

# New Media, Old Methods – Internet Methodologies and the Online/Offline Divide

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## Introduction

In an imagined conversation between two of the key profiles of twentieth-century American social science – C. Wright Mills and Paul F. Lazarsfeld – Stein (1964) summarized an issue that has remained key to research methodologies concerning communication and culture. The fantasy has Mills reading aloud the first sentence of *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959): “Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps.” “Lazarsfeld” replies: “How many men, which men, how long have they felt this way, which aspects of their private lives bother them, do their public lives bother them, when do they feel free rather than trapped, what kinds of traps do they experience, etc., etc., etc.” (Stein, 1964, p. 215) (discussed in Gitlin, 1978, p. 223).

Whereas “Lazarsfeld’s” quantitative formulations remain subject to debate, and while the vocabulary of how “men” feel belongs to Mills’ “nowadays,” it is still true today that grand theoretical assertions call for concrete empirical investigation. The many utopian as well as dystopian conceptions of the Internet during its first two decades as a public medium are a case in point, challenging research to assess recurring claims that the Internet may be either entrapping or empowering its users. In a future perspective, the new medium of the Internet will grow old, enabling research to review early projections of its likely consequences and implications (Marvin, 1988). And other new media, perhaps an “Internet of things” (ITU, 2005) that further embeds media within common objects and everyday settings, will follow. The role of research is not to predict future media, but to prepare the resources for studying them. What the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said about life as such applies to the study of new media: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards” ([1843] 2008).

In this chapter, I outline some of the opportunities for studies that approach the Internet as one constituent of a historically evolving media environment. My first premise is that while the early emphasis on a divide between offline and online

practices and worlds – cyberspaces and virtual realities – may have been a necessary step for theory development of the 1990s, it has become increasingly counter-productive in methodological terms (see also Slater, 2002). My second premise is that the common notions of convergence and mediatization – that previously separate media are joined into similar formats and shared platforms, and that the sum of media is displacing embodied interaction – are, at best, partial accounts of contemporary culture. Old media rarely die, and humans remain the reference point and prototype for technologically mediated communication. In this vein, I suggest that research on present as well as future incarnations of the Internet still has much to gain from a range of old methods that have examined how people communicate through analog as well as embodied media. Communicative practices crisscross bodies and technologies.

The first section situates the Internet in the current media environment. I refer to a configuration of media of three degrees, including humans as media. The second section briefly considers the variety of methods that have served Internet studies so far. Here, I reemphasize the distinction between methods and methodologies – concrete research instruments and theoretically informed research designs. Before asking which particular methods may serve to sample the requisite empirical data from and about the Internet, it is important to ask, in the first place, what are the relevant questions and purposes of Internet studies. The third section discusses some of the ways in which the Internet and other digital technologies are replacing or complementing traditional methods of data collection. In certain respects, new media remediate old methods.

In the fourth and final section, I return to the sort of grand questions that Mills and Lazarsfeld posed, specifically the issue of how people exercise their agency vis-à-vis the Internet, and how these practices can be tapped by research. Compared to previous media forms, the Internet holds a potential for more widely dispersed and differentiated forms of social and cultural innovation. Scholarship is a specialized case of human inquiry; Internet studies rely, in part, on the sociological imagination of ordinary users. Through the perspectives of different constituencies of informants, research is in a position to ask both what is, and what could be. Even though scholarship has few grounds for predicting the future of the Internet, the people using and developing the Internet day by day are important sources of insight into what it might become.

### **Media of Three Degrees**

The coming of digital media has served to question the long-standing dichotomies of mass versus interpersonal and mediated versus non-mediated communication. For one thing, computer-mediated communication resembles face-to-face interaction in important respects, more so than mass communication. For another thing, everyday conversations, while non-mediated by technologies, are mediated by aural-oral modalities and by non-verbal expressions. The very idea of communication

has been informed over time by the available media. In fact, communication only came to be thought of as a general category of human activity following the rise of electronic media from the last half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the telegraph. These media encouraged researchers and other commentators to think of diverse practices of social interaction – in the flesh, through wires, and over the air – in terms of their family resemblances. In John Durham Peters' (1999, p. 6) words, "mass communication came first." Responding to yet another generation of technologies, research today rarely speaks of "mass communication" or "mass media." The question is, What comes after mass media? To address this question, I refer to media of three degrees (Jensen, 2008b).

*Media of the first degree* are the biologically based, socially formed resources that enable human beings to articulate an understanding of reality, and to engage in communication about it with others. The central example is verbal language, or speech; additional examples include song, dance, drama, painting, and creative arts generally, often incorporating mechanical techniques such as musical instruments and writing utensils. *Media of the second degree* are what Walter Benjamin ([1936] 1977) defined as the media of technical reproduction, enabling the mass distribution of artworks and other representations, while undermining their quality of aura or uniqueness. Whereas Benjamin was commenting on photography, film, and radio, in the present context media of the second degree include printed books and newspapers as well as television and video. *Media of the third degree* are the digitally processed forms of representation and interaction, recombining media of the first and second degree on a single platform – the computer is a meta-medium (Kay & Goldberg, [1977] 1999). The central current examples of how the principles of computing allow for a recombination of previously separate print and electronic media are networked personal computers and smartphones, although these interfaces are likely to change substantially in future developments of the Internet.

It is the place of the Internet in the total configuration of media that is of particular interest in this chapter. The terminology of degrees refers to the fact that different media offer distinctive and ascending degrees of programmability, not just in the familiar technological sense, but also in terms of their flexible modalities of expression and institutional arrangements. Various media afford diverse means of expression that are extremely, if variably, adaptable – programmable – for different purposes and contexts of human interaction; media are institutions that facilitate the reorganization of society on a grand scale across time and space. At the same time, each new type and degree of medium recycles the forms and contents of old media in a process of *remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Over time, this process involves a reconfiguration of the old as well as the new: traditions of typography and printing, not surprisingly, came to inform web design; television adopted an aesthetics of overlapping windows from the graphic computer interface. Even more important, old and new media enter into a shifting social division of labor in getting the many jobs of communication done. For example, email, text messaging, phone calls, and face-to-face contact are acquiring

culturally consensual profiles as well as more varied patterns of use – for instance among different age groups (Kim et al., 2007). Being able to choose the right medium and genre for the occasion is to have been socialized and acculturated within a particular historical and social context of communication.

Whereas it is easy, as always, to exaggerate the implications of a new medium, the Internet has taken center stage over the past two decades, in two interrelated respects. First, it now constitutes a common global *infrastructure* for the distribution of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications. This is in spite of the many outstanding issues concerning diffusion and access in different regions and cultures of the world. Also, viable business models and legal frameworks for both one-to-many and many-to-many communication are still taking shape. Second, at least in the industrialized West, the Internet has been taking over the role of being the most widely shared *cultural forum* (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984), in which public issues can be articulated and negotiated. Twenty-five years ago, this was the role of television, notably in the context of those nation-states that had previously taken shape as imagined communities through the press and other print media (Anderson, 1991). Despite technological and institutional differences, the Internet has come to constitute the sort of information reference and communicative resource for everyday political and cultural interactions that television had provided from the 1950s to the 1980s, affording themes, frames, and agendas of public discourse in local, national, and global arenas. This is not to say that television was the primary originator or controller of public communication in the decades following World War Two, nor that the Internet is approaching the status of a unified equivalent. In network terminology, however, television served as a key node in the flow of cultural forms across print and audiovisual media. As the field of media and communication research took shape during those same decades, the flow lent itself to studies of *intermediality* and *intertextuality*, that is, the interconnectedness of media, with each other and with various social institutions, as discourses and organizational structures (for overviews, see Jensen, 2008a, 2008c).

Such perspectives, focusing on media not as discrete entities, but as constituents of layered social and technological networks, translate well into Internet studies. A relational approach to media and texts helps to bring out some of the distinctive features of the Internet, not just as a source of information and representations, but as a resource for action. With digital media, action, interaction, and *interactivity* have acquired new prominence as aspects of media use, even if research has been struggling to arrive at a workable definition of interactivity (Kioussis, 2002). For methodological purposes, interactivity can be conceptualized and operationalized, not only as a matter of the users' selectivity at the interface, but also as a repertoire of actions reaching beyond the interface – to significant others at a distance and into the impersonal institutions of politics, economy, and culture (Neuman, 2008). To take full advantage of the lessons of previous communication studies, and of the research opportunities presented by the Internet, the research agenda should include those intermedial, intertextual, and interactive relations

– across media types – that enter into the ongoing structuration of modern societies (Giddens, 1984).

## After the Great Divides

Following early and widely popular notions of the Internet as an extraordinary cyberspace (Benedikt, 1991) – a place apart in which identity experiments, avant-garde artworks, and innovative business models might find an outlet – the Internet has been going through a process of becoming ordinary. Likewise, Internet studies have been maturing as well as diversifying. The Internet can now be recognized as one more resource for communicating about and co-constructing a shared reality of social ends and means. During the heyday of *mass* communication studies, Andreas Huyssen (1986) commented that the pervasiveness of popular cultural forms had made the presumed great divide between elite and mass culture increasingly untenable. For a brief moment, Internet studies have been facing another great divide – that between online and offline communication. At present, research is in a position to move beyond the latter divide and perhaps, in time, to revisit the former, as well.

Fifty years ago, Elihu Katz introduced a motto for media studies that may also serve Internet studies, arguing that research should ask, not only what media do to people, but also what people do with media (Katz, 1959). In a later study, appropriately entitled, “On the Use of Mass Media for Important Things,” Katz and his co-authors explored the comparative relevance of different media for the public, asking in what respects newspapers, cinema, television, etc., might replace or complement one another (Katz et al., 1973). The question today is how online and offline media, and media of different degrees, complement each other for important things that people do.

## Methodologies versus Methods

In response to its public breakthrough since the mid-1990s, the Internet predictably has invited a wealth of research approaches. In overview, the approaches can be characterized with reference to methods – the concrete instruments for collecting and analyzing data, traditionally divided into qualitative and quantitative groupings. Table 3.1 lays out six basic forms of research evidence, with typical examples from and about the Internet in each cell.

The various data types can be thought of, in communicative terms, as vehicles of information that allow for inferences about the contents, forms, and contexts of communication which are enabled by the Internet. First, verbal evidence is a mainstay of social-scientific and humanistic inquiry into culture and communication. As noted commonsensically by Bower (1973, p. vi) “the best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them” – although the

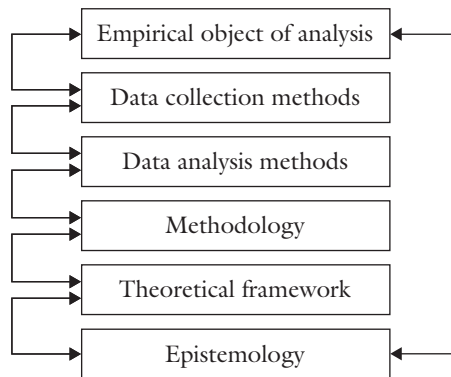
**Table 3.1** Basic Methods in Internet Studies

	<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>
Discourse/speech/writing	Survey interviewing (offline and online)	In-depth individual and focus-group interviewing (offline and online)
Behavior/action	Experiment (e.g., web usability studies)	Participating observation (e.g., digital ethnographies)
Texts/documents/artifacts	Content analysis (e.g., of political information resources and search engines as meta-information)	Discourse analysis; historical and aesthetic criticism (e.g., of “netspeak” and digital artworks)

inference from what people say, in either surveys or focus groups, to what they think, is fraught with methodological and epistemological difficulties. Second, human actions are meaningful, as established both by social actors themselves and by scholars and others observing them. In the words of Clifford Geertz (1983, p. 58), much research on human culture and communication seeks to determine “what the devil they think they are up to.” Third, the records that individuals, organizations, and historical epochs leave behind, again, bear witness to what people may have been up to, or what they may have thought about. Historical sources, of course, amount to one-way communication. Luckily, several sources may lend themselves to comparison. And, like different media, different research approaches complement each other.

Methods handbooks of the day habitually state that the “how” of research depends on “what” and “why” – that the approaches should fit the purpose and the domain of inquiry – in contrast to past calls for a unitary “scientific method” (cited in Jankowski & Wester, 1991, p. 46). The difficulty is how, specifically, to link theoretical conceptions of the Internet, and the public issues it raises, to particular empirical instruments, data sets, and analytical procedures. Studies *about* the Internet do not necessarily entail a focus on samples or specimens *of* the Internet in any concrete technological, organizational, or demographic sense. In order to elaborate on the options for Internet studies, it is useful to revisit some basic levels of planning, conducting, documenting, and interpreting research projects, which may too often be taken for granted. Figure 3.1 distinguishes six levels of doing empirical research (Jensen, 2002, p. 258).

Each of the levels can be addressed, again, in terms of the discourses or symbolic vehicles through which research is constituted as an intersubjective, social practice – language, mathematical symbols, graphical representations, and other meaningful signs:



**Figure 3.1** Six Levels of Empirical Research

- The empirical *objects of analysis* include discourses arising from or addressing the Internet (from websites and chat sequences, to policy documents and user-test responses), but also discourses with different origins for comparative purposes. In order to know what the Internet is, it can be important to ask what it is not, or what it might become.
- *Data collection methods* – from content sampling frames to interview guides – delineate that small portion of reality from which inferences and interpretations will be made. I return below to the distinction between data that are “found” (e.g., archives of debate forums), and data that are “made” (e.g., interviews with moderators), which has taken on new salience in digital media.
- *Data analysis methods* cover diverse operations of segmenting, categorizing, and interpreting evidence. In addition, empirical projects typically include a meta-analytical component in the form of statistical tests for significance or an “audit trail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) documenting the steps of qualitative inquiry.
- *Methodology* is a theoretically informed plan of action in relation to a particular empirical field. It is at this level that the status of the data that *methods* produce, and their relevance for “the Internet,” is explicated. If methods are techniques, methodologies amount to technologies of research, mapping theoretical frameworks onto empirical domains.
- *Theoretical frameworks* lend meaning to the given configuration of empirical findings, linking a highly selective empirical microcosm with a conceptual macrocosm. Theories can be thought of as frames (Goffman, 1974; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which enable certain interpretations, while discouraging others.
- Whereas theoretical frameworks tend to apply to particular substantive domains – nature or culture, society or the human psyche – such a partitioning of reality is supported by more general, meta-theoretical, or *epistemological* arguments and assumptions. In the practice of research, epistemology provides

preliminary definitions and justifications of the “what” and “why” of empirical research, its object and purpose. The Internet should be studied as, among other things, a medium of communication and social interaction.

In this general perspective, methods and methodologies represent two sides of an interface – the Janus face of research: methods face the objects of analysis; methodologies spring from human subjectivity, which, importantly, is not a source of noise, but a resource for scholarship, as disciplined through communication within research communities. Methods only yield insight in response to theoretically informed questions and plans to answer them. In order to discern what are the appropriate methods and methodologies for Internet research, one overarching research question is what may distinguish the Internet from other media forms as a social infrastructure of information and communication, and as a common cultural forum.

### Availability, Accessibility, and Performativity

Media are vehicles of *information*; they are channels of *communication*; and they serve as means of both interpersonal and macro-social *action*. As part of social interaction, the three aspects of media translate into relations of availability, accessibility, and performativity: What is known – in particular historical and cultural contexts? Who knows what – compared to whom? And, who says and does what – in relation to whom?

Despite continuing debates about the epochal significance of computing and the Internet, it is commonly recognized that information has taken on a specific structural and strategic role over recent decades in economic production and social governance (Porat, 1977). The proliferating *availability* of different kinds of information for everyday living and social coordination is, to a significant extent, a product of digitalization. Current institutions of information and communication, to be sure, stand on the shoulders of the “control revolution” of 1880–1930 (Beniger, 1986), which refers to the emergence of an entire sector of opinion polling, advertising, and organizational bureaucracies that would facilitate social self-regulation. In comparison, however, digitalization promotes the availability of information on a different order of magnitude, for example, about the individual social actor. Today, people habitually provide, more or less willingly and knowingly, and into operational systems, the sorts of information about themselves that previously had to be sampled and documented for distinct purposes. A radical example of the more general phenomenon is Gordon Bell’s MyLifeBits project of documenting each and every aspect of his interactions with the world around him (Bell & Gemmill, 2007). In response to the rather different kind of documentation that authorities and marketers accumulate about citizens and consumers, it is relevant to begin to think in terms of “the right not to be identified” (Woo, 2006). And yet, there can be a trade-off between protecting one’s privacy and practicing personalized search and communication, which users appear to



consider more important than their privacy (Kobsa, 2007). These issues might be addressed in future research under a heading of *reverse copyrights* – rights not to be linked to certain items of information or acts of communication. Such a project is one example of studies that require several different kinds of methods and interdisciplinary competences to lay out popular attitudes, legal degrees of freedom, and technological models of implementation.

The question of *accessibility* involves access to information, but also to other people seeking information and engaging in interactions, as part of the growing centrality of pull modes of communication (Negroponte, 1995, p. 170). In advertising jargon, people are accessible as “eyeballs” in front of computer and television screens; they also make themselves accessible in chat rooms and gaming environments. The Internet has contributed to a greater differentiation of the ways in which information entities and communicative events become accessible. Moreover, given interactivity, reciprocal forms of accessibility come to the fore. For example, pulling a later push of information through an RSS feed, forwarding a web news story to a friend via an embedded email service, and meta-tagging a blog entry, all amount to instances of communication, making information accessible to oneself or others. In theoretical terms, this configuration of interactions calls for a better understanding with reference to what Gregory Bateson (1972, pp. 150–66) termed meta-information and meta-communication: by meta-informing about the meaning of message elements, and by meta-communicating about why and how they would like to communicate, people establish social contexts for themselves. In empirical terms, Bateson worked from face-to-face encounters, whose interrelations with, for example, mobile-phone interactions call for much further research: The micro-coordination of everyday routines by phone (Ling, 2004) can be considered meta-communication that anticipates a great deal of our face-to-face professional and family contacts.

*Performativity*, finally, reemphasizes the close links that exist between communication and action – in several respects. First of all, any instance of communication can be considered a form of action, occurring in a context and for a purpose. Speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) has helped to displace the understanding of communication as, first and foremost, a representation of reality. Furthermore, actions similarly constitute communications in their own right. As Bateson’s student, Paul Watzlawick put it, “one cannot *not* communicate” in the presence of others (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 49). Most important, communication anticipates action – it allows for doubt, delay, and deliberation before undertaking actions that will make a practical difference. In all three respects, the Internet has contributed to a new kind of communicative infrastructure: emails are actions; surfing the mobile web on the subway is a way of communicating distance to fellow travelers. And, the Internet supports all manner of discussion and socially coordinated action – from political debate and activism, to e-banking and peer production. Again, it is not so much that we go online into a different political system or economic market, but rather that politics and markets exist online as well.

## Remediated Methods

In most research fields, the Internet is primarily an instrument for sharing data and findings as well as debating and deliberating on their implications. In Internet studies, it is emphatically both a tool and an object of analysis. Throughout this chapter, I have suggested that Internet *methodologies* require data about other things than the Internet and *methods* that compare communications across media. At the same time, the Internet is a special kind of analytical object which, in part, generates its own data.

The issue of data of, about, and around the Internet highlights the common distinction between research evidence that is either “found” or “made.” In one sense, all the evidence needed for Internet studies is already there, documented in and of the system, with a little help from network administrators and service providers. In this sense, the system *is* the method. In another sense, hardly anything is documented in advance, given the radically dispersed nature of the Internet and the local embedding of its communications. Joining the two extremes of auto-generated and highly contextualized evidence poses one of the main challenges for future Internet research.

Returning to the six prototypical methods of Table 3.1, one could say that the two lower cells – content analysis and discourse studies – have been coming back in style with the Internet. A wealth of online information lends itself to study as texts and documents, including the meta-information that situates this information in relation to its contexts of communication – the origin of the information, its interrelations with other items, their interdependent trajectories, the users accessing the information and perhaps adding meta-information, etc. Not just the contents, but the forms and some of the contexts of communication are available for analysis, depending on the formal conditions of access, ethical considerations, and the ability of the researcher to anticipate information of interest to be auto-generated. Lessig (2006) has argued persuasively that, at the juncture of technological, political, and legal practices, code is law; also for Internet studies, code is one of the enabling and constraining conditions of empirical research.

For other prototypical methods, as well, the line between what is made and what is found, has been shifting. The most obvious case is digital or virtual ethnographies (Hine, 2000), in which the archives of, for instance, virtual worlds or social network sites present themselves as “contents” and “discourses” for analysis. In comparison with the traditional written and, later, electronic records of anthropological fieldwork, such archives provide a measure of real-time details, to be complemented by other sources of evidence on the intersections of online and offline interactions. Internet applications, further, give rise to natural experiments, akin to studies of how the introduction of television affected the social life of communities (Gunter, 2002, p. 226; Williams, 1986). For surveys as well as qualitative interviews (Mann & Stewart, 2000), the Internet provides not just a research tool that complements, for instance, telephone interviewing, but also a diverse

repository of data on the public's lifestyle preferences and everyday activities. Amid legal and ethical concerns, data-mining (Han & Kamber, 2006) has become a standard approach to examining what people say or think they are up to. With pervasive and ubiquitous forms of computing (Lyytinen & Yoo, 2002), the research opportunities as well as the ethical and political stakes are raised (see Buchanan, this volume, chapter 5).

A corresponding challenge comes from the complex embedding of the Internet in everyday contexts of use. How does the Internet enable users to exercise their agency in different types of social contexts? In what respects does the Internet enter into reproducing or readjusting the embedding structure of political, economic, and cultural institutions? And, to what extent does the Internet replace or complement other media with regard to either agency or structure? Auto-generated evidence on the Internet is an instance of what Webb and colleagues (Webb et al., 2000) referred to, in 1966, as *unobtrusive measures*, which avoid the direct elicitation of input from research subjects. Since then, the resurgence of qualitative approaches to social and cultural research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) has brought new attention to the relative merits of obtrusive and unobtrusive, experimental and naturalistic research. Also the everyday contexts of Internet use lend themselves to unobtrusive and naturalistic methods. Like most other fields, Internet studies are constantly engaged in balancing what evidence can be found, and what must be made. The thing for Internet researchers to remind themselves, from time to time, is that both kinds of evidence exist on both sides of the online/offline divide.

## The Double Hermeneutics of the Internet

The Internet constitutes a historically unique configuration of informational and communicative resources, being the digital marriage of a massive information archive with high-speed communications, accessible and applicable, in principle, anywhere and anytime. Most distinctively perhaps, the Internet enables its users to interact, not just with each other and with major social institutions and imagined communities, but with the system of communication itself, in ways that may significantly reshape the system (Finnemann, 2005). This was brought home on a grand scale by Tim Berners-Lee's public posting in 1991 of the protocols and principles that came to support the World Wide Web (<http://groups.google.com/group/alt.hypertext/msg/395f282a67a1916c>, accessed March 29, 2008). The ongoing process of reproducing and reinventing the Internet, partly through contributions from research, can be specified with reference to the concept of double hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics refers to the long tradition in the history of ideas that has examined principles and procedures for interpreting texts, originally within religion and law, but increasingly with reference to texts of any kind and, indeed, to human experience as such, understood as a text. The particular terminology of a

double hermeneutics was advanced by Giddens (1979), who was summarizing widespread criticisms of the predominant natural-scientific conceptions of social science after 1945. In contrast to natural sciences, the social sciences encounter a world that is pre-interpreted by its participants. And, when research feeds *its* interpretations of *their* interpretations back into society, it reshapes the object of study. Examples range from the mundane opinion poll that may affect the course of an electoral process, to paradigmatic shifts in the understanding of what is an economic transaction or an ego, which may have global consequences. Marx's works reshaped twentieth-century history in decisive ways; Freud's ideas introduced a realm of the unconscious into common parlance and everyday dealings.

Studies of the Internet, and of media as such, are a distinctive instance of a double-hermeneutic practice. Media and communication studies examine the basic processes by which social reality is reinterpreted and reconstructed on a daily basis (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Double hermeneutics underscores, first, that such processes occur in everyday conversation as well as in dedicated institutions, from schools and universities, to news media and museums. Second, the concept places special emphasis on the nexus between domains of practice and of reflection. New media suggest new agendas to academic research; the social context of research further contributes to the dominant conceptual repertoires by which new media will be understood and examined.

In the case of the Internet, the hermeneutic process could be said to take on an added dimension. Because ordinary users can reprogram, to some degree, the Internet as they find it, they may be in a position to change, not just interpretations of themselves and their social context, but the very medium through which they perform their interpretations. The double hermeneutics of the Internet thus involves both form and content. Again, it is easy to exaggerate the distinctive and empowering aspects of the Internet and the implications for the users' performativity vis-à-vis the Internet or their conditions of life. As a research strategy for exploring what the Internet might become, however, double hermeneutics holds potential.

The interpretive capacities of users have been tapped for some time under headings of user-driven innovation and social or peer production (Von Hippel, 2005) – as exemplified by Wikipedia and the wider Web 2.0 phenomenon. The Internet has been part of a reconfiguration of the relationship between business, consumers, and civil society, and of a changing role for states and governments in administering rights of information and communication. In critical social theory, as well, an extended notion of immaterial production, deriving from Marx, has been associated with the Internet to suggest avenues of cultural resistance and social change. The dynamic of capitalism has contributed to the emergence of a general intellect, which may contain the seeds of the system's own destruction (Dyer-Witheford, 1999). Regardless of the ideological inferences, there is an opportunity for Internet studies to tap such mass intellectuality, as recognized in business as well as civil-society settings (Benkler, 2006), in order to explore what the Internet is, and what it could be.

In doing so, it is timely for Internet studies to return to and extend Katz's (1959) motto, asking not just what users and (other) developers do with existing media, but how they may be seeking to change them, to do something different with them. The Internet is a moving target for developers, users, and researchers alike. In a methodological sense, this returns Internet studies to a classic distinction between *emic* and *etic* perspectives on social reality – the internal perspectives of community members and native speakers, as opposed to the external, general, theoretical perspectives of an academic discipline (Pike, 1967). A central task for research is to translate between the discursive and conceptual repertoires of the two perspectives. In the case of the Internet, the emic perspectives that users may be willing to act on, are of special interest, because they outline future forms of the Internet. As such, users themselves participate in the translation of local, emic views into general, etic plans of action, which in time may become code and law.

## Conclusion

In addition to the temptation to commit prediction, Internet studies may have had an inclination to exaggerate the novelty and specificity of its object of study. In this essay, I have argued that the Internet should be studied in the context of the composite media environment of which it is a part. The media of three degrees provide a framework in which to reflect on its current configuration. Specifically, the online/offline divide has long been a guiding metaphor for substantial portions of Internet research, and its dismantling will require further research on theoretical alternatives and on the multiple empirical interrelations of MySpace and my space. Toward this end, I have suggested that more explicit distinctions be made between the different levels and stages of empirical research, particularly regarding the methods for sampling the Internet *and* other relevant objects of analysis, and the methodologies informing why we do Internet studies in the first place. On the one hand, the Internet in and of itself is, in part, self-documenting; on the other hand, the embedding of the Internet in social structures and human agency means that it can never be self-analyzing or self-explanatory. Instead, Internet studies have an opportunity to revisit the full range of social-scientific and humanistic research approaches, across emic/etic, obtrusive/unobtrusive, experimental/naturalistic, and online/offline divides. In doing so, Internet studies can neither predict nor shape the future of the Internet, but they inevitably participate in the exercise of a sociological imagination, as users and developers articulate the present and future of the Internet.

It is still the early days of Internet studies. In certain respects, the field today is comparable to anthropology in the early twentieth century, when Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) was charting the western Pacific, equally trying to come to terms with several interrelated realities. Malinowski commented on the danger of having “preconceived ideas” about one’s object of study. He added, however, that it is important to recognize “foreshadowed problems” in the field, which he took

to be the role of theory. By explicating the relationship between field and theory in methodological terms, and by encountering the field both online and offline, Internet studies may contribute to a better understanding of how humans feel about their mediated lives nowadays.

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