

DOING ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY An Overview of Central Issues and Methodological Strategies

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April 25, 2020

The world is changing and in an increasingly digitized modernity, the postdigital fieldsite I describe will become increasingly common. Developing methodologies therefore which recognize the legitimacy of this kind of field, consisting of a blended online and offline space is vital, not only to ensure the continued validity of anthropology as a discipline, but also because ethnography in a postdigital landscape provides the researcher with insight and understanding that other methods cannot achieve.

Bluteau 2019: 14

In light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, many students as well as faculty are finding themselves forced to redirect their research online. This also includes doing research remotely, using Zoom or other platforms to conduct interviews with participants that you had previously scheduled to meet in person or whom you are now forced to recruit online. **The value of learning how to do online ethnography extends far beyond the immediate moment**, however, as nicely summarized by Bluteau (cited above).

There are several guides that have popped up online in the past several weeks, including a very useful crowd-sourced document from Deborah Lupton, which includes brief descriptions and reference lists for a multitude of innovative methods, including photo/video/voice elicitation; Diaries; Doing Online Interviews; etc. It is available here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#>.

It is important, at the outset, to note that what I am calling “online ethnography” has also been referred to as:

- cyber-ethnography (Hallett & Barber 2014; Keeley-Browne 2010)
- virtual anthropology (Weber 2015)
- virtual ethnography (Hine 2011)
- virtual world ethnography (Boellstorff et al. 2012)
- digital anthropology (Horst & Miller 2012)
- digital ethnography (Underberg & Zorn 2013)
- netnography (Kozinets 2015)
- social media ethnography (Postill & Pink 2012; Postill 2015)
- network ethnography (Howard 2002)
- networked anthropology (Collins & Durning 2014)
- media anthropology (Postill 2009)
- web archaeology (Foot & Schneider 2006)

- digital ethnography (Abidin & de Seta 2020)

Each of these authors have produced various arguments for their calling it one thing or the other. Rather than favoring a specific terminology, however, this guide draws upon many of these perspective in providing an overall outlook on participant observation and ethnography online in terms of: *Ethnographic ideals; Internet as fieldsite; Ethics in online research; Understanding how people experience the internet; Language online; Specific methods; Ethics in online research; and Important lessons from experienced ethnographers.*

(1) ETHNOGRAPHIC IDEALS

Several authors have discussed the ways in which online research challenges anthropologists to reconsider their methods, especially the idealistic notion of participant observation. Burrell (2016), for example, talks about the ways in which physical immersion in a fieldsite is something that adds depth to fieldnotes because of the ways in which it inscribes the “kinesthetic sense” of place and experience into the memory of the fieldworker. Online research and/or remote research, in this sense, can fall short. **This perspective confirms the intuitions of many non-internet research scholars who may judge your project as “not real ethnography.”**

The notion that internet ethnography is not “real” hinges upon both popular and theoretical idealizations of the distinction between the real and the virtual. Deumert (2014: 10), however, reminds us that the experience of “interacting with people, objects and events that are *physically absent* as if they were *present*...are not new and human societies have attended to the virtual, the possibility of imaged presence, long before the introduction of computers and mobile phones.” As examples, Deumert thus lists: praying to deities, talking to the dead, dreams, mirrors, optical illusions, the monetary system, as well as books, letters and telephone conversations (ibid).

Though it is common for people to assume that their virtual interactions contrast with IRL interactions, Deumert thus draws on philosophy to explain that instead of contrasting the virtual with the real, we might instead contrast it “with the *actual*, that is, the *concrete* (Deleuze [1977] 2002; Baudrillard 1983)” (2014: 11). With this kind of contrast in mind, it becomes clear that there is still meaning in the act, for example, of toasting someone with an imaginary (virtual) glass (ibid).

This helps us appreciate the fact that, according to (Kozinets 2015: 17): “Online social experiences have real consequences for social image, social identity.” It is also the case, suggest many researchers, that “[the] internet interweaves with all of social life in ways that cannot be untangled” (Markham 2017: 659). **The truths that, for our informants (1) virtual interactions can be understood as just as real as other kinds of interactions and (2) virtual experience (and experience of the virtual) is interwoven with every aspect of their lives lead us to engage with a range of perspectives that examine how to conduct online ethnography with integrity.**

Markham (2017: 653-4) thus writes that “The ethnographic attitude doesn't necessarily change when we study the digital,” further noting, however, that ethnographers must become attuned to the ways in which “the digital is transforming what it means to be social and human in the world.” **How can we adjust our ethnographic ideals to accommodate this transformative process?**

Postill & Pink (2012: 125) advocate for what they call “internet-related ethnography,” defined as “ethnography that engages with internet practices and content directly, but not exclusively.” They

therefore suggest ethnographic projects that follow people on and offline. Postill & Pink argue that internet-related ethnography “neither replaces long-term immersion in a society or culture, nor aims to produce ‘classic’ ethnographic knowledge; rather, it creates deep, contextual and contingent understandings produced through intensive and collaborative sensory, embodied engagements, often involving digital technologies in co-producing knowledge” (2012: 126). The internet, in this sense, is engaged with ethnographically as “real” in the sense that “social media are co-implicated” in many face-to-face social contexts (2012: 125). **The notion of following people online and off- is ideal for a situation in which you can meet some of the people who you are studying face-to-face, engaging with them in activities as well as conducting interviews. While not necessarily a fit for doing research in a pandemic, there are other ways to “follow” participants offline, for example by conducting remote interviews or establishing relationships with them that occur via texts or other message services.**

Bluteau (2019) develops the idea of “immersive cohabitation” in internet research, which “should involve daily interaction, over a substantial period of time, forging social relationships with informants, and establishing oneself in the field” (p. 14) but also importantly hinges on the embodied experience of the researcher as they navigate the process of learning to engage with the media in the same ways as participants do: learning how and what to post, learning the language (both in terms of words and typography) that participants express. In his research on men’s fashion and tailoring on Instagram, it also involved learning how to dress and take photographs that represented him as someone aware of the care that went into presenting the body. **For Bluteau, who also conducted in-person research with participants, immersive cohabitation allowed him to experience what his participants were experiencing in a more visceral way, again making the internet “real” in the way that traditional fieldwork might be.**

Another kind of digital ethnography involves more direct participant observation of peoples’ engagement with the devices that connect them to the internet. Richardson & Horth (2017), for example, conducted a study of how people engage with their mobile devices at home, noting how much of that engaged constituted an “embodied or sensory mode of interaction” (p. 1655), what they also call a “haptic intimacy” (p. 1659), especially in terms of the ways in which peoples’ engagement with their mobile devices occurs in the flow of everyday life. **Though you may not be studying this directly, this perspective is important because it helps you understand the way the participants you are studying—and you yourself—experience a kind of haptic intimacy with their/your devices. It may even be something they discuss online or in an interview with you, potentially leading to an important new line of inquiry or analysis. From this vantage point, it also makes for a great opportunity to develop methodological reflexivity and/or autoethnography.**

Many of the proposed solutions for approximating ethnographic ideals in online research involve direct engagement with participants, and anthropologists are notorious for questioning and critiquing internet research that is based in “lurking,” or simply observing online activity). Costello et al. (2017: 7), for example, issue a critique of researchers who adopt a “passive stance” to conducting netnographic research. This passivity, they argue, “appears to threaten the premise upon which netnographic methodology retains its qualitative rigor” (ibid). Overall, they suggest, participatory online ethnography or netnography is far superior than passive approaches in which researchers lurk without engaging. This is not an absolute, however, and the authors note that “a researcher’s active participation in an online community is admittedly neither always easy nor appropriate, particularly when researching online communities dealing with extremely sensitive or risky matters” (Costello et al. 2017: 7).

Even in cases where one is just lurking, however, there are ways to think ethnographically about what is

observed. The kinds of observations one makes in this case can be considered as more than simply textual analysis. “Forum and chat texts differ from conventional documents,” writes Nardi (2016: 194), “in that they embed, completely within themselves, readers’ assessments.” **If you encounter what you observe on social media or other Internet forums as real conversations that have consequences in participants’ lives and are thus entangled within their lives, this opens up the possibility of engaging with them not as “texts” but as “practice.”**

Even if you are not following people offline, moreover learning how to participate in whatever medium you are studying sheds important light on the embodied nature of the experience for participants, the particular ways in which it demonstrates the entanglement of “real” and “virtual” worlds. Costello et al. (2017: 7) thus note that “even the passive netnographers’ experience of lurking could, and arguably should, be analyzed autoethnographically.” Passive stages of observation can also form a foundation for later, active phases. **Further questions to ask, depending on your project, is how might you still benefit from the perspectives of internet-related ethnography, immersive cohabitation, and haptic intimacy if you are not observing people directly, communicating with them, or meeting with them offline?**

(2) INTERNET AS FIELDSITE

People often talk about “online communities” as if they were bounded cultural groups, but this has been questioned by several scholars. Bonilla & Rosa (2015:5), for example, ask a series of compelling questions related to what “fieldsite” means in terms of digital ethnography:

Is Twitter the ultimate “non-place” (Auge’ 2009) of super modernity, a transient site of fleeting engagement, or is it an instance of a “virtual world” (Boellstorff 2008), with its own set of socialities and forms of engagement? And is the study of an event through social media a return to a previous era of “armchair anthropology”? Or is hashtag ethnography the next logical step in an anthropology of the 21st century, one that has become increasingly concerned with the ontological implications of digital practices (Horst and Miller 2012)?

Bonilla & Rosa make the case that neither Twitter (where they based their research) nor the internet more generally are necessarily best thought of as a “non-place.” Nor are they best conceived of as what Boellstorff et al. (2012) call a “virtual world” [e.g., “shared social environments with synchronous communication and interaction” (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 7)]. Doing internet ethnography, Bonilla & Rosa further argue, is also *not* armchair anthropology. Instead, building on Pink (2009), they advocate for thinking of online ethnographic places—indeed, *all* ethnographic places—as “collections of things that become intertwined” rather than as demarcated physical localities (Postill & Pink 2012: 127). This perspective, importantly hinges upon the critical realization that internet and “real-life” (virtual/real) are deeply intertwined. Markham (2017: 657) further argues for a perspective that engages with the internet fieldsite as “a way of being” that highlights the “very close interweaving of technology and human” (p. 657).

The perspectives and concerns that scholars have recently vocalized in thinking about the internet as our fieldsite (or part of our fieldsite) thus bring up persistent questions about “culture” and “community” in anthropology more broadly.

Kozinets (2015: 10), for example, discusses how the perception that internet is “not real culture” elides the fact that “culture” itself is always changing:

Culture adapts quickly to technologies and becomes technoculture perhaps because it is always in liquid motion, transforming and transformative. When studying online interaction, we surely wish to identify clear cultural categories such as nationalities, ethnicities, localisms, religiosities and occupational identities. However, we must strive to view them less as solid states of being than as liquid interactional elements that individual members bring to life as mental meanings

Here, Kozinets notes the centrality of the concept of “**consociality**,” which points to the kinds of “affable” yet limited relationships that contrast with more formally “social” relationships we develop with close friends and family members.” The ties that bind consociality are thus friendly,” he writes, “but not particularly strong” (2015: 11). Seeing many of the online relationships that people form with others through the lens of consociality, he argues, points less to the notion of bounded “communities” and more towards the “an expression of an ongoing negotiation between individuals” (2015: 12-13). Kozinets (2015: 4) thus proposes the method of “netnography” as a flexible method that responds to the ways in which “online access to vast amounts of archived social interactions along- side live access to the human beings posting it entirely changes the practice of ethnography and, in fact, all of the social sciences.” **In Kozinets’ view, netnography may not be able to access the kinds of communities and cultures that traditional ethnographers at least imagined they were accessing, but it does allow for the study of (con)sociality as a human activity.**

Shifting our perspective from fieldsite to **field-activity** can also open up many possibilities for online ethnography. As described in Nardi (2015: 20), for example, many scholars have studied activism online, noting how virtuality “[affords] communication and collaboration on a scale never before possible.” Online researchers have thus investigated the role of the internet in the Arab Spring movement (e.g., Tufekci & Wilson 2012); the Libyan political protests in 2011 (Lindgren 2013); in student-led protests in Chili (Barahona et al. 2012); among members of the anti-Trump #MagicResistance movement (Fine 2019), and among dissidents in China (Link and Xiao Qiang 2013). **When we shift to thinking about the kinds of activities (religious/spiritual, social, political, etc.) that are accomplished online—often in combination with in-person meetings that may be referenced in online conversations—this opens up the possibility of studying online activities as our fieldsite or field-focus. Depending on the context, moreover, closed and stable groups might arguably be considered a distinct fieldsite or community that you can justify as worthy of study as such.**

(3) UNDERSTANDING HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE INTERNET

Understanding how people engage with the internet is important to consider when doing online research. Scholarship on online experience note, for example, that contrary to the assumed disconnection spawned by the internet, Twitter and live streams often generate in participants a sense of “shared temporality” (Bonilla & Rosa 2015: 7). Even when interaction is asynchronous, sociality online is often perceived by users to strengthen relationships rather than detract from them. Kozinets (2015: 16) thus states that “**As of 2014, 67% of American Internet users credit their online communication with family and friends with generally strengthening those relationships; only 18% say social media generally weakens those relationships (Fox and Rainie, 2014).**” This is true, Kozinets further notes, across a range of variables, including gender, age, education, and race. Though it might result in more “weak ties,” McCulloch (2019) admits, but “the internet doesn’t lead to the collapse of strong ties, either” (p. 39).

McCulloch (2019) draws upon Ray Oldenburg’s (1989) notion of “**third spaces**” to understand internet sociality. Third spaces, she explains are places like local pubs, parks, and barbershops that are

“distinguished by an emphasis on conversation and playfulness, regular attendees who set the tone for newcomers, the freedom to come and go as you please, a lack of formal membership requirements and a warm, unpretentious feeling of home away from home” (McCulloch 2019: 220-1). McCulloch thus compares social media spaces to a kind of third-space “hallway.” “Posting into the ether is like sticking your head out into the hallway to see who you might run into,” McCulloch writes. The kinds of relationships established in such spaces may be regarded in terms of consociality (Kozinets 2015) or weak-ties. “Many of your Facebook friends, Twitter people, or Instagram folks remain surface-level acquaintances” McCulloch continues, however, “but adding someone on social media is a way of adding them to the hallway you stroll down, a way of saying, ‘I might like to have more unplanned interactions with you, and we can see where things go from there’” (p. 228). **Relationships formed via consociality or what McCulloch might characterize as hallway banter thus always contain the possibility of becoming stronger relationships.**

The value of internet spaces for developing and maintaining real social relationships is thus clear. The everyday navigation of such spaces as virtual spaces *does* differ from face-to-face, physical encounters, however. The kinds of third spaces created online are distinct from physical third places, McCulloch acknowledges, but actually have the added benefit of keeping you connected to “hallways” that are **open any time, day or night, and are open to people from a range of physical locations.**

Anthropologists have also noted the ways in which internet sociality can generate a sense of disconnection. Here, it is not necessarily the technology that causes the problem, however, and still requires a close ethnographic engagement with the particular ways in which the disconnection may be experienced. Karimzad & Catedral (2018), for example, focused on how images of “the homeland” can instigate a feeling of disconnection among migrants. And McCulloch (2019) points out that the feeling of no one “liking” a post can make people feel disconnected and alone. The experience someone has online will further differ depending on whether they are interacting with IRL friends, online friends they’ve had previous engagements with, unknown and anonymous others, etc. This depends, of course, a lot on the platform (see below for a discussion of different platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan).

Rather than thinking about disconnection as characterizing online experience, however, an appreciation for the range of different types of experiences people might have online (even in the space of a day) is important.

Instead of foregrounding the person, many scholars (especially in the early days of internet research) have engaged with the internet generally and/or different social media platforms as an *affordance* “to describe the relationship between the properties of technologies and the structure of social relations” (Costa 2018: 3650). Many observers have taken what Deumert (2014: 34) calls a deterministic approach to understanding the affordances of technology, wherein “technological objects are [seen as] as active agents: ‘Google *makes* us stupid’ or ‘robots *put* people out of work.’” **The technology here is seen as determining the agency (or lack of) of the people who interact with it.**

One of the affordances of internet sociality scholars have closely examined, often assuming to be true, is what boyd (2014) calls “context collapse”—where social worlds overlay upon one another (think about being a teenager and being FB friends with your mom and her friends). This is often considered a central part of the experience for people online. Costa (2018), however, develops the notion of “**affordances-in-practice**” to better situate the ways in which people have diverse ways of managing their participation online: how they manipulate features previously thought to lead them in certain ways (see above). In her own study in Mardin, for example, “social media users actively appropriate online platforms and change

privacy settings in order to keep different social spheres and social groups apart” (Costa 2018: 3641). The notion of affordance-in-practice thus foregrounds the ways in which “users actively appropriate and adapt digital technologies to better reflect their own goals and lives” (ibid: 3649). Another thing to consider with context collapse is the ways in which young people have maneuvered around contexts collapse by using “private messages that vanish after they’re seen, live video streaming, manual deletion of old posts, and story-type posts that only stay visible for twenty-four hours all reduce the likelihood that messages will be encountered outside their intended context” (McCulloch 2019: 104). The view of technology as providing **communicative affordances** (see Hutchby 2014) that allow for but do not determine the ways in which users engage with them is further highlighted by several authors as a critical turn in thinking about the internet as an affordance. Approaches that consider human agencies in interacting with technology take more of what Deumert (2014) calls a **social constructivist approach** to understanding online spaces and technology. **From an anthropological perspective, then, it is thus important to foreground the ways in which people engage with digital spaces in doing online ethnography. This can only be ascertained through the close study of people, e.g. ethnography.**

But can we always assume that people online are being “authentic”? Several scholars have thus investigated the strategic ways in which internet users adapt and adopt different identities, crafting a distinction between what is imagined between “the real me” and “online me.” This distinction is often assumed to be operating in such a way that we cannot possibly glean anything real about our participants by what they post online. Deumert (2014), however, discusses the ways in which even the pseudonyms people choose for online handles can often be seen as “an extension of the self” (p. 161). This is not always the case, however, and Deumert cautions us to be aware of the fact that “what we do online is not always and necessarily an extension of who we are or wish to be; it can also be quite separate from that” (ibid). Ilana Gershon (2015), on the other hand, argues that “rather than *performances* of offline identities, online selves on web- sites such as Facebook are productively seen as *animations* enlivened by the network of individuals who come to co- orient to each other through the profile in question” (as cited in Nakassis 2016 :339). The idea of “branding” oneself, for example, is consistent with the practice of becoming (or attempting to become) a “micro-celebrity” (Marwick & boyd 2010) as well as with LinkedIn profiles in the “new economy” (Gershon 2018), and often involves a great deal of strategic manipulation of one’s self-presentation that may not be seen as authentic but which can still be engaged with as a human practice that is culturally relevant.

What this means for doing online ethnography is that it is important to ask people what their experience of the internet is, both overall and on any given day. This is something you cannot assume: even in peoples’ interviews with you they may represent themselves in ways that others would deem “inauthentic” (a long-standing consideration of anthropologists!).

As Deumert notes, the possibility of inauthenticity (not to mention various levels of anonymity) threatens traditional methods of doing (in her case) sociolinguistics—techniques that often depend upon knowing who is speaking if not necessarily that they are being authentic—online. Digital sociolinguistics,” she however argues, can still be of value in that it “encourages us to explore other ways of looking at language, and suggests that fantasy, play and creative practice are just as important as conventions, norms and identities” (Duemert 2014: 165). **From an anthropological perspective, this encourages us to consider how it might be possible to analyze at online data to get a sense of how people engage with (if not necessarily experience) online sociality through various forms of self-disclosure (authentic or not) and sociality. The important thing here is not to go beyond what the data themselves are “saying” (more on this below).**

The lesson here for anthropologists/ethnographers is that we may also need to adapt the ways in which we focus our research and make sense of what we can collect online. **Whether or not we are linguistic anthropologists (or sociolinguists), this demands an attention to what language is and what language does in online spaces.**

(4) “LANGUAGE” ONLINE

In terms of online ethnography, whether or not you are interested in linguistic anthropology, it is useful to have a few linguistic anthropological perspectives in mind when you approach the question of what it means that so much of your data emerges as written language. **Language is in quotes above, for example, because when linguistic anthropologists speak of “language” they are often referring to the practice of “linguaging,” which includes a range of communicative processes that include gesture, gaze, bodily movement, engagement with objects and the physical environment, etc.**

From this perspective, online interactions occurring on social media or other social forums have a range of pragmatic purposes for those engaging with and in them. “An online forum,” writes Nardi (2016: 193), “creates and sustains itself as participants ask questions, offer opinions, provide information, give advice, make jokes, reflect on activities of interest, comment on others’ posts, and sometimes write merely to provoke.” **When thinking about doing ethnography online, then, this is where the data you collect offer the opportunity of witnessing what people are doing online: not necessarily what they think they are doing, trying to do, or whether they are doing it authentically, but what they are doing.**

Here, it is important here to remember that what we are dealing with in internet ethnography is not just words, but also includes “images, drawings, photography, sound files, edited audiovisual presentations, website creations and other digital artifacts” (Kozinets 2015: 5). Online language, Deumert (2014) thus writes, is multimodal, and the ways in which internet language is threaded with emojis and emoticons, pictures and videos, memes, gifs, and links is a critical part of understanding what happens online not just in terms of a “text” or “document” but in terms of the ways in which “they embed, completely within themselves, readers’ assessments” (Nardi 2016: 194). As described below, moreover, multimodality can be seen as a way of bringing gesture, tone of voice, and other embodied features to the practice of languaging.

Studying “linguaging” online—again, even if you are not a linguistic anthropologist and have no aspirations to become one—is a critical part of online ethnography. The following provides a few key perspectives on speech vs. writing and conversations in online ethnography that detail how the shift from language to languaging opens up the possibility of conducting online ethnography generally.

(4.1) *Speech vs. Writing in Online Ethnography*

Many of us have seen critiques of informal internet writing in memes and op-eds that comment on the kind of “linguistic whateverism” (Baron 2008, as cited in Deumert 2014: 102) that seems to have descended on our young people like a plague. **What about when we consider the kind of writing that emerges online as more “speech-like”?** Deumert (2014: 102) thus points out that “linguists have described such texts as ‘typed conversations’ or ‘fingered speech’, and have argued that they ‘have much in common with face-to-face conversations’ (Vandekerckhove and Nobels 2012: 658; also Dorleijn and Nortier 2009).” There have been other scholars, Duemert continues, who place internet writing somewhere in between speech and writing, but she goes on to critique both approaches as contingent on an absolute binary between these two forms of communication. Instead, she argues, we need to focus on the fact that “[even in] the most intimate physical, bodily presence of others, communication is

never the unproblematic communion of two minds” (p. 103). **This opens up the space for us to consider what is happening in online writing without getting hung up on comparing them to the ideal of face-to-face communication.**

McCulloch (2019: 14) has another way of approaching this question, choosing to focus on internet writing as a form of “informal writing” that, she notes, is “cool” because of the way it is used **“to restore our bodies to our writing, to give a sense of who’s talking and what mood we’re in when we’re saying things.”** From this perspective, McCulloch argues, “internet writing is a distinct genre with its own goals, and to accomplish those goals successfully requires subtly tuned awareness of the full spectrum of language” (2019: 60).

Both Deumert and McCulloch thus examine what Deumert refers to as “textpl@y” as a form of creative engagement with writing that facilitates authors’ agency, creativity, and ability to restore tone of voice, facial expressions, and other embodied signals to language written online. Contrary to popular belief, moreover, Deumert (2014) notes that **“research indicates that non-standard writing—far from being a scourge—has educational benefits and might help, rather than hinder, formal literacy by developing metalinguistic awareness (Plester et al. 2008; Wood et al. 2011)”** (p. 123).

What are some of the ways in which the body is restored in creative online textpl@y? Many of the strategies are used to demonstrate emotion, for example, to individualize one’s style, to be poetic, or to flirt. Examples include:

- **Keysmash** [adfsdfjaklsdf] “that haphazard mashing o fingers against keyboard to signal a feeling so intense that you can’t possibly type real words” (McCulloch 2019: 6)
- **LOL:** “lol’ occurs with certain types of emotions, like flirting, requesting or offering empathy, alluding to undisclosed information, repairing a previous message, or softening a confrontation, but not with others like expressing love, exchanging information, and small talk” (McCulloch 2019: 105)
- **Punctuation:**
 - **Passive aggressive periods:** often used to be trite/passive aggressive in texts, especially short texts. But “still often found in messages longer than seventy-two characters or containing words like told, feels, feel, felt, feelings, date, sad, seems, and talk. The added weight of the period is a natural way to talk about weighty matters.” (McCulloch 2019: 113)
 - **Exclamation marks:** “The exclamation mark is frequently repurposed to indicate warmth or sincerity, rather than just excitement” (McCulloch 2019: 123-4)
 - ***~~sparkle punctuation~~*:** Fun ways to represent yourself or your message
- **Capitalization:** “WHEN YOU WRITE IN ALL CAPS IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU’RE SHOUTING” (McCulloch 2019: 115); Ironic Capitals Can Convey Sarcasm; lack of any punctuation can also convey deadpan irony (McCulloch 2019: 139) [we have to be careful with this one though, because “we know that there was an earlier stage where people didn’t bother with capitals and punctuation for reasons of economy, not to convey a particular tone of voice” (McCulloch 2019: 142)

- **Expressive lengthening:** “reapeatingggggggg letterrrrsssss, especially for emotive words like ‘yayyyy’ or ‘noooo’” (McCulloch 2019: 119); “What’s cool about expressive lengthening is that, although it started as a very literal representation of longer sounds, it’s ended up creating a form of emotional expression that now has no possible spoken equivalent, making it more akin to its typographical cousins, all caps and italics” (2019: 121)
- **Emojis:** politeness can be expressed by adding a smiley face; emojis are also often used to incorporate emblematic gestures in internet language (like thumbs up, wink, etc.); repeated emojis, on the other hand, can be understood as “beat gestures”: “We type [kiss] [kiss] [kiss] because we might also blow multiple kisses, we type...because when we give the thumbs-up gesture, we sometimes do it rhythmically or hold it up for several seconds to emphasize it” (McCulloch 2019: 171); emojis are also good for contextualizing our words and adding a “phatic” dimension to communicating online (Danesi 2020); finally, emojis “can soften other kinds of harsh statements: making a demand into a softer request, or a seeming insult into softer teasing” (McCulloch 2019: 186)
- **Hashtags:** Not just used to index! Often used as a “metacommentary” (McCulloch 2019)
- **Other creative text strategies:** wOrDs iN mIxEd (pp) cAPiTaLiZaTiOn, eXtRa SpAcEs. Deumert (2014) links these to futurism “Futurist poets saw writing as a form of painting, full of creative and expressive potential. They called—in metaphorical language—for the ‘liberation’ of not only the word, but also the letter from the drabness of convention. Letters should be dressed beautifully and not all ‘wear the same government overcoats...lined up in a row, humiliated, with cropped hair, and all equally colorless, gray’ (Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov 1913, in Lawton and Eagle 2004)” (p. 125)

Creative textpl@y in online interaction thus does a lot of social “work.” It can also, importantly, be used as a strategy for young people (and older people too) to find “freedom from the strictures and surveillance of the classroom” (Deumert 2019: 144). It can also be used as a way to avoid condemnation by government censors. In China, for example, people speaking against the government or engaging in dissident and/or illegal activities online can capitalize on the fact that Chinese characters can be switched in order to convey meaning.

Other discursive strategies to convey emotion, create relationships, and avoid censorship include “vaguebooking,” for example. “if someone posts, ‘I just don’t have time for this nonsense,’ it’s obvious even to the completely initiated that some kind of drama is going on...[but] you’ve got to figure it out for yourself or resign yourself to not knowing” (McCulloch 2019: 232-3).

People can also employ multimodality (e.g. incorporating images, gifs, memes, and slang terms into text) to convey emotion and accomplish social and/or political goals. Deumert (2014), for example, gives an example of how “the multimodal affordances of digital communication allowed Chinese dissidents to escape political surveillance and to play cat-an-mouse with government censors”:

In that year, Liu Xiaobo, who was serving a jail sentence for political activism at the time, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Chinese government, known for persistent online censorship, initially blocked all digital messages containing the name of the dissident laureate. Soon they blocked further *words* in order to silence unwanted political debates, including ‘Norway’, ‘Oslo’, ‘Nobel’ and even ‘empty chair’, the latter the most conspicuous symbol of Liu Xiaobo’s absence at the ceremony in

Oslo. Chinese bloggers responded to these *linguistic* restrictions creatively by posting *images* of empty chairs, ranging from reproductions of a Van Gogh painting to seemingly arbitrary photographs of kitchen chairs. By exploiting the multimodal affordances of the medium, the bloggers kept the discussion alive and avoided the censors just a little longer (Larmer 2011; see also Link and Xiao Qiang 2013). (Duemert 2014: 79)

It is thus important to recognize the ways in which multimodality in online writing is used for a range of purposes. For example:

- **Images** can be used as part of the message, for example in Instagram stories or on Snapchat where “you get to use your face as the emoticon instead of an actual emoticon” (Snapchat user, as cited in McCulloch 2019: 164)
- **Gifs** are often used to display emblematic gestures “such as applause, eww, eye roll, facepalm, fistbump, goodbye, happy dance, hearts, high five, [etc.]” (McCulloch 2019: 64)
- **Memes:** “Creating, sharing, or laughing at a meme is staking a claim to be an insider” (McCulloch 2019: 258). Using a meme or responding to a meme in a conversation thus does important social work.
- **Slang** is important for establishing and maintaining relationships, presenting the self, and guarding secrets online (obvi).

All of the above are important to consider in interpreting language and language behavior or languaging online. **In interpreting the meaning of anything you see online, however, a few things are important to keep in mind.** Language and other communicative forms, for example, are always **indexical**: the meanings they index for different users vary, and new meanings can always arise (Deumert 2014: 100). In order to ethnographically interpret the meaning of a given interaction online, then, we need to know as much as we can about the authors (this is where interviews and other offline participation definitely help).

Even if we only have the texts that we observe, however, it is still important to keep in mind that many of the creative discursive strategies that people use in online communication cannot be analyzed as stand-alone terms with stable meanings (EVEN ALL CAPS!!!!!!). Many of these strategies, rather, “[operate] on a sentence level or a whole utterance level” (McCulloch 2019: 142). To understand internet writing, McCulloch thus argues, demands a “subtly tuned awareness of the full spectrum of language. Media representations of chatspeak ring hollow when they borrow the exotic trappings (like ‘lol’ and ‘ttyl’) without acknowledging the linguistic expertise that it takes to navigate the system as a whole” (p. 60). **Understanding language online thus requires attending to the ways in conversations occur online.**

(4.2) Conversations Online

The idea that digitally mediated conversations are lacking in some deeply human way is related to idealizations of the “real” in comparison to the “the virtual.” Deumert (2014) thus writes that “there exists a deep-seated belief that ‘good’ communication is ‘soul-to-soul, among embodied live people’, and that mediated engagement is potentially problematic, impoverished and prone to misunderstandings (Peters 1999: 47)” (p. 9). **Deumert takes issue with this bias, arguing that online conversations are not necessarily impoverished versions of the real thing.**

Even if we accept that online communications are quite “real,” however (both for ourselves and our participants), it is still important to attend to the ways in which digitally mediated conversations change when they are enacted online (Hutchby 2014). McCulloch points out, however, that when we think about all the ways in which online conversations are “different,” overall it is important to keep in mind that, throughout history “macro-level conversation norms have changed and will keep changing” (2019: 235). This occurs in tandem with changes in technology as well as other social structures. **The point here is that conversations online may be different from other types of conversations (face-to-face, telephone, written letters) in multiple ways, but that does not make them any less real.**

The particular differences often depend on the particular platform you are studying, as well as the ways in which particular users interact with it. A couple of general things to keep in mind when looking at conversations that occur online include:

Temporality

Whereas body-to-body communication as well as voice or video calls require real-time interactivity, text-based interactions allow us to desynchronize interactions. Even in contexts where there is an expectation of an immediate reply, we can usually delay our response. (Deumert 2014: 35)

“Synchronicity, however, is not necessary to establish feelings of togetherness, and asynchronous communication can also work this way. A sense of shared presence can be *brought about*, for example, by linguistic means...the ways in which texts are written. Thus, an appeal to shared knowledge or the use of the present tense in Facebook status updates...creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy, even if the update is only read days after it was posted (Page 2010).” (Deumert 2014: 12)

As noted by Herring (2010), online interaction presents a “striking” example of the ways in which norms of conversation that apply to in-person conversation (turn-taking rules, for example) are adapted in chats and other online contexts.

It is thus important not to assume (as many do) that lack of synchronicity stands in the way of people having real conversations online. Face-to-face conversations, it is important to remember, also often weave back and forth in terms of focus and topic. In any particular project, however, the question of temporality and the types of exchanges you are looking at needs to be considered as part of the data.

Participation

What counts as participation online? It is important to consider how the “footing” in a conversation may differ from in-person conversations (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Hillewaert 2015; Jones 2014; Jones 2015: as cited in Nakassis 2016). It is also important to consider how locally developed rules for participation may emerge in specific groups and on various websites

The question of *who* is participating in a conversation is also important. Drawing on the concept of the “adjacency pair” in conversation analysis (*adjacency pairs are things like ‘How are you? I’m good’ and other paired sequences common to interaction*), Durrani (2018) examines how “‘me too’ is the second pair-part to a personal revelation of sexual trauma.” #MeToo is thus a powerful way of participating in a conversation among many women. It further indexes multiple past conversations in which these women often confronted “disbelief, denial, or rejection.” Online conversations can therefore be different from in-person conversations in the sense of how many people are involved.

The *how* of participation is also interesting to look at. Utterance breaks or line breaks are an important part of the ways in which people participate in online conversations, and there are considerable differences in the ways in which people of different ages manage this (McCulloch 2019). Jones & Schieffelin (2016: 214) further highlight the ways in which in-person conversational strategies are mimicked through line breaks, giving an example of a young woman who “uses line breaks to differentiate her voice as a narrator and the voices of the characters—including herself—whose speech she reports....The line breaks here are (very effectively) doing the work of quotation marks, periods, commas, capitalization, and paragraphing to coordinate the mimetic representation of a narrated conversation.”

There are, moreover different “levels” to participation in online contexts, just as IRL. On Facebook and other social media, for example, one can participate by liking or otherwise responding to something (sad face, angry face, love, etc.). A deeper level of participation (deeper in the sense of requiring more time and energy) is to comment, using words, videos, pictures, gifs, or memes, each of which displays a different level of investment. At an even greater scale, “response videos” and parodies on YouTube constitute a form of participation (Deumert 2014: 81)

The *why* of online participation also matters. McCulloch thus writes that “consciously or not, a lot of our social media posts are optimized around getting some kind of interaction: we may fuss over the precise wording for maximum humor, run a draft post by a friend, message specific people to get them to comment, plan the posting time for the most interactions, or simply like others’ posts for moral support, so our friends know they aren’t shouting into the void” (p. 229). When people “like” our posts, for example, we receive acknowledgement of our presence in a way that can be compared to our friends nodding at us as we pass, or waving as we enter a shared space. When we don’t receive any acknowledgement, however, it can be overwhelming and confusing.

In observing how people participate in conversation on various platforms that you might be studying in an ethnography, it is thus important to attune to local norms and expectations regarding the who, how, and why of participation. You can certainly ask about such things in an interview, but people are not always cognizant of the rules they follow in interaction. You can also pay attention to any comments that people make (metacommentary) about others’ or their own participation, but often this type of structure is observable from simply paying close attention to the site or forum (or chat) that you are witnessing.

Audience

The who of participation begs for a more fine-grained analysis of audience, Several authors foregrounding audience online, for example, write that:

Virtuality allows us to communicate not only with specific, known others in distant places, but also—via public platforms such as Twitter—with an indefinite range of potential, often unknown participants...(pp) The fact that we know that our posts can be seen by this large audience may shape the way we write, that is, the language we choose, and how we craft our posts... Sociolinguistic research has shown that linguistic choices are not only *responsive* to a real or imagined audience, they can also be *initiative*, that is, used to shape and (re)define the situation, to address specific groups or people, and to exclude others....In this way, digital writers are able to address particular groups within a larger, even potentially global, audience; that is, they create spaces of intimacy by writing in a particular way, or by using particular languages (Tagg and Seargeant 2014). (Deumert 2014: 13)

Here's the sharpest line dividing internet writers: Who is the imaginary authority in your head when you choose how to punctuate a text message? Is it the prescriptive norm of an offline authority, like your former English teacher or a dictionary? Or is it the collective wisdom of your online peers, the anticipation of their emotional reaction to your typographical tone of voice? The difference between how people communicate in the internet era boils down to a fundamental question of attitude: Is your informal writing oriented towards the set of norms belonging to the online world or the offline one? (McCulloch 2019: 108)

In any study you do online, then, it is important to consider the ways in which the audience is set up on a particular platform may shape the ways in which conversations take place, whether you are looking at the “post” level or even within the comment threads that develop beneath or in response to posts. As described above in the section on users' experience of the internet, however, it is also important never to assume that people are not separating their audiences according to levels of privacy, using other means such as vanishing messages to engage with different audiences, etc.

Authorship

“The internet has been very good for shared authorship” (McCulloch 2019: 261-2). In considering shared authorship online, it is also important to consider the phenomenon of **intertextuality**, or the ways in which “as audiences engage with, and respond to, what they read, hear or see, they create new texts that are equally embedded in networks of meaning” (Deumert 2014: 77). An easier way of putting this: stories travel. It is thus important to consider **entextualization** and **decontextualization**: “Once a perceivable and reproducible text has emerged through entextualization, it becomes available for the potentially infinite processes of decontextualization and recontextualization. The text is detached from the context in which it occurred and decontextualized, that is, inserted into new contexts...when inserted into new contexts the replicated text might look the same, but it will not mean the same, and although it carries with it certain meanings from its earlier uses, it also acquires new meanings” (Deumert 2014: 83-4). **What becomes of stories as they travel, becoming co-authored in the process—or “co-narrated” (De Fina & Gore 2017)—is important to understand as data.**

As I hope to have demonstrated here, whatever your project is, your ethnographic attention to detail can be immensely enriched by a focus on the ways in which people “do language” online.

(5) SPECIFIC METHODS FOR CONDUCTING ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

Overall (as described above) there is a lot of debate over what the best methods are for doing online research. Some scholars (mostly from beyond anthropology) aim to provide a set of specific guidelines, but anthropologists tend to be more engaged with what Postill & Pink (2012: 126) discuss as the “messiness” of online fieldwork. Rather than “a finite set of research techniques” then, Pink et al. (2016) describe online ethnography “as a series of methodological principles: multiplicity, de-centering media, reflexivity, open-ness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy” (Alinejad 2018: 429). **That said, there is a lot we can learn about online ethnography from those who've published about it, and what they've said about specific methods.**

(5.1) Developing your research question & research plan

Just like in any other kind of study, it is important to develop a relatively specific research question (or set of research questions) in online ethnography. Venturini et al. (2018) call this the “object” of your research. The specific types of things you can ask with research questions geared to online ethnography will differ depending on what kind of online ethnography you are aiming to do: whether it also involves interviews or other face-to-face meeting, if it is participatory or observational etc. As in other types of ethnographic research, your research question(s) may also shift based on what you find. You may also develop testable hypotheses for engaging in online ethnography, as long as they are carefully crafted in accordance with the type of data you will be collecting.

What kinds of research questions can you ask and hypotheses can you test when your data may be limited to online interaction? It depends, of course, on many factors, but a few examples are worth discussing here to demonstrate what is possible. For example, scholars have investigated how moral commitments are navigated in online interactions: a study by Sneijder and te Molder (2005) looked at the ways in which interactants in an online discussion group about veganism managed conversation about vitamin deficiency vis-a-vis a moral logic of responsibility and blame. Vásquez (2014) wrote a whole book about how people perform identity and engage socially in online reviews. And Lourdes de León (2017) examined how WhatsApp messaging afforded new kinds of love relationships for Mayan youth. Kiesling et al. (2018), finally, investigate how stance-taking—the ways in which people express approval, disapproval, emotional perspective, etc.—can also be quantitatively measured. **Importantly, these researchers’ questions aligned with the site they were examining as well as the limitations of the data (see more below). Their insights produced useful ethnographies nonetheless.**

For research that is only partly or temporarily online, and which may include interviews (conducted face-to-face or remotely) or other aspects such as freelisting or pilesorting, **preliminary research questions and hypotheses can be further be developed by observing research sites in order to gather ideas for what you might ask about in your interviews, for example, or to form preliminary observations about which cultural domains might be most salient to certain groups of people.**

(5.2) Specific sites/platforms

In their discussion of defining the object of your research, Venturini et al. (2018) note that you have to take the medium(s) that you will be investigating into account, considering how specific platforms might play diverse roles in mediating the kinds of data you will be able to gather. Your research question—regardless of whether it is complete or preliminary—thus needs to attune to the kinds of communicative affordances built into different platforms (e.g., the hashtag on Twitter, see below). As discussed above, however, it is also important to consider the ways in which users might evade or strategically engage with the affordances offered by different platforms. This may be difficult to discern without conducting interviews, but if there is past research on users of that platform, that could be very helpful. **Overall, it is important to keep in mind that the affordances of the site do not necessarily always shape the behavior of users.**

It is also important to think about how the study might “spill across several media” (Venturini et al. 2018: 4207), and to consider how to limit or delineate your field in ways that complement your research question. According to Postill & Pink (2012: 129) it is therefore important to set up a “homebase” (whether it is Twitter, Reddit, or whatever) which “can be seen as ports from which the digital ethnographer embarks on short exploratory trips—rarely venturing too far, however.” Some of the websites people have investigated include: Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, Tinder, 4chan, DWSN (Dark Web Social Networks), Instagram, WeChat, and Weibo (to name just a few). Researchers will often discuss the specific aspects of each site where they conducted research in the methods and/or introductory

sections of their articles, so it is important to consult previous studies done on a specific platform before initiating your own research. **Beyond simply going to a site and witnessing for yourself how it works—or reading content and privacy policies on various sites—it is important to consult previous literature because anthropologists and other scholars often have unique observations about different platforms.**

(5.3) Recruiting participants & maintaining relationships

If you are doing participatory online ethnography, the issue of introducing oneself and gaining rapport with participants is important to consider. Nardi (2016: 196) argues that posting a survey or other short research tool to a forum, “is oddly like arriving in a remote village to begin anthropological research” and is useful for establishing a connection with participants because (at least in an established forum) “taps into existing social relationships, interests, and habits of communication.” Maintaining contact with participants, Postill & Pink (2012) further explain, can range from “likes” to text/message threads or in-person meetings. While strong ties and regular exchanges with key research participants are crucial, it is equally important to develop an extended set of ‘weak ties’ with other participants. These are sustained via social media platforms that facilitate ‘phatic communion’ (V. Miller, 2008) with a large set of contacts with very low investments in time per contact (Postill and Pink 2012: 129).

(5.4) Day-to-day Fieldwork

Regardless of what kinds of data you aim to collect, it is important to remember that the investment one makes in online research is similar to the investment one makes in conducting traditional ethnography, e.g., it involves “living part of one’s life on the internet, keeping up to date with and participating and collaborating in social media discussions.” (Postill & Pink 2012: 128). **Collecting online data therefore does not necessarily make for easier ethnography in terms of the time commitment or work you put in, and may even be considered in terms of the embodied practices (and risks to one’s eyes and carpal tunnels, for example) as other kinds of fieldwork.**

(5.5) Collecting & analyzing data

Netnographic data, in Kozinets (2015: 5) view, “can be rich or very thin, protected or given freely.” Here, he points to the relative range of ways that netnography...

...can be generated through interactions between a real person and a researcher, or be sitting in digital archives. It can be highly interactive, like a conversation. Or it can be more like reading the diary of an individual. It can be polished like a corporately created production, or raw and crude, full of obscenities and spelling errors.

In constructing a “digital corpora,” Venturini et al. (2018) point out, one should acknowledge that the ideal of exhaustiveness is false (there’s just too much!). This can increase considerably, note Sumiala and Tikka (2020: 46) if you engage in collaborative or collective ethnography. Regardless of whether you are working alone or with others, however, your study “should not necessarily cover *each and every* thread that constitutes the fabric of social phenomena, but they should not tear such fabric or artificially extend it” (Venturini et al. 2018: 4210). It is important to acknowledge the ways in which the need to delimit one’s focus in online ethnography aligns with Hine’s (2015: 46) insights on ethnography in any context. “Ethnographers,” she writes, “always have limited ability to encompass the whole situation.”

All of this said, what you collect can lean towards the kinds of representativeness that you need, depending on your question or hypothesis. True representativeness, write Venturini et al. (2018: 4210) may not work for online research. What you can do to address this, they suggest, is take care “to

describe explicitly the various operations of selection and transformation that connects the original traces to the final corpus and reflect on their analytical consequences” (ibid). **In crafting a plan for data collection, then, it is important to set out the boundaries of what you might be able to do with such data once you gather it (e.g., how its analysis contributes to answering your research question). It is important here, then, to think about the types of data you will be able to collect online, how you will keep track of them, and how you will analyze them:**

Types of Data

Multimodal data is standard for online ethnography. Screenshots are thus often used by researchers as data in this kind of research. Screenshots capture conversation in ways that fieldnotes or other means would elide.

Nardi (2016: 193) further examines the ways in which the archiving of online forums and chat texts can themselves be engaged with as fieldnotes or “high-fidelity representations of the events and ideas pertinent to ongoing activity in a social group that the ethnographer is studying.”

Another type of online ethnographic data, Jones & Schieffelin (2016: 212) argue, are the “inscripts” that are like transcripts that emerge from online chats that do not, like in-person conversations, disappear after they occur, but leave recorded traces that “are, in principle, exhaustive.” “Inscripts,” they explain “contain most of the signifying material—graphemes, fonts, punctuation, time intervals—available to interactional partners.”

Data Storage

In terms of keeping track of your data, there are multiple ways to do this. Postill & Pink (2012) talk about using Delicious (<https://www.archive-team.org/index.php?title=Delicious>) to archive social media posts. This tool is now defunct, but other archiving sites exist. This article discusses 10 of them (<https://searchengineland.com/10-alternatives-to-delicious-com-bookmarking-59058>). There is also the possibility of using a web crawler/scrapper such as <https://webscraper.io> or <https://www.scrapestorm.com>.

Here, it is important to remember, you are creating an archive that can later be analyzed just as in traditional fieldwork.

Data Analysis

Online data can tell you a lot about people, whether you are studying the conversation per se; a topic within the conversation; or the moral ways in which people enact stance or express agreement with a cultural domain in a conversation.

Depending on your question(s)/hypotheses, analyzing data collected online can be geared towards either qualitative or quantitative analysis. For anthropologists conducting ethnographic research, qualitative analysis is often the dominant approach and proceeds according to the same principles of qualitatively analyzing any other kind of data. Archived posts/pages/images can be “tagged” or “coded” in an emergent fashion to generate a list of salient domains for further investigation, for example.

When making sense of your data, it is important to consider the ways in which your data may be limited due to the lack of the kinds of contexts that traditional fieldwork might convey. “Possessing an inscript,” write Jones & Schieffelin (2016: 212), “in no way confers relevant contextual information—

such as cultural background knowledge or the personal history of conversational partners—necessary to interpret it.” The possibility of fabricated speech is a further problem if one is considering the authenticity of certain kinds of interactions. There is also, when dealing with sites on the Dark Web or on 4chan, for example, the fact that near total anonymity makes it hard to tell who is speaking. When conducting an ethnography of hashtags, moreover, questions about the context of each repeat of the hashtag arise. As Bonilla & Rosa (2015) write: “for example, that there were eight million Ferguson tweets— tells us very little. How many were critical of the police? How many were critical of protestors?” “Beyond knowing that people tweeted,” they continue, “we know little about what those tweets meant to their authors and their imagined publics. We do not know, for example, how many of the eight million tweets were aimed at a national audience...versus how many were aimed at a smaller group of followers with the contextual information necessary to assess both the explicit and implicit use of hashtags and other references.”

Even with all of these difficult contextual limitations to consider, there are several options and perspectives that aid in conducting responsible analyses:

- Considering the “plausibility” of the interaction: conversations that “make sense” —even if they are fabricated—can provide important insights into conversational norms (at the very least) and cultural attitudes in a general way (Jones & Schieffelin 2016)
- Considering the context of the interaction (rather than the context of the speakers): this relates to plausibility. If people are on a Reddit thread asking for advice about health-related matters, for example, the plausibility of a conversation emerging from a post by someone who asks a question and continuously engages with the 10+ comments that are posted in response is arguably an example of a “real” internet interaction.
- Even with Dark Web accounts, pseudonyms are linked to accounts (not so for 4chan) that Ghel (2016) notes, are often linked to an enduring (if anonymous) persona that one can grow to understand if one spends enough time on the site.
- Even in trolling comments—often produced for the sake of “lulz” rather than semantic content—can be analyzed for the ways in which they “do being annoying” or the ways in which they instigate comments and responses from others who may try to engage seriously with them (bless their hearts) or who systematically disregard them as being trolls: both of these responses can tell you a lot about the cultural norms and expectations among different communities.
- Even if we only have public interactions online, it is possible also to consult with existing research on the same topic (and perhaps in the same community) conducted in person. In this way, we might be able to compare the findings and say something interesting about the unique ways in which the ‘online-ness’ of the interaction changes the dynamic(s) we are looking at.

These strategies are useful for making sense of what our data means in online ethnography. It is important, Markham (2017: 661) however notes, not to confuse what we can say about such data in relation to “the personalized experience of time and place, the multiplicity of identity, or the simultaneity of global and local.” They cannot be interpreted in terms of “sense making” or “experience” in other words. **As long as your data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted in response to your established research question(s)—or in response to research questions that emerged over the course of the study—there is a lot that you can say with online data.**

(6) ETHICS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

As Deumert (2014: 27) writes, “If we accept that the actual and the virtual are deeply entangled, then the basic ethical principles for offline research should also apply to online research: the right to informed consent, anonymity and the protection of privacy.” If you are doing research in private groups or collecting posts that are identifiable or require you to be “friends” with a participant, you must do online ethnography in the way you would any other kind of ethnography: people must know you are there and you must have informed consent before collecting any data.

There are several issues unique to this kind of ethnography, however, especially when new members might join a group and may object to taking part in your research. Do you introduce yourself to every single person individually? Or do you post an announcement in the group, which may or may not be read (or even seen) by every member?

Technically, publicly available content on the internet is free game for researchers. **One must always check the policies of specific websites, however.** Even if you are looking at publicly available data, there are still issues to consider if one aims to adhere to the ethical principles of protecting participants’ privacy and anonymity. Unless it is important to cite the authorship (as in the case of a celebrity or well-known author’s tweets or posts, for example), changing the names, nicknames, or handles of people posting on public sites is an important commitment that many researchers have made in their studies. This may still be problematic, for example “if the text is quoted verbatim, then it is usually possible to locate the original context (and the author) via a simple web search” (Deumert 2014: 30). If you use an image, moreover, Taylor (forthcoming) point out that image searches can locate original authors using incredibly small amounts of detail: even if you blur an image, for example, it may be searchable.

It is also important to consider the fact that, regardless of the websites policies, “people do not always consider their data public and use such spaces to engage in fairly private conversations” (Deumert 2014: 30). Here, Deumert suggests that “privacy needs to be understood as contextual and emergent...while some Twitter posts do not carry any identifying or personal information, and are similar to public blogs, other tweets might be quite personal and not suitable for citing without consent” (ibid.). Here, it is important to adhere to the core principles of ethical ethnography as you would in any other fieldwork situation, perhaps even reframing your approach to ethical engagement with participants through the lens of care (Black & Conley-Riner, Forthcoming).

Many authors writing about their online ethnography discuss ethics, so it is important to review the literature on the specific sites and topics you are interested in studying. There are also several resources you can consult, including:

- Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>
- The [APA](#) and [BPS](#) both have detailed ethical guidelines for Internet research
- The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services also has published guidelines, which are especially useful for understanding the ins and outs of how to consider something “public” and when consent can be waived: <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/sites/default/files/ohrp/sachrp/mtgings/2013%20March%20Mtg/int>

(7) IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCED INTERNET ETHNOGRAPHERS

- **Dealing with context collapse:** If one is “friends” with research participants, things may get awkward if you don’t construct separate lists for who will see your personal posts (and your friends’/family members’ replies). Some researchers have approached this by creating separate researcher profiles, but that can stand in the way of coming off as a “real person” in certain contexts. Others have gone ahead and blended their groups. It depends on what is right for you/your project.
- **Dealing with public critique:** Nardi (2020: 203) discusses the ways in which “online venues are uniquely vulnerable to public conversations about the ethnographer’s methods.” Research participants (if they know you are there) will often post challenging and sometimes confrontational comments and engage with other participants in conversations about your research. Nardi emphasizes that “such exchanges make for great fieldnotes” (ibid.). They also can provide text for you to describe the “broader impacts” of the study: “Texts discussing the research activity itself may accomplish quite a lot: raising the salience and visibility of research, stimulating discussion of how and why research is actually conducted, and allowing for public discourse about what has been learned and why it is important” (2020: 201). Nevertheless, Nardi notes, this can be distressing and uncomfortable for the researcher. It does, however, help in developing a strong sense of what the project is about as well as it provides an opportunity for critical self-reflection during the process.
- **Others?** As you conduct research online, it is important to make notes about your experience. This can contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique challenges that face online researchers as we develop the field.

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