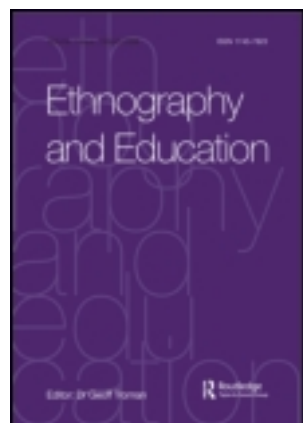


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Ethnography and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reae20>

### Conceptualising the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: as tool, as data and as context

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Published online: 28 May 2013.

To cite this article: Sally Baker (2013) Conceptualising the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: as tool, as data and as context, *Ethnography and Education*, 8:2, 131-145, DOI: [10.1080/17457823.2013.792504](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2013.792504)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2013.792504>

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## Conceptualising the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: as tool, as data and as context

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This article proposes a three-part conceptualisation of the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: as a tool, as data and as context. Longitudinal research with young adults at a time of significant change provides many challenges for the ethnographic researcher, such as maintaining channels of communication and high rates of participant attrition. Facebook offers a resolution to such challenges as a measure of maintaining research interest and relationships, alongside its potential as a unique research tool and rich source of data on students' reading and writing practices. Despite significant methodological and ethical issues arising from the use of Facebook in the research study presented, this article argues that the benefits of using Facebook, such as its potential for maintaining communication, providing context and generating data, override any such issues and offers valuable insights and commentary on facilitating online–offline longitudinal research with young people.

**Keywords:** Facebook; longitudinal research; methodology; ethical issues; literacies; transition

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explain how the social networking site (SNS) Facebook can be considered a key research tool that offers unique benefits to the ethnographic researcher engaged in longitudinal literacies research. This article is based on an ongoing research project exploring students' reading and writing practices and their perceptions and attitudes towards these practices, in the context of the transitions made in moving between A level and undergraduate study. This research was responding to the concerns and complaints about falling standards of students' literacy voiced repeatedly and vociferously in the British media (Paton 2008; Davies, Swinburne, and Williams 2006). Relatively little empirical research has focused on the impact of transition on students' writing; the majority of published research into transition has tended to concentrate on single subjects (Ballinger 2003; Winterson and Russ 2009) or focus on transition-related issues (Smith 2004). There has been very little investigation specifically linking students' writing across a range of disciplines with the transition from A levels to university. Given that the medium for summative assessment is usually written (Lea 1999), the ability to 'write well' is fundamental to students' success at university. If students are unable to articulate their knowledge in writing, according to the conventions and criteria imposed by awarding bodies, they will not be classified as 'successful'.

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Studies into students' writing in transition have typically focused on cohorts of students at the university side of the transition (Kapp and Bangeni 2009; Delcambre and Donahue 2012; Gourlay 2009), offering relatively static snapshots of students' experiences of transition. While such studies are able to offer insightful commentary on what is happening with students' reading and writing at university level, issues related to the pre-university side of this transition can only be explored retrospectively. The study described here intended to provide a real-time, rich and layered understanding of students' thoughts, attitudes and practices across the multiple transitions they made as they moved between educational levels and between disciplines. Facebook facilitated this, offering a different vantage point into the lives of participants in ethnographic research, providing insight into participants' personal (non-official) attitudes and feelings towards their academic reading and writing practices.

This article will firstly explore the context within which the study described was set and then offer a discussion around the methodology. The findings will be presented according to the three-part conceptualisation of the use of Facebook in ethnographic literacies research offered: as a communicative medium, as context and as data. These three constructs of Facebook usage in an ethnographic research context will be brought together in the discussion, alongside providing insights from the context of this project into the specific advantages and disadvantages that the use of Facebook contributed to this literacies-focused inquiry.

### **Context: conceptualising the online environment**

The Internet is a contested space and any research using the Internet needs to carefully articulate an ontological position regarding the nature of the online world and whether it is considered to be different from the offline world. Hine, for example, suggested in 2000 that the 'virtual' online world is markedly different from the 'traditional' or offline world, in terms of the physical versus experiential nature of ethnographic research and the types of interaction that were possible in each domain. However, more recently researchers have argued that the real-virtual dichotomy suggested by early Internet-based research such as Hine (2000) is no longer valid as the Internet has become an integral part of our contemporary social world (Murthy 2008; Garcia et al. 2009; Beneito-Montagut 2011). Garcia et al. extend the argument by claiming that there is one social world, which is mediated by 'traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity' (2009, 54).

Markham (2004), in writing about using the Internet as a tool for qualitative research, argues that the way the Internet is perceived alters the possibilities for how research can utilise Internet-based technologies, and she offers a three-part definition of the Internet: *Internet as a communicative medium*, *Internet as a global network of connection* and *Internet as a scene of social construction* (2004, 95). In the study described here, I would argue that the conceptualisation of Facebook as an instrument for research was informed by a hybrid of Markham's three-part definition in that while it was primarily used as a communicative tool, it also provided a network that connected the participants together as the co-participants and it was a site of social construction, predominantly seen through the participants' status updates.

Facebook is a free SNS, which currently has 483 million daily users and 42.78% of the UK population are signed up to Facebook (Arthur 2010). Exact figures of Facebook users are difficult to locate, but in 2009, 71% of young adults (aged 18–29) in the USA had a Facebook profile, according to the Pew Research Center (2010). Facebook users register with the site and create a personal profile, the public interface of which is known as the ‘wall’. Facebook is a dynamic online social community; users befriend each other, which gives mutual access to each other’s profile pages, photos, videos, interests, groups and friends. A key benefit of SNS sites, and Facebook in particular, is that they offer multiple functions, such as instant chat; messaging; public posting areas (such as the NewsFeed, the central column of each individual’s homepage which features a constantly updating list of stories from the people and Pages that the user follows); and sharing, for example photos/videos/events/songs/websites, all of which facilitate social networking and relationship maintenance.

Facebook has attracted growing research interest in the recent years; in particular, Facebook as a site of (higher) education and learning has been the subject of increasing research (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Madge et al. 2009; Cheung, Chiu, and Lee 2011), with varying foci from how students make use of Facebook to aid their informal learning or how they use it to increase their social, cultural or academic capital. Aydin (2012) provides a helpful overview of how Facebook has been used in educational research and concludes that not only are the majority of Facebook users students (85% according to Heiberger and Harper, 2008; cited in Aydin 2012), but Facebook can also be construed as an educational environment in its own right, and this use of Facebook should receive further and increased research attention.

Hine (2005) reminds us that conducting ethnographic research in digital contexts is complicated by the inability to assume that ‘digital’ means the same thing to the researcher as it does to the participants. Similarly, Beneito-Montagut makes the claim that online-mediated research ‘necessitates a technologized researcher’ (2011, 720), so that the researcher is familiar with the technology that she is attempting to utilise. In the context of this research, I was already an active user of Facebook and therefore was familiar with the site and its potential benefits and limitations, albeit not in a research context.

A major conceptual and methodological consideration of adopting an SNS as a research tool is how it blurs the traditional construction of the research field. In viewing the social world as a blend of online and offline domains, ethnographic research is afforded a ‘new’ or adapted raft of methodologies and methods, which enable the researcher to ‘capture both sides of the screen’ (Orgad 2005, 52), and challenges traditional notions of what the research field is. Garcia et al. view the Internet as such an integral part of modern society that contemporary ethnographic research ‘should include technologically mediated communication, behaviour or artefacts’ when defining a research field (2009, 57). Conceptualisations of ‘the field’ in ethnographic research which is (partly) situated online are more fluid and less bounded than ‘traditional’, offline constructions of the ‘field’, therefore constituting an ‘expanded field’ (Sade-Beck 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Beneito-Montagut 2011). In the study described here, the field expanded from the fixed, bounded physical environments of the participants’ schools and universities and extended to Facebook: one of the various online spaces they inhabit. Individual Facebook profiles cannot be considered to be bounded entities, as the Facebook

function 'NewsFeed' publishes Friends' updated information in a news-headline format on each individual's 'home page'. Therefore, the profiles of all Facebook users can be described at best as loosely bounded entities as the limits between users are blurred by the shared and public interface of the News Feed.

Facebook as a research tool contributed significantly to the research described here and its use has important methodological implications for online–offline ethnographic pursuits, which will be discussed in the following section.

## Methodology

In order to explore what happens to students' writing as they make educational and disciplinary transitions, primarily from secondary school to university, the decision was made to follow 11 students over two and a half years, from their last year of A levels (the exams taken in the final two years of secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) until the middle of their second year of undergraduate studies. As I was the sole researcher, the maximum number of participants was limited by what was feasible, considering the length of the project and the volume of data that would be collected. Initially 20 students were recruited to participate in this project from three different entry points into higher education: a secondary comprehensive academy in central England, a city Further Education in the south west of England and an independent, fee-paying boys' school in the south of England. Of those, 11 stayed with the project throughout its entirety.

A range of methods was used to explore students' reading and writing in the context of transition in order to develop a multilayered, rich and detailed account of the experience of transition. Three interviews were conducted, face to face or over the phone, with each participant in their last year of A levels (Year 13) and covered various issues related to their academic and vernacular reading and writing practices. I also collected student texts and institutional and curricula documentation, such as textbooks, exam board criteria and departmental guidance on learning, reading and writing. Photos were also collected of students' study spaces and of their institutional learning environments.

The same students were then followed as they moved to their chosen universities and a further two interviews were conducted in the first year of university alongside further students' texts and institutional documentation, such as course and departmental writing/style guides. The final interviews took place in the first semester of Year 2. In addition to the interview data, students' texts and institutional documentation, the participants in this project were also asked to offer snapshots of their daily literacy practices, or literacy logs as they were called, which were collected via Facebook in response to researcher prompts. Pictures of study space were also collected, some of which were accessed via Facebook with the participants' permission. Finally, three of the participants were shadowed for a day, which involved accompanying them on a typical day in the second semester of Year 1 and attending seminars/lectures. Field notes were made during the seminars, noting aspects such as the physical environment and the interactions between the participants and their peers. Detailed notes were made on the reading and writing practices observed during the day.

The use of Facebook was conceptualised initially as a communication tool for this project, facilitating the maintenance of research relationships at times of personal,

social and academic upheaval across time and space. As the participants in the study described moved between secondary school and university study, many different transitions took place, which presented methodological and logistical challenges to the researcher. Facebook was chosen because it was familiar to and used by all the participants and the researcher. Facebook evolved to be more than a simple tool of communication; emerging as a means of generating rich data on young people's academic and vernacular literacy practices that would be otherwise unavailable using 'traditional' or offline methods. However, with this extended use came a range of challenges, predominantly conceptual, methodological and ethical in nature.

A particular issue that arose with engaging in this longitudinal qualitative research project with young and mobile people was finding a medium of communication that would provide consistent and reliable contact with the students as they moved between their A level and university environments. Communication between the researcher and the researched can often be problematic, particularly with younger participants (Harden et al. 2000), and is an integral part of all qualitative inquiry. However, it can be argued that the issues associated with communicating with adolescents in a research context are under-documented and over-simplified in the research literature. The multiple movements made by the participants across the data collection period (temporally, educationally, socially, geographically, disciplinarily) meant that a dynamic and encompassing form of communication was necessary, rather than preferable. Initially, email details and mobile phone numbers were requested at the first point of contact in the recruitment process, based on the assumption that texting would be a familiar and reliable form of communication for young people. However, texting proved to be a fairly unsuccessful method of contacting the participants, albeit significantly more successful than emailing, because it required the participants to have available credit on their phones to reply, which was not always the case. Therefore, an alternative was sought and Facebook emerged as a good-fit solution, not only because it is hugely popular with young people (Pew Research Center, 2010) but also because it utilised the documenting services of email whilst also have the real-time chat facility and a dynamic fluidity about how it could be used for research.

In this research, Facebook was used in three key ways:

- (1) As a communicative medium (used to communicate with the participants across time and distance).
- (2) As data (including the participants' status updates, message contact, photos).
- (3) As context (a shared, observable space that fed into and framed data collection).

This three-part conceptualisation of Facebook as a research tool will now be used as a heuristic device for exploring the benefits and drawbacks of its use in the research project described.

## Results

### *Facebook as a communicative medium*

The opening up of geospatial boundaries is a particular benefit of employing online tools in ethnographic research. The proliferation of Internet-enabled technologies,

such as smart phones, tablet computers and laptops, means that utilising Facebook enables the possibility of following participants across their local and global lives. In the project described here, Facebook permitted insight into the participants' lives that could have previously been hidden from the researcher's gaze. Using Facebook made it possible to observe, for example, what the participants did in their holidays, as long as they remained active in updating their Facebook profiles, and involved many unexpected aspects of the participants' lives, such as bereavements, unexpected exam grades or graphic information about their social lives. Facebook therefore arguably allows an alternative insight into the lives of participants, permitting the researcher to 'burrow further into [participants'] lives' (Murthy 2008, 845). Facebook also helped to preserve established research relationships when 'face-face contact is impossible due to physical distance between parties' (Sade-Beck 2004, 46). In particular, this meant that as the participants moved from where they were recruited (school/college) to their individual universities, the communication and occasions for observation were not lost.

In a research context, these functions also offer temporal advantages and disadvantages. In the study described, Facebook provided unique communicative pathways to the participants, which other forms of communication could not. The dynamic and multi-faceted nature of Facebook permitted several avenues into the participants' (online) lives, such as the constantly updating news feed and the instant message function. A primary benefit of using Facebook is the instant messaging function, which offers the opportunity for synchronous communication providing that both the researcher and the participant are online at the same time. While this is similar in a sense to the real-time interaction of face-to-face or phone interviewing, Facebook also offers a messaging service, similar to email, which functions asynchronously and therefore allows time for the respondents to consider what they want to say/disclose and how. For example, I utilised the messaging function to collect the participants' literacy logs because I wanted the participants to offer as many examples of their reading and writing as possible and in as much detail as possible; the transient and disposable nature of instant messaging was likely to have collected less detailed data.

Using Facebook was preferable to relying on email communication because many of the students used school-based email addresses, which were due to expire once they had received their A level exam results, meaning that there could have been increased participation dropout in the period between A levels and university. Facebook, in contrast, was viewed as being able to bridge the gap between A levels and university, given its increasing popularity and prolificacy, and the participants all spoke about using Facebook as part of their vernacular (non-academic) literacy practices in their first interviews.

The participants were contacted via Facebook for various reasons: to organise interviews, to collect supplementary information following or preceding interviews as part of the interview process, to gather contextual information that informed the interview schedule, to gather information about the participants' daily literacy activity (called 'literacy logs'). As the project progressed, and the researcher-participant relationships developed, other aspects of our Facebook interaction became salient and significant, such as discovering common interests and shared 'Friends', although in the ethnographic research context, this presented ethical

challenges that needed to be urgently addressed (to be discussed in depth later in this paper).

While this project did not fully harness the full potential of the many functions Facebook offers, it is clear from the work of others who have used Facebook for research purposes, such as publicising research projects via a university Facebook network (Madge et al. 2009); observing interactions and interviewing solely on Facebook (Beneito-Montagut 2011) that it can offer great possibilities to the ethnographic researcher (see Wilson, Gosling, and Graham 2012 for a comprehensive review of Facebook research in the Social Sciences).

### ***Facebook as data: a surprising benefit of using Facebook in literacies research***

The creation and collection of dynamic data were an unexpected benefit of using Facebook in the research described. In the first instance, I used Facebook as a platform to request and collect the participants' literacy logs and to collect pertinent documents or links to online documents relating to their courses or literacy practices. This could be seen as a first level of data collected using Facebook.

A second more interpretively challenging use of Facebook as data can be seen in the status data collected. As part of the online participant observation engaged in through Facebook (see the following section for further discussion), I collected any status updates that pertained to their reading and writing practices, which included their articulations of how they experienced their academic lives and to any other literacy-related activities. The ways in which the participants used Facebook provided unique and critical insights into their opinions and attitudes on their reading and writing activities, along with synchronic commentary on their academic reading and writing tasks and practices.

Methodologically, Facebook presents the ethnographic/literacies researcher with a new research context and a valuable source of data that offers unique pathways into participants'/writers'/students' thoughts and attitudes towards their literacy practices. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) work on speech acts and performance, status updates on Facebook can be seen as a discursive practice enacted to achieve a particular reality or to assume a particular identity. An example can be seen in the Facebook status of Maggie, which was written early in the first semester of her first year of a History degree:

MB just wrote THE shittiest note taking assessment ever!

Maggie's post on Facebook provided an insight into the backgrounded practices that Maggie engaged in when writing the mentioned assignment, data that would not have been readily available without the utilisation of a platform like Facebook. Through articulating her experience of writing the assignment, which was the first piece of assessed work she was given to write for her degree, in these terms Maggie is arguably performing the identity of a self-deprecating student, someone who wants to present herself as unsure of her writing ability. This can be seen in the following extract of the fourth interview with Maggie:

Maggie: But it's been like, the first one was a note taking exercise . . . It was so weird. It's the weirdest thing I've ever done for . . . It's because . . .



Researcher: You wrote 'just wrote the shittest note taking assignment ever'

Maggie: Yeah, a few people liked that so I was like, hey.

Maggie's performance and publication of her feelings towards the note-taking assessment on Facebook provided a useful, and otherwise invisible, pathway for me to question and seek Maggie's understanding of the task and the practices she enacted to complete the task. For example, Maggie thought the rationale behind the assignment was to develop and show 'your skills basically' and so the lecturers could see 'how you make an argument'. The frustration evident in Maggie's Facebook posting signalled a key issue that she had with the assessment task, namely the incongruence of the assignment with her lived writing and reading practices. Maggie felt it was unfair to assess her on an idiosyncratic and highly individual practice:

Maggie: They told us to write it exactly how we'd take notes down so I did but obviously they wanted it more in-depth than I thought they would.

The data collected from Facebook status updates, such as the example from Maggie presented above, complemented the 'talk around texts' methodology (Ivanič 1998) employed in the project, which creates 'spaces for talking about writing' (Lillis 2009) and allows the writer's perspectives to be foregrounded. The Facebook status data became part of the texts around which the talk was based and provided vital contextual, attitudinal and affective insight into the practices in which the participants engaged. The posting of Maggie's comment highlighted the note-taking assignment as a significant assignment task that would be (and was) valuable to discuss in the subsequent interview with Maggie. This blended method of data collection permitted the gathering of information that would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to gather with other methods of data collection or from other contexts.

Similarly, another participant, James, wrote the following comment on his Facebook wall early in the first semester of his first year of a History degree:

[James] needs to learn how to read and write quickly again

At face value, this message could be seen to serve to publicise a lack of confidence and a sense of trepidation at this particular transition in his academic reading and writing. However, despite the loss of direction and confidence suggested in the post, James gave the following explanation:

James: It happens at the beginning of the term every year. You really haven't been reading much besides trivial reading and writing at all so when you get back to school at the beginning of term it's like 'urgh'! But I mean in 2 or 3 days you're fine.

James' post offers an important reminder of the rhetorical or performative possibilities that Facebook offers. James' comment on Facebook was incongruent with the confident and self-assured student whose voice populated our interviews. Seen from the view of reading and writing in the context of transition, one reading of James' comment is that he wanted to be seen to be 'playing' up to expected conventions of 'the transition' from school to university, publically professing self-deprecation but

privately feeling confident. Alternatively, James could have simply captured how he was feeling about his reading and writing at that particular moment in space and time. This points to the role that Facebook, and its potential for performance, has in helping student-writers to construct particular identities related to their reading and writing. It also provides a warning to the ethnographic researcher to be careful not to decontextualise data collected from Facebook.

As data, drawing on the participants' Facebook updates provided key insights into how the participants articulated their authorial selves and performed different aspects of being a student. This corresponds with the findings of Lea & Jones' (2008) study of digital literacies in the lives of undergraduates, who found that students who used SNS sites 'were engaged in multifaceted kinds of interactivity in which they took on different roles and constructed identities within the textual space of the interaction' (2008, 210). The multiple positions that the participants took up in Lea & Jones' study permitted students to adopt different roles: supportive friend; student in need of help; older, wiser friend. Facebook can, therefore, be seen to provide a platform for experimentation with various roles, particularly ones that may not be valued or recognised in their academic domains. However, it is important to reiterate that although the data presented here was collected from an online environment, it was utilised in later offline interactions.

Therefore, Facebook provides access to data that would be unavailable to the purely offline ethnographic researcher. Furthermore, Facebook is a space that offers an extended view into the literacy lives of participants, as will be discussed in the following section.

### ***Facebook as context: offering new and unique tools for participant observation***

In addition to Facebook's communicative potential and advantages as a source of data, discussed above, Facebook also constituted a shared space between the researcher and the participants that framed our online interaction. Facebook offered an online vantage point to observe the participants in their 'privately-public, publicly private' online lives (Waskul 1996).

The role of the active researcher is fundamental to the epistemological stance of ethnographic researcher. The importance of the active researcher as a research tool is well established, with Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, 17) labelling the researcher the 'research instrument par excellence'. Brewer (2000) has argued that the production of ethnographic knowledge is contingent with 'intimate familiarity' with the field/people being researched. Such intimacy – or building of rapport between the researcher and the participants – is vital to gaining the emic perspective that is so valued in ethnographic accounts of social behaviour. One way of developing familiarity is through participant observation, which is considered to be an essential aspect of the researcher's role when engaging in ethnographic research (Brewer 2000; Pole and Morrison 2003; Van Maanen 2011).

In the study described here, participant observation was enacted in two key ways. Firstly, attempts were made to observe the participants in their offline lives by spending time and interviewing them in their study environments and by 'shadowing' three of the participants for a typical day at university in their first year. Secondly, Facebook, which constituted an 'expanded field', facilitated observation of their situated online lives. By regularly checking my second, 'research' Facebook profile, it

was possible to observe the ways that the participants engaged in the being and doing of their various identities and provided examples of how the participants were choosing to publish their various experiences, which in turn provided vital contextual insight into the participants' attitudes, practices and performances.

In accordance with the ethical issues outlined above, a decision was made to predominantly focus on the parts of their profiles that pertained to their academic reading and writing practices (including comments that indicated attitudinal or affective insights) or the academic transitions that they were making. However, other information posted provided contextual cues that were fed into our interactions (both formal interviews and informal online communication). This arguably strengthened our relationships because it provided 'common informational ground' from which to work.

The sharing of this online SNS space complemented and strengthened the offline relationships that had been established at the start of the project. By blending online and offline connections, the use of Facebook constituted an 'expanded field' (Sade-Beck 2004; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Beneito-Montagut 2011) compared with 'traditional', offline constructions of the 'field'. It was possible to not only maintain research relations and enthusiasm to participate, but also to collect rich data through participant observation via Facebook, which gave insights into both the participants' academic and vernacular literacy lives.

## Discussion

The study described here began as a purely offline inquiry, with all the participants recruited directly from the institutions where they took their A levels following a face-to-face presentation about the research. Facebook, which added the online element to this research, was added after conducting the first interviews as a response to the logistical challenges of maintaining open channels of communication with the participants. The researcher's and the participants' existing use of Facebook made it the obvious solution to the communicative issue facing the future of the project. Indeed, the selection of Facebook appeared to confirm Beneito-Montagut's (2011) suggestion that the Internet has penetrated social life to an extent that it is now 'disappearing into the background as a taken-for-granted aspect', meaning that the 'boundaries between online and offline communication can be considered blurry and vague' (2011, 717). Her argument that the social world that we inhabit, in the UK at least, is constructed of face-to-face and online environments renders dichotomous notions of online–offline research or environments as neither useful nor applicable to the project described here.

As a research tool, using Facebook facilitated communication between the researcher and participants across geospatial and temporal boundaries, which may have hindered researchers relying on more 'traditional' forms of maintaining contact. Facebook emerged as a culturally and personally salient platform for communication and its popularity and tenacity as an SNS offered a consistent communicative pathway as the participants made their various and individual transitions from A level to university study.

Using Facebook in the study described here provided an unexpected benefit: that of Facebook as data. In this longitudinal, ethnographic project into students' reading and writing across multiple transitions, Facebook emerged as a source of rich data. The insights collected through participant observation on the site constituted critical 'backroom' contextual information about the participants' academic reading and

writing practices. Consequently, this information fed into the ‘talk around texts’ method that was a central methodological feature of this project, and other research situated in the academic literacies frame. Therefore, instead of the solely communicative function originally envisaged, Facebook emerged as a site of meaning making in its own right and exposed what Gershon (2010) calls ‘media ideologies’, or ‘how beliefs about different media shape how they use these media’ (200). The ways in which participants like Maggie and James used Facebook to talk about their literate lives (and perform particular identities) were not uniform across the cohort, which suggests that media ideologies, and their associated practices, signal different understandings of the possibilities that Facebook as a medium offers. Therefore, the performative and rhetorical potential of Facebook use needs to be taken into account when including public-facing and dynamically organised texts (such as status updates) as data.

A key advantage of using Facebook as context, or as a ‘global network of connection’ to use Markham’s (2004) term, is that it offers innovative and convenient alternatives to traditional conceptions of participant observation. It is no longer necessary to physically be in the space of the participants to engage in participant observation, although Facebook by no means offers a like-for-like alternative to this offline engagement. However, as a research context, Facebook presents ethical challenges for ethnographic research as it forces the researcher to confront their own ontological assumptions about what constitutes online space and the private–public nature of interactions framed in an increasingly networked and dynamic online environment. The ‘traditional’ dichotomy of what constitutes space (online–offline) is no longer clear-cut; it is now blurred as SNS, such as Facebook, cross the threshold from being purely online environments to having a tangible effect on the situated, offline lives of the users.

Furthermore, in this age of disclosure, Facebook presents a critical and much-needed challenge to the obsolete and traditional ethical guidelines that guide and constrain educational research. As the notions of public and private are tested and subverted in SNS spaces, arguments have been made to push for new and adaptive ethical guidelines that allow for the changing nature of how research is and can be conducted in online environments (Berry, 2004; Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2008). Indeed, not only does the ethnographic researcher need to attend to their own ontological assumptions about space and privacy, but the researcher also needs to adapt their own practices and ways of being to ensure that they are able to successfully utilise the new research tools that they wield (Beneito-Montagut 2011).

Despite the wealth of advantages outlined in this paper so far, the use of Facebook in an ethnographic research context prompts complex ethical questions. A key concern with using Facebook in ethnographic research is the difficulty of protecting the privacy of the participants (including that of the researcher) and avoiding what Sharf (1999) called ‘narrative appropriation’ of the voices of non-participants whose presence is made visible through their communication with research participants. In order to protect my personal privacy, a new Facebook profile was created which was used solely for the purpose of contacting the participants. This meant the participants were not able to access my own personal profile. While this action meant that my own personal profile was protected from the view of my participant ‘Friends’, it also meant that there was an inequality in the volume of available (personal) information between the researcher and researched. However, the counter-argument to this issue is that such inequality of personal information would be the same in an offline context as well.

Working within the parameters of the Facebook interface, it was not possible to protect the identities of the people (Friends) who added me as a contact because all my Friends were able to see each other (all of whom were involved in the project) and vice versa. This presents a new and unique ethical concern for the modern researcher: Facebook was not created as a research tool; instead Facebook was used here as a tool for facilitating research. Users of Facebook are required to read and acknowledge the conditions of use of Facebook and have a degree of autonomy over the privacy settings of their own individual pages. Therefore, when agreeing to become a friend on Facebook, all the participants were aware to some degree of the way that the site operates and the risks that can be incurred as a user. As reflexive researchers, we arguably have an ethical duty to call attention to this lack of privacy. In order to achieve this aim, a consent form was written specifically for Facebook-research participation using Facebook terminology and highlighting their right to privacy as part of their agreement with Facebook (Appendix 1).

The fact that the absolute privacy and anonymity of the participants (between the participants) could not be guaranteed for the two years of data collection effectively breaks one of the 'golden rules' of the ethical guidelines in the human subject model, although it could be maintained in other forms of data and in the later dissemination of the project. However, Berry (2004) argues that 'ethical research boards should avoid maintaining monolithic ethical guidelines in online research, especially unreflexively advocating ethics drawn from human subjects research' (330). Instead, he advocates flexibility of the part of online researchers and the committees that evaluate such research. Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder (2008) offer a similar evaluation of online research ethics, suggesting that 'online research must be sensitive to different online contexts, since the Internet is many things to many people' (26). Therefore, while one of the 'golden rules' of traditional ethical guidelines may have been broken, by acknowledging the complexities of using Facebook in the research described here, and taking steps to protect participants from harm, flexible ethical decisions were made (whilst still bound to the approval of an ethical committee). Yet, despite the considerable attention and thought given to this issue, the question of whether the private/public issue is at all significant to the participants remains. Indeed, the students who participated in the research described here were quite unbothered by the privacy issues flagged to them. This corresponded with Gross and Acquisiti's (2005) findings, as they concluded that the population of Facebook they studied were 'by large, quite oblivious, unconcerned, or just pragmatic about their personal privacy' (78).

## Conclusion

While Facebook has been the subject of increasing attention amongst educational researchers in recent times, there is relatively little literature that reports how Facebook can be used to enhance ethnographic inquiries or literacies research. This article has provided a three-part conceptualisation of how Facebook can be utilised in ethnographic research, particularly research exploring young people's literacies or that is longitudinal and working across multiple transitions. Viewing Facebook as a communicative medium, data and context offered a useful heuristic for exploring not only the practicalities of how Facebook can be employed to aid ethnographic researchers, but also provided space to discuss the advantages and drawbacks of utilising an SNS in such research contexts. While the pitfalls discussed in this paper are

complex and deeply intertwined with our own ontological and epistemological assumptions, the benefits offered by using Facebook as a part of ethnographic methodology far outweighed them in the project presented here. Facebook has a lot to offer the ethnographic researcher, particularly if, like in the case of the project described here, there is an offline dimension to the research. The blurring of offline–online environments not only offers an expanded field for the researcher to work within, thereby facilitating the collection of richer data and generating different and perhaps unexpected insights, but it also presents potential to strengthen research relationships.

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Appendix 1

Anonymised version of the consent form was written specifically for Facebook-research participation using Facebook terminology and highlighting their right to privacy as part of their agreement with Facebook.

Sally Baker  
s.baker@open.ac.uk



The Open University

'Student Writing and the Transition from School to University'

Thank you again for agreeing to take part in this research project.  
This form is concerned with your agreement to communicate with me via Facebook.  
Please read the following statements and sign at the bottom if you agree with them:

"I understand that I will be asked to become a contact of Sally Baker on Facebook. I understand that I do not have to accept this 'friendship request' but if I do, other participants will be able to see that I am involved in the *Students' writing and the transition from school to university* project and I will be able to see the other participants. I therefore realise that Sally Baker is unable to provide anonymity from the other participants. I acknowledge that I can adjust the privacy settings on my own Facebook account to decide whether I will be visible to Sally's other facebook friends.

I also understand that Sally Baker will be able to view as much of my personal Facebook profile form as I allow her to. I acknowledge that Sally Baker will be able to see my status updates on the Facebook homepage and accept her assurance that she will not intrude into the personal areas of my profile (such as my photographs).

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can remove Sally Baker as a friend from Facebook at any time without giving a reason. I can ask questions at any time. I am free to withdraw or discuss any concerns with Name of supervisor at any time throughout the research process."

"I \_\_\_\_\_ (NAME) consent to participate in the study  
of Sally Baker (Institute of Educational Technology)

Signed: .....

Email: .....

Date: .....