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# Moving ethnography online: researching Brazilian migrants' online togetherness

Mieke Schrooten

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**Abstract**

This article contributes to recent scholarship on the changing nature of fieldwork practices within migration research, focusing on the practice of online ethnography. It makes a case for the significance of the internet and, more specifically, social network sites, in the experience of many migrants. I state that online togetherness is an integral part of the lives of many migrants which also interrelates with 'offline' aspects of their social lives. Therefore, I argue that current research on migration would benefit from a more balanced combination of offline and online ethnography, taking into account how online connectivity affects the nature of migration and the conditions of being a migrant. Methodologically, I suggest that ethnography is well suited for generating understandings of the significance of the internet in the experience of migrants, but that a number of adjustments in methods of data collection and analysis must be made.

**Keywords:** Migration studies; transnationality; online ethnography; social network sites; online togetherness; Brazilian migrants.

Throughout history, human populations have constantly lived in interaction with one another, crossing and levelling out territorial borders. Today, global relationships between people, capital, commodities and ideologies have even intensified, leading to a globalized world that is typified by a 'proliferation of cross-border flows and transnational networks' (Castles 2002, p. 1143). A strong illustration of this transnational reality is the growing number of international migrations. In the year 2005, there were 191 million people living outside their countries of birth, more than ever before in history (United Nations 2006). By 2007, estimates approached 200 million or approximately 3 per cent of the world's population, marking what

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former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan described as a 'new era of mobility' (Adey 2010, p. 1).

The current 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller 2009) is urging social scientists to rethink the study of migration. The classic migratory picture that conceptualized migration as a (temporary) sharp break from the home community is no longer tenable. Rapid technological development, worldwide trade and a revolution in communication are increasingly interconnecting individuals and places, giving a new impetus to human mobility (Bauman 2000; Urry 2007; Castles and Miller 2009; Audebert and Doraï 2010).

In recent years, there have been a number of stimulating studies that have attempted to bridge the gap between theory and this globalized reality, resulting not only in a re-evaluation of a number of long-standing conventions and assumptions but also in a gradual transformation of classic research practices (see for instance Marcus 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Amit 2004; Tsing 2005; Faubion and Marcus 2009). The subject of this article – the research of migrants' online togetherness – can be situated in one of the key transformations of this discipline, namely the shift away from 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) towards a theorizing that is rooted in the concept of transnationality (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1995). Criticizing the taken-for-granted equation of society with the nation state, contemporary scholars recognize that 'national organization as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as the orienting reference point for the social scientific observer' (Beck and Sznaider 2006, p. 4).

Instead, the social sciences have been transformed by the emergence of a transnational paradigm, referring to processes whereby people structurally operate in social fields that transgress national borders (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc 1992; Faist 2000). Migrants very often participate in social networks that are stretched across multiple locations. For example, many sustain family relations or support across national borders (Parreñas 2001), contribute to socio-economic development in their homeland and/or their country of residence (Brinkerhoff 2009), participate actively in communities that span the globe (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1995), or enact their political engagement in multiple states (Smith 2007).

This focus on transnational communities urged researchers to adapt their research strategies to the globalized world and to escape the established practice of using the national geographic level as the spatial unit of reference. The development of a transnational approach on migration was accompanied by the introduction of 'multi-sited fieldwork' (Marcus 1995), a new form of data collection that allowed researchers to investigate transnational units of reference. Differing from a mere comparative study of localities, the 'multi-sited fieldworker'

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quite literally follows people and their connections and relationships across space (Marcus 1995, p. 97; Hannerz 2003; Falzon 2009).

In this article, I demonstrate that the 'methodological transnationalism' that results from a multi-sited approach also generates 'new' research locations that are important for social scientists to take into account. The shift from the study of the 'uprooted migrant' to that of transnational and fragmented networks involves more than a simple multiplication of the physical locations at which social scientists should conduct research; it also involves researching new types of data and research sites. The focus of this article is on one specific 'new' fieldwork site, namely the internet, and, methodologically, on the application of online ethnography to migration research.

In what follows, I seek to expand the discussion of internet use among transnational migrants by exploring the example of Brazilian migrants' online togetherness on the social network site 'Orkut', which is enormously popular among Brazilians, both among those residing within Brazil as well as among Brazilian migrants. I argue that migration researchers should adapt their fieldwork locations and research methods to the environment in which today's interconnected migrants live.

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## Migrants' move online: transnational social networks

On 5 February 2011, the *New York Times* published an article titled 'Movement began with outrage and a Facebook page that gave it an outlet'. The article focuses on the revolts that have sprouted in Egypt and Tunisia and shows how Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and cell phones have offered a way for the discontented population to organize and mobilize and to spread the word about the demonstrations against the regime (Preston 2011). The digital public sphere was not only useful for the Egyptians and Tunisians to spread information within an oppressive regime, but it also allowed them to build support in the transnational community. As Benhabib noted: 'What we have witnessed is truly revolutionary, in the sense that a new order of freedom – a *novo ordo saeclorum* – is emerging *transnationally* in the Arab world' (2011, emphasis in original).

The cases of Egypt and Tunisia are illustrative for the fact that more and more people are increasingly engaged in what have come to be called 'transnational social fields' (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc 1992). Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the rapid evolvement of applications for using and accessing these technologies have strongly contributed to the creating and maintaining of these transnational fields, enabling ideas, information and social networks to flow quickly through and across geographical and political borders (Wilding 2009). Various commu-

nication modes, such as mobile telephony and short message service (SMS) texting, the internet and email, as well as digital broadcast, have become increasingly and undeniably central for global communication, thus affecting the lives of migrants as well as non-migrants. At the same time, it is clear that, despite the fact that global access to these technological advances is continuing to grow, certain groups are under-represented online and some individuals are more readily able to access ICTs than others (Mann and Stewart 2000; Murthy 2008).

The impact of new technologies on the everyday lives of people has received considerable attention among scholars in many disciplines, including anthropology, communications, sociology, linguistics and interdisciplinary fields such as marketing and consumer research. Already in 1994, when research on these issues was still in its infancy, Arturo Escobar suggested that researchers should pay more attention to how the integration of new technologies into daily life modified and negotiated the social construction of reality (Escobar 1994). Addressing Escobar's challenge, several studies have since been launched on this issue.[1]

In 1999, Lyman and Wakeford noted that 'the study of digital and networked technologies is one of the fastest growing fields of research in the social sciences' (1999, p. 359). Today, this statement is even more true than it was more than a decade ago. As Burnett, Consalvo and Ess noticed: 'What began as a scattered series of first efforts to come to grips with the Internet has now matured into a body of literature that represents not only a wide range of extensive and increasingly fine-grained findings and discoveries – but also an increasingly sophisticated set of theoretical reflections regarding appropriate methods and research ethics' (2010, p. 2).

After an initial surge of excitement as to the boundless possibilities for the creation of online identities, the discussion in the literature has moved to more nuanced accounts of the meanings of the internet. Early studies of the internet tended towards a technological determinism perspective, suggesting that the internet provided a poor foundation for cultural and social activity. Moreover, initial research often radically distinguished between online and offline worlds, and between real-world and virtual communities (Boyd and Ellison 2008). More recently, many scholars have moved beyond the assumptions and frameworks that guided much early research, and have, for example, demonstrated the complex interactions between online and offline. The recent revolts in Tunisia and Egypt have provided another example of the multiple ways in which the internet is intimately interwoven with people's offline lives. Furthermore, the scientific debate focuses more and more on the ways in which individuals make use of the technology, rather than investigating the technology itself.

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During the past decade, the field of internet studies has seen an explosion in scholarly interest (for a comprehensive overview of internet studies, see Wellman 2010). In this article, I argue that research on migration would also benefit from a more explicit focus on the way this online connectivity affects the nature of migration and the conditions of being a migrant. The rise of ICTs has greatly changed the world of many migrants. As the example of the social network site Orkut will demonstrate, we are no longer in the age of the uprooted migrant, but have instead entered the age of the 'connected migrant', who is both internationally and digitally mobile (Diminescu and Pasquier 2010; Kissau and Hunger 2010). On a large scale, migrant communities are experiencing new forms of connectedness through acting in and occupying digital territories.

There are many existing studies of migrants' use of the internet, looking, for example, into the use of the internet by migrants for civic engagement (Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2009), enabling freedom of self-representation (Landzelius 2006), putting themselves on the global stage (Miller and Slater 2000), maintaining their affiliation with the local community in which they grew up (Komito 2011), and having an impact on international affairs (Brinkerhoff 2009). Despite this growing body of literature, it would be too strong to state that the ethnographic practice of following social groups online has been established within migration research (Murthy 2008, p. 838; Kozinets 2010, pp. 1–3). Studies of migration are often still exclusively situated in the 'offline' social world.

Theoretical contributions and empirical research focusing on transnational communities have a tendency to neglect the influence of the increasing virtual mobility that marks the life of many contemporary migrants. There have even been a number of discussions about the appropriateness of the internet as a field of study for migration research (Beaulieu 2004, p. 142). But when one starts looking at how people enact transnationality on a daily basis, it becomes apparent that migrants' use of the new technologies is deeply embedded in their transnational lifestyle. In particular, the way social network sites (SNSs) (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Orkut) affect the nature of migration and the conditions of being a migrant needs more scientific attention. As the next section will show, online togetherness on Orkut is as important to many Brazilian migrants as their offline togetherness. Moreover, there are many similarities, connections and overlappings between the two.

## Brazilian migrants' online togetherness

The research presented here is part of a larger study on migration and transnationality among Brazilian immigrants in Belgium

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(2008–2013). The study makes use of a multi-sited research design. Besides geographical research sites at points of departure and points of arrival, the social network site 'Orkut' also became one of the central sites of the ethnographic fieldwork. Launched in January 2004, Orkut was named after Orkut Büyükkökten, the Google employee who developed the service. Although the site traces its roots to the United States, originally having an English-only interface, Portuguese-speaking Brazilians quickly 'invaded' the site and became the dominant user group (boyd and Ellison 2008). Today, the social network site is one of the most widespread online communities in Brazil. According to Orkut's own data, 50.6 per cent of the more than 100 million users worldwide come from Brazil, followed by India with 20.44 per cent and the United States with 17.78 per cent. Pakistan, fourth in rank, only has a share of 0.86 per cent (Orkut 2011).

During the research, I studied Brazilians' online togetherness in the two largest Orkut communities that were referred to by Brazilian migrants in Belgium, namely *Brasileiros na Bélgica* (Brazilians in Belgium) and *Brasileiros em Bruxelas* (Brazilians in Brussels), as well as one smaller community, *Brasileiros em Leuven* (Brazilians in Leuven).[2] The largest community, *Brasileiros na Bélgica*, was created in 2004. At the time of the research, the community was already well established and was attracting many new members. In September 2010, 4,369 people had already joined this Orkut community. Currently, even more people have become members (4,822 in July 2011). The founder of this community, a Brazilian man who lived in Belgium, wanted to create a place where Brazilians who (had) lived in Belgium or were thinking about moving to Belgium could meet and exchange ideas and experiences. By the time of the research, the community founder had left Belgium and another Brazilian man had become the moderator of the community. Despite this change of moderator, the objectives of the community stayed the same.

In 2006, the community *Brasileiros em Bruxelas* became the second Orkut community that addressed Brazilian migrants in Belgium. Counting 1,077 members in September 2010 (1,164 in July 2011), it was also a popular community among Brazilian migrants. The explicit reference to Brussels – the region where most Brazilians in Belgium live – in the name of the community was an important reason for many of the members to join. Like the *Brasileiros na Bélgica* community, the founder of this community created the community for the exchange of ideas and experiences. In addition, he explicitly invited people to announce parties or other Brazilian events in order to allow people to meet offline.

The third community, *Brasileiros em Leuven*, was smaller than the other two. At the time of the fieldwork, 212 members had joined this community (233 in July 2011). Unlike the other two Orkut

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communities, the *Brasileiros em Leuven* community resulted from an already existing offline group of Brazilians residing in the Belgian city of Leuven. In 2002, a group of Brazilians had founded a non-profit organization, which aimed, among other things, to provide useful information to Brazilians living in Belgium. The founder of *Brasileiros em Leuven* originally used the online community to promote the activities of the offline organization. At the time of the research, however, the number of activities of the non-profit organization was very low. Still, many members continued to use the Orkut community to be informed about events they could attend. But a lot of them also started to look for other information or help, trying to resolve various problems they encountered in Belgium.

For most Brazilian migrants I met, computer-mediated communication via Orkut was already embedded in their daily life practices before they migrated to Belgium. In Brazil, they mainly used the site to connect with friends and relatives. After migrating to Belgium, many also found the internet to be a valuable tool for helping them in maintaining social, political and cultural connections to their home country. SNSs such as Orkut facilitate the maintenance of continuous personal (transnational) contacts through the blending of many interconnecting activities, such as email, diaries, photo albums, video and messaging. Orkut members can create personal profiles, keep these updated, and network with familiar and new contacts through the scrapbook. Orkut also offers the opportunity to send private messages to other Orkut members and to chat with friends who are online.

All Orkut members can also create communities in which other Orkut members can participate. Within Orkut communities, members can create polls, vote in polls that interest them, or start a topic in the forum. This last application in particular is quite popular since it allows members to post upcoming events or discuss certain topics with one another over a period of time. In many cities all over the world with a significant number of Brazilian migrants, Orkut members have formed online migrant communities, creating opportunities for online togetherness. The functions of these communities vary from providing a forum for the exchange of ideas, to providing solidarity among Brazilian migrants, pursuing purposive objectives related to their homeland identity, and helping them to become embedded in their place of residence.

In the Orkut communities I studied, I found that the key functions of these communities were different in each stage of the migration process. Also, the degree of users' involvement varied, ranging from consumption or lurking – a loose online togetherness – to a strong social life online – an intense online togetherness.[3] For those who are planning to migrate or who have recently migrated, the Orkut

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communities often play a significant role as bridges between Brazil and Belgium. The communities often provide a variety of social capital, both online and offline, which assists in the migration transition. Many of the forum topics in the migrant communities are questions from recently arrived Brazilians who ask for information or assistance with the challenges they are confronted with during their settlement in the city and their day-to-day life. Sônia, a woman who participates in two of the three Orkut communities I studied, told me during an interview:

> People find me in the community and ask me for information about Belgium because they are arriving here and don't have a lot of information. What also happens: someone wants to resolve some problems over here in Belgium, but doesn't know where to go. So they ask. I think it is also to try to get some help, help from the other Brazilians who are already living here. So one helps one another. Those who are already here help out those who are arriving. (Sônia, personal interview, 13/07/2010)

Among the Brazilians who have already lived in Belgium for some time, the Orkut communities also serve as a way to keep in touch. On the forum, many posts can be found that announce upcoming events and the location of (new) Brazilian meeting places. Many other topics in the forum are commercially oriented, trying to sell products or services. Most of these are posted by already established Brazilians who have set up small businesses, like Rone, a 36-year-old Brazilian who mainly uses Orkut to promote his language courses:

> I know them [recently arrived Brazilians] because I advertise my Dutch introduction classes. They are open to Brazilians who have recently arrived. And to their partners as well, who are married to Brazilians but never wanted to learn Portuguese. Sometimes they do want to learn Portuguese now. So I earn money with these people. I advertise on Orkut. So they know me, they contact me. (Rone, personal interview, 30/12/2010)

Orkut is also a means by which Brazilians reaffirm themselves as Brazilians and construct a shared imagination. Besides references to Brazil in the uploaded pictures or videos in the profiles of the members, much of the content of the online discussions concerns expressions of nostalgia for Brazil and the performance of 'being Brazilian', as defined by the self-ascription of the participants. This is illustrated by many discussions on the cultural differences between Belgians and Brazilians, where community members discuss 'typical Brazilian behaviour' and compare this with situations with which they

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are confronted within Belgian society. The Orkut communities are thus also instrumental to Brazilian migrants' ability to reinforce and recreate their identity in order to retain psychological links to the cultural identity of their homeland. Moreover, community members also use Orkut to disseminate and discuss information about Brazilian politics and/or news and events. As such, Orkut has become a social basis for cultivating national subjectivity and discourse across borders.

Nevertheless, not all of the potential effects of the Orkut migrant communities on the lives of participants are necessarily positive. Participation in such communities can, for example, result in increased expectations of exchanging other forms of support. Rone, who first told me about the opportunities Orkut gave him to promote his language classes to newly arrived Brazilians, said later during the interview:

> I often receive emails from people I have never heard of. 'Hi Rone, you don't know me, but I know this and this of you. Give me your opinion, how hard is it to find a job in Europe?' I even have an email over here, that I saved. This girl said: 'I graduated in biology. I would love to go to Europe to study English and to work as a tourist guide. What is the job market like for tourist guides for someone who studied biology? Because I read on Orkut that you are a tourist guide.' (Rone, personal interview, 30/12/2010)

Many other members of the communities I studied also told me that they were often contacted by other Brazilians with requests for help. Even though most respondents acknowledged that they themselves benefited from the many forms of economic or emotional social support that can be found in the Orkut communities, some of them also associated their presence online with an increased obligation to help other Brazilians. Others complained about the gossiping that took place online, or even distanced themselves from the other participants in the communities.

## Moving ethnography online: methodological and ethical challenges

In my research, I had initially underestimated the importance of online togetherness for Brazilians in Belgium. The original research proposal did not even mention the internet as a possible research site. However, within the variety of Brazilian websites, magazines and satellite channels I encountered in the course of the research, Orkut was often mentioned as the most important medium to keep in touch with other Brazilians inside and outside Brazil. Therefore, it quickly became one of the central fieldwork locations. However, I chose not to restrict my methodology to online research. Instead, I adopted a dialectical

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research praxis, trying to understand how different research sites were interrelated. The research related to Orkut consisted of an analysis of at least six months of web-based discussion among members of each community, personal interviews with the community founders, online participant observation, and personal and email interviews with members of all three Orkut communities, as well as with Brazilian migrants who did not participate in any of these communities (forty-one in total). I tried to meet as many Orkut community members as possible in person. This gave me the chance to verify information gathered online. It was also an opportunity to fill gaps in online data collection and to extend my focus from migrants' participation in Orkut communities to my other fields of interest.

However, choosing to include online research in the study required a number of methodological adaptations. In this section, I will focus on two critical differences I was confronted with between the face-to-face and online ethnography, namely gaining access to the fieldwork location and the question of obtaining informed consent. First, an obvious difference from physical ethnography was the way I had to find an entrée into the Orkut communities I wanted to study. Although the problem of how to present oneself also exists within traditional ethnography, in gaining access to the online research setting, I could not rely on my physical presence and interactional style (Mann and Stewart 2000; Garcia et al. 2009, pp. 68–73). In my research, I gained access to the online communities through offline research. In the course of my fieldwork in Belgium, many of my informants added me to their list of friends on Orkut, informed me about the existence of online migrant communities, and invited me to become a member. This strongly facilitated my entrée.

Soon after joining the Orkut communities, I introduced myself as a researcher to the moderators and asked to meet them in person. After explaining the intentions of the research, I requested and obtained their permission to conduct participant observation and to contact members for research purposes. The reactions of the moderators to my request were very positive.

Among researchers, a debate has revolved around the question of whether or not researchers must do this: i.e. ask for permission to conduct online ethnographic fieldwork and to use comments that are posted online. Some researchers have argued that all cyberspace postings are in the public domain and thus imply permission for their use by others (e.g. Finn and Lavitt 1994; Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard 1998; Schaap 2002; Magnet 2007). Many of these researchers have explicitly chosen to conduct physically 'invisible' research, maintaining a covert position in their research site. A major advantage of this approach is its entirely unobtrusive character and the chance this provides to research naturally occurring behaviours.

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There seems to be, however, a continuum of private to increasingly public online communities, but with continuation of earlier methods. Many early scholars studied reasonably private online communities such as listservs that were password protected or discussion forums or Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) with chosen usernames often de-linked from personal or distinct offline identities. Today, the distinction between public and private domains in the online world is more and more blurred as multiple forms of online togetherness co-exist in cyberspace. Some of these sites are still private, but many others, including SNSs, are much more public, with profiles that often explicitly connect online and offline identity. The various types of current online communities involve dramatically different ethical implications for research and pose different challenges and opportunities for the ethnographer. In the case of SNSs especially, I urge online researchers to communicate who they are and to ask for permission to use online data for their research.

Another line of argument that is often used against announcing one's presence to ask for consent focuses on the fact that 'the lurker' is a socially acceptable and sometimes even routinely used position in the setting (Schaap 2002). Although lurking was also a common behaviour in Orkut, I argue that the subject position of an ethnographer does not map that of a common member of a social network site. Most obvious is the difference in intentions and consequences of lurking: 'The instrumental stance and consequences of ethnographic lurking are problematic to participants, in a way that other forms of "lurking" may not be' (Beaulieu 2004, p. 147).

Moreover, overtly participating in the online setting allowed me to check my interpretations and gain the informed consent of research participants, another cornerstone of ethical research. However, given the number of participants in the online communities, obtaining consent was more problematic than in my offline fieldwork. Also, I was already a member of Orkut before I started my PhD project. Therefore, at the moment my research started, I introduced myself in my new role as a researcher, presenting the research topic and announcing my online presence. After this introduction, I did not continue to regularly post messages on forums introducing myself as a researcher, in order to maintain the naturalness of the conversation. Instead, I chose to make sure that the fact that I was conducting ethnographic research was appearing permanently in my user profile.

Nevertheless, despite this overt presence as a researcher, many participants may not have been aware of my study. For this reason, before using quotes in publications, I asked for the permission of research participants. Whenever possible, I tried to meet the community members whose quotes I wanted to use, in order to gain their trust, and to ask for permission to share their fragments for the study.

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Research participants who were geographically dispersed were provided with an information sheet sent via Orkut-mail. All participants were also informed that they could withdraw their participation from the study at any given point and that they would be properly masked in order to protect their privacy.

This representation of participants' data in publications is another important privacy aspect. Because names and textual fragments obtained online are easier to retrieve, the masking of contributors to online websites is often more complex than guaranteeing anonymity to offline research participants. The blurring of the private/public distinction adds another dimension to the matter of anonymity. Not all internet users necessarily want to remain anonymous. Instead, they may have chosen to deliberately publish in the public domain and should perhaps be treated as authors (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002). I chose to give the actual name of the online community I study, but to alter online pseudonyms, names, and other means of identifying the participant. Even though this denies credit where it is due, I considered the omission of potentially damaging information more important.

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## Conclusion: migration research in a globalized world

Contemporary life is marked by an increasing virtual and geographic mobility (Garcia et al. 2009, p. 53). Rapid technological development and a revolution in communication are interconnecting individuals and groups, making it increasingly easy for migrants to maintain close links with their regions of origin and with other migrants around the world. For many migrants, it is not only possible to return home more often for physical visits, it is also possible to maintain continuous contact by virtual visits (Hiller and Franz 2004, p. 735). Therefore, I suggest that it is of little use to think of the 'virtual' world as a different social space from the 'real' world. Rather, I state that 'online' activities are part of how people live today and are thus strongly interrelated with 'offline' aspects of social life.

Because of the possible important role this online togetherness can play, I argue that contemporary migration researchers should adapt to the environment in which today's interconnected migrants live and include online research sites in the definition of their fieldwork sites. For research that takes a particular social phenomenon such as migration as its focal area of interest, an ethnographic study on the internet can play an important supporting role. It can raise new questions or hypotheses that orient the offline fieldwork, deepen the understanding of offline events, or lead to unexpected insights into the life of our research participants. The surge of new forums where migrants discuss different aspects of their migration experiences, find news and information, and work in solidarity on a variety of issues

directs our attention to the fact that we have to think about the changing multi-sitedness of ethnographic research.

Although the transformation of classic research practices is already well under way, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork will have to broaden its scope to include online and offline research sites, following connections across different media. 'Because information and communications technologies have permeated so many areas of contemporary social life and to such an extent, we have reached the point of no return' (Kozinets 2010, p. 2). A balanced combination of offline and online ethnography, including data gathered in face-to-face as well as online interaction, can provide a fuller, more comprehensive account of the phenomena of interest and transnational processes.

Also in my research, the integration of qualitative data-gathering methodologies both online and offline turned out to be an important research strategy. Performing one without the other would have resulted in a significant amount of information, but would certainly have missed critical elements. Ethnography solely based on online research could not be the sole source of data as it offers only a partial picture of the migrants' transnational activities; a pure offline ethnography would not have provided me with detailed information on the important associations between the online and offline world. The use of complementary methodologies of data-gathering, online and offline, has enabled me to collect comprehensive information on the transnational practices of Brazilian migrants in various realms.

In this article, I make a case for the significance of the social network site Orkut in the experience of Brazilian migrants to Belgium. Despite my focus on social network sites in this article, these form only one possible site of online togetherness. SNSs should therefore be placed within the wider spectrum of mediations that affect people. Studying only one medium of communication that certain migrants use may blind us to the fact that people draw on different media in order to communicate with each other. Therefore, I recommend that current migration researchers – depending on the question(s) they ask – pay explicit attention to technologically mediated communication in their research, either through an online ethnographic study or in a different way. Such a rethinking of the notion of 'the field' – the place where the ethnographic research ought to take place – might open the way for both a different kind of research knowledge and a different kind of research subject.

## Notes

1. For example: Hine (2000); Mann and Stewart (2000); Landzelius (2006); Bakardjieva (2007), Diminescu and Pasquier (2010).

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2. I use the term 'community' in this article because it is the name used on Orkut. Even so, defining people's social activities online as an 'online community' is not unproblematic, as these so-called 'communities' often have low barriers to entry and to exit, and members can easily ignore other members they don't like (Brinkerhoff 2009), and not all of people's online activities live up to the value-laden name of 'community' (Bakardjieva 2007). Bakardjieva (2007) proposes instead to use the term 'virtual togetherness', as a collective noun for the many variations of people's social activities online. Although I agree with her view about the inappropriateness of the term 'community', I also argue that the term 'virtual' does not contribute to a better understanding of people's online activities, as it suggests a sharp distinction between the 'real' world and the 'virtual' world. In contrast to this view, I argue that the internet and its many communication modes have become increasingly and undeniably central for its many users. Therefore, I propose to speak of 'online togetherness' rather than 'virtual togetherness'.

3. Although some Orkut members in the Orkut communities I studied were non-migrants, I will not elaborate on the role of the online migrant communities for non-migrants in this article.

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