

**At the Electronic Evergreen: a computer-mediated ethnography of a
newsgroup from Montserrat and afar**

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Abstract

Technological change such as computer-mediated communication (CMC) is affecting social interaction, supporting the creation of new virtual communities with distinctive conventions of interaction. This article argues that such changes impact upon both the subject matter and practice of ethnography. The Electronic Evergreen, for example, is an internet newsgroup community devoted to 'Montserratian' news and gossip precipitated by the 1995 eruption of a volcano on Montserrat and the relocation of two thirds of the island's population. Through this case study, this article examines the nature of computer-mediated communication, and the affective sense of community which it can foster. The article argues that ethnographic research should come to terms with this new medium of communication and its affects upon traditional notions and investigations of community.

Abbreviated title: At the Electronic Evergreen

(Keywords: Montserrat, computer-mediated ethnography, newsgroup, community)

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Date: Sat, 20 May 2000 22:14:09 -0800

From: Geoff Dandy <dandyg@candw.ag

Sender: owner-mni-info@troy.seeker.com

Subject: THIS IS how this news group got its name.....!

To: MNI News Group <mni-info@nationalradio.com>

Message-ID: <014401be6862\$cd60b8d0\$b9e9a0cdrom@keeper.candw.ag>

For the few of you that might not know.....This News Group that is in some circles called the "Electronic Evergreen".....is all because of a TREE !

This little Square in the middle of the Capital City of Montserrat.....Plymouth had a little "Square" like so many other Towns, that was located in front of Lawyer David Brandt's Chambers...that was a "location" that people met and talked politics.....and all about everything else that concerned Montserrat.

When Jenny & I moved to Montserrat just over 7 years ago, that tree was "Knocked-Down" by Hurricane HUGO in 1989.

But the important part of this message is that this "News-Group" got its real name from that Park with THAT EVERGREEN TREE on the Northern Corner.

It was THE place that everyone went to get the latest Local News (gossip included).....and socialised.

As this is something that many people that are members of this Group....are more knowledgeable than > I < Please guys.....share with this group of Interested people.....what being there was like. Freddie....? Ashman.....?

<http://24.3.18.12/montserrat/photos/072/originalevergreen.jpg>

Blessings.....

Geoff & Jenny

This email arrived in my mailbox file held by my computer whilst I was online. When I read the message, immediately, I was back on Montserrat, back at the Evergreen where I worked as an

ethnographer, listening, recording and joining in with the latest island gossip. I could feel the heat, smell the scent from the tree mingling with the smell of the beer bottles we all carried. With this email, I was there in a flash - another flashback. These flashbacks come with the emails. They can also be triggered by sounds and tremors such as when my washing machine moves onto spin cycle and the floor shakes, my pulse races in reaction to another volcanic earthquake. Seconds, or even minutes, later and I am back in front of my computer screen. Curiously, though I can prevent my emails from initiating these accompanying experiences, I don't.

Email newsgroups operate in virtual spaces, places where text-mediated interaction takes place. The above is a good example of an email posting to the Electronic Evergreen email newsgroup (names and addresses have been changed). This email takes the form of an informal letter and is addressed to all of the members. The email refers to the folk memory, and a digital photograph, of a large tree near the centre of Plymouth, capital of the Caribbean island Montserrat, a town now completely destroyed by volcanic debris. It explains the informal naming of the newsgroup after the Evergreen meeting-point tree for those that don't already know. Implicit in the email is a sense of group identity, a sense of community which is held by the authors of the email, and which they assume is also held by the readers of the email. This is the subject of this article - newsgroup interaction such as this, and how this maintains and fosters a strong sense of community, a legitimate topic of investigation for anthropologist and sociologist ethnographers.

Computer-mediated ethnography

New technologies tend to change old ways of doing things.

(Jones 1998: 21)

In her virtual ethnography of Louise Woodward campaigners on the internet, the sociologist Christine Hine (2000: 72) describes her sense of physicality during the time of the judge's verdict: she felt an excitement of multiple engagement, of hereness and thereeness, 'multi-present and thoroughly engaged', sitting in her university office with her feet up on the desk clicking her way through the websites, talking with a friend on the telephone, and listening to conversations taking place outside her door. I was particularly struck by this breathless phase

of Hines' ethnography because this is what I often feel during my own ethnographic research on the internet. My reactions above and my engagement with the Electronic Evergreen are perhaps even more immersive than those recounted by Hines.

According to computer guru Howard Rheingold, 'virtual communities' are 'computer-mediated social groups' (1995: 1), 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (1995: 5, my emphasis). These relationships are formed and maintained in a conceptual space where 'words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using computer-mediated communication technology' (Rheingold 1995: 5). These ideational groups cut across the traditional geographic, political and cultural boundaries; the Electronic Evergreen, for example, is just such a group of 'like-minded' email posters and readers, linked by cognitive sympathy, empathy and interest. They are the informants of a traditional ethnography I was conducting which went virtual. This transition from face-to-face ethnographic research to computer-mediated ethnographic research is an example which further establishes computer-mediated ethnography as a legitimate ethnographic focus and, because of the transition, this example is important because it differs from other newsgroup ethnographies which largely concentrate exclusively upon the online (see Baym 2000, for instance; and Rheingold 2000, Kollock & Smith 1999, Senft 2000 for website and newsgroup communities).

Members of the Electronic Evergreen such as the authors above, Freddie and Ashman who are described as regular readers and members of the newsgroup, and other readers known and unknown, communicate collectively - if indirectly - through their typed messages; they are members of a 'virtual commons' (Bioca 1992: 5). Their text-based messaging (Harasim 1993: 26, Aycock & Buchignani 1995), the pure use of alphabet and punctuation symbols to communicate, has both its advocates and its critics in the social sciences: supporters of these narrative worlds (Leach 1989, Harasim 1993, Hiltz, Johnson & Turoff 1986), consider computer-mediated communication (CMC) a great leveller, freeing the literate from the bonds of the body, one where creative 'emoticons' and 'signatures' and new languages spring up out of the alphabet and punctuation symbols (Reid 1995, Danet 2001, Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright & Rosenbaum-Tamari 1996: 2), and where capitalisation and alternative punctuation is used for emphasis (as above) but has to be used carefully so as not to cause offence and retaliation (flaming). Critics of this communication thesis - sceptics of the strength of this narrative world

network - Kiesler and Siegal and McGuire (1984) have pointed out that communication through text alone reduces the co-ordination of communication because we have lost all nonverbal behavioural cues; depersonalised, socially and racially anonymous (see also Aycock & Buchignani 1995) or even masked communication is no substitute for traditional face-to-face (FtF) communication. Furthermore, Introna and Whitley (undated: 2) suggest that levels of obligation between CMC communicators are considerably lower than between FtF communicators: computer communication lacks background or context, what Habermas referred to as the 'lifeworld' of the utterance, and so is less binding or formal - what they create is an insincere environment, a 'pseudocommunity' (Beniger 1987). For example, the email above did not start a discussion 'thread' as the authors intended it to do. Neither Freddie nor Ashman responded.

Significantly, there are also both advocates and critics of CMC research in the anthropological and sociological communities. There, the new communication technologies are frequently discussed in terms of whether or not they can be considered legitimate research topics, and whether or not internet information relays can constitute 'real' communities. Ethnography is commonly taken to entail the doing and the writing, the living and 're-writing', of social reality. It is a method which Conklin (1968: 172-178) defines as the direct observation of behaviour - in-depth participant observation, fieldwork - which once polarised anthropology (those seeking Malinowski's native point of view) and sociology (those influenced by the Chicago School's urban studies). This form of description-led theorising, with its naturalist roots, has long been an integral and magical part of anthropology, the essential and rigorous rite of passage for the neophyte graduate student seeking to gain access to the academic order of anthropologists. Recently, however, this 'fieldwork fetish' has come under great scrutiny by the Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and Siting Culture (Olwig & Hastrup 1997) 'new ethnographic critics' and their followers (see Marcus & Fischer 1986, Clifford 1988, Gupta & Ferguson 1997, Amit 2000). The former initiated an interrogation of ethnographic literature, whilst the latter developed this into an examination of culture locations, the anthropologists' place of and upon the field. They raised questions such as: how might anthropology keep pace with a decolonised and deterritorialised world, one of transnational cultural flows, shifting migrations, displacements and dislocations? This question is especially pertinent to the predicament facing the Montserrat place and Montserratian people

amongst others where multi-sited fieldwork may be necessary following a recent exodus from the island.

Seeking to get away from the static and worn notion of ‘fieldwork as dwelling’, Clifford (1997: 198) suggests that fieldwork can be viewed as a ‘travel encounter’, one involving displacement for the anthropologist in whatever form or fashion. Electronic travel would count, then, as a kind of dépaysement, notes Clifford (1997: 1992) who goes on to cite David Edwards’s (1994) traditional village study in Afghanistan which continued into Pakistan, neighbouring international refugee camps and eventually on into distant Afghan computer newsgroups - all of which was in-depth, in detail, and long term ethnographic practice. With hindsight, Rapport (2000: 73) argues that ethnography is processual and accumulative over a period of time, and that, crucially, the sense of displacement in the ethnographer, the cognitive and experiential, is more important than the physical. This conclusion was reached following a traditional period of fieldwork in north-west England where Rapport found many of the locals leading lives far more mobile than that of the ethnographer. It is this form of ethnographic openness which I would like to extend in this article, a support for Hine’s (2000) recent study, a rebuttal of recent and unexpected assertions made by prominent and progressive anthropologists such as Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik (1994: 3) (ethnographic fieldwork is experiential and performative and thus cannot be communicated in dialogue; it requires physical presence), and Judith Okely (1992: 8) (fieldwork is a ‘total’, unbounded experience).

Given recent advances in information communication technology (ICT), both anthropology and sociology disciplines have had to grapple with questions such as how, for example, does one investigate virtual community according to Rheingold’s ‘with sufficient human feeling’ criteria? Is it possible to map anthropological and sociological notions of community onto the web? Indeed, “can the internet make a polity?” Jones (1997: 26) and MacKinnon (1995) ask variously. Tonnies’s turn of the last century articulation of the social change from stable and intimate Gemeinschaft community (based upon traditional kinship and moral bonds), to mobile, fluid and impersonal Gesellschaft society (where interaction is dictated by purpose), does not exactly parallel the transition from face-to-face to computer-mediated communication, but it is a useful if simple analogy to help think of the social implications of technological change (see also Cohen 1989: 22-37). We might note that a community can be a community of ‘common interests between people’ (Rapport 2001: 114), more Durkheim’s organic than mechanical solidarity; that communities are personal and

affective thoughts; that they are imagined and constructed out of nostalgia, for bourgeois or anachronistic reasons, or to symbolise boundaries (Cohen 1989: 12).

There are different types of ethnographies of electronic community online just as there are different types of ethnographies offline: there are the MUDS and MOOS - Rheingold (1995: 23, 10) characterises his WELL conferencing system a 'group mind' where real and virtual communities fuse together. There are internet Relay Chatrooms (IRCs) where subscribers work with authentic or inauthentic avatars (Slater 1998). And there are the bulletin boards and newsgroups: these range from Spender's (1995) 'nattering' women's groups on the net; to Baym's (1998, 2000) community of continually posting online soap fans, a community of practice and performance; from Hine's (2000) campaigners who inhabit the net both as a place and a produce of culture; to Fox & Roberts' (1999) British male GPs with their hierarchies and strict conventions; and then there are the members of the Electronic Evergreen who migrated from the Montserrat place (an island in the Caribbean) to their own Montserrat space (an island in their heads). All of these people 'behave as if they are part of a community' (Fox & Roberts 1999: 664), greeting each other as though face-to-face, apparently unphased by the asynchronous nature of their interactions, behaving informally and with feeling.

According to Benedict Anderson (1983: 15), '[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'. This notion of community takes us away from the type of understanding of social interaction based upon geographic area (Bell & Newby 1971), and leans us instead towards an understanding of community as a complex of ideas and sentiments (see Auge 1995). Hines (2000: 17) rightly points out that this type of computer-mediated communication research has now moved on from an observation of how it feels like a community to its participants, to an examination of the ways in which that perception is created and sustained. CMC has moved from medium for social relations to CMC as a context of social relations. Contra the claims of Sardar (1996) and other critics of CMC and computer-mediated ethnography, I would concur with Hines' position that CMC can and does contain personal commitments, authentic identities, temporal continuities and embedded contexts of interaction (see also Miller & Slater 2000). Newsgroup etiquette - 'netiquette' - is, for some commentators of email use, one of the defining attributes of community on the internet or amongst the various email groups. Netiquette reveals a communal commitment to discursive standards of behaviour (McLaughlin, Osborne & Smith 1995) which reflect 'real' life cultural codes and customs. On the Electronic Evergreen

newsgroup, all the addresses are listed in the address box, leaving members with a strong idea of themselves, all listed together in a self-constituting way. Nevertheless, the virtual ontological nature of such an organisation still begs the question of what commitment is begat by such new interactions and communications where people can engage and disengage with each other with ease: '[w]hat are the consequences of differences between temporary and persistent worlds?' as Steven Jones frames it (1998: 4). Community, I would suggest, is apparent in cyberspace: meetings may be temporary and dialogues fleeting and readers silent (lurkers), but this is also the case offline. People group together at the Electronic Evergreen, interact as a group, and think of themselves as members of a group (consider the collective nature of Geoff's general comments and appeal to other readers in the Electronic Evergreen). These group, newsgroup or chat areas are 'places' where people meet face-to-face but with different understandings of the words 'meet' and 'face' (Jones 1995). They make a convincing community, one worthy of investigation as an ethnographic object.

Montserrat and The Electronic Evergreen

I suppose like a teenager who has just developed new cognitive skills, I thought this medium could change the world - well, maybe the Montserrat world - that it might empower people, a pure one-man one-vote democratic marketplace of ideas, which could help overcome some of the hidebound secrecy of the way things are run on Montserrat, that it might become some sort of real virtual global village reflecting the real "village" it is focused on.

(Arthur Smith)

This was the vision for the Electronic Evergreen expressed by the newsgroup moderator Arthur Smith in an email interview I conducted with him in September 2000. Arthur was talking about 1995 when the newsgroup began to coagulate, a new medium giving on to new social possibilities and interactions, a tool with the potential to precipitate great social change through collective action. The Electronic Evergreen, however, did not turn out the way it was expected to.

Montserrat is a small British Dependent Territory in the Eastern Caribbean. Eleven miles long and seven miles wide, an extinct volcanic island, Montserrat had, up until 1995, a population of approximately 10,000 black Montserratians and 300 expatriates. British and yet

black, Montserrat is too small to have a large runway for mass tourism but is quiet enough to market residential tourism. I was on Montserrat from 1994 to 1995, a social anthropologist interested in colonial relations between Montserrat and Great Britain, carrying out traditional participant observation, mucking in, when, in July 1995, we were suddenly hit by waves of earthquakes. The central peak on the island suddenly started rumbling, belching out ash and sulphur; the volcano was no longer extinct. I was subsequently evacuated from the island alongside many Montserratian families and American and British expatriates. I returned to Scotland whereupon I began writing up my doctoral thesis about life before the volcano. Because I left Montserrat so suddenly, I felt a sudden loss of community: I was desperate to keep in touch with many close friends that I had made; news and social interaction were what I sought, especially given the natural disaster taking place.

During my time in Scotland, I came across an email group under a 'society Caribbean' heading. People from all over the world were 'chatting' to each other about Caribbean issues and topics from hanging to reggae, slavery to tourism. Naturally, some of the conversation turned to what was happening on Montserrat: in the early days, there was a lack of information around both on and off the island as to what was happening (where the safe areas were on the island, who had been evacuated, and who was still living in an enclave in the north of the island). For information, Montserratians and expatriates on Montserrat posted press briefings to the group from the government in Montserrat, from the local radio there and from what they could see. These reports and descriptions were read avidly by Montserratians living off island, by 'friends of Montserrat', and other concerned members of the public who sometimes replied with news cuttings typed in from their local or national papers. I might, for example, type out part of an article from The Times and send it to the moderator for passing on. After a short period of time, we began to build up a simple and fast exchange system for pooling information, hearsay and trivia, gossip and chat about Montserrat. Though the communication was asynchronous, less immediate in the speed of the interaction, space/distance was compressed to such an extent that it became practically immaterial: technological globalisation allowed those in the United Kingdom or other islands off Montserrat to feel that they were there with their community, particularly with the regular and repeated nature of the correspondences. For me, it felt as though fieldwork had never finished.

Several months into the volcano crisis on Montserrat, and there was a dozen or so members of this Caribbean newsgroup, regularly posting messages, dominating the topics of

conversation. Because we were not interested in reading or responding to talk about tourism or problems on other Caribbean islands, it was suggested that we break off from the 'soc.Caribbean' pages to create our own autonomous newsgroup. Approximately twelve addresses were linked together by Arthur Smith, a British academic living in Canada who had spent twelve years living on Montserrat and still felt an affinity with the place and the people. Arthur was our online moderator: he organised and ran the new newsgroup, adding addresses to the list. He also had the interesting idea of adding details about the people he added to his mailing list, such as where they came from, even who they were related to if they were from a Montserratian family. And he asked the new members to introduce themselves to the group. During the early days of the growth of the newsgroup, most of the people from the island knew (of) each other; certainly many of the surnames were recognisable, and distinctively Montserratian in many cases. The number of the group rose to fifty in the first two months of operation, and conversation moved to island gossip interspersed with news information about the volcano. We were an interesting group: many of the members knew each other from real time, whether Montserratians on the island or Montserratians off the island, tourist visitors, or concerned researchers like myself - any doubts about identity were more personal and existential than projections upon other members. Our Electronic Evergreen newsgroup had the advantage that it was able to move quickly past the pleasantries of salutation - though it remains a place to continue old relationships as well as to forge new ones ('how can I get in touch with Daisy Irish who I last saw in St Patricks before it was evacuated?'; 'does anyone have the address or telephone number for Gabriel Harris?'); a chance for extended long term field research for myself; an addictive opportunity to reiterate and substantiate the self for others (see Turkle 1995).

I have remained a member of this newsgroup ever since its inception in July/August 1995, following the debates, the flow backwards and forwards of messages: the poetic, political, existential, religious, antagonistic, placatory, the news article cuttings, and the personal rants about slavery and racism. Everyday, there are at least five or six postings; several thousand over the years. 'Who am I' was a posting which went on for several days, people talking about Montserratian identity, what made them Montserratian as well as their political and international status, what happened to them - in terms of their roots - when they left the island. It was sparked off by some thoughts and comments about being a British Dependent Territory Subject with a British passport but no right of abode in Britain.

Via MNI-INFO

If I travel to England to which I should do so freely because my passport says British Passport, I find that I am classified as a foreigner. Lately, because of a natural disaster in the form of a volcano, I am classified as a refugee from Montserrat. I find that strange. England is our Motherland and we should freely walk in to seek refuge. [...]

This being the case, can someone out there please tell me who I am?

(David Irish)

One poignant observation about members of the group evacuated from the village of St Patricks, just before it was destroyed by the volcano, was that they still lived a village life between each other on the group, writing to each other in dialect and swearing as they usually did (until other members objected on the grounds that it was too exclusive between them, and too offensive for those who could follow the communications). In another instance, a reader of the Electronic Evergreen copied an email, pasting it into her own letter, and sent it on to the Chief Minister's Office, copying the newsgroup in on her correspondence. Messages of support, comments about independence and cultural identity were also regularly sent in to the collective newsgroup. Below is one such reply which was made to the above the posting. It became part of a long thread of correspondence which can be read as a virtual dialogue:

>>I have had other situations (not in bars) where my passport had to be

>>referred to senior management for verification that I am not from

>Noddyland.

>

>>I look forward to the day when I can carry an official National Identity

>>Card and or a Passport which says MONTSERRAT and nothing else.

(Brendan Garrity)

These computer-mediated interactions were by no means moderated by the computer medium or the filter of the moderator (though many were aware that their email could be copied and reposted): moderation came from a consensus of opinion against irrelevant and unacceptable postings, repeated discussion strings (one reason why Freddie Ashman may have not taken up Geoff and Jenny's email), and continually provocative postings (ironically, this is one of the symptoms of newsgroup where people are more likely to write in opposition, and to remain silent when in agreement, thus giving rise to the erroneous perception of a newsgroup always in dispute).

As the volcano covered the island, destroying village after village, plot of land after plot of land, there arose a discussion which set expatriates - who felt that they were or had been at home on the island - against Montserratians. Expatriates felt that they were being excluded from the group, that some of the references to colour were racist against them (substantiating Kolko and Nakamura and Rodman's [2000] thesis about the embedded nature of internet communication, one which repeats offline categorisations such as race). Cudjoe Bailey, a local political figure, is a vociferous and antagonistic character. I was working with him on Montserrat before I left. Cudjoe, as he is known to most, is anti-colonial, a nationalist and a Pan-Afrikanist who wants Montserrat to become a black-only socialist island. Cudjoe is eager to engage with Montserratians, expatriates and tourists to point out the continuing slave position of the black man in the Caribbean and further afield, slaves to the white man, to capitalism and to colonialism. On several occasions, Cudjoe offended members of the Montserrat newsgroup, provoking public replies to 'get professional help'. Sanctions against Cudjoe's behaviour (ignoring his postings; deleting his postings unread; setting up a kill file to automatically delete them; publicly and privately replying to his postings in the same style; or deliberately trying to take the upper hand by replying more formally) were less damaging than the police and colonial harassment he regularly faces on the island.

At present, Cudjoe is no longer a member of the Electronic Evergreen. In the last two years the newsgroup has grown to several hundred members, more and more unknown people, some unwilling to introduce themselves; and many of the postings have become business adverts, simple requests for information about tourism to the island, or basic questions about the island which have been covered extensively in previous discussion threads. One spat earlier last year between Cudjoe and an expatriate became particularly bitter and led to Cudjoe's departure: Cudjoe received and reposted some personal replies to his public messages. In

other words, his comments to the entire group were replied to at just his own address, but his reply to the unfortunate expatriate was just as public as his original posting. This was tantamount to reading private mail according to the expatriate writer and many Evegren readers - a serious and deliberate breach of netiquette.

Via MNI-INFO.....

i don't make threats. i say what i have to say in the EE public forum. Any of you have anything to say about what i say. Place it here. On the EE. Send it to my box and I'll place it up for you

Cudjoe Bailey

---- Original message ----

From: Alison Graves <a2032@starway.net>

To: Shaka zulu <zulu@hotmail.com>

Sent: Friday, May 21, 1999 21: 23 PM

Subject: Re: Fw: the infamous "LIST"

> Your threats don't bother me at all. I sent it to you privately out of respect to you. It is obvious that you don't respect anyone unless they agree with you. To me that shows what little class you really have...

>

> zulu wrote:

>>

>> Via MNI-INFO.....

>> This is a message to all expats. Any time you all invade my mail box

>> privately from now on I'm going to post it.

>> i could na really care less what your opinions of me are.

>> i say what i want, and where it drops it drops. Who like it fine. Who

>> don't also fine.

>> Cudjoe Bailey

Such exchanges polarised the regular contributors to the newsgroup into two loose camps: those who supported Cudjoe, or thought that anyone had the right to voice their views in the group, no matter the consequences; and those who thought that Cudjoe should stop posting such critical, aggressive and controversial 'letters'. This exchange, amongst others, resulted in Cudjoe leaving the Electronic Evergreen and setting up his own Montserratian newsgroup where discussions could be made by 'descendants of the Afrikan Holocaust' about discontinuing colonial mentalities, bureaucracies and practices without incurring cursory 'white comments' such as the above, as well as below:

>>>> Oh Cudjoe,
 >>>> Get a life, why don't you. I am so sick of hearing you whine all of the
 >>>> time. So there were injustices in the past. There will continue to be
 >>>> injustices in the future. Why can't you let go of the past and embrace the
 >>>> present? I can assure you, you would be a much happier person, instead of the
 >>>> unhappy one that you are now.

(Jim Delvechio)

At the end of May 1999, Cudjoe sent his 'Last Post' message - 'It is full time that Montserratians assert themselves here. The EE is for Montserratians to address issues that relate to every aspect of OUR lives. Past, Present and Future' - inviting 'Montserratians to join an alternative Email group called MNIFuture', a collection of Montserratians who can 'begin a dialogue about the things WE consider relevant without Outside interference or objections.'

In this way, Cudjoe and several other members left the Electronic Evergreen, founding a rival newsgroup, a select grouping of Montserratians who subscribed according to Cudjoe's approval - an action which met with many criticisms about censorship on the internet from indignant members of the Electronic Evergreen, the same censors of Cudjoe! Individual comings-and-goings are expected on the internet, but groups' fissionings-and-fusionings - communication breakdown - are not expected or anticipated. Significantly, in this newsgroup case study, some members can maintain allegiance in both newsgroups. Daniel Riley was one

member who left for Cudjoe's service, leaving the following anti-tourist/expatriate parting shot in his wake (it includes a dig at the island's controversial tourist slogan):

I will join Mr Galway's group because I know he and others will engage in serious discussion about the future of Montserrat from a Montserratian perspective.

A lot of people on the EE only care about Montserrat from the perspective of 'Montserrat, The Way It Used To BE'

For them, a few cosy bars and restaurants, some exotic cheeses and Diet Coke from Rams, perhaps a golf course and access to their villas would be quite sufficient. [...]

I look forward to a group where I don't have to put on gloves when I write, for fear of upsetting someone's sensibilities.

In our email interview, Arthur and I discussed and lamented this bifurcation of the Montserrat newsgroup. For us, the action highlighted the difficulty involved with applying the 'community' label to fluid email newsgroups. Yet we both felt that this was an example of community breakdown.

Computer-mediated community from Montserrat and afar

Dear Group,

At the suggestion of some folks in the EE group, I went into Plymouth with my wife yesterday to try and find some way to get a slip, seed or something from the Evergreen tree that could be raised up and eventually planted in Little Bay or some appropriate park that generations to come could sit under. ...

(George Jackson)

The Electronic Evergreen split around the members' ideas of 'Montserratianess' (blackness) versus expatriacy (whiteness). This email newsgroup case study shows that there is a physical undercurrent to virtual relationships, an embeddedness of relations which goes against Giddens (1990) and Castells' (2000) disembodied characterisation of modernity. Perceptions of physical identity are maintained and symbolically brokered through many email interactions; if anything, Montserratian versus outsider perspectives about events on Montserrat were

intensified by the Electronic Evergreen exchanges: in-your-face exchanges which could have retained some context of diplomacy and decorum, some social signs and cues to read for any irony, were lost to the invasive in-your-head reading affronts on the self.

In both settings - face-to-face and computer-mediated - communicative interaction is virtual and imaginative (in Anderson's sense of the word) as well as part physical: there is the presence of computers and sentences, and the presence of bodies and speech, all of which are received and interpreted internally. Internally, the words and reactions are added to memories and senses of identity and feelings of belonging. On Montserrat, 'belonger' is the local term for association with the island. It is more than a legal status granted to outsiders after marriage to a Montserratian or several years' residence on the island. The term is ascribed to those who have been accepted socially on the island, as members of the Montserrat 'community' as it is conceived. Problems and confrontations arise when this belonger status is assumed and self-ascribed by some, actions which lead to criticism and discontent amongst others: Daniel Riley echoes Cudjoe's 'Montserratian perspective' which is in disharmony with Alison Graves and Jim Delvechio and their expatriate or North American 'belonger' perspective.

The Electronic Evergreen is a 'community of the mind, to rephrase Minsky (1986). Like all communities - part cognitive illusion and part affective delusion - it is the members' beliefs about community and subsequent community behaviours that create the community - and make it accessible for the ethnographic researcher. A community is more than a collection of interactions. A community is social space collectively owned and sustained by performance and practice (to return to Hines and Baym); it is a feeling of communion; and it is in people's heads whether text-based or not. These feelings affect and alter people's behaviour, their practices and the ways in which they interact. The netiquette of the Electronic Evergreen is one key manifestation of community, the inclusive content and style of the emails is another. In this case study a large proportion of the Electronic Evergreen email virtual community have a strong sense of community and nostalgia derived from their strong and long physical and emotional associations with the Montserrat place and the Montserratian people. Members from Scotland, Canada, England, the United States, a range of European and Caribbean countries, and Montserrat all come together to create this special interest, folkloric space.

I would like to suggest in this article that one of the Electronic Evergreen's initial social strengths, the background knowledge and physical relationships of members with respect to other members, eventually became one of the newsgroup's weaknesses, a centrifugal force

impelling it towards fragmentation. Disagreements over the internet were exaggerated by physical identity, by embedded relations and histories, and not just a Goffmanesque presentation of self online. Everyday expressions of opinion and identity contributed to what seemed like a virtual polarisation of the newsgroup 'community', a collection of assumed and unknown readers from Freddie and Ashman to Riley and others such as Cudjoe.

The members of the Electronic Evergreen created a new home for themselves in the absence of a physical sense of place. The evergreen tree became the label for the newsgroup, a conscious attempt to replace real activities with the virtual, a symbol of Montserrat as people remembered and wanted others to remember: the place where one socialised and gossiped, limed (hung out). The naming of the newsgroup and Jackson's cutting from the evergreen are not arbitrary actions. Trees have often been used to represent people and places: the oak as an emblem for the British people for example (see Malkki 1992), and Jackson's cutting from the evergreen tree, a root from Montserrat's past. In this case study, the arborescent root metaphor is particularly appropriate, symbolising the recreation of the place, the people and the time before the volcano when interactions (and ethnographic research) were face-to-face and not computer-mediated. Now the imagined environment and imagined community is sustained and facilitated by Microsoft Outlook sub-directories, for me at least.

Conclusions

Naive indeed. Nobody with any real power and influence has allowed themselves to descend into the fray and become open to questions or to respond to the medium (or even list their addresses!); it is remarkable how few policymakers, politicians, lawyers or other powers that be in Montserrat have descended from their small thrones to participate. A few have become lurkers (the Governor's Office, a few ambassadors, the Jamaican PM's office).

(Arthur Smith)

When Fox and Roberts (1999: 651) carried out their cyber-ethnography of the 'gp-uk' newsgroup, they carefully considered the ethics of their research and the status of online ethnographers. After weighing up the pros and cons of participant observation (to lurk as covert research versus the 'distortion' of active newsgroup membership), informed consent (public versus private distinctions, as well as between that which is publicly accessible and that

which may be publicly disseminated), and the ‘dis-inhibiting’ effect of online communication media, Fox and Roberts surprisingly decided respectively to lurk as well as to contribute actively to the newsgroup for 12 months. My relationship with the Electronic Evergreen has been more immersive, traumatic and more long-term than theirs. What began as a mutual information and support list became an extensive and divisive newsgroup over the space of almost six years. At the start, I was an active poster and could reckon to know and be known by all in the group. Once the newsgroup members swelled, my voice became one of many (I never formally introduced myself because I had always been a member, and so I may be an unknown name to new members). For me, the newsgroup has been a support group helping me to deal with my departure from the island and returning culture shock. Our messages are, so I believe, public material because they are available to anyone who joins the ‘open’ group.

I also believe that I was ‘hanging out’ when I was on Montserrat, liming at the Evergreen; and, similarly, I believe that I am hanging out when I am online, liming at the Electronic Evergreen. In both instances, I have immersed myself as an ethnographer, a participant observer with more than enough ‘sufficient human feeling’ - perhaps even too much as the start of this article might suggest. Clifford notes that ethnographic practice (Rosaldo’s ‘deep hanging out’ [cited in Clifford 1997: 188]) needs to change to reflect and be able to engage with the social and technological effects of the new information communication technologies (ICTs). Yet rather than become ‘multi-sited’ in the words of George Marcus (1995), Clifford (1997: 190) echoes Hine (2000: 64) when he advocates a ‘mobile’ form of ethnography; this is because multi-sited fieldwork is an oxymoron: it compromises ethnographic notions of ‘depth’. A mobile ethnographic approach problematises reality as a text account of a text-based community (both have the same epistemological basis), and the ethnographic convention of using travel to demarcate the field site; it reorients the notion of the field as site to the field as flow.

Ethnographic practice should follow these navigators of a new space. It should examine social and technological (and biological [see Escobar 1994]) changes, and look at the new and complex ways in which people are coming together. Communication is taking place in new computer-mediated forms, with new patterns - even if the content is similar to the more traditional face-to-face interaction and the standard letter. New forms of connection with the island Montserrat are being fashioned despite their similar content. People such as the Cudjoe’s and the Delvechio’s are coming together, meeting and joining or rebounding from

each other over the internet, particularly in the newsgroups such as the Electronic Evergreen, a collection of individuals from Montserrat and afar.

My brief example has been one of newsgroup communication and community. It is part of my traditional ethnography of Montserrat, Malinowskian participant-observation, which went online along with my subjects. This research had a natural development to it, responding to circumstances on the island, and the needs of a naive anthropologist to retain a sense of connection with a place and a people. It is ethnography, 'anthroethnography' as Hakken specifies it (1995: 46): descriptive and analytical writing based upon the repeated, sustained, immersive interaction and observation of individuals in league with each other, their moments of interaction, their moments of being. The place Montserrat, and the people Montserratian have changed considerably over the last six years of my subscription to the Electronic Evergreen, as, indeed, has the newsgroup itself (now lumbering and unwieldy, it is too large to convey information quickly, to sustain dialogues between members; it now has rival newsgroups). This study was not conceived at the time of membership, but is a by-product of concern and the printing of significant - according to my judgement - messages and exchanges. Rather than sympathise with Cohen's (1992) argument about discrete fieldwork periods following discrete fieldwork periods, I conclude from my fieldwork experiences that fieldwork never ceases; in this example, new and unexpected avenues of the same field of research opened up, cyberspace avenues of social life. As a cyber-ethnographer, I am fortunate to be able to avoid some of the old 'ethnographer at home' problems because all are now equally 'the Other' (Hakken 1999: 68), but it would be closed minded of me to maintain that there are no old anthropological and sociological debates apparent in these new and open systems.

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