

“Ethnographic Videoconferencing”

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Photography developed into film and video; and film and video have developed into videoconferencing. This evolution of communication technology has the potential to have a special impact on ethnographic research, documentation, and presentation processes. Thus, it can also be said that ethnographic photography developed into ethnographic film and video; and that ethnographic film and video have developed into *ethnographic videoconferencing*.

Photography involves still images. Film and video can involve moving-images that can speak. Videoconferencing can involve moving-images that that can speak, and that can interact with other moving images.

Videoconferencing is sometimes seen as telephone communication with video added: this refers to videoconferencing in the context of the evolution of interactive telecommunication. This paper, however, refers to videoconferencing primarily in the context of the evolution of the visual image.

In the case of videoconferencing, as with previous technology breakthroughs, older technologies continue to exist and be useful, but their natures and roles are re-conceptualized in the context of the existence of the new technology.

Representation has been an issue in ethnography for a long time. In the past, the scholar alone had the power to write about, and to compose images of, the people whose culture was being studied. Now people of the culture under study can participate in the image-composition process -- including by composing their own photos and movies, and through videoconferencing. Ethnographic videoconferencing enables the people of a culture under study to frame themselves, and to speak for themselves. They can also ask their own questions of the distant scholars, because videoconferencing enables the back-and-forth of conversation.

This article presents the concept of ethnographic videoconferencing. It asks and begins to answer such questions as: “What is ethnographic videoconferencing?” “What makes a videoconference increasingly ethnographic?” “What are some things that can be said about ethnographic videoconferencing in the context of ethnography, and life, in the world today?”

Ethnographic photography, and ethnographic film and video

Photography technology, and the academic discipline of Anthropology, came into existence and developed as members of the urban elite of the “advanced” nations were leading the way in colonizing the rest of the world. Anthropologists’ use of photography -- like Anthropology itself -- was in many cases part of the colonizing process. (This can also be said of Folklore, which, although it is a discipline unto itself, is also a type of Cultural Anthropology.)

One early ethnographic photographer, Edward Curtis, published twenty volumes of his photographs of Native-American peoples (Curtis, 1907-30). He also made one of the first ethnographic films meant for general audiences: *In The Land of the Head-Hunters* (1914). This movie was made with Native-American people of northern

British Columbia, Canada, and southern Alaska. It did not catch the public's attention, in part because WWI was the primary news of the day, and in part perhaps because the film had no distinct characters with whom audience members could identify.

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) did find a commercial audience, and became very famous, in part because movie-goers could identify with the lead character, Nanook.

Ethnographic photography and film made great advances through the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. They published books of photographs with analysis (Bateson and Mead, 1942; Mead and Macgregor, 1951), and made a series of films about infant behavior and child-rearing methods in Indonesia and New Guinea. The filmed material was shot in 1936-8 and released in 1958.

A problem with ethnographic film and video is that though the image-composition, editing, and translation processes, the movie-makers at times may impose their worldviews on the material that they would present to their audiences. Thus, scenes have been staged, scenes have been presented out of order, and voice-over translations have often not corresponded closely to what the people in the movie were actually saying. Moreover, the ability to interpret the meaning of events has often been the movie-maker's alone, especially through the device of a narrator's voice-over.

Timothy Asch -- filmmaker, professor of Anthropology, and director of the Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California -- was a central figure in the development of ethnographic film. He collaborated with a series of anthropologists, filming in Canada, numerous African countries, Trinidad, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

The first phase of Asch's career involved filming Yanomamo Native American people in the Amazon rain forests in Venezuela, in the 1960s. He did this work in collaboration with Anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. Here, as throughout most his career, Asch did film work in collaboration with a scholar who specialized in the culture and language of the people under study.

By the mid-70s, Asch had a number of reservations about the Yanomamo films. His intellectual shift can be said to represent the awakening of Western ethnographic filmmakers in general:

Films of people who look exotic can be, and frequently are, used to reinforce Western prejudices about "primitive" people... I regretted not filming more Yanomamo conversations, which would have allowed individual Yanomamo to reveal their thoughts and opinions more directly. It is disappointing that so few individual characters emerge in ethnographic films.

(As cited in Connor 1986, p. 43-4)

This mid-career statement by Asch involves his recognizing that the subjects of ethnographic research are individuals with intellectual, emotional, and other types of interiors, and recognizing the value of enabling these individuals to speak for themselves to and with the public. When he was asked in 1991 how he felt about his films of the Yanomamo, Asch answered,

I am no longer as interested in making films about them, as I am in seeing the kinds of films that they might make about themselves. Moreover, I now question my role as an outsider representing their life and concerns to the outside world.

(Asch et al, 1991, p. 102)

Indigenous media

Indigenous Media is the study of what happens when indigenous people use (mechanical or) electronic media. The field is often said to have begun with a project led by Prof. Sol Worth (Communication) and Prof. John Adair (Anthropology) (Worth and Adair, 1972). They brought 16mm film equipment to a Navaho community in New Mexico, and enabled a number of Native American people to make movies. One point of the project was to discover if and how the Native American film-makers might express their traditional culture through the film equipment and process. The resulting films including the portrayal of a lot of walking, and few close-ups. Perhaps the most telling finding, however, was that community members seemed to be at least as interested in the process, as they were in the product: they were very concerned with the details of the social processes around the production and exhibition of the films.

This work was followed up on by Eric Michaels, who in the early 1970s was hired by the Government of Australia to advise it regarding how to bring commercial TV to some of Australia's Aboriginal populations, utilizing satellites newly in place. Michaels discovered that some Aboriginal people were making their own video recordings, and were in some cases transmitting these recordings to each other. Michaels became an outspoken advocate of Aboriginal people developing these activities (Michaels 1986). Michaels especially worked with Warlpiri people, in the town of Yuendumu, north of Alice Springs.

Michaels' work was one of the inspirations for Warlpiri people and others to, in 1992, create the Tanami Network -- an indigenous people's global videoconferencing network. The Tanami Network (named after a local desert) was founded by Robin Japanangka Granites and Peter Toyne, an educator and politician. The Tanami Network linked four remote Warlpiri settlements with each other and with videoconferencing sites in the cities of Sydney, Darwin, and Alice Springs, and beyond.

Ethnographic videoconferencing

Crystal balls -- through which it is claimed that (with magical or divine assistance) one may see distant scenes, and scenes from the future -- have existed in human folklore since time immemorial. But perhaps it is primarily in relation to dreams, the imagination, and spiritual visions, that people have spoken of seeing beyond the power of one's eyes, of being a "seer."

Ways to generate, store, and apply electricity first appeared around 1800. Transmission of electrical signals that could be coded to represent letters of the alphabet, known as a "telegraph," was developed shortly thereafter. Transmission of sound via wires, known as "telephone," was invented in the mid-1800s. Wireless transmission of sound, known as "radio," was invented in the late 1800s.

Attempts to transmit visuals -- both through wires and wirelessly -- occurred at an accelerating rate after the inventions of the telephone and radio. By the late 1920s, wired and wireless one-way television had been demonstrated by numerous inventors (Miller 2010).

Videoconferencing is two-way (or multiple-way) television. Television (literally, "seeing from a distance") had already existed in the popular consciousness long before it was achieved electronically:

For centuries, the portrayal and the putative portrayal of illusions and images had attracted the attention of magicians, charlatans, and pseudo-scientists. There appeared to be a popular demand for visual displays and exhibitions of the unexpected as part of the social fabric of living. The demand was partly filled by the *tregetours*, or wandering entertainers, of the Middle Ages, with their silvered concave mirrors, by peep shows and magic lantern shows, by theaters and pageants, and by phantasmagoria. Other means, panoramas and dioramas, offered their audiences two-dimensional images which were the precursors of the modern newsreels and travelogues as seen on television... The appeal of "distant vision" was beguiling and was enhanced by the ideas, crude and simplistic as they were, which had been propounded in the 1870s. These notions encouraged writers and cartoonists to evoke fantasies showing, perhaps, the eventual outcome of "seeing by electricity." (Burns 1995, p. 34)

Videoconferencing -- also known as video calling, and video chatting -- is a form of interactive telecommunication in which parties at two or more sites can send-and-receive audio-and-video to and from each other.

Videoconferencing can be seen as a further development, and a convergence, of all other electronic communication technologies. Videoconferencing is in a sense the ultimate interactive telecommunication process, in that all other forms of electronic communication (including typing; electronic drawing; image-processing of one's own and/or one's conversation partner's images; the viewing and manipulating of websites; and the playing of prerecorded video) can occur within a videoconference.

The first videoconferencing systems consisted of two closed-circuit television systems connected via cable. Bell Labs demonstrated such wired two-way television in 1930. In the years that followed, numerous movies, cartoons, and comic books portrayed videoconferencing. In 1964, one of the famous milestones in the history of videoconferencing occurred: at New York World's Fair, AT&T displayed the "videophone," which delivered two-way voice and video over standard telephone lines.

In the 1960s, during space flights that carried humans, NASA used two (UHF or VHF) radiofrequency links, one in each direction, to videoconference with the astronauts in space. In the 1980s, digital transmission -- such as through ISDN lines -- came into being. This marked the beginning of the wide use of videoconferencing, especially in the business world.

We have become acclimated to videoconferencing by observing others do it, in comic-strips and comic-books (fictional detective Dick Tracy, who had introduced the 2-way Wrist Radio in the 1930s, introduced the 2-way Wrist-TV in 1964), in TV shows (such as Star Trek and The Jetsons, also in the 1960s), in countless movies,

and perhaps most of all, on TV news (when anchor people converse with reporters and guests outside the studio).

Skype and other free videoconferencing software programs have now become quite popular for use on home and office computers. However, many people who could use videoconference technology are not yet doing so, for a variety of reasons -- such as that the activity may involve additional costs, and perhaps fears of relinquishing one's own privacy and invading others' privacy.

One reason Videoconferencing seems to be uncomfortable for many people is that in many videoconferences presently, one is seemingly directed to look at, and be seen by, one's conversation partner, continuously throughout the conversation. In unmediated conversations, a lot more flexibility and variety is possible -- conversation partners may at times look away from each other; or, together they may look at something. A rhythm often develops of looking away from, and looking at, one's conversation partner. The possibility of this sort of informal flexibility needs to be built in to videoconferences to make the medium put less pressure on participants to always be looking directly at each other. Most people do not want to feel they are constantly under surveillance, that they are constantly being "sized up," judged, and evaluated -- and these kinds of feelings are what the presence of a videoconference camera evokes in many people.

We are well into the Age of Videoconferencing. The needed hardware, software, and infra-structure are becoming ubiquitous. Most new laptop computers, tablet computers, and mobile telephones come with built-in cameras, usually above the screen, facing the user; videoconferencing software is now often pre-installed in these devices; and broad-band Internet and 3G Networks are becoming widely available. As time goes on, it is inevitable that videoconferencing will become an ever more available and practical communication option in our personal and professional lives.

Even though videoconferencing is not a daily activity for many people, we know it is possible and that it is being widely-used. Thus, videoconferencing has become the ultimate and ideal form of interactive telecommunication, and we tend to measure all other communication in relation to this standard, this frame of reference (as in, "I can read his words, and I can see his picture, but it is too bad that I can not see his moving image and speak with him now").

Presently, a shift is occurring in the videoconferencing world -- led in part by the global higher education infrastructure -- from the use of non-Internet ISDN-lines, to the use of the Internet and Internet2 (www.internet2.edu). Internet2 was signed into existence in 1996. Internet2 is a very high-speed, second generation of the Internet. Originally developed at USA universities, Internet2 has now spread to universities around the world, and into the business world and elsewhere. Videoconferencing is a major application on Internet2.

I first publicly used the term, *ethnographic videoconferencing*, in a paper, "Videoconferencing for Folklorists," presented in a panel on Fieldwork Methodologies at the AFS annual meeting in October 1999, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Another scholar who uses the term, ethnographic videoconferencing, is Dr. Janice Graham, a medical anthropologist in the field of Bioethics, at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. In 2004, Dr. Graham, built the Qualitative Research Commons & Studio (QuRCS), which is

a state-of-the-art multimedia research facility that allows for high-speed audio and video connectivity among multi-site national and international research groups... QuRCS provides the physical platform for Dr. Graham's innovative, interdisciplinary, and participatory qualitative research programme. Inspired by the traditions of medical and visual anthropology and ethnographic film, this facility will enable interactive access among participants and communities in multi-sited research projects... The Studio is a dedicated site for research interviews including patient and clinician encounters, focus groups, and community meetings.¹

I would propose that four factors, the presence of which make a videoconference increasingly ethnographic, are:

A) All of the participants agree that a primary purpose of the event is the presentation of and discussion about aspects of a community's culture.

B) The videoconference has at least these two sites: a fieldwork-related site, and a university-related site. The organizing scholar may be at either site. People who attend at the university site may include faculty and students of the university, members of the public (including artists and experts) who are interested in the culture under study, and members of the culture's diaspora community.

C) The videoconference follows an extended period of physically-present ethnographic fieldwork by the organizing scholar. Ethnographic fieldwork involves visiting and staying with members of the community under study for an extended period of time -- classically for at least a year. Videoconferencing should not be seen as a replacement for physically-present fieldwork: previously-conducted physically-present fieldwork makes a videoconference increasingly serious, sophisticated, and ethnographic. And fieldwork is typically embarked-upon only after the scholar has begun reading existing historical, sociological, and other scholarship about the community and culture under study.

D) The oral language of the community under study is used in at least in parts of the videoconference. At least one person who speaks the community's language attends from the university site of the videoconference.

Two ethnographic videoconferences

A) Videoconference title: "***Tamil children's songs/chants/dances/games, and language-learning.***" 15 October 2005, Chennai and Philadelphia.

I organized two videoconferences to gather data for my Ph.D. dissertation: they occurred on 16 October 2004, and 15 October 2005). In both cases, the videoconferences' primary scholar (myself) was at the fieldwork-related site, in Chennai, south India, and I was accompanied by the people of the culture under study, namely Kanikaran tribal people. I had invited approximately ten children, and some of their parents, to Chennai to take part in these videoconferences. It seemed appropriate to hold the videoconference in Chennai, known as the "Gateway to the South," rather than seek to use a site closer to the Kanikaran people's homes in Kanyakumari district, five-hundred kilometres to the south.

¹ <http://bioethics.medicine.dal.ca/people/qurcs.php> . Accessed on 26 September 2011.

At the University site, members of the culture's (Tamil Nadu's) diaspora community attended: children of each group played songs/chants/dances/games together, and practiced speaking Tamil language.

For these videoconferences (which were also webcast), a video-mixer was used at the Philadelphia site to combine the local and incoming images. The Philadelphia site sent, as its videoconference image, the resulting mix to Chennai (and it also sent this mix as the webcast). An advantage to this method is that videoconference participants at both sites saw the same mix and so could develop spatial relationships between the two pictures; a disadvantage is that we in Chennai saw our own image with a double-delay (having sent it and received it), and this was somewhat distracting.

For the purposes of this paper, I would discuss one incident in the 2005 videoconference. Approximately 30 minutes into the session, the children at the Chennai site performed the action-song, "One Garden."² Someone on the Philadelphia site asked, in English, for a translation of the words. In Chennai, Banu -- a young tribal woman who is fluent in English (due to language training in a Catholic school), Tamil, and Kani Pasai (Kani Speech, a dialect of Tamil -- conferred with Rajammal in Kani Pasai. Rajammal was the senior member of the Kani party, and the mother of my research assistant, Velmurugan.

Rajammal explained the words in Kani Pasa to Banu. Banu then explained the words in Tamil to Vasu Renganathan (a Penn faculty member) at the Philadelphia site. Renganathan then explained the words in English to the other people at the Philadelphia site.

² "One Garden" is presented, in Tamil and English, on pp. 199-207 of my dissertation. For information about and access to this dissertation, please see the Bibliography.



1

Chennai



2

Philadelphia



3



4

This sequence illustrates the linguistic and social steps that often are necessary in fieldwork and documentation processes. A key figure is the young member of the community who has the language and social skills needed to communicate both with senior members of the community, and outsiders. In this ethnographic videoconference, the step-by-step translation process occurred for all to see. The scholar who facilitated the event (myself) was off-camera during this sequence: in this case it was his role to enable the conversation, but not to participate in it.

To the possible objection that exposing tribal people to, and helping to involve them in, videoconferencing might somehow be detrimental to their culture, I would answer: These people are already inundated by electronic visual images, from TV and cinema. Videoconferencing, like video recording technology, simply gives community members the opportunity to engage with this technology as active creators, not just as passive consumers.

B) Videoconference title: “*An anti-war sentiment in the performance of Mahabharata, an epic about war.*” 15 October 2011, Chennai and Bloomington.



Bloomington

Chennai

Storyteller Udayarani chants an invocation (12:53 from the start of the webcast).

This videoconference occurred on 15 October 2011, as an event in the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, held in Bloomington, Indiana. The theme of this AFS meeting was, “Peace, War, and Folklore.”

The primary scholar of this videoconference, M. D. Muthukumaraswamy, was at the fieldwork-related site, in Chennai, south India. He was accompanied by three people of the culture under study: Udayarani (a professional *Mahabharata* storyteller), Siva Muthu (accompanying musician), and Jayachandran (village elder, and community organizer).

This videoconference concerned a particular episode of the *Mahabharata*, one of India’s most prominent epics. The episode is the Patukalam, the battle on the final day of the war.

M. D. Muthukumaraswamy presented a paper on the topic: “Patukalam: Performing the Banality of War and Evil” (2011). He had done fieldwork in the village where Udayarani often performs the story. In the course of the videoconference, three brief video recordings of episodes of the story being performed in the village were played from the Bloomington site (we in Chennai had posted these recordings on YouTube for advance viewing, and they had been downloaded by people at the Bloomington site).

On the Bloomington side of the videoconference, one of the discussants was Brenda Beck, who especially studies the *Annamar Kathai* (the *Story of the Older Brothers*), another epic performed in Tamil Nadu.

The videoconference was webcast, and the recording of the webcast can be seen online.³ I chose a side-by-side screen-configuration for the webcast, so viewers of the webcast could see the listeners, as well as the speakers, throughout.

We had a translator on the Chennai side, who orally translated the Tamil speech into English. However, one output of the event was the clear need for an ongoing visual translation, perhaps to appear in a separate window. This could be done by a

³ The recording is at <http://tinyurl.com/archived-webcast-of-videoconf> . The Videoconference Agenda webpage is <http://www.storytellinginstitute.org/36.html> .

person who could listen to the Tamil and type in English, and/or by automatic voice recognition, transcription, and translation software.

Udayarani mostly commented on the elements of the *Mahabharata* story in terms of the ethics and morality the story can teach. The scholars' comments (in English) -- including abstract ideas about how the story realm is mapped onto village places and people during performance -- would have been needed to translated more fully into Tamil for Udayarani to really engage in this conversation. In such English-to-local-language cases, two types of translation may be called for: linguistic, and cultural (stating ideas in terms to which non-scholars can relate).

Conclusions

Ethnographic videoconferencing (with optimal translation processes) presents opportunities to overcome the barriers of distance and language between people, and to together discuss a culture. The mind boggles regarding what could occur once videoconferencing via mobile devices becomes popular. It needs to be kept in mind that prior physically-present fieldwork, and scholars' attempts to learn community member's spoken languages, will always be factors that will give depth to ethnographic videoconferences. It may also be useful to remember that every conversation can be seen as containing the seeds of an ethnographic conversation, and we are all just folks.

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