Ethnography in hostile environments

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"What do you mean we are cruel? I would only peel off your skin with a knife, if knew who you soyfag are and where you live". (orig. Miten niin julmia? Minä vain kuorisin sinun ihosi veitsellä irti, jos tietäisin kuka sinä soijahomo olet ja missä asut.) (Ylilauta, 2021)

The above comment was given as a response on the image board Ylilauta to a popularizing article I had written (Nikkilä, 2021). The article was a historical presentation of the so-called image board culture and contained some analysis of its societal effects. Even though it is not entirely clear who the writer of the comment on Ylilauta believed to be responding to, there is a distinct possibility that the writer thought to be addressing me personally.

Whether they are intended to be taken seriously or not, responses like these pose a significant challenge to researchers. This is evident especially in the field of online ethnography and if the researcher's area of interest lies within forums that promote for example far-right views, sexism or antifeminism (Colley & Moore, 2020).

Traditionally, ethnography and especially online ethnography have stressed the fact that the researcher has to be recognized by the members of the community one is studying (Hine, 2000). Online ethnography requires the researcher to present one's findings to the community. If a researcher remains a lurker or silent member, this cannot be achieved. Paradoxically, the article I wrote was an attempt toward presenting the community with my findings, in accordance with the requirements of the nexus analytical methodology (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 177).

The ethnographic method is beneficial in that it develops a deeper understanding of the studied community, as well as results in attempts at influencing the community for the positive (Hine, 2000). However, the risks involved in studying a hostile environment online may pose a threat even to the audience of the researchers (Colley & Moore, 2020, p. 18). This shows that there is a need for discussion over how to conduct ethnographic research with hostile communities online.

Bibliography:

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