experiences in the field of politics. The information, therefore, was all valid for me, as the informants fit the missing pieces in the puzzle that I was looking for. And they came up with their identity as the trust given on both sides.

**Considering speed-space**

Cyberspace literary means ‘navigable space,’ which equates more to the environment of digital space that Paul Virilio called ‘dromosphere.’ Dromology originates from the Greek word, dromos. It is the science of the ride, the journey, the drive, the way, which Virilio delivered as the speed. Dromosphere therefore means the sphere of speed.

For Virilio, dromosphere has linked concepts to the political economy of speed. If time is money then, here, speed is power. It focuses on the environment of velocity in transmitting information. Those who can gain access to the velocity of dispatching information will be on the top of power.

Dromosphere is speed-space, the space of time ‘…that of electronic transmission, of high-tech machines, … and therefore, man is present in this sort of time, not via his physical presence, but via programming. Speed then is not a means, but a milieu, …. a milieu in which we participate… through information science and ‘robotized’ systems” (Armitage 2001:70). “[S]peed is environment, as the word is understood in the natural sciences. Speed is a domain with specific properties. Speed is not simply a matter of time. Speed is also space-time. It is an environment that is defined in equal measure by space and time.” (Armitage 2001:61).

So, besides affecting the urgency of things, the velocity of transmitting in speed-space also impacts the organization of information. When Sun Tzu—a Chinese strategist of centuries ago—said ‘promptitude is the essence of war,’

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6 The term cyberspace literally means ‘navigable space’ and is derived from the Greek word kyber (to navigate). In William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, the original source of the term, cyberspace refers to a navigable, digital space of networked computers accessible from computer consoles; a visual, colourful, electronic, Cartesian datascape known as ‘the Matrix’ where companies and individuals interact with, and trade in, information. Since the publication of *Neuromancer*, the term cyberspace has been reappropriated, adapted and used in a variety of ways, by many different constituencies, all of which refer in some way to emerging computer-mediated communication and virtual reality technologies (Dodge and Kitchin 2001:1)
it was speaking to the cavalry. However, this saying is still true these days. In the domain of speed, those who transmit data and process information the fastest, and are most promptly on target, get the strongest position.

In a heated up political situation where the actors felt the need to act promptly, this domain of velocity was the answer. Trust was therefore given to actors in the strongest position who were those who could access the net and disseminate widely: professional workers, students and media people. In a case like this, self-identity was less important than the collective-identity, especially when the condition of anonymity made actors safer.

**Conclusion**

On the first page of this paper, the argument was stated, ‘…internet is not a proper sphere for anthropological study…’ followed by the question, ‘What is the role of identity in our appraisal, evaluation or understanding of information and communication?’ I believe my reflection upon the methodological issue identity in cyberspace (or speed-space) has somehow helped me make sense of the unchanging principals of professional responsibilities of an ethnographer, including anonymity. When Spradley (1997) said ethnography is a report writing about a society, recorded by an anthropologist after a long-time of fieldwork, I see cyberspace as a society that we can take as a fieldsite, too. We can use the same methodology, qualitative analysis to get at the native’s point of view, via participant-observation and open in-depth interviews.

Trust is the first thing we need to gain, both in virtual or non-virtual research. When we reach this point, identity will come out easily, whether individually or collectively. And as far as information can fit the missing piece in our puzzle by clarifying the broader picture of the conditions stated, we can take it as valid data.

As Mann and Stewart (2000:208) say through quoting Fernback, ‘Ethnographers working in cyberspace must “develop a sense about the truthfulness and candor of their informants, just as ethnographers of the nonvirtual must,”’ I myself, like Hakken, believe that in the virtual world, the more we learn about culture and society, the more we know that it has little difference from the nonvirtual one.

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