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Ethnography Research by Sarah Payne

Quilting as a virtual community



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MSc E-Learning - E-learning and Digital Culture

Welcome to my ethnography project researching a quilting community.

References

Bell, David (2001) Community and cyberculture, chapter 5 of *An introduction to cybercultures*. Abingdon: Routledge. pp92-112

Clari, M (unpublished, 2009) A Flickr ethnography

Rheingold, H (2000) Introduction to *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. London: MIT Press. [web site]

Hine, C, (2000) "The virtual objects of ethnography" from Hine, C, *Virtual Ethnography* pp.41-66, London: Sage

If you are unable to view the embedded vlog, please click [here](#) to view it on youtube.

The History of the quilting community

The community element of quilting had almost died out by the end of the 20th century. There was a brief renaissance in the 1970s but it didn't continue into the commercial ethos and throwaway culture of the 1980s.

My Mum remembers going to a neighbour's house to help complete a quilt. But that was 20 years ago when she first move to Eire, and it hasn't happened again since!

However, as we became more environmentally aware in the 21st century, the ideas around traditional crafts began to gain a following and in a surprising place - online.

My personal feelings are that as life gets busier and work more hectic, we long for those halcyon (and fantasy) days when life was slower and we could sit down and make beautiful things, and like many techies, I feel the urge to be creative in some forum away from the pc.

[Quilting Gallery](#) was created in December 2007 by a Canadian web developer with an interest in quilting called [Michele Foster](#)

Method of research

For this ethnographical research I will be examining the following questions:

1. What makes a community and is Quilting Gallery a community?
2. What do rewards do members get in return for membership?
3. Can member submissions be considered authentic?
4. Has my interest in the topic influenced my research in any way?

So is [Quilting Gallery](#) a community?

The first question must surely be: What is a community?

Bell paraphrases Baym (1998) as saying that "an online community is a community if participants imagine themselves as a community" (p102).

In her virtual ethnography on a Flickr photographic site Clari uses the following definition of a community as put forward by Hamman (1997) in his Introduction to Virtual Communities Research and Cybersociology Magazine Issue Two. A community exists if they are:

- a. A group of people
- b. who share social interaction
- c. and some common ties between themselves and other members of the group
- d. and share an area for at least some of the time.

If I apply each of these to my group we will be able to determine whether this is a group or a community.

I would like to extend my thanks to the community members who gave me permission to use extracts from their blogs, and especially to Michele Foster who created and maintains [www.quiltinggallery.com](#)



Any comments on this ethnography can be left on my [MSc Blog](#).

Blogs featured here were:

Rsisland Crafts
<http://rsislandcrafts.blogspot.com/>

Geta's Quilting Studio
<http://www.cadouri-din-inima.blogspot.com/>

Quilters Gallery Blog
<http://quiltinggallery.com/page/1/>

Happiness is a bottomless button box
<http://www.sarahlpayne.blogspot.com/>

a A group of people. The users of Quilting Gallery are a group, and a very open group in the sense that they clearly identify themselves and their hopes for the community. They use their real names, and often include photographs and personal details about themselves.

b Who share an interaction. There is a high level of interaction between members of the community, with a [chat](#) section, a well used [Facebook](#) fan page and a long list of [blogs](#) with nearly 3,500 bloggers registered. This interaction goes further than simply virtual and social. Creative blogs differ from 'chat bloggers' in that they physically 'swap' items. This could be in the way of [tutorials](#) shared by members, or even in actual swapping of quilts and quilt pieces.

In the [example](#) quilt swap I have examined group members register interest in taking part and their are deadlines for registering to take part and completing the project.

Results are then displayed and discussed in a Flickr [group](#) which is incredibly well behaved and full of supportive [comments](#).



For these quilt swaps there are rules that must be adhered to in order to ensure fairness within the group. This fits in with Rheingold's concept of "social codes or 'netiquette' and reciprocity ('knowledge-potlatching') as social cement to bind those interest groups as communities" (Bell page 100)

c and some common ties between themselves and other members of the group. This group of people have a common interest in quilting and what could be considered a common set of values. The conversations that can be viewed through the chat room and in blog and Flickr comments is always polite, support and full of warmth. I was not able to find any evidence of flaming or dissident voices being used anywhere on the site or through the number of blogs I visited. In fact, some loggers have felt safe in confiding some very intimate details of personal bereavement, illness and unhappiness in their blogs - and all responding comments have been gentle and caring.

d. and share an area for at least some of the time. These users share a number of virtual areas, including chat rooms, facebook, Flickr and blogs. Postings are continuous updated and are posted from across the world. Quilting Gallery could definitely be considered what Rheingold considers "a tool for using the communication capacities of the networks to build social relationships across barriers of space and time" (Rheingold 2000)

So are they a community? In general, users of Quilting Gallery fits Hamman's definition of 'community'. They also fit Gee's description of people inhabiting an affinity space' (2003) as they share a common interest in quilting, and Wenger's idea of a 'community of practice' (1998), because they all share a love of quilting, as well as knowledge and support in the skills required, and furthermore they share physical items through the quilt swaps.

What do members gain from the community?

Please click the [link](#) to view the images individually or view as a slideshow. It is not possible to slow the slideshow speed in the settings, but you can scroll through it yourself as you watch .

Is this community to be considered authentic?

Please view my [blog](#) entry.

Has my own interest in this area coloured my ethnographic research?

This is an interesting question because I already have a crafting [blog](#) where I display jewellery, embroidery and my first attempts at quilting. As such I already read other crafters blogs, though I have never visited a site like Quilting Gallery before.

Well I agree with Hine that to get a true sense of a culture you need to experience it.

"An ethnographer who managed to be an invisible observer (a cultural lurker) would leave the setting undisturbed, but would also leave their interpretations of it undisturbed by trial in practice" Hine (2000) pg 48

I feel that I really did experience it. I spent quite a few happy hours following connections from one blog to another, each time a blogger's choice of reading led me onwards.

"Ethnography in this strategy becomes as much a process of following connections as it is period of inhabitation." (Hine 2000)

I left comments, had email conversations with a few bloggers and had a few of those bloggers leave comments on my own blog as a result. To lurk "is to relinquish claims to the kind of ethnographic authority that comes from exposing the emergent analysis to challenge through interaction" (Hine 2000, pg 48).

So in conclusion I would have to say that my previous experience did not colour me research, though I feel that my research will colour the way I view the community going forward.