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THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS CURATOR: INTRODUCING A DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION AS A COLLABORATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY FIELDWORK METHOD

ABSTRACT

Collaborative and participatory ethnographic methods present the possibility of an intriguing contemporary shift; from the anthropologist's role as author to one of curator in/of the digital landscape. Photographs, blogs, and digital exhibitions can all be incorporated into the methodology and storytelling of Internet-related ethnographic research. In this article, I reflect upon the rationale of curating a digital photography exhibition as a fieldwork method during my research with Iranian photobloggers. I discuss how the digital exhibition offered me unique way of collaborating – remotely and online – with my interlocutors and other participants physically based in different countries. I conclude by evaluating the digital exhibition's broader methodological and epistemological implications for digital/visual anthropology.

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INTRODUCTION: COLLABORATIVE DIGITAL-VISUAL MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY

Digital and visual methodologies in the Internet era open up avenues for conducting ethnographic research *with* (and not just *about*) participants (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012; Horst and Miller 2012; Gubrium and Harper 2013; Underberg and Zorn 2013; Heidbrink and Statz 2014; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis et al. 2015). This emerging body of scholarship builds on a host of earlier engagements with websites and hypermedia in anthropological research (Biella 1994; Miller 2001; Forte 2003; Biella 2008), as well as visual anthropology's existing engagement with participatory media practices (Ginsburg 1991; Turner 1991; Ginsburg 1994). Today, research on and with the Internet presents a fertile ground for current and future digital-visual ethnographers. Those who utilise digital methods often do so with the groups of people with whom they conduct research, creating reflexive partnerships that develop and transform the research process itself. This process facilitates what Horst (2016: 7) describes as a 'knowing beyond the self'; shifting the subjective I of the solo researcher towards a collective epistemological framework that is socialised and developed through the research process. This particular emphasis on collaboration and participation in digital-visual ethnographic research presents the possibility of an intriguing contemporary shift from the anthropologist's traditional role as *author* to one of *curator* of/in the digital landscape.

It is from this theoretical and ontological stance – which takes websites, blogs and visual hypermedia seriously as sites and methods of anthropological knowledge production and curation – that I begin the following discussion. I hereby introduce a digital research exhibition (*www.photoblogsiran.com*), which I developed with some of the principal research participants involved in my PhD project studying photoblogging in Iran.

I examine how the exhibition served as a tool for exploring my particular social research topic – popular online Iranian digital photography and the online creation of contemporary visualities of 'Iranianness' – with members of the specific community of media practitioners that I was studying: Iranian photobloggers.

As I will discuss throughout this article, issues of representation and identity politics were at the core of my research questions, since many Iranian photobloggers themselves seek to negotiate the historically and politically layered image of Iran and perceptions of 'Iranianness' through their photography. This field-specific factor, coupled with the fact that questions of identity and representation generally often characterise much of the political and cultural work that exhibitions perform (Karp 1991) explains something of the relevance of curating a digital exhibition as a fieldwork method; a notion that I will expand upon in this discussion. At the same time, digital exhibitions are not uniform, nor do they necessarily share any common intention or outcome.

They vary according to the research rubric, researcher, participants and the social, cultural and aesthetic frameworks from which the material is drawn (and feeds back into).

A useful starting point can be taken from Gubrium and Harper (2013: 173), who describe the digital exhibition as a *process*, whereby 'a group of participants work together to create a web-based interface where users may access a multimedia collection of visual, audio and text files'. Notions of the interactive/'participatory' (Huvila 2008), and 'operational archive' (McQuire 2013) are all relevant components of the digital exhibition's overall conceptual and ethical design, based primarily on a shared ethos of collaboration. For Huvila (Ibid), the participatory archive is contingent on a process of 'decentralised curation' and 'radical user orientation', involving placing the subject on an equal footing with the researcher as co-curators. McQuire's concept similarly describes an active (and not passive) digital environment, wherein participants (indigenous Australians in his study) realise an active sense of cultural self-determination and reflexivity by coming into close contact with digital images pertaining to aspects of their socio-cultural heritage, such as those of their ancestors. In my research in/on Iran, as I will detail, both the rationale and its specific *digital* form emerged from, helped me navigate, and in turn represented my multi-sited ethnographic field site - comprised of physical, digital and social 'spaces' that were variously linked to notions of Iranian identity. I conclude by suggesting how the exhibition, in contributing to a nascent contemporary visuality of 'Iranianness', bears broader relevance for contemporary visual ethnographic research, particularly concerning groups of people wherein identity-based activisms and issues of representation/self-representation are particularly prevalent.

But first, I will contextualise the broader significance of the digital exhibition within the specific epistemological, ontological and methodological framework of my research. I begin by giving an overview of my research topic and questions, before proceeding to discuss how I developed my methodological toolkit for studying photobloggers in Iran, the UK and online, which involved developing the digital exhibition as a fieldwork method. I conclude by assessing the broader relevance of this method – including the wider theoretical/methodological proposition of *anthropologist as curator* – for digital-visual ethnographic research.

PHOTOBLOGGING IN/OF IRAN

To begin my discussion, I will first outline the topic and central questions of my research in order to contextualise the broader intellectual rationale for developing the digital exhibition as a fieldwork method. My research investigated the on- and offline practices of Iranian popular photographers, with a special look at photobloggers (individuals/groups who blog predominantly with photographs rather than text). Photoblogging is a popular hobby the world over (Cohen 2005).
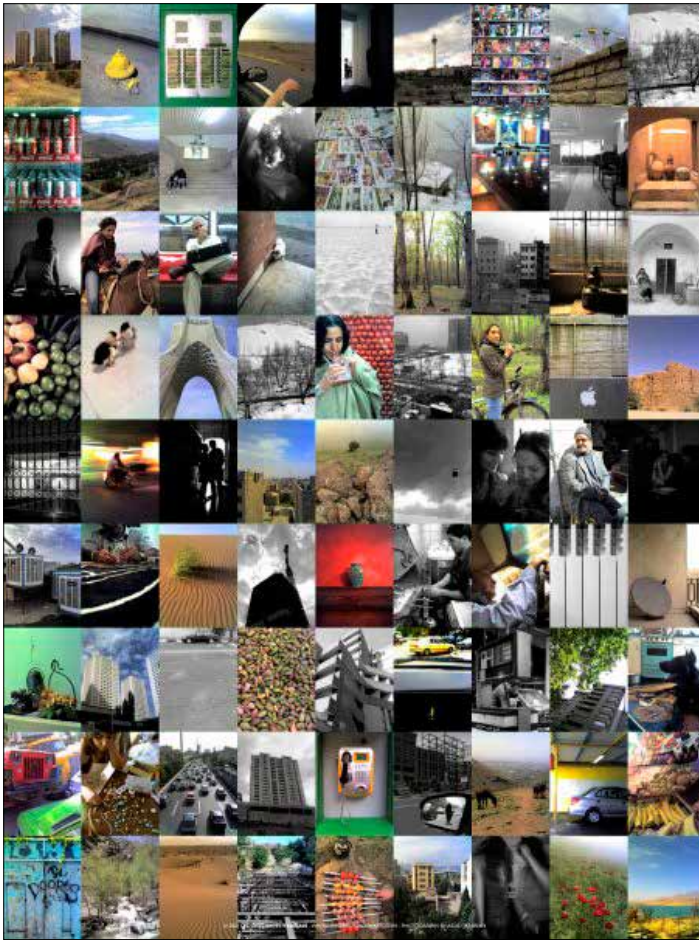
However, like social media, it also has its local peculiarities. My research found, for instance, how many Iranian photobloggers, inside and outside of the country highlight Iran itself as the chief subject of their photography and visual storytelling practices. Photographs are taken in and across Iran on digital cameras and camera phones in order to be shared across the globe via the Internet, in many cases to perform a specific kind of cultural work; namely, to 'show Iran as it really is'. Viewers are thereby encouraged to reconsider their received assumptions about the country and its variety of peoples. As I have also discussed elsewhere (Walton 2015), much of this showing reflects a 'soft political' intervention, whereby many Iranian photobloggers since the early 2000s, have been seeking to alter perceptions of Iran and Iranians as the 'enemy other' of the West and vice versa, propagated in official and mainstream visual/media narratives of the country in Iran and in 'the West'. This cultural polarisation became particularly exacerbated under the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013); a period of social and political conservatism, which re-enforced barriers to the West, and simultaneously, saw a significant amount of economic hardship brought about by sanctions imposed on the country by western powers.

FIGURE 1 - A FACEBOOK PROFILE IMAGE CREATED BY THE PHOTOBLOGGER FROM THE LIFE GOES ON IN TEHRAN PHOTOBLOG. USED WITH PERMISSION

 Summing up how many photobloggers have viewed their practice as one of 'humanizing' Iran and Iranians in light of this fraught political climate, the anonymous photographer behind one of the most popular photoblogs, 'Life Goes on in Tehran' (LGOIT)[1], and one of my main research participants puts it as follows: 'I knew early on that the most effective approach to humanizing Iranians was to show the daily life in my immediate surrounding…photoblogging is my medium of choice if for no other reason than the fact that it involves a camera and the Internet. Even a tiny barely functional camera phone provides the means to capture what I wanted to show to the world: the *truth* about Iran' (online interview, LGOIT).

Here, LGOIT conveys the broader significance of photoblogging in Iran as a vehicle of Iranian cultural self-representation. Mobile digital technologies – even a 'tiny barely functional camera phone' – are hereby deemed as the appropriate means for capturing and deploying a certain everyday 'truth' about Iran 'from below' to viewers online - in Iran and across the globe. Crucial to Iranian photobloggers' construction of a new 'visual ontology' in/of Iran, is their practice of rooting their photographic aesthetic in the everyday. Digital photographs shown on photoblogs convey the traditions, folklore, religious practices, material culture, food, history and ethnic diversities of Iran in rural and urban contexts - all of which are intended to serve as visual testaments of everyday life in a much-misunderstood country. As I will discuss, this visual emphasis on the everyday and the 'soft politics' of the Iranian banal similarly characterises the visual make-up of the digital exhibition, and its broader methodological intention to form a basis for discussing image politics in/of Iran during interviews and related research activities. In another capacity, photoblogs also serve as low-cost/free exhibition venues for showing and developing Iranian photography beyond official galleries and public museums inside and outside of Iran, and their respective politics, policies, and restrictions (Sreberny-Mohammadi 2014).

Given the relationship introduced above between nascent mobile digital technologies and their being mobilised by photobloggers to bring about an epistemological shift in ways of seeing Iran, I will turn to discuss how I developed my visual-methodological toolkit for studying photobloggers and their practices in Iran, the UK and online, in ways which spoke, and contributed to the overall intervention on the image of Iran that I was studying.

DOING DIGITAL-VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY IN/OF IRAN

Firstly, a relevant contextual note about my ethnographic research, which explains many of the *digital* and *visual* choices I made when designing my methodological toolkit, to which the digital exhibition belongs. In my research, the digital environment was not just a site of my topic, but became a principal field site.

[1] *lifegoesonintehran.com, www.facebook.com/lgoit/?fref=ts*

As a result of fraught international and domestic political climates when I began my fieldwork in 2012, travelling to Iran for British citizens (such as myself) had become a significant point of contention, as expressed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the UK and, in turn, my university division's health and safety committee. For this reason, I spent one month in Iran for my research; significantly less than I had hoped.

My limited access to Iran is not a unique methodological predicament; it has been cited as a particular issue facing British and American anthropologists of Iran in the post-revolutionary period (1979 to the present) due to deep-rooted political tensions between Iran and western powers (Hegland 2009)[2].

More broadly, limited access to field sites is something anthropologists are often faced with, and must find ways of adapting to. Postill (2016: 5) notes how restrictions of multiple kinds routinely affect how much time anthropologists spend in the field; ranging from war and natural disasters to local political turbulence, or more prosaically, lack of funds.

Most recently, factors relating to restricted physical presence are being cited, to varying degrees, as a rationale for conducting 'remote ethnography' in *digital* environments (Ibid).

This relies, for the most part, on establishing a series of relationships with participants over time online, based – true to the anthropologist's traditional commitment – on trust and 'intimate visual co-presence' (Ito 2005).

Back in the UK following my trip to Iran, I sought to devise some such *digital* strategies to continue my fieldwork remotely, and maintain presence and connection with research participants I had met in Iran, as well as those who I connected with purely online.

I will briefly account for some of these methods below as a precursor to introducing the digital exhibition.

Remote ethnographic research can take a variety of forms; from the use of remedial technologies (social media; Skype; email, and so forth), or via other layers of non-technological mediation, such as the use of research assistants, translators, and other influencing agents (Postill 2015: 5).

All of these strategies contribute to and make up the digital ethnographer's mediating lens. In the case of my ethnography, participatory digital and visual methods allowed me to build *digital* and *epistemological* proximity to my participants in the absence of physical presence, and as I will discuss, proved central to my understanding of photoblogging from the perspectives of the people whom partake in it as producers and viewers across the globe.

An early *digital* step I took in my research was to set up a research photoblog for my visit to Iran. I did this fairly simply through Tumblr.com, a popular blogging platform.

Via the research photoblog I documented and shared my travels to Iran with participants, which in turn, formed a useful basis for discussion with research participants, bringing together my experiences with their insights.

[2] Due in part to broader political tensions between Iran and 'the West', brief research trips to Iran (sometimes on tourist visas) such as the one hereby described in relation to my case are reasonably common for anthropologists of Iran, leading to what Hegland (2004) describes as the often necessity of 'zip in and zip out fieldwork', particularly for British and American anthropologists of post-revolution Iran.

With the increasing use of digital technologies in anthropological fieldwork, these kinds of digital practices, which actively include research participants in the research process, have been suitably termed 'e-Fieldnotes' (Sanjek and Tratner 2016) and have become increasingly widespread[3]. Technology-facilitated collaboration was something I developed throughout my research with Iranian photobloggers. In my broader fieldwork activities, I carried out online participant observation of Iranian photoblogging for twelve months, during which I became a 'consequential social actor in online space' (Boellstorff et al. 2012). With the permission, I took hand written notes and recorded video and audio calls on Skype using a relevant software application. I also printed and physically archived e-mails, chat correspondence and interview transcripts.[4]

Many of these research activities involved establishing live digital co-presence with participants across multiple physical locations; an ontological aspect that has been cited as one of the unique features of doing digital ethnography today (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Marcus 2012; Pink et al. 2015). After nine months of such remote digital-ethnographic activities, coupled with traditional ethnographic research conducted amongst the Iranian diaspora in London, I decided to develop a more specific methodological apparatus, a digital exhibition, for extrapolating greater ethnographic texture with my transnationally dispersed research participants. I turn to discuss this below before evaluating its broader relevance for collaborative and participatory research in digital anthropology.

THE DIGITAL EXHIBITION AS A
VISUAL-ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK METHOD

The digital exhibition *www.photoblogsiran.com* was curated and employed as a formative part of my research process (see Figure 2). The rationale for developing it principally relates to the overall epistemological framework of my research; the study of self-representational storytelling practices by Iranians about Iran, through digital photography. In this sense, the digital exhibition forms what I term a 'site-specific methodology'; whereby the *form* of the method (a digital exhibition of digital photographs/photoblogs) was carved out of the *field site* (photographers practices in online environments).

The exhibition also had the effect of carving out an 'art space' (simultaneously a research space), for exhibiting popular Iranian photography within the broader digital landscape. Here, participants and I could virtually 'meet', reflect upon and collectively explore the research theme within the safety and confines of a platform co-created precisely for this purpose. More specifically, we could talk about and explore issues concerning images of Iran that we were all in the business of producing and/or studying.

This had the effect of building upon the virtual co-presence (Postill 2013), which we had already established via the digital-ethnographic activities mentioned above.

[3] For a relevant discussion on producing 'live fieldnotes' using digital applications see Tricia Wang's (2012) report: ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/

[4] See Horst (2016).

photoblogsiran.com

home / contact

Photoblogs from Iran:
A Digital Exhibition

Methodological component of a PhD research project in Anthropology (2011-2015) conducted at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford.

ENTER

In developing the digital exhibition as a method, I made use of what Gubrium and Harper (2013: 173) suggest to be the primary goal of placing exhibitions online in the form of online web 2.0 platforms, namely 'to make materials available to a wider public', while fully attending to the ethical implications of this[5]. From the onset, ethical considerations were intrinsic to the theoretical conception of the exhibition.

It was agreed that participants would maintain copyright of all of their photographs, and these would be featured on the site in conjunction with their broader participation in my research project. The photographs would be introduced, contextualized and presented as part of one such wider research process, as described in the 'about' and background' sections of the site. Apart from LGOIT quoted earlier, who officially maintains public anonymity, each photographer is introduced with their real name (Figure 3). This reflects a conscious ethical policy implemented throughout my broader study, based on the desires of the principal participants, that their real names would be used, just as they also are in other online public platforms, including on their own photoblogs. The digital exhibition shares conceptual affinity with Varzi's (2006) (offline) methodology of the *dowreh* (circle or salon), used in her ethnographic study of Iranian youth in Tehran. Varzi's method similarly sought to involve individuals in an active manner during research process. While conducting research in Tehran, Varzi put together a *dowreh* of college students in the hope of establishing a 'comfortable environment (as opposed to an environment whereby the subject simply answers questions...)' (ibid: 14).

[5] For a relevant discussion on the ethics of making digital research material public, see Gubrium and Harper (2013), pp.45-69.

Cover image for the Facebook fan page of the popular photoblog 'Life Goes on in Tehran'.

FIGURE 3 - HOME PAGE OF THE DIGITAL EXHIBITION: *WWW.PHOTOBLOGSIRAN.COM/BLOG/*

This collaborative space aimed to move beyond a focus group governed by her research questions, and towards a more collective project that, as Varzi puts it, 'became their project' of examining their own lives, as they thought about how they consume their public space and public culture (ibid: 14). The exhibition methodology presented here extends these principles to the digital and transnational Iranian context. In addition, through curating the exhibition, I was able to generate and extrapolate ethnographic texture by obtaining first hand experience of what it takes to design, curate, maintain and monitor a photoblog, including 'behind the scenes' details of the process that the presented photoblogs themselves do not share with the general viewing public. A core ethos of the exhibition therefore is the idea of the anthropologist as a curator in and of the field; something I expand upon in the following discussion.

DIGITAL CO-CURATION

The essential template of the exhibition website was established with assistance from two of the eight participants, who were able to devote the most amount of their time to the project in its design phase. The working site was initially password protected, allowing for a period of one month's relaxed co-curating, developing and editing before the site was made public.

Between the exhibiting photographers and I, we decided that I was to be the sole editor of the page, with access to the main editorial dashboard of the site. Moreover, for the sake of consistency with many of the existing photoblog platforms Iranian photobloggers use (such as WordPress and related blogging platforms), but also in anticipation of the exhibition's future global publics, the site would be in English - as indeed much of the text on Iranian photoblogs themselves often is given their intended global reach (many use a combination of Persian written in the English alphabet, popularly known as 'PEnglish'). In practical terms, participants would make suggestions and changes to content and display during the developments stage by communicating though e-mail, Skype, Facebook and the general ways we had been digitally communicating during the research process as earlier described. My role and activities, as chief overseer of the exhibition raises relevant questions concerning the precise nature of collaboration in participatory research of this kind. Whilst it is fair to term the digital exhibition a collaborative and participatory project, the nature of the participation also varied amongst participants, and between them and myself. Given that I maintained my role and activities as chief overseer of the exhibition, it is perhaps useful to speak of the digital exhibition as an on-going point of collaborative contact, rather than a fully collaborative project; a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997) of sorts, between myself and Iranian popular photographers, which relied on active participation and a good deal of transnational, digital collaboration.

REPRESENTING SELF-REPRESENTATION

In addition to practical and ethical considerations, an epistemological quandary posed by the exhibition pertains to the conceptual 'double bind' of the frame within a frame of representing self-representation. Visual anthropologists who work with the 'Photo Voice' method invite participants to explore aspects of their subjectivity and lived experience using cameras they either physically give to them, or by using modern technologies participants have themselves, such as smart phones and or digital cameras (Gubrium and Harper 2013). In the digital exhibition, the exhibited photographs are not created for the purposes of the research. Rather, they pre-exist and have an online presence in other digital contexts before (and after) my intervention on them as researcher, which draws them into the research process.

In this sense, the digital exhibition presented here marks a subtle shift in the way in which anthropologists might carry out these kind of 'visual interventions' (Pink 2009).

Though this issue of adoption and appropriation of subjects' own visual material is not altogether a new concern –anthropologists who study artists and their works admittedly also study pre-existing systems of visual [self-] representation (Schneider 1996) – studying visual media-producing self-representing subjects in the manner described in this article raises important methodological questions for collaborative and participatory digital and visual anthropology.

I will discuss some of these below as I detail the process of co-curating the exhibition online. A first step my participants and I took during the curatorial process was to discuss which images (out of the potentially thousands from their own photoblogs) would be included in the exhibition.

This meant deciding on what Kratz (2002) calls, in her work curating a travelling exhibition of photographic portraits she took of the Okiek people of Kenya, 'the ones that are wanted'. By the same token, it was equally important to consider in our exhibition, the ones that might be *un*wanted.

This basic curatorial concern felt particularly pertinent given the fact that visual-cultural representations of Iran was itself a chief concern for the Iranian photobloggers I worked with, and which was also therefore a central analytical object of my study.

In addressing this question, it is helpful to consider another of Kratz's (2002: 1) quandaries from her physical exhibition of Okiek portraits: 'How do we know and show who we are and who others are?' As discussed, this is a question that Iranian photobloggers themselves explore in their practices.

Though by no means intending to offer any comprehensive portrayal of Iranian photobloggers, or the images of Iran that they create, the digital exhibition would capture, distil, and itself communicate aspects of the exhibiting photobloggers visual repertoires, drawn from their existing collections of digital photographs from across Iran, which would form a useful basis for exploring the broader socio-political, historical, and epistemological questions of my research of photography and visual culture in/of Iran.

Practically speaking, it was agreed that individuals would select as many images as they wanted for their individual exhibit pages in the exhibition.

In a couple of cases, we negotiated processes of choosing together at some of the photographers' requests. This process explains the variation in size of the photographers' exhibits, as well as the various categories of image 'types' that emerged. The submitted/retrieved images totalled 173.

This variation reflected the different sized photoblogs in the wider Iranian photoblogosphere; whilst some are prolific photographers, updating their photoblog on a daily basis, others take fewer, more stylised shots; the latter gallery size I found to be particularly common amongst those with aspirations of becoming professional photographers and photojournalists.

 Once the photographs had been submitted and uploaded to the exhibition site (still in draft form and not yet made public), we discussed their ordering and arrangement.

One participant suggested that the 'tagging' function might be used (just as it is on photoblogs) to assign exhibiting photographers with certain types of images. Out of our conversations, thirteen main categories emerged from various themes and visual interests discussed.

These include references to the landscape, material culture, arts and cultures of Iran, the movements of photographers themselves – between urban and rural photography locations and subjects – as well as more 'artful' types of what exhibitors and I referred to (following some photobloggers use of the term on their own photoblogs) as 'experimental' photography; that which leans more towards artistic practice than documentary photorealism. The categories featured on the exhibition digitally group together the photographers – not their photographs in isolation – under the said category. This places emphasis on the photographers' themselves; their interests and their journeys with photography, and keeps the images within their autophotobiographical contexts. In some sense the category types appear fairly conventional. Indeed, they were not intended to represent the broader visual complexities of the storytelling witnessed in Iranian photoblogging - including in captions and viewer comments. Of greater significance than the individual category, or photograph, arguably then is the sum of their parts; or rather, the overall aesthetic emphasis on the 'Iranian everyday' that the photobloggers, as a specific group of media practitioner, seek to communicate. In this manner, the 'local' categories that emerged through the digital exhibition strike up a direct relationship with the wider 'global' (but also national) mediascapes in which these photographs – pre-existing as they do on individuals own photoblogs– are in active visual dialogue.

FIGURE 4 - MATERIAL CULTURE CATEGORY ON THE DIGITAL EXHIBITION: *WWW.PHOTOBLOGSIRAN.COM/ BLOG/CATEGORY/MATERIAL-CULTURE/*

DIGITAL PHOTO-ELICITATION

Viewership is an important aspect of photoblogging. Here, digital photography is a dialogical social/media practice, rather than a one-way, flat or finished representation (Crang 2007; Larsen 2008).

One of my main research activities as researcher/curator involved sharing the exhibition with relevant viewing publics, for research purposes. Between June 2013 and October 2013, the digital exhibition was incorporated into interviews, on- and offline.

It was shared *digitally* (via the URL link), and *physically* (in the UK) by myself on my or participants' own computers. Viewers included (i) Iranian photobloggers not taking part in the exhibition, (ii) Iranians in Iran, (iii) members of the Iranian diaspora in the UK, (iv) Iranians and non-Iranians in the UK, as well as (v) gallery curators, artists and journalists (Iranian and non-Iranian) in Tehran and London who were contributing to the wider ethnography (see Table 1).

This viewer base broadened the potential sample of physically participating subjects by allowing easier access (virtual and economical) than that traditionally afforded by visiting a physical exhibition in a fixed physical location.

Sharing the exhibition in this manner allowed me to carry out *digital* photo elicitation: a digital form of the established visual method of photo elicitation (Collier and Collier 1986), which uses images to elicit discourse with participants, particularly in interview contexts, and which subsequently informs the researcher's analysis.

I was able to investigate different (but fluid) categories of viewer 'types', and discuss different interpretations of image sets in relation to individuals' physical location and their wider sense of proximity (cultural, political, affective) to Iran.

The exhibition's specific visual focus on Iran and photobloggers' visual storytelling practices also aided my analytical capacity to construct what Pink (2011: 96) calls the 'ethnographic place', in which description and theory come together to create a representational rendering of the ethnography.

This ethnographic 'place' becomes itself a contemporary anthropological archive, forming a digital 'cabinet of curiosity' of the field for viewers, while also standing as a testament to the research process itself, and individuals' participation in it.

In more general terms, curating a digital research environment such as this can prove beneficial in constructing a discursive virtual space, made of an ensemble of people from across multiple countries and time zones, and whose multi-sited/multi-temporal ontology cannot exist in the offline setting in a physical sense.

Here, the digital exhibition offers certain ways of knowing and being – namely, digitally and virtually co-presently across time/space – which extends the methodological and epistemological possibilities of what traditional physical fieldwork methods alone might provide.

IRAN (VIA URL LINK)	UK (IN PERSON WITH COMPUTER)
Photobloggers not participating in the exhibition	Members of Iranian diaspora in London
Other Iranians (students, young professionals, filmmakers, media professionals)	Students, academics, journalists, artists (Iranian/non-Iranian)
	Gallery owners, photography curators, London (Iranian / non-Iranian)
Across the globe (via URL link)	
Iranians in diaspora	
Non-Iranians (with/without connections to Iran)	

DIGITAL AFTERLIVES

Finally, an important practical reason for setting up the digital photography exhibition pertains to the life span of photoblogs. Photoblogs are essentially vulnerable digital objects; they have no guaranteed presence or 'afterlife', but are both paid for (though some photobloggers use existing, free software programmes) and maintained by their creators.

This means that their activity and longevity are largely contingent upon photobloggers' own attitudes towards them.

In some cases, I found that individuals do not renew their photoblog's web presence after its scheduled online expiry date, due to a combination of the personal and/or financial commitments required in maintaining it. This potentially leaves the digital ethnographer suddenly devoid of a particular 'data set'. In these cases, the digital research exhibition intervenes. It extends the lifespan and virtual presence of the 'dead' photoblog, resurrecting it in another, protected digital space (and, if shared, other digital viewing publics). At first the exhibition was (and still is) preserved as a website under my own auspices. However, it will also be archived – digitally (and physically as a CD-ROM) – with my university library.

During this process, the individual's photoblog, and its 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) are in part revived and reformulated by way of viewers' engagements with a digital simulacra of an otherwise 'dead' platform. In so doing, the exhibition simultaneously captures the present digital-visual 'moment' to which these photoblogs about Iran – constructed at specific time and places by particular individuals using certain technologies – belong. This process of archiving and preserving recalls, and in some sense forms a digital contribution to established practices of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology, involving the collecting, representing and exhibiting of ethnographic material. Critical debates in anthropology and museum studies have since addressed this tradition, of what has been termed 'salvage ethnography' (Clifford 1989: 73), denoting the 'desire', as Clifford puts it, to 'rescue something "authentic" out of destructive historical change'.

Though not staking any claims to cultural 'authenticity' along these historical lines, my efforts to preserve a dead photoblog through the digital exhibition 'salvages' something of a digital moment in Iranian online cultural production, whereby photoblogging was a prominent *modus operandi* of digital cultural self-representation. This endeavour raises wider questions concerning the expiry and obsolescence of digital objects and artefacts in current and future digital anthropological research. Thinking through the associated politics and practices of these issues arguably puts ancient cultural objects, dead photoblogs and even deceased persons (see provisions taken by Facebook to memorialise users' accounts after physical death[6]) on an ethico-methodological plane which, I suggest, should continue critical thinking about preservation, cultural heritage and digital participatory practices, from the museum/gallery to the web.

CONCLUSION: THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS CURATOR

In this article, I have critically reflected upon the relevance and efficacy of developing various digital and visual methods drawn *from* and *within* the field (digital photography on the Internet) to simultaneously render, curate and study the field (the digital and social spaces collaboratively generated during the research process), showing how it can provide another option to physical collaboration. In particular, I have examined a site-specific fieldwork method, a digital photography exhibition, which I curated as a research technique that spoke directly to my multi-sited and multi-spatial field site. This raises the question of the anthropologist as curator in/of the field in the digital environment. As discussed, digital exhibitions of this kind enable anthropologists to access, convene and study groups similarly bound by the confines of wider offline social, political and economic conditions, and/or aesthetic frameworks. In the case of my research, the digital exhibition allowed me a unique way of collaborating discursively through image-based work, with my interlocutors based in different countries, and with other participants inside and outside of Iran. The implications of this fieldwork technique are both methodological and epistemological. As discussed, the digital exhibition became a method of anthropological research *and* representation amongst different viewing communities inside and outside of Iran. The exhibition allowed me to ask relevant questions about the politics of representing Iran via the lives and practices of the exhibiting individuals and their photographs. In this sense, it signals a subtle shift from the anthropologist predominantly as *author* to the possibility of her role as *curator* of visual-ethnographic knowledge (without negating the former). Acting as curator in/of the digital landscape not only gave me a special entry point into the practice, but it also established a unique way of collaborating with my interlocutors from outside of Iran, without physically being present with them.

[6] https://www. facebook.com/help/ contact/651319028315841, accessed 08/06/15.

I am not suggesting that this signals any replacement, nor arguably anything entirely 'new' in (visual) ethnography. However, exploring such collaborative and participatory digital and visual methods, I contend, can prove particularly salient features of a broader ethnographic investigation, in cases when physical access to field sites may be knowingly or unexpectedly restricted.

The digital exhibition discussed in this article should ultimately be considered as part of a broader methodological moment in visual ethnography, whereby established approaches are converging with and readjusting themselves to the epistemological possibilities of the digital. One such potential identified in this article is the opportunity for intervention and methodological creativity afforded by digital and visual methods such as the exhibition - partly (but not necessarily) in response to physical access quandaries. The digital exhibition, as a mobile, material method responds to these challenges, whilst endorsing Pink's earlier (2011: 211) proposition that visual anthropologists can use collaborative methods, interactive hypermedia and the Internet to 'produce ethically responsible texts that engage with the corporeality of vision, have activist ambitions and might bridge the gap between written and visual academic anthropology'. In sum, collaborative methods such as the digital exhibition attend to these, and a host of related questions concerning how those involved in digital-ethnographic pursuits might collectively curate, mediate, and represent an increasingly interconnected world, off- and online.

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