

How to study social media practises in converging library spaces. Making the case for deploying co-presence ethnography in studies of 2.0-libraries

Introduction

Ethnographically inspired methods have in recent years been successfully applied in Information Science (IS) research on different forms of social media related practices (c.f. Sundin & Francke 2009a; 2009b, Kjellberg 2010). This paper aims to contribute to a discussion on the use of this methodological approach for analysing and comprehending consequences of the 2.0-turn in public libraries. Drawing on the experiences of a one-year long ethnographic study of everyday work-related social media practices in a Swedish public library, I suggest that there are significant epistemic benefits of using the ethnographic approach in this field. By shifting focus to everyday practices and routines in local settings, new features of the 2.0-phenomena are accentuated, contributing to different understandings of the role of social media in public library development.

However, doing ethnography in this setting also constitutes an epistemic challenge. The 2.0-turn has contributed to transforming public libraries into assemblages of mediated and non-mediated settings where content is continuously flowing between disparate, but converging spaces. Such a research-field contests traditional understandings of central features of ethnographic research, such as the conceptualization of fieldwork, the role of the researcher and her relation to the object of research. In the following text I propose a way to address this issue by introducing STS-researcher Ann Beaulieu's (2010) epistemic strategy of *co-presence* as a method for approaching converging library spaces ethnographically. This strategy, I argue, provides means for keeping the epistemic benefits of the ethnographic approach, while considering the particular conditions of 2.0-environments. I will commence by further explaining my conception of 2.0-libraries as converging spaces, followed by a discussion of the conditions of such a field with regards to intellectual conventions in ethnographic research. I will then clarify how *co-presence* constitutes a powerful methodological tool for IS-research that expands our knowledge of Library 2.0 and its consequences.

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About the study

The study referred to in this text is an ethnographic study aimed at providing a research-based understanding of how public libraries enact the 2.0-shift and its consequences in everyday work-related practices and routines. For one year I exploratively followed and analysed work practices pertaining to social media at one of the larger public libraries in Sweden. The library in question was reorganized in 2007 and, in connection with that, a new department called Digital Content and Presence was initiated. The department, hosting three to four co-workers, had as its main purpose to rebuild and manage the library web site as well as "create a digital presence" for the library. The later meant making sure that the library was actively using different social media, such as Facebook, youtube and Twitter and kept up-to-date with the latest developments in the web 2.0 field.

I contacted the library manger in June 2010, and was permitted to commence with a digital study in September 2010. In this part of the study I observed and participated to a limited extent in the library's activities in different digital environments. I focused on

those platforms categorized as social media in everyday language, such as the social networking site facebook, the micro blog twitter, two blogs run by the library and also the library's youtube channel. In October 2010 I additionally started spending a couple of days a week at the library, observing and participating in the day-to-day activities at the department. During this period, the workers were asked to write logbooks describing their work activities. Additionally, interviews with library managers on different levels in the organization were conducted.

By localizing the 2.0-phenomenon in a particular setting it is possible to understand its production as embedded in local institutional routines, which, I argue, diversifies and deepens our understanding of its consequences. Hence, the emphasis on everyday, situated actions, which the ethnographic approach suggests, provides IS with the opportunity for novel insights into this turn in library development. Bearing these benefits in mind, an answer to the challenges the 2.0-environments provide for IS-researchers is called for as to be able to continue developing this methodological approach for this object of research.

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Converging library spaces

Adjusting the camera before filming an intended YouTube clip of a colleague giving a book presentation, one of the participants in my study – an IT-librarian – turned to me and said:

- You know, we like to expose the activities that take place here as much as we possibly can. It's not our strategy to produce separate web content. Instead we try to present what goes on in here /.../ with a different twist depending on the channel we use.

This episode exemplifies a set of practices that I observed in my study, which renegotiated understandings of place in – and for – library work. The use of movies, photos and text to mediate different library events and activities in diverse online environments – preferably those categorised as social media – contributed to turning library space into an assemblage of mediated and non-mediated settings. Also, content continuously flowing between these and other connected settings added to contesting the boundaries defining library space. However, although borders were frequently crossed, a powerful adhesive prevented fragmentation by pulling the wide array of spaces together. As one of my informants described their work:

- We're thinking of it as storytelling. It's a powerful story of the library... and we want people to participate in our work. That's our main purpose for using social media.

This practice of storytelling, I realized, played an important role of binding different library spaces together. In other words, narrating practice produced a sort of convergence.

This can be related to the notion of *Convergence Culture* put forward by media researcher Henry Jenkins (2008). He describes contemporary media landscapes by using the concept of convergence, meaning

.../the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want /.../ In the world of media convergence, every story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms /.../ This circulation of media content – across different media system /.../ depends heavily on consumers active participation.

Jenkins 2008, pp. 2-3

The storytelling by my informants could, from this perspective, be interpreted as an enactment of a media culture of convergence framed by the particular socio-material setting of the library. The ethnographic approach – designed to study social and cultural phenomena in everyday action (Murchison 2010) – provided me with the basic tools that enabled me to get close to these events. However, it required a renegotiation of traditional ethnographic understandings of my research field, my access to it, as well as my role as a researcher within it.

Ethnography and convergence

The first time I accessed my research field I spend a couple of hours on my living room sofa reading through the log-archive on the library's Facebook page. The weeks that followed I made it my daily habit to check and respond to the library's twitter feeds, their blog updates and their status up-dates on Facebook. Without even visiting the library I had entered some of the converging spaces of the research-field and started my ethnographic study.

The notion of field as equating a specific place where the researcher has to be physically present has typically been a requirement for ethnographic investigation (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, Beaulieu 2004; 2010). In line with this, face-to-face interactions have often been treated as a prerequisite for gaining the everyday and intimate knowledge associated with ethnographic studies (Marcus 1998). Consequently, mediated relations to the field of study are sometimes approached as a barrier to ethnographic rapport (Beaulieu 2010). However, as explained above, physical place was but one – although equally important to considerate – of many converging spaces constituting my research field. With online environments as important constituents, mediated practices were crucial for me both to engage in and investigate. Finding an epistemic strategy to embrace the particularities of my research field, which would enable me to deconstruct the notion of mediated interactions as perceived obstacles, was therefore pertinent.

From co-location to co-presence

I found my strategy in recent approaches accentuating “networks”, “flows” or “streams of practices” as objects of ethnographic study (c.f. Mol & Law 1994, De Laet & Mol 2000, Beaulieu 2010). Not equating field with physical place permitted me to study practises and engage with informants in multiple settings, not giving priority to any one setting in particular. Designing my study in this way turned out to be, not only preferable, but also necessary to get close to the everyday work-related practices I aimed to study. Thus, for a study of a library of converging spaces, thinking co-presence rather than co-location

proved to be an important move. Beaulieu (2010, p. 454) describes the epistemic strategy as follows:

Co-presence decentralizes the notion of space without excluding it. It opens up the possibility that co-presence might be established through a variety of modes, physical co-location being one among others. Not only does it enable the researcher to take mediated settings very seriously (insofar as they are means or resource for being co-present), but it also does not exclude face-to face situations. Co-presence as a starting point enables a more symmetrical treatment of forms of interaction.

Deploying the epistemic strategy of co-presence and focus on “streams of practices” rather than a single physical place, allowed me to closely follow the actions of informants through different settings and places. Moreover, this enhanced the possibility of understanding the connection between the library environment and other settings, thus establishing the links to more widely dispersed media practises as I suggested above. In this way co-presence draws the attention to what can be seen as intersecting worlds present in libraries constituted by converging spaces.

Conclusions

Analysing and comprehending consequences of the 2.0-turn in public libraries using ethnography provides IS with novel possibilities of gaining original insights into this shift in library development. Applying recent strategies, such as the notion of co-presence, have the possibility of further enriching these insights. Focusing on “streams of practices” and following the work of informants through different spaces provides the foundation for a better understanding of new skills required by librarians when their workplace is not restricted to a physical place but dispersed in many converging spaces.

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