



Narrative online and offline spaces. Field notes from the becoming of an anthropologist

Ioana Florea¹

Abstract

To look back and reflect upon past field diaries, field encounters and events is the invitation of this paper, constructed both as a research note and as a personal research story. The invitation is addressed especially to young anthropologists. The paper recalls and re-analyses data from three past online fields – one interactive website calling itself the “Romanian online community in Vancouver”, one online forum entitled the “Indian online community in Germany”, and the real-time communication portal Yahoo Messenger. It highlights the out-of-the-ordinary events recorded on each field, which illustrate complex relationships between the online and offline worlds. Further interpreting the fields as what contemporary American anthropologist Timothy Simpson, following Richard Sennett, calls “narrative spaces”, I hope to reveal more of the social construction of these virtual spaces. The main hypothesis to be explored and proposed for further debate are 1) that interactive virtual spaces develop as narrative spaces, around the frame-story offered by their initiators and 2) that narratives are continuously transcending different online and offline spaces, connecting them, while being continuously re-negotiated and re-told.

Keywords

Narrative space, frame-story, transcending spaces

Reflections on past field diaries

The present paper is the result of reflection upon field notes recorded few years ago, during three online research projects. I propose a reading of my past online fields in the “key” offered by an article on offline public spaces: an article by American anthropologist Timothy Simpson (2000) on a popular semi-public hang-out space in Florida, work

¹ Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, Romania, and CIES-ISCTE, Lisbon University Institute, Portugal, ioana.floreaa@gmail.com

recently encountered during my current offline research project. The following pages are an attempt of a second analysis of my own previous online data, following Simpson's argument that "the narrative quality of space is crucial to understanding why people choose to gather in them" and his explanation that

"people are attracted to narrative spaces that in their ambiguity offer the possibility of an interactive public life, yet when people gather in those spaces, they often merely congregate into separate 'lifestyle enclaves' and display their difference from other groups" (Simpson, 2000, pp. 683).

Simpson's conceptualization of narrative spaces follows Richard Sennett's metaphor, explained in "The conscience of the eye. The design and social life of cities" (apud Simpson, 2000, pp. 685-686), that good social places are 1) to be read, lived, written or retold by the users, like a good novel, and 2) are those spaces that allow beginnings of stories, unexpected continuations, but also some stable and common reading guides or frame-stories. In this understanding, a narrative space offers a given frame-story to be read and accepted by its users, but also the possibility for all user to create, live, tell, share their own stories; it is a familiar space, but not all predefined; it is a place of creativity, new beginnings, unexpected events, but in a stable frame.

One of the limitations of this paper is the absence of a deeper examination of the narrative concept, tracing back to Gérard Genette and literary theory. Another one is the reduced space allocated to reviewing the literature in the field, compared to the space allocated to formulating hypotheses and possible conceptual connections. Bearing these limitations, the paper will neither be an exhaustive description nor a presentation of strong conclusions, but an invitation to reflect upon these possible connections and upon the researcher's narrative of field experience, concepts, discourses, mistakes.

Learning to become a researcher in social studies, a young scholar gathers different field experiences and theoretical insights, which are usually considered to represent just a preparation phase, a necessary passage rite prior to turning to professional research. Nevertheless, this phase is decisive for the becoming of the specialist, as it sets the ground for everything that is subjective in one's further objective professional research endeavour, such as: the personal choice for certain fields, case studies or research questions; the preference for certain theoretical approaches and field methods; the preference for certain interpretation perspectives, and the personal decision for the overall research goal.

I will take the opportunity the present article offers to reflect back on the data I have gathered online, few years ago, while learning to become a social anthropologist; I will illustrate some of the data recorded in the past field diaries, but also at the social situations and contexts which brought me to those specific fields and research projects. Even though my current research interest addresses the social design of urban offline public space, my training as an apprentice in social anthropology actually began with the study of virtual social spaces and interactions; thus, my first ethnographic field was an online field that began in the autumn of 2004. Since then, I passed through different stages and different contexts of learning, in the process of becoming a social researcher. Throughout the paper, I will briefly present these stages; they will set up the frame-story

for this academic narrative; they will also exemplify the ability of narratives to transgress online and offline spaces, spaces used by researchers and spaces used by research subjects.

In parallel, the main aims of the paper are 1) to illustrate the construction of online interactive spaces as narrative spaces building around the creators'/ owners' frame-stories and 2) to introduce the debate upon the continuities among narrative spaces and upon the narratives' force to transcend and connect different online and offline spaces. While to illustrate the researcher's learning stages as a continuous narrative, stretching across time and (subject) spaces, is actually the secondary aim of the paper.

The online fieldwork

After the first online field, two others followed, one in 2005 and one in 2008. Revising the three past virtual fields, the differences are obvious: rovancoover.com is a Romanian Diaspora website (Hall, 1999), a space mostly built and conducted by its webmasters, with few hundred users, which generated a twin site, illustrating even more the webmasters' options for intervention; theinder.net is a second generation Indian migrant forum, a space of debate, information exchange and mundane talk, with over a thousand registered users bringing their own input to the forum, which was the target of racist hackers attack; Yahoo Messenger is a private chat portal, where users get in direct contact only with approved others, in a reciprocity chain, personalizing their own contact list and space of communication, but which can enable sudden massive expansion and connection to other contact lists, through mass message events. The similarities are more subtle: from the start, they were chosen for they involve issues of identity. All of them are interactive and offered a public voice for their users, a form of self-expression; at the same time, this voice was differentiated and targeted towards a certain group of users perceived as or perceiving themselves as similar; a differentiated and personalized space is, in a sense, a private space, as it is used in the company of people sharing or perceiving to share a common ground; thus, the three virtual spaces have both public and private characters. Throughout these diverse yet similar field studies, my constant inquiry was about the mechanisms of social construction of spaces (i.e. how spaces are socially developed, maintained, and reshaped).

The first online encounter

During the fourth year of bachelor studies in sociology, academic year 2004-2005, I was enrolled as an Erasmus visiting student at the "Europa Viadrina" University, in Frankfurt am Oder, in Germany. Most of the social studies there were oriented either towards political studies or towards anthropology – thus somehow different from the sociological approaches learnt at the University of Bucharest. Being unsure of my German language abilities, I chose to attend mostly English language courses; among them figured a course entitled "Virtual Ethnicity", taught by (then) Associated Lecturer and researcher Urmila

Goel, specialist in anthropology of “alterity / otherness” (in German, “Andere”) and developing a long term study on the construction of ethnic identity in virtual spaces.

In parallel, right at that time I was starting to use the internet more intensively, in order to communicate with the friends and family in the home country. Until then, I did not know much about the internet and did not have frequent access to it. A close friend introduced me to the “Yahoo Messenger” private chat network, advertising it to be the most effective and enjoyable transnational communication channel. Entering the virtual communication spaces represented a new social experience in my personal life; the virtual channels offered me an alternative way to keep connected to the social networks back home, while engaging in the new social networks offered by the exchange-student status. The virtual space thus was a socially significant space for me at that time, charged with the significance of a mediation space, a threshold space.

The opportunity to attend the “Virtual Ethnicity” course overlapped with my personal exploration of the virtual, and echoed in a more academic frame my personal curiosity about the nature of virtual identity. Unfortunately, at that time I was not acknowledging the methodological potential of this parallel between my personal situation and the course assignment fieldwork – parallel revealing how the academic research academic narratives continue the personal stories of researchers. I tried (rather unsuccessfully) to repair this loss of potential fruitful insight into research methodology, by returning three years later to researching about the Yahoo Messenger social interactions.

As main assignment for the “Virtual Ethnicity” course, each student had to choose one particular virtual ethnic space, observe it systematically for one semester, record the observations and personal data interpretations in a field diary, and produce one concluding essay, dealing with issues of ethnicity in the virtual space. A virtual space could have been considered ethnic if it self-assumed an ethnic character – calling itself with an ethnic cue. Our research assignments involved observing online spaces – websites and associated chats or forums – created through sharing personal experiences and knowledge, through writing and reading posts.

My choice then was the website www.rovancouver.com, calling itself the “Virtual Romanian community in Vancouver” – first of all because its self-assumed Romanian character, corresponding to my nationality; secondly because of feeling more as an “insider” while observing it: no language barriers, no topic barriers (knowing most of the facts mentioned by the webmasters and users), understanding most of its symbolic images and attached social meanings; third, because of the strong wave of recent Romanian migration towards Canada, rendering this particular field more challenging (Florea, 2005a).

The website had a static part, consisting in articles and photos posted by its creators (webmasters), and an interactive part, consisting in comment options for each article, one forum, one chat, and the option to send personal articles or photos to the webmasters, who would then post them on the site. The webmasters and creators of the website were five first generation Romanian migrants in Canada, all with university studies and under the age of 40, three of them visible on the site through almost daily

posts or comments. Other writers declared different ages, ranging from about 20 to 60; the website was used both by writers – frequent or occasional – and readers – registered or not; all together, the site had over 140,000 visits (entries) in about three years.

The observation assignment went on from October 2004 to February 2005. It involved reading the topics, articles and announcements on the website, observing the image archive (photos), following the chat, observing the spatial arrangement and web-design, checking the number of visitors and members, registering the webmasters' activity and its results (changes in the web-design, added articles or topics), following the general dynamics, the main debates, the periods with more or less active posting (Florea, 2005a). It was not participative fieldwork, but an observation exercise; my observation practices were similar to those employed by the passive users of the site – the readers. My only participative initiatives consisted in 1) registering as a user, 2) posting a public announcement about the fact that I was following the site for a course assignment, as an ethnographic exercise, and 3) writing an email to the webmasters, hoping for some answers about their relationship with the site; there were no answers to these writings.

Urmila Goel continuously encouraged us to record our expectations and curiosities, our surprises, our work-in-progress interpretation, our first impressions, even if, later in our observations, we would find indicators to contradict our initial assumptions and interpretations. Thus, beyond the tentative ethnographic description, we exercised to reflect back and re-analyse our own relationship with the field. Contemplating these learning practices, I could retrospectively say that I was experiencing the “Virtual Ethnicity” course space as a narrative space, in the sense employed by Simpson (2000, p. 686): I was reading the space, by reading the course assignments; I was living the space, by attending classes, interacting with other students in that context, reflecting on the information learnt; I was writing the space, by writing the course assignments and by exchanging comments in class, influencing the writing of other students. The course thus offered a narrative space, with exploring and creative possibilities (research and debates), combined with a reassuring and safe frame (common readings and the lecturer's advice). Our observations were performed in this narrative context, thus becoming a narration in the frame of another narration: the virtual stories with ethnic character, rearranged as academic stories by the students. Again, becoming aware of this narrative overlap between the online and offline would have proven resourceful for an apprentice-researcher and could have offered the occasion to explore how the knowledge discourses, theorized by Foucault (1997), relate both to the online and offline contexts.

While preparing the essay assignment, drawing from the field records as well as from Anthony Cohen's (1995) and Fredrik Barth's (1969) understanding of processes of group identity formation, I tried to follow two topics: the construction of the feeling of security and the construction of symbolic borders in the virtual space. The main ideas debated around the essay were 1) that virtual spaces offer specific instruments of defining the “insiders” and “outsiders”, of constructing and practicing ethnic identities and differentiations, such as language cues, key-words of welcome or rejection, key symbolic images to be understood only by insiders, account registration formalizing the

insider's status, preset debate topics and information categories (now, reassessing these specific instruments of defining insiders and outsiders, I would consider them to be "narrative" or "textual"); 2) in the negotiation process between insiders and outsiders, some users' feeling of security in certain virtual spaces mirrors others' feeling of insecurity; 3) the virtual space, as a social space, is a socially constructed reality – thus its borders are not less "real" than any other social border, generating separations; 4) but inside the borders of a website, the users' relationships with the content of the website and with each other could be quite divers, and not necessarily reflected in the webmasters' point of view (Florea, 2005b).

With the final essay assignment, ended the first "chapter" in my learning process on fieldwork observation and ethnographic description. Beyond its shortcomings – the fieldwork reduction to non-participative observation, the short time span of the fieldwork, the ambiguous methodological coordinates – this undergraduate exercise had a rich potential for further research. I tried to explore this potential by continuing to research ethnicity-related online spaces, while continuing my learning process as an apprentice-anthropologist.

Revising the data gathered throughout this past fieldwork in the conceptual line of narrative spaces, I am tempted to say that rovancoover.com could have been a fruitful field to observe how the webmasters plant and manage the frame-story inside the narrative space they want to develop; how their imagined community (Anderson, 1991) of Romanians in Vancouver becomes a story, which transgresses the limits of the offline world and animates one virtual space; how other people relate to the story and become users of that virtual space. With sufficient data, it could have illustrated interesting connections between frame-stories in online narrative spaces and people creating and sharing them offline.

The second online encounter

After being introduced to the virtual field as an undergraduate student, I continued working as an apprentice-researcher for the "Virtual Second Generation" project, conducted by anthropologist Urmila Goel. The overall project explored, over a time span of several years, the alternative social spaces constructed by second generation Indian migrants in Germany (born in Germany, speaking German as first language, but with migrant parents coming from India). My contribution to the research project consisted in observing interactions and communication processes on the website and online forum www.theinder.net, the self-declared "Indian online community".

From April to December 2005, I recorded a systematic field diary detailing the images, texts, symbols, topics, dynamics, language uses I was able to observe on theinder.net; the observation process consisted, for most of the time, in reading (texts, comments, messages and dialogues) and in transforming the action of reading into an exercise of ethnographic description. My field diary was subject to secondary analysis performed by Urmila Goel; the leading researcher was analysing my interpretation of the social construction of theinder.net, for two reasons: 1) to merge different interpretations

of the same social space and thus to enrich the project results and 2) to include my personal relationship to theinder.net as a subject for analysis. My personal relationship with this online social space was considered worth analysing due to its insider-outsider ambivalence: as I was a non-German non-Indian, theinder.net was not targeting me as an insider; but as I was experiencing a migrant position (displacement) in Germany, I was not entirely an outsider to the displacement narratives shared on the forum.

Again with the occasion of this project, the parallel between my personal context and the field of observation could have offered insight on the process of knowledge-discourse formation and on methodological choices. Fortunately, this potential was explored by the leading researcher of the project.

Theinder.net was much more interactive than the Romanian website in Vancouver – as its main feature was the online discussion forum; it had over one thousand registered users, hundreds of topics (“threads”), tenths of thousands of posts, and several moderators. The active registered users had personal profiles, with avatars and mottos, which they changed and up-dated every now and then. The forum was semi-public: anyone could read it, but one had to be registered in order to post (write). I organized my observations by reading the most recent threads, threads opened by some of the users that I wanted to follow more closely, and threads which attracted me with their titles – methodological choices vulnerable to subjectivity.

My field notes contained descriptive aspects – such as observed new topics, debates, avatars, changes, design and structure of the space – but also possible interpretations regarding the empirical data; the latter were not formulated as strong conclusions but as hypotheses about: why would a person be active in an online ethnic community; what is “community” in the virtual space; why would a user develop more than one virtual identity; the importance of offline meetings for an online community; the importance of mundane, “small-talk” virtual interaction, in the development of a certain online network; the issue of German-Indian-virtual but also my own “Romanian-in-Germany-writing-in-English” identity; the issue of “other-ness” and difference; the issue of symbolic borders (Florea, 2005c). In parallel, the users themselves were opening up discussions about identity, community, online lives, and the social uses of internet.

The overall analysis perspective was mainly influenced by Werbner and Moodod’s (1997) conceptualization of cultural hybridity and hybrid identities in the new world of globalization and new media, respectively by Karim’s (2003) collection of analysis on media channels enabling ethnic spaces.

The concept of cultural hybridity emerged inside colonial studies, to describe a phenomenon triggered by colonial encounters and flourishing in post-colonial contexts: the absorption into one’s language and behaviour of objects, words and narratives, symbols, practices from a different cultural context. Werbner and Moodod’s collection illustrates through several empiric examples how the phenomenon is catalysed by the transactional nature of ethnic identity (Jenkins, 1994); in other words, it exemplifies how hybrid identities are formed through processes of social negotiation and mirror-self symbolic interaction (Goffman, 2003[1959]): the (ethnic) hybrid identity of a person or group forms through the superposing of 1) what the person/group perceives that the

significant Others believe she/he/the group is and should be, with 2) the available alternatives to react to these perceived beliefs.

Complementary, Karim's collection illustrated how the internet, due to its general accessibility, experimental, de-territorialized, and non-hierarchical character, allows ethnic and hybrid identities to be developed, practiced, shared; how sharing cultural practices on the internet can lead to the formation of online hybrid spaces, which have the potential to challenge negative stereotypes, homogenizing social labels and exclusion.

"The Virtual Second Generation" project was analysing theinder.net as such a space; we considered the premises for its creation and intense use to be: the (potential) users' feeling of being perceived neither as Germans nor Indians, superposed with the feeling of being expected and forced to be either Germans or Indians, with the possibility to access both German and Indian cultural elements, and to manifest them online.

A closer contact to the rovancover.com users – through email exchanges and some interviews – might have shown the same hybrid nature of the space and of the ethnic identity it enabled; but, in that case, the gathered data were not enough to approach the hypothesis. In further comparison to my first online field, the study of theinder.net had a stronger participative character: the leading researcher opened a thread in the forum, explaining the project and our observation process.

As any thread in the forum, anyone could read it but only the registered members (about 1,000) could reply and comment to it; the thread also offered a public link towards all the field diaries; the research team sometimes added new posts with citations from the diaries, rendering them even more accessible and visible. The creation of this thread had intended and unintended results.

One intended result was to generate a closer communication path between researchers and subjects, as they did not meet in person; another intended result was to generate an interactive approach, by allowing the subjects to directly react to the interpretations offered by the researchers. All together, the intention was to compensate for the fact that the researchers did not gather data interactively (through interviews), but performed a kind of content-analysis of written material (messages, comments, debates), similar to the content-analysis of already transcribed conversations. The thread was active weekly and received questions and comments. But only part of the forum users read the thread and was aware of being observed; only some of them were reading the field records; fewer were reading my field records, written in English; and only fewer were giving direct feed-back and shared their reactions.

In parallel, the uncontrollable results were embedded in the feed-back received from the forum users: comments, questions, new threads created, as reactions to our research; the reactions contained different formulations of issues such as insider-outsider relations, public-private nature of online forums, researcher-subject relations and the legitimacy of academic discourses. Considering these different formulations contributed to a deeper reflexive approach in the research project (Goel, 2009).

In my public field diary, I stated and assumed the following position: as an apprentice-researcher, my field diary would illustrate possible manners of understanding

social reality, mirroring the informational and interactional content of theinder.net, but also mirroring my background as a social scientist in the process of learning and formation. In this general context, the research experience was multi-directional; the social negotiation between researcher and subject roles was more intense; my own place as an insider or outsider in the studied field was more ambiguous, negotiable and challenged.

These negotiation processes reveal the permanent exchange and challenge of narratives between the online and offline worlds, including the academic world; they also illustrate the narratives as mechanism to permanently develop and re-arrange online spaces.

In addition, the concept of narrative spaces could well complement the concept of hybrid identity; both involve negotiation and creativity, allowed by the ambiguity of their mixed content; both involve possible beginnings and reinventions, reasons why people and groups are attracted by them. Furthermore, the concept of hybrid identity involves stories, merged from different cultural spaces – thus it echoes the ability of narratives to transgress different spaces (beyond the spaces where they are generated or the spaces which they order). Online and offline spaces inhabited by hybridity are thus narrative spaces, spaces of continuously re-told and re-negotiated stories.

When the online research part of Urmila Goel's project was completed, in December 2005, my contribution to the "Virtual Second Generation" ended as well; the project continued with offline in-depth interviews with some of the most active forum users, and with the elaboration of concluding articles by Urmila Goel (2009). At that time, my involvement in online research projects stopped for the following two years, until early 2008. Spending most of the time in Bucharest, experiencing and observing (at first informally and unintentionally, then systematically) its rapid post-socialist changes, my study interest was attracted towards the daily and most visible realities around me: the offline public spaces and the social negotiations regarding the right to use them, their symbolic value, and their borders with private spaces, in the post-socialist urban context. The online spaces and testimonies about their uses seemed less visible, accessible and challenging to me at that time, in comparison to the offline research opportunities offered by the public spaces of Bucharest. Influences from the previous online fields upon the methods, theories, personal choices employed in the subsequent offline fields are not clarified yet, which is one of the limitations of the present paper and a possible line of methodological reflection for the future.

The third online encounter

After a two years break from cyberanthropology, in February 2008, I started an individual research in the virtual space: this time, for my Master in Anthropology dissertation project, and in a familiar space for me – Yahoo Messenger, the one I have been using exactly since my first encounter with cyberanthropology, as an Erasmus student.

The context of the research was marked by the following coordinates: I wanted to explore the different ways young adults use the Yahoo Messenger (Y!M) communication

portal and the different social meanings attached to Yahoo Messenger interactions, for the 18-30 age group, in the city of Bucharest; my main acknowledged/ aware reason for this choice was the growing popularity of Y!M in all social groups I was in contact with, at that time.

Yahoo Messenger is a private network, thus one communicates directly only with other desired Messenger users; this implies a previous social connection embedded in the online interactions. Due to this private, less accessible character, as an initial exploration I chose to observe my own list of contacts, with about 150 users: recording what avatars are used, what status messages, what are the most frequent mass messages, what are the most active communication hours.

Next, from my list, I chose 15 contacts with different social, educational, professional backgrounds and with different social connections towards me, for in-depth offline interviews; I chose three unemployed persons, three persons still in professional formation, nine professionals (with university degree) in different domains; I chose five friends (known for a long time, sharing an offline social life), five online friends (communicating weekly online but rarely offline), five acquaintances (rarely connecting offline and online). The choices were rather random and based on opportunity; the methodological purpose of the choices was to cover a wider range of different Messenger users, and to obtain different types of data – more intimate or more formal – from more, respectively less familiar informants.

In the last research phase, five of my informants – two of the friends and three acquaintances – allowed me to observe their Messenger communication behaviour and the interactions in their personal lists, for about (not necessarily consecutive) 5-7 days, during the times of the day when they used Messenger most intensely. This meant standing by each informant's side while they were using the internet and Y!M, recording the frequency, length, language uses, image uses, purposes and nature of the communications/ dialogues, and then asking questions about the online-offline relationship between the interlocutors. At the debut of any communication, my subjects informed their interlocutors about the fact that the communication was observed for research reasons.

Most of the (interviewed, directly observed, indirectly observed) informants were surprised by my research topic, wondering if it was not too mundane or “trivial” for academic inquiry. Initially, most of them accepted to be part of it as an entertaining experiment; but after the first discussions, most of them admitted to find it useful to talk about and to be observed while performing Y!M mundane practices – as a catalyser for self-reflection.

I can now evaluate this observation technique as not very deep and revealing, but rather as a “trial and error” methodological exercise; back then, I was not aware of other methods of following the Y!M behaviours. Moreover, I can now re-evaluate my “snow ball” approach as not elaborate enough and not systematic enough; but back then it allowed me to face few educative challenges: the challenge to ethnographically describe a reality in which I was aware of being personally involved; the challenge to explore private behaviour and communication; the challenge to go beyond confirming with more

empirical data the expectations formed at the beginning of the “snow ball”. As an answer to these challenges, I was hoping to find a solution in using a “thick description” approach, theorized by Clifford Geertz (1973); thick description allows the research subjects to represent their own view of the social world, but it also frames this representation in the wider context in which the subjects interact, catalysing a comprehensive study. But I can evaluate now that the methodological questions of the complex Y!M field overwhelmed my ability to find solutions, even using thick description.

In addition to thick description, I was organizing the gathered data on the support given by three theoretical lines: 1) Miller and Slater’s (2000) argumentation that online and offline worlds are not contradictory but continue each other, while mundane, small-talk interactions are vital for maintaining an active sociability both in online and offline worlds; 2) Bunt’s (2000) argumentation that the ritual sharing of information enabled by online portals is responsible for the stability of the otherwise fluid online social spaces; 3) the idea argued in Jones’ collection (1997) that the nature of online communication is mostly textual. While observing my field and interviewing the informants, I was looking for clues that corresponded and resonated to these theoretical lines; at that time, the empirical data seemed to fit these lines.

Applying now the concept of narrative space to this past fieldwork generates the confluence of previously followed theoretical lines; a more coherent interpretation is thus made available: if one virtual space involves mostly textual communication – through reading and writing – that space has the premises of a narrative one; if that space involves ritual sharing of information – through registration processes, adhesion to a certain network or access to certain knowledge – the respectively space gains stability in its fluidity, thus offering both a frame-story and possible beginnings for diverse personal stories; such a virtual space can be analysed as a narrative space; the personal stories beginning in its frame can be shared through online small-talk interactions; through these interactions, the shared frame-story is continuously negotiated, the space continuously rearranged and brought in connection to other spaces – and thus kept alive.

Among my past virtual fields, Yahoo Messenger is the most similar to Timothy Simpson’s field in Florida, concerning 1) its public-private nature, 2) its textual, readable and writable nature, 3) the compatibility of certain interests among users (leading to the adhesion to what Cohen calls “border-maintaining metaphors”).

The Messenger lists are usually private networks, but they can easily become semi-public; for example, when someone decides to make public her/his contact identification (ID or username); or when cascade-messages (“mass messages”, sent to ones entire contact list) are made public by being sent from one contact list to another, reaching numerous unacquainted users. This rather private nature, combined with the possibility of public uses, builds stronger definitions of insiders-outsiders and of the feeling of reciprocity-based security. The space studied by Simpson was a private-owned record store, which allowed people to hang-out in and around it, without the obligation to purchase anything. The owner of the record store is similar to a Y!M list owner; the Messenger list and the store are private spaces, but opened for people sharing a certain social network or cultural background. The users can write their own stories in these

spaces – literally, as Messenger holds mostly written communication and the record store holds posters, flyers, graffiti, scribbles. The users can reinvent themselves through virtual identities or through musical subcultures. In both spaces, the small-talk and the hang-out are means to share and to enrich the stories, but also to turn them into stable elements of the spaces – memories, micro-history, customs etc. Thus again, familiarity and creativity, privacy and public interactions coexist in these narrative spaces. At the same time, these private-owned public spaces don't give up their stronger privacy core, protecting their selected and self-selected "insiders".

The online events

During the three online research projects, I was lucky to witness several events, breaks in the everyday routine; while anthropological observations are statutory dedicated to ordinary, daily practices and social meanings, most researchers witness unexpected turns while on field, turns which they cannot ignore. In the present case, the events bring more light to the way virtual social spaces permanently reinvent their borders, rearrange through narratives, and permanently relate to other offline and online spaces, enabling new beginnings for personal and common stories.

New "twin" website created

While observing rovancover.com, during the autumn and winter of 2004-2005, its webmasters decided to create a new website, connected to it through reciprocal advertising, functioning in parallel with it, but with different design and content. It was called voci.ro (meaning "voices") and it stated to be "the friend you need... we are here for you".

The initial site had mostly images related to Romanian tradition and history: flags, maps, pictures of traditional celebrations, events, costumes, representative historical characters etc.; but its articles, debates and posts were mostly related to everyday life issues, in Canada, Romania and in the migration process. While the new site (still under construction while I was observing it) had high quality images of children, flowers, people, with no symbolic reference to Romanian specificity; but its start-up articles and debate topics were strongly linked to Romanian orthodoxy, religious tradition in Romania, the importance of religion in national identity and the importance of national identity.

Being at its beginnings, voci.ro represented mostly the webmasters' creation, their preferences and views of what an online Romanian community should be; while rovancover.com, already being an older platform for interaction among more people, offered more possibilities for identity negotiation, communication, participation and interaction. The fact that, until now, the two different Romanian online (declared) "communities" continue to coexist shows that they respond to different needs, of different people, to tell stories in different ways. Such narratives that fill up these two virtual spaces are: the personal stories of the webmasters, the personal stories of other

Romanian migrants, the collective stories of religion and nationalism, in different interpretations and understandings; all these narratives begin around the frame-story – planted in this online space by the webmasters – a possible story of a possible Romanian community in Canada.

At the same time, *voci.ro* was the result of the webmasters' desire to promote their web-design work: they revealed the story of how they founded a web-design company and wanted to promote it. But why not create a website for commercial/ advertising purposes, in English, for the local non-Romanian clients? The choice to address again, with a new site, the Romanian clients might reveal an offline "lifestyle enclave" of Romanians living in Vancouver and mostly connecting to each other. This fact illustrated the deep connection between online and offline needs and events, connections mediated by (in this case, ethnicized or hybrid) narratives.

Hackers

Theinder.net clearly stated its association to the Indian minority in Germany; this was a visible way of ethnicizing its symbolic borders and its frame-story – narrative of an Indian community in Germany. Still, the numerous diverse stories, written in German, English, with some Hindi words, filling up this online space, render the ethnic character of its content more ambiguous, despite its clearly ethnic borders and ethnic frame-story.

While observing it, in 2005, it received quite often racist remarks, in some parts of the forum (for example, in the "guest room" where one could post messages without being a registered user). The long-term users debated this issue in several threads, showing that the racist feed-back was going on since the beginning of the forum.

In July 2005, hackers attacked it and shut it down, clearly stating their anti-Indian and xenophobic position; it was closed for few days. Then, its creators managed to recover it partially and to put it back on use, with some changes and missing parts. The "guest room" was not included in the recovered version; the appearing order of the messages and posts was reversed, some of the oldest threads were lost.

When the forum was reopened, the users posted hundreds of messages showing their joy to meet again – a new beginning, the main attraction of narrative spaces. They also posted acknowledgements of the fact that, due to the ethnic character/ difference of the forum, it represented a target for racist hacker attacks. As a direct outcome, the forum closed itself more from the "outsiders", in its form, not in its content – as it closed the possibility for non-registered members to post, but it did not restrict the possibility for anyone to become a registered member. The event opened new threads about racist realities in material and virtual Germany, but also about coping strategies for the identified and self-identified "other" ("Andere"); the users' expressed reactions were diverse, ranging from amusement to anger and desire to assume a more radical position.

The attack illustrated continuities between the online and offline spaces: racist issues from the offline world invaded the online world; reactions towards racism argued and shared by the users in the online world strengthened their attitudes in their offline worlds. Few months after the attack, I did not observe new posts directly related to it; on

the other hand, racism, identity, and the vulnerable public nature of the forum were still popular topics, as before the attack. Reflecting back and using the reading of theinder.net as a narrative space, I propose to interpret this event (the attack and the users' reactions) as an illustration of how an online space re-arranges around its frame-story, building new ones derived from it (new beginnings), while the frame-story is permanently re-negotiated 1) inside the space and 2) outside it, in other online and offline worlds (for example, by racist intruders).

The radio show

At the time of researching about Yahoo Messenger, there was a parallel online phenomenon going on in Bucharest: online radio broadcastings were becoming popular; first, some professional private radio "channels" were set up; then, young people set up their own radio shows, using basic pirate software, and performing it as entertainment for their friends and social networks.

One of the contacts in my Messenger list (at that time, my contact list grew to about 150 contacts, in order to observe as many users as I could and to be in contact to a wide social network) created such an online radio show. The shows were mostly music, but also "live" comments, every now and then; the shows took place during some evenings and nights, not in a regular manner. The creator advertised for his shows using his own Messenger contact list (which included me); some of the contacts from his list were forwarding the advertisement to their own Messenger contact lists, circulating it to a wider and interconnected social network. As mentioned earlier, this "mass messaging" process transforms private information (received through one's private contact list) into a public one (shared through the chain of interconnected contact lists of several Messenger users).

One night, the creator of the online radio changed the live comments into musical "dedications" and advertised through a "mass message" that anyone could contact him via Messenger and ask for certain dedications (the desired music and the text to be transmitted live). His mass message was rapidly transmitted through the chain of interconnected Messenger lists and dedications went on all night – among people who knew or didn't know each other, among people who were connected through Messenger or became connected after this event. For example: people who knew each other and were directly connected in Messenger, stopped communicating directly (for that one night) and communicated instead through the live dedications on the radio; other radio listeners, who didn't directly know the previous ones but enjoyed their dedication exchange, intervened and offered dedications for them, opening new connections.

This extreme expansion and interaction of Messenger networks did not repeat with the same radio show; it was an ephemeral configuration in the virtual space and in the Messenger network, with entertaining and socializing purpose. Still, it revealed the fluidity of this kind of virtual spaces, their possibility of expanding and connecting to other spaces, the creativity and surprise – characteristic to narrative spaces, reasons for

their long lasting success. Most of all, it illustrated how narratives (in the form of dedications) can transgress “lifestyle enclaves” (the private Messenger lists) and can penetrate different online and offline spaces, challenging their borders.

Further debate

The above events revealed deep similarities among the three online spaces: the fluidity between their public and private nature; their continuity into other material and virtual worlds; their flexibility to reinvent themselves/ to be reinvented as narrative spaces with new beginnings and diverse stories. This last characteristic is double-folded: on one side, it involves the ability of online narrative spaces to create new/ extra-ordinary permanent and ephemeral conditions of interaction or to recover from extra-ordinary conditions of interactions – in order to keep old users close and to attract new users, around the frame-story. On the other side, it involves the possibility for users, “new-comer” or “veteran”, to find or to create their personal meanings, significance, representations, understandings of the respective space – in other words, the possibility for each user to have a personal narrative in and around the respective space.

The limitations of the present paper derive from the limitations of the past fieldworks and from the effort to bring together too much field data, aiming to compensate for too little analysis in the past; the limitations derive as well from the fact that the writing process went through three different stages before arriving to a final form.

First stage tested the form of descriptive field notes, revised and contemplated from past online fieldworks. In this form, the paper lacked any thesis. But as plain description was rather unchallenging, I tried to enrich it by drawing parallels between the offline (personal and professional) past situations conditioning me as researcher, and what I observed/ learnt from the studied online spaces.

The attempt was not taken to a complete end, as another approach, more challenging, overlapped with the initial one; this led to a second stage of the paper. This time, it tested the form of secondary analysis, applied to past online fields, in order to reveal their resonance with the concept of “narrative spaces”. In this stage, the paper had too many theses, which made hard for it to have one well-argued thesis.

Becoming aware of the overwhelming number of possible theses, this approach was supplemented by a third one, leading to the third stage of the paper; this one tested the form of a critical analysis of the past fieldworks, illustrating their limitations, searching for their current usefulness. The thesis illustrated – through the present example – that the methodological exercise of looking back at past (and undergraduate) fields can lead to the discovery of new research questions and methodological improvements. Thus, the paper invited to the contemplation of the researcher’s work as an always re-arranging narrative, always connected to processes of learning, hybrid as it integrates ideas from the subjects, other researchers, suggestions from reviewers and professors.

The concept of “narrative spaces” remained of interest to the third stage of the paper, as well; this allowed for the crystallization of two main theses for the second stage of the paper, out of the mass of initial hypotheses.

The two theses were explored throughout the entire narrative (above) and they are now proposed for further debate: 1) the social construction of interactive online spaces as narrative spaces, around initial frame-stories – be they marked by symbolic borders, hybrid identities or ritual communication; 2) the quality of narratives to include continuous re-negotiations and to transcend the spaces where they emerged – be they online or offline – thus continuously connecting those spaces to others. These continuities might represent a challenging theme for further research.

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Ioana Florea has a Master's degree in Anthropology and Community Development from the Faculty of Political Sciences and Administration in Bucharest, Romania. She studied online spaces as an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology. She is now working on a doctorate in Urban Sociology at Bucharest University, and she is a fellow at CIES - ISCTE, Lisbon University Institute. Her interdisciplinary thesis combines perspectives on urban planning, sociability of public spaces, and a "new urbanism" approach.