Towards ethnography of television on the Internet: a mobile strategy for exploring mundane interpretive activities

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Abstract

This paper aims to expand on the currently popular practice of conducting ethnographic studies of individual online fan groups to find other ways of using the Internet ethnographically for television studies. The example of the *Antiques Roadshow* is used to explore a strategy for ethnographic attention to the diversity of mundane engagements with a particular television text via the Internet. The development of this strategy draws on recent thinking on the constitution of ethnographic fieldsites, focusing on conceptualisation of the field as a made object, and development of multi-sited approaches as appropriate forms of engagement with contemporary culture. This strategy also builds on recent debates about the significance of “found” digital data for social research. Potential problems with this approach include loss of depth and contextualising information, and the risk of only focusing on that data which is easily found by dominant search engines. These problems can be offset to some extent by increased focus on reflexivity, and by allowing the field site to spill out beyond the Internet as the ethnographer finds it necessary and useful in order to explore particular practices of meaning-making.

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Introduction

Successive waves of reception studies have attempted to address concerns with what an audience might be and how it might engage more or less actively with media texts (as described by Moores 1990; Goldstein and Machor 2008). Whilst the issue is not entirely reducible to questions of method (Silverstone 1994), there has been ongoing interest in developing appropriate methods for studying people's engagement with media such as television. Each methodological approach has a theoretical corollary, in that it stakes a claim for what might be relevant contextual factors for comprehending engagement with media.

An ethnography of media consumption can, for example, in its initial design embed potential for a claim about the significance of such factors as the socio-economic, cultural and ethnic positioning of a family (Gillespie 1995), or ongoing kinship relations and the moral economy of the household (Silverstone et al. 1992) in situating participants in relation to the media. By the act of choosing to do ethnography within defined contexts we make tentative claims about what might be significant in making particular engagements meaningful, and different from other engagements. Methodological choices can, therefore, be highly consequential for theoretical development, and the issue of choosing contexts relevant to understanding interpretive practices is particularly highly charged.

In a contemporary society within which the concept of context appears to have spiralled beyond comprehension with the advent of diverse forms of technologically mediated communication, the challenge of choosing appropriate contexts to study, and reflecting on the consequences of those choices for our ability to theorise adequately, seems greater than ever. This paper explores one response to this challenge, situated within recent thinking about the

potential of the Internet as a resource for sociological investigation. As a phenomenon which makes interactions of diverse kinds persistent, traceable and amenable to sociological gaze (Beer and Burrows 2007; Savage and Burrows 2007), the Internet provides a rich resource for studying the way that people engage with media. Being in the presence of both media and media audiences can now take diverse forms, and taking account of these diverse forms of presence can occasion innovative approaches (Beaulieu 2010).

The approach developed here is a mobile ethnography of media engagement across diverse sites, making use of ready-to-hand Internet search engines to identify locations and connections. Such an approach is inevitably selective, and it will have short-comings in depth, as compared to intensive study of a bounded location. It could, however, prove a revealing resource for theoretically driven reflections on the role of media texts as cultural resources, and the diverse yet patterned modes of engagement with media texts. The next section reviews literature on media ethnography, the Internet and multi-sited ethnography which inform the development of this approach, before moving on to introduce the example of the *Antiques Roadshow* to illustrate how the proposed approach might work in practice. A final section of the paper then reflects on what this mobile approach to ethnography of a television text can and cannot offer, and discusses strategies for locating, bounding and exploring the field.

Media studies and Internet ethnography

Quite early in the development of the mainstream Internet it became clear that discussion groups focused on television shows offered a new way to participate in fandom.

Acknowledging the specificity of the Internet population and the unusual nature of the form of fandom that he observed, Jenkins described the Twin Peaks discussion group that he observed in 1990 as a committed interpretive community for whom “the computer had

become an integral part of their experience of the series” (2006: 132). Baym’s now classic study (1995; 2000) demonstrated the potential of the Internet for making fan practices visible, and new forms of collective fan engagement possible. It has since become commonplace to study fandom via the online groups that fans form. These online studies often focus on a single interpretive community, but can also usefully move between groups to demonstrate the very situated nature of these interpretations: Bury’s (2008) study, for example, compares two online groups of fans engaging with the same show.

Fandom itself has flourished with the mainstreaming of the Internet and this form of intensive engagement with media has become accessible in unprecedented ways to media studies researchers. Studies of online fandom can, however, be somewhat frustrating in how little they can tell us about the people who take part and the way that group participation fits into other aspects of their lives, and also just how distinctive this particular way of engaging with television might be. The study of online fandom is, no doubt, a significant concern for media studies. But by focusing too heavily on this kind of media engagement, at the expense of other more dispersed, more casual and less attentive forms of engagement, we risk distorting our impression of the way that people engage with media products and with the Internet. Inevitably, by focusing on a particular kind of bounded online context we also bound the possibilities of our theoretical development.

To limit our studies of television on the Internet to the committed fans who take part in online discussion groups over a period of time runs, in fact, counter to many trends of recent thinking in media studies and does not sit well with a lot of contemporary theoretical and methodological developments. As Silverstone (1994) points out, much everyday engagement with television is more fragmented, fleeting and, in fact, inattentive. It can, however, be a challenge to study this form of television engagement because there is no self-evident bounded field site to study. There have been attempts to develop methods which capture

television engagement in everyday life, such as Dahlgren's (1988) use of unobtrusive methods to formulate his typology of talk about television news. By hanging out and listening to what people said when they were not consciously part of a research situation focused on television, Dahlgren was able to explore what he termed the "mundane interpretive activities" that our casual consumption of television news entails. More recently, Press and Johnson Yale (2008) carried out participant observation in a hairdresser's salon, focusing on the occurrence of political talk oriented to television which arose in that setting. Dover (2007) describes a study focusing on spontaneous everyday references to popular media among teenagers, using interviews combined with recordings of naturally occurring talk.

Developing an ethnographic approach to media reception, Radway argued that we should seek to explore "the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it" (Radway 1988: 366). Radway felt that this task could best be achieved by a team of researchers focusing on diverse aspects of media as manifested in daily life. Her approach was adapted for historical studies by Levine (2007), drawing upon such persistent traces of everyday life as photographs, contemporary reports and high school yearbooks to track engagements with television. Such unobtrusive methods offer a way to find out what people say about the media when they are not consciously "talking about the media", as they are when a media studies researcher interviews them. "Hanging out" in some form or other is often a part of the ethnographic experience, although it has possibly been under-used in media studies research. It is my goal, in this paper, to develop an online version of "hanging out" in order to pursue Radway's aspiration and complement in-depth studies of online fandom.

Unobtrusive methods in dispersed sites have also been deployed in online studies. boyd's (2008) ethnography of MySpace deployed a strategy of spending time where teenagers were, noting their naturally occurring conversations about MySpace as a complement to her in-

depth studies of the online environment itself. She also searched out blogs where teenagers were commenting on how they used social networking sites. An ethical concern prevented her from tracking teenagers between online and offline contexts, but she was able, through unobtrusive methods online and offline, to capture data that supplemented and sometimes steered her more active data generation through interviewing and participation in social networking sites themselves.

boyd (2008) deploys a combination of online and offline, directive and unobtrusive methods to flesh out her ethnographic exploration of what the use of social networking sites means in the lives of teenagers. A similar combination of methods offers significant promise for a study of the contemporary television audience that would be compatible with Radway's aspirations. The sheer quantity of user-generated content now available on the Internet, and the possibility of searching for relevant remarks and unobtrusively lurking in the places where they are generated, offers a renewed possibility for media studies researchers to "hang out" where people are and capture some of the ways that they engage with media. An alternative to focusing on a particular bounded site of intensive fandom is, then, to "follow the thing" in Marcus' (1995) terms – where the thing is television, and where Internet search tools provide for a very particular kind of following. Back in 1994 Silverstone was able to observe confidently that television should not be viewed as an isolated medium, but was part of a complex media environment involving converging media, communications and information technologies. Now it seems ever more clear that even if our research interest is television, it will often be necessary to explore how other information and communication technologies and media mediate television and provide new contexts for its production, dissemination and consumption (Livingstone 2004). In the following sections I use the example of the *Antiques Roadshow* to show that exploring the persistent traces that the Internet preserves of what would otherwise be ephemeral and often unremarkable

engagements with television can usefully extend this part of the media studies researcher's toolkit.

The Internet encourages us to move away from a model of ethnography focused on intensive engagement within a single site, towards a more fluid, mobile and connective form of fieldwork. This move is in line with a strand of recent developments in anthropology which stress the strength of mobile and multi-sited approaches for engaging with the complexity of contemporary life (Marcus 1995; Marcus 1998) and which recognise that the singular bounded field site is largely a fiction constructed by the research itself (Gupta and Feguson 1997; Amit 1999). Mobile approaches have allowed anthropologists such as Constable (2003), Tsing (2005) and Hannerz (2003) to explore complex forms of connection enacted through contemporary culture, which transcend any straightforward notions of field site and place. A more fluid notion of field sites for the study of engagement with television may help us to avoid the temptation to think of it as happening in bounded places such as the living room or the online forum. Multi-sited ethnography and other mobile methods (Buscher and Urry 2009) offer a way to explore complex and variable connections and to think about the ambivalence and multiplicity of objects in the world (De Laet and Mol 2000; Law 2002; Mol 2002). An object can, according to De Laet and Mol (2000), be a quite different thing in different places, and Mol (2002) in particular makes this a question of ontology rather than mere interpretation. By moving around the ethnographer can ask how different locations construct and connect with one another, and how they come to constitute common objects in very different ways. Attention to the practices of location (Gupta and Feguson 1997) can include a focus on media texts and media technologies as simultaneously cultural locations in their own right and cultural artefacts co-constructed with the specific locations in which they are embedded (Hine 2000).

New media technologies have offered a potent challenge to our understanding of audiences (Livingstone 2004). Just like media texts, however, new technologies for media engagement do not bring their own self-contained logics with them, but are encountered and constructed within already complex social contexts. Drotner (2008) says that we need to be aware of the communities of practice within which digital practices develop. According to Drotner (2000; 2008), to address the complexity of contemporary media culture we need studies that look at media ensembles rather than individual technologies, that cross boundaries of online and offline and boundaries of the home and different organizational contexts, that look at the connections and interweaving of the production and reception work that people carry out in their digital practices, and that take into account the diverse yet interconnected global contexts of media practice. Each of those in itself is a major methodological challenge. And to these we can also add a further set of questions about how media practice, as an observable feature of contemporary social activity, is made visible, politically and ethically accountable and circulates beyond the initial sites of practice. Taking as read Drotner's exhortations and drawing on Marcus' (1995) advice to follow the thing, I will develop an example that traces a single media text through diverse mediating technologies and locations, making use of a variety of ready-to-hand tools such as the Internet search engine to locate relevant connections and explore some of the meaning-making practices that unfold in diverse settings.

Media studies and the *Antiques Roadshow*

The example which I will use to demonstrate a mobile approach to ethnography of television reception on the Internet is the *Antiques Roadshow*. This programme is a flagship BBC production first made in the UK 1979, and subsequently replicated round the world with versions produced in the USA, Sweden, the Netherlands and Canada. The original British

show itself has been sold around the world. Each show revolves around location footage of a “roadshow” in which antiques experts discuss and value items brought in by members of the public. In recent series the roadshows usually take place at a stately home, museum or other “heritage site”, and footage of the site itself, and the large queues of people eager to attend the roadshow there, feature prominently in setting the scene for the show. A single episode comprises a series of segments each very similar in format. In each segment a member of the public describes to an expert how they came to own a notable object which they have brought along. The expert then explains something of the object’s origins, provenance and significance. The encounter then culminates in the expert offering an estimated value for the object, to which the owner reacts, often in some surprise and delight.

The *Antiques Roadshow* has for many years been a staple of the Sunday evening television schedules, although more recently spin-off shows have featured in daytime slots or early evening weekday slots. As a successful and prominent show, the *Antiques Roadshow* has received considerable attention from sociologists and media studies scholars, each bringing out specific issues relevant to the particular theoretical interests of the researcher and the concerns of the discipline at the time. Before moving on to a discussion of what can be found of the *Antiques Roadshow* online in the next section, here I will explore what this existing media studies literature has to say about the show. I do this not because any of these works are in themselves problematic, but in order to demonstrate the extent to which a mobile Internet-enabled approach can supplement and build on what we already know.

Bonner (2003) talks about several aspects of the show in exploring its status as “ordinary television”, including the role of the experts and the way that members of the public know the kind of role they are expected to play, the prevalence of economic discourse in the show’s formulation, the global spread to a largely expat audience and the celebration of a particular form of Britishness that the show provides. Bonner situates the show in a history and

contemporary environment of connected shows and discusses popular knowledge about the show and the way that we read people's reactions to valuations. The formatting of participation is also described by Ytreberg (2004) and the resulting contests of status discussed by McCracken (2008), while Bishop (2001) writes an ethnographic account of a visit to the Roadshow, seeking to understand the occasion of the filming as a cultural event. Lanham (2006) offers a reading based on the television text that sees the *Antiques Roadshow* as exemplifying our current preoccupation not with "stuff" in itself but with what it represents while Hetherington (1997) discusses one object valued at a roadshow, and traces its subsequent insertion into a museum context to track transformations of value and status.

De Groot places the Roadshow at the educational end of a spectrum of current heritage and antique based shows which extend into much more frivolous competition based often more overtly on the value of the items. De Groot is particularly concerned about the effect such shows may have on our relationship to material artefacts:

"Decorative antiques provide an instance of historical artefacts in the material culture of everyday life, part of the day-to-day fabric of the world. *Antiques Roadshow* and the other television shows on antiques warp this relationship..." (De Groot 2008: 69)

He discusses the relationship of the owner to the object and the "dramatisation of authenticity" (De Groot 2008: 69) involved in the encounter with the expert. De Groot's concern that these shows have an excessive interest in monetary valuation of objects is shared by Palmer and Forsyth (2006) who see the show as primarily engaged in attaching economic value to objects.

A purely textual analysis of a television show is, of course, open to disputes about the appropriate interpretation and some commentators make specific reference to audience

interpretation. Rayner et al (2001) use an episode of sitcom *The Royle Family* in which the family watch the *Antiques Roadshow* and bet on the outcome of valuations to demonstrate the potential for audiences to interpret a programme in their own class-located fashion. Clouse (2008) critiques Bishop's (1999) textual analysis of the show, in which he claims that narratives serve to give meaning to the objects that are brought along by participants. Bishop's analysis claims to identify a linear narrative structure in which the desired end point is the conversion of participants and viewers to an understanding of the objects as valuable collectibles. Clouse looks for a more varied, and more complex structure, deploying a close reading of the show itself combined with the associated website, and using this to read off some of the producer's intentions to supplement a textual analysis. She looks closely at the standard sequences of description and valuation that surround each object, and the varied ways in which valuations are delivered and received. Clouse (2008) offers a different reading of the programme to that of Bishop (1999), claiming that the various narratives that surround the object in the show do not allow economic values alone to dominate. She claims that in fact it is this complexity of narrative which renders the show appealing: "The tangled relationships between different systems of value that are derived from the stories of the owner and the appraiser create a socially compelling drama" (Clouse 2008: 10). Still, though, Clouse's reading takes it for granted that the *Antiques Roadshow* is about the objects, and the human dramas that are created around them.

In many of these accounts of the *Antiques Roadshow* the television show, or the filming of the show, or an occasion of watching the show, are treated as an isolated object to understand. Bonner (2003) and Clouse (2008) seem to go the furthest in developing a complex and multi-faceted understanding of the show, but they leave a lot of ground to cover in terms of the varieties of mundane engagement with the show: it is often difficult to discern from discussions about the assignment of economic value to objects and exchanges of

expertise why on earth anyone would enjoy watching the show! Analyses of the text itself also do not often range extensively into the extended network of online representations and cross-media references that the contemporary show is manifested through, often described as paratexts (Gray 2010). I would suggest that a rewarding complementary approach would to explore connections between the diverse manifestations of the *Antiques Roadshow* in different sites and through different mediating technologies and look at how the show is constituted in diverse ways in their interactions and locations. This would encourage a more grounded and more varied understanding of how it is that people come to enjoy and interpret this highly successful show. Any individual will create their own sites of media consumption out of the diverse possibilities open to them and will forge unpredictable and highly individual connections of their own. A connective mobile ethnography offers the opportunity to weave a way through these practices of location and interpretation without assuming in advance that we know where to go (Hine 2007). In order to illustrate this potential I will now present a brief account of the *Antiques Roadshow* as it is manifested online.

Where (and what) is the *Antiques Roadshow* online?

A search for the *Antiques Roadshow* on the Internet reveals an at-first bewildering array of different formats, sites and genres of commentary. In this section I aim to discuss some key themes which emerged from my exploration of this wealth of data. This discussion is not, in itself, an ethnography. The exploration is, however, ethnographic, in that it aspires to understand cultural practices in their own right, accepting that they make sense for the people engaged within them. The ethnographic spirit of enquiry focuses on exploring how practices are made meaningful, without assuming in advance what the appropriate structures of meaning-making might be. This is, I would argue, an appropriate way to deal with such a

diverse array of material and a useful way to open up the territory for theoretical development.

My research strategy for the initial exploration was to conduct Google searches on the term “*Antiques Roadshow*”, visiting as many as I could of the sites on the results list and then exploring within them to read discussions, view associated pages and begin to identify the evocations of *Antiques Roadshow* that arose in that setting. This search strategy led to the official sites of the show’s producers, plus dedicated discussion forums both within and beyond these official sites. Local media mentioned the show as the filming schedule came to their area. Many discussion forums mentioned the show in passing, and here I spent some time exploring the context within which the discussion arose and the extent to which the mention of the show mirrored some existing preoccupations or practices of a group. I also used the search facility within YouTube to find video clips associated with the show, and here I would not only watch the clip that was tagged with “*Antiques Roadshow*” but also view any comments and watch other clips produced by the same person, to explore how their reference to the show fitted in with the rest of their YouTube practice. As I searched and viewed I also noted the advertisements that appeared on my screen. I tried to remain conscious of the extent to which the paths I travelled were sanctioned and suggested for me, as a measure of the extent to which my ethnographic journey was being travelled with or against the cultural grain. I felt it was important, for example, not just to try and find out who authored a particular clip, but also to reflect on the conventions which make that an easy or difficult thing to discover and to think about how technologies and practices shape the conditions of identity in different settings.

The search was carried out using the UK Google site and thus is inherently biased towards the British version of the show, although I did sometimes find myself in discussions about versions produced in other countries. Some bias is inevitable when a ready-to-hand search

engine with different national portals is used, and this is, I would argue, a true reflection of the everyday experience of Internet searching. As an ethnographer wishing in some way to explore how other people might experience the *Antiques Roadshow* manifested on the Internet I could not help but be situated in some way, just as they would be. I did attempt to reflect on the national biases which my search strategy introduced, and in this I was assisted by the YouTube search which I did not restrict by country. This instant immersion in the international nature of the show led me to a strong realisation of how different the shows and their audiences were in different countries and how specific my UK-based Google perspective might be. Nonetheless, in what follows I continue to term the object of exploration *Antiques Roadshow* without specifying a national origin, leaving for another occasion a more systematic discussion of where and how national differences emerge. The description that follows here is an initial taxonomy on the way to an ethnographic account, of the cultural practices and evocations that were associated with the *Antiques Roadshow* online.

A genre of antiques shows

One of the obvious places to begin is the official website, and indeed, the top result in my Google search was the show's home on the BBC web site. Here information on past and present series is offered, situating the show as an ongoing phenomenon even whilst a series is not currently being aired. In keeping with the BBC's wider portrayal of itself as owned by and run for the public, it is also very much presented as participatory show, with information featured in the "Be on a show" section of the website. Insertion within both the BBC web site and the institutional culture of the BBC clearly shapes the portrayal of the show. It is portrayed as part of a genre of antiques-related shows, featured as a subcategory of factual programming within BBC which is, one could argue, more aligned with the BBC's aspirations than alternative categorizations one might make, such as "reality TV". Based on

this official generic categorization the show does indeed, as many commentators suggest, appear to be about the objects themselves. Certainly, when conducting Google or YouTube searches on the *Antiques Roadshow* one is targeted for advertising which assumes one is interested in collecting antiques and as Hill (2007) discusses some viewers do place the show in a factual television category. It is doubtful, however, to what extent the genre is a meaningful one for many viewers, as the following observations from outside the official BBC website demonstrate.

Fandom, antiques and celebrity culture

Outside of the BBC's official portrayal of the series I found a thriving fan culture focused on a small number of discussion forums. Within this fan culture there was, indeed, interest in the objects themselves as antiques, and an excitement around the possibility of high valuations and notable discoveries. Participants in the fan culture of the *Antiques Roadshow* often participated in other discussions about antiques which did not reference the show. To some extent, then, talk about the *Antiques Roadshow* was about the objects, and often was situated within a sustained hobby or even commercial interest for the participants concerned. This kind of fandom also thrives on YouTube, where clips of particularly high valuations or interesting objects are celebrated. There was, however, also evidence of a considerable celebrity culture focused around the presenters and experts featured in the shows and much of the discussion in some forums focused on the people rather than the objects. Information about the professional and personal lives of the experts was traded, and sightings were boasted about. The show, then, for some discussants, generated an aura of celebrity around the people involved, and knowing about these celebrities rather than the antiques became a form of capital.

This celebrity culture around *Antiques Roadshow* was confined to a few discussion forums populated by the kind of committed fan with which we are familiar from studies of online fandom. It would be valuable to conduct an in-depth study of the form of fandom that the *Antiques Roadshow* participates in, by using one of the discussion forums as a field site. It would certainly be interesting to explore how the practices of *Antiques Roadshow* fans compare with those of fans of other objects of fandom with a younger fan base and a different cultural cachet. However, my interest was in exploring the diversity of experiences of the *Antiques Roadshow*, and it emerged that the intensive fan experience actually characterised very little of the references to the show that I found on the Internet. I therefore turn to those to explore the very different aspects of the interpretation of the show that the more mundane and casual references display.

Nostalgia in two senses

Bonner (2003) discusses the inherent Britishness of the *Antiques Roadshow* in her analysis of ordinary television. This seems to be apparent to at least some viewers, as my Google search found a scattering of casual references to the show evoking a sense of home for expatriate Britons. Participants discussed missing the show in the way that they missed the stereotypically British foodstuff Marmite. This aspect of ordinariness, as representative of home, was complemented by other portrayals of the show as the epitome of ordinariness in terms of family life. Bloggers and YouTube video producers referenced the show as an inherent part of childhood. They revelled in the sense of security combined with boredom that Sunday evening watching with your parents represented. The *Antiques Roadshow* therefore represented nostalgia both in terms of place, by representing home for expats and in terms of time, by representing the security of family life in childhood for young adults. The show clearly held a familiarity: it was invoked without prior explanation as a shared cultural

figure that would be understood by other participants in a discussion. As such the references to the show helped to create and sustain a sense of shared history among the participants and to formulate the places where these discussions happened as self-evidently British spaces. By implication anyone who hadn't watched the *Antiques Roadshow* with their parents on a Sunday evening was in some sense other. Whether the nostalgic references to the show do indeed reflect the experience of all participants in the discussion, to what extent this is generationally specific and class-based and how any resulting exclusions are experienced and borne would merit further exploration. References to television shows which assume a shared experience of viewing, even when delivered as passing comments, are potentially highly charged in the carving out of identities (Livingstone and Lunt 1994).

A formulaic interaction

The familiarity of the show which was invoked in nostalgic references was manifest somewhat differently in a rich vein of humour which used the format of "owner shows object to expert" in YouTube videos. Many mainstream comedy shows have used the format of the *Antiques Roadshow* coming to town in order to expose some weakness of the key characters such as greed, lack of sophistication or inability to "read" a situation. Many individual home producers also used the format of the show in videos with humorous intent. They invoke a general familiarity with the show, but also a detailed familiarity with how the encounter between owner and expert is supposed to go. These parodies derive their humour from a situation in which either the owner or the expert or the object is in some way wrong in their qualities or behaviour. These uses of the show for humorous intent work on an assumption that audiences are in fact quite skilled at diagnosing the formula and spotting deviations from it. They assume, in fact, that we know how the show works. These parodies are not, on the whole, produced by committed fans of the show. Instead they often occur within series of

humorous videos on different topics, produced largely by teenagers and young adults who simply assume that the show is a shared cultural object. Another common use of the show as a shared cultural object simply deploys it as a metaphor for being old, as in the case of the video recorder described by a reviewer as fit for the *Antiques Roadshow* or a spoof newspaper article which describes a fan taking Madonna along to be valued . Again, these references take it for granted that we know the formula and connotations.

A familiar soundtrack

A further category of references to the show focus not on its content, as such, but on the theme tune. Assumptions about the familiarity of the format were complemented by the assumption that the theme tune would also be familiar. In this vein were ringtones for download and remixes of the track, often in a deliberately incongruous style such as drum and bass. The familiarity was evoked also in novelty YouTube videos featuring a dog howling along with the theme tune or a baby inside a pregnant belly kicking in time with the music. These references are not commentaries upon the *Antiques Roadshow* as such, but they index it as part of a familiar soundscape in which the audience are assumed to participate.

A commentary on greed and misplaced hope

Many of the references to the *Antiques Roadshow* which were made in nostalgia or humour were quite approving: the worst that was said of it was that it was dull or formulaic. There was, however, another common trope of damning critique of the show itself, or of those who participated within it. This particularly emerged in the vitriolic culture of comments on YouTube in response to clips from the show. Commentators would share their assessments of the participants as greedy, and gloat over participants' misplaced hopes that an item might be valuable. Celebrated instances of disappointment were circulated and enjoyed on YouTube. It

is therefore not adequate to describe the show as inherently reinforcing a culture which assigns economic value to objects. Some viewers saw the show as providing an exposé of a misplaced set of values. Some simply revelled in schadenfreude prompted by others' discomfiture. These viewers distanced themselves strongly from the urge to participate in the show itself. Others, as the next category demonstrates, saw participation in a much more desirable light.

Being local on a big stage: "me on the telly"

As a long term viewer of the show myself I could not help but be intrigued by the opportunity to go along to a roadshow being held at a museum nearby. As the show approached, and after the event, I followed an array of local media sources online and offline which discussed "our" roadshow. The local media saw the roadshow as offering our local place a chance of visibility on a much wider stage, and this visibility became (locally) newsworthy in its own right. In a similar way, the participatory nature of the *Antiques Roadshow* is referenced repeatedly in a genre of YouTube videos in which people reproduce clips of themselves on the television for the benefit of friends and family. These clips receive very few viewings compared to the "top ten valuations" series of clips organized by fans, but are clearly highly meaningful for the people concerned in fixing their moment of significance and making it available within their own social networks. Had my daughter and I made it onto screen when we visited the roadshow I would certainly have wanted to show off our appearance to friends and family (although not quite sure why I would have felt so compelled), and YouTube would have offered a vehicle to achieve this "showing". An in-depth study of these aspects of the participatory culture of television would be an interesting way to look more closely into contemporary cultures of participation, celebrity and display and also the ways in which we

conceive of the relationships between local places and media platforms as mutually constitutive.

Discussion: prospects and problems for mobile Internet television ethnography

The Internet offers a rich resource for exploring a broad array of cultural references to the *Antiques Roadshow*. Supplementing textual analyses of the show which see it as exemplifying inequalities of expertise, or reinforcing economic valuations of artefacts, I have shown that a rich vein of humour and nostalgia revolves around the show focusing not on its content per se, but on its distinctive music, its format and its positioning within the weekend television schedule. This insight complements and extends the understanding of its status as ordinary television (Bonner 2003), giving an insight into the assumptions which people make about each other's viewing experiences and competences, and thus furthering consideration of the ways in which assumptions about shared cultural references carve up identities and create potential exclusions. Each instance of a reference to the *Antiques Roadshow* that we might uncover on the Internet is situated somewhere: indeed, it is multiply situated within a technological format (such as YouTube or the discussion forum) and a culturally specific interpretation of what that technology is for, within the timeliness of the schedules of the show as aired on television and of the show as it features in the schedule and history of the individual concerned, within a particular social network manifested both online and offline and within a practice which is recognisably meaningful to the individual concerned (even videoing of dogs howling at television theme tunes is a meaningful practice in its own right which is gaining new life on YouTube).

The taxonomy of references to the *Antiques Roadshow* that I have presented above is not in itself an ethnography. It is lacking in the contextualization that would come from stopping to explore these references to the show in more depth. I have indicated just a few instances

where I was tempted to stop, to explore contexts and to find out more about how the practises I could observe on the Internet were meaningful to the individual, and how they fitted in with aspects of their life not observable from the Internet, but there are of course many more. The itinerant strategy on its own is a powerful way to explore diversity in media interpretations and yet examine what is common amongst that diversity. Being itinerant can, however, usefully be complemented by digging down in specific, strategically relevant places to formulate a suitable research object for the theoretical task at hand. Being itinerant should also not always entail being content to be a passive observer. The taxonomy that I have presented is based upon found data, and an ethnographer would gain from a more active stance, formulating ideas from observation and interviews and putting developing theories to the test with the people concerned.

Much of this fieldwork to extend the itinerant approach would spill out beyond the online. Remembering the aspirational methodological complex that Drotner (2008) identified we would, by staying online, miss out on much of the ways that digital practices of media consumption emerge and are stabilised within social networks. For example, having found a group of young people who produce their own comedy videos that reference the *Antiques Roadshow* we might want to spend time with them to explore the foundations both of their video production practice and their experience of the *Antiques Roadshow* in order to understand in more depth how those two intersect with each other and how they become meaningful within the broader context of living meaningful lives. In choosing places to move the study offline we will, of course, be limited by geography as much as by the limitations of being able to explore in depth only in a few selected places. A further extension we might usefully make is sometimes to start offline, as Miller and Slater (2000) suggest, and look at how people make the online manifestations of the show meaningful from their own

perspective. Following people online through “accompanied surfing” would be a useful complement to the ethnographer’s own explorations of online territory.

We can also usefully extend our fieldwork into our own sense-making practices, using an autoethnographic reflexivity to reflect on where our own experiences go with or against the cultural tide that we are exploring. It is not an accident that I chose to explore the *Antiques Roadshow*. As a long-term fan I began my study by reflecting on the way that I experienced the show myself across different life stages as a child, a student living away from home, an independent adult and subsequently a parent. I also considered my changing experience of the show across the advent of video-recording, hard-drive recorder and iPlayer (the BBC’s Internet television and radio service), and the different domestic negotiations that revolve around whether I watch the show as leisure or to accompany the ironing, alone or in company, and the way in which my watching subsequently features in interactions with family and colleagues. These autoethnographic reflections help to keep in mind the contingency and specificity of engagements with the show, and to maintain a consciousness that what is visible on the Internet is by no means everything as far as media consumption is concerned. Thinking of my own practices, I have been particularly aware of the historical specificity of the nostalgic relationship with the *Antiques Roadshow* which I came across, and its dependence on a particular era of television technology. It remains to be seen how far multi-channel television and the availability of multiple ways to time-shift watching will affect the show’s role in formation of cultural memory. What will my own children reference with their peers when they reminisce about the security of repetitive family rituals? Will memories of shared television viewing still play a part, and what else might take their place?

It is somewhat perverse, in the context of contemporary media studies, to argue for a return to studies of a single text, since much of the trend of recent thinking has been towards recognition of complexes of media content and media technologies within everyday life. The

Internet, however, offers up the possibility of a renewed form of the single text study which celebrates the ontological diversity (Mol 2002) of the text rather than closing down on potential interpretations. Searching the Internet offers a way for the researcher to navigate the cultural territory that the text comes to life within, where each reference to the show offers up a new site for potential exploration. Rather than being treated as a subsidiary paratext (Gray 2010), each reference to the show can be viewed as an act of cultural creation in its own right which becomes meaningful to its author and its audiences partly in dialogue with the original show but also within contexts which are defined through the practices of participants and remain to be uncovered by the ethnographer. The Internet offers a way of pulling at one thread in the complex set of connections that is contemporary media culture. By being mobile in our approach we are positioned to look at how various interpretations of media circulate, become fixed, and acquire moral and political force. I began this paper proposing that methodologies for study of engagement with media embed theoretical positions. The mobile, Internet-search based ethnographic method described here embeds an expectation that media texts are inherently multiple, and their reception often far more fragmented and diverse than studies of online fandom alone might suggest.

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