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SOCIAL [MEDIA] DISTANCING: ON DIGITAL ESPIONAGE, ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD, AND ETHICS 'IN THE FIELD'

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of digital ethnographic methods in an emerging research landscape struck by COVID-19, whereby more traditional anthropological methods have been rendered impossible due to social distancing restrictions. It argues that while anthropology has long privileged physical proximity and presence as a central tenet of ethnographic method, digital methods can also afford a certain sense of social distance, which in fact can be beneficial to the research process. It draws upon experiences of conducting fifteen months of fieldwork both online and offline amongst marginalised groups in Cuba and its diaspora in Miami to reveal the ways in which digital distance can level the relationship between researcher and researched, and ultimately lead to a more ethical way of carrying out fieldwork amongst vulnerable communities.

Keywords: Social distancing; social media; digital ethnography; ethics; fieldwork; ethnographic methods.

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1 A NEW ERA OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

As I write this from my central London apartment — facemask-clad passers-by striding purposefully past my window in the attempt to remain two metres away from anyone else — the term “social distancing” is already passing from the realm of dystopian science-fiction into everyday vernacular. Across the globe, people have rapidly been forced to adjust their expectations of physical co-presence with loved ones, yet for many anthropologists this has been a double blow. Deprived of contact with loved ones, we have also suddenly lost much of what constitutes our livelihood, for how, in an emerging reality taking form around physical “distance” rather than “presence”, are we to conduct ethnographic fieldwork?

This has caused not a small modicum of panic amongst some anthropologists I know, and recent months have seen many research position job advertisements withdrawn or indefinitely paused while we, as a collective, wait for things to “go back to normal”, or work out a new, palatable way of moving forwards. For many, it’s an anxiety-inducing prospect. For some, though, this new “socially distanced” era may bring some degree of welcome relief to a longstanding discourse within the discipline that has traditionally privileged the embodied situatedness of the ethnographer — or social *presence* — ideally within a community as far away from our home as possible. We, as anthropologists, tend to like distances only when able to cross them in a plane and see what’s “over there.”

This article situates digital ethnographic methods within such longstanding debates within anthropology about the role of fieldwork as an anthropological rite of passage, the construction of the fieldsite as a (physical) place, and the requirement to be physically present in this fieldsite throughout a prolonged period of time. It then argues that digital technologies and digital ethnographic methods afford new ways of being present, such as may now become more mainstream in anthropological research by sheer necessity, yet at the same time such technologies also afford a degree of absence which, in contradiction of hegemonic anthropological views on the matter, can in fact also be valuable in the research process. Most significantly, I argue that the affordances of the digital to simultaneously foster presence and absence can re-shape the researcher/research subject relationship in new, and arguably more ethical, guises. In this light, a future of “social distancing”, which might strike horror into the hearts of many an anthropologist, perhaps need not seem quite so bleak.

2 HOME AND AWAY

While anthropologists have been critiquing the role of fieldwork for many decades now, there are certain truisms that seem particularly resilient. Separations between “home” and “the field”, the (gendered) assumptions of the always up-for-anything fieldworker, and anthropology’s proclivities toward suffering subjects remain points of tension within the discipline (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Günel et al., 2020). When conducting ethnographic fieldwork, one has to actually be present in the field, assert Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik (1994, p. 4), and long-distance means of communication simply do not measure up. Duration and embeddedness (physically) in the field is crucial, as Judith Okley (1992) reminds us. The long-term immersion in anthropological fieldwork as a “total experience, demanding all of the anthropologist’s resources, intellectual, physical, emotional, political and intuitive” (Okley, 1992, p. 8) have long been central tenets of the methodological approach. Such understandings of the value of ethnographic fieldwork have direct forebears in the approaches of early anthropologists, for whom research necessitated long-distance travel to see the “native” in his (or her) own “natural habitat”, and observe them close hand (Kuklick, 1991). As Vered Amit pointed out two decades ago, however, this rendering of ethnographic fieldwork “no longer suffices even as a serviceable fiction for many contemporary ethnographers” (2000, p. 2).

To be sure, anthropologists have evolved with the times over recent decades. George Marcus’s call for “multi-sited ethnography” (1995) marked one key moment in the process of deconstructing a more “place-focused concept of culture” (Olwig & Hastrup, 1997, p. 4), and this shift away from locality coincided with a broader scholastic attention to globalisation(s), cultural flows, growing diasporas and migration (Bhabha, 1994; Kearney, 1995; Appadurai, 1996; Ong, 1999; Brah, 2005). Yet, despite the trenchant criticism expressed over the last thirty years of the concept of culture as a discrete self-contained entity and bounded location, anthropology at large continues to cling onto its colonial view of the world (Caputo, 2003). Moreover, such ideas continue to assert and reify powerful and systematic hierarchies that make the notions of “us” and “them”, “home” and “away” very real, in very tangible ways. As Virginia Caputo outlines, and as I have already argued elsewhere, past examples of “exotic” fieldwork as norms against which we continue to compare the authenticity and value of contemporary research continue to embody a differentiation of what “real” fieldwork looks like, which in turn becomes painfully stark to doctoral students and early-career researchers when applying for competitive grants and academic positions (Caputo, 2003; Cearn, 2018). This distinction between the authentic field and home continues to rest (more often than not) upon their spatial separation; we “collect” data in the field, and “write

up” once we’re “back” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 12). The former is “raw” and “real”; the latter, “refined” and “polished”.

These old debates are once again thrown into stark relief by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which has effectively grounded all of us, wherever we happened to be in early 2020. There are many improvisational dimensions to knowledge production in general, and as Lisa Malkki points out, for ethnographic research, improvisation is indispensable (2007, p. 163). Consequently, many of us are starting to think through some new ways in which we could go about our work; if ever there was a time for some improvisation, it would surely be now. A new form of “patchwork ethnography” has been proposed, for example, to accommodate now widespread restrictions upon mobility (Günel et al., 2020). It is my contention that the only truly new aspect of this, however, will be the widespread degree to which anthropologists may now have to abandon prior preconceptions of what demarcates the authentic field, and adopt these more mobile, at times fragmentary ways of working. Moreover, I argue that this is not to be viewed purely in negative terms, for there is something to be gained from such an approach, both for anthropologists and our research participants.

3 VIRTUAL PRESENCE & DIGITAL DISTANCING

While digital ethnographic methods have been utilised by anthropologists (as well as sociologists, geographers, ethnomusicologists, and so forth) for approaching two decades now, they are still widely regarded (within anthropology, at least) as insufficient in isolation at forming the wider, holistic picture of a community that anthropology so prizes. Conceiving of the digital landscape as an anthropological field site generally remains, as Shireen Walton observes, a “poorer supplement for being there ‘for real’, where not being there physically, equates to not being there at all” (2018, p. 2). Even in cases where the object of study is fundamentally digital in nature — such as ethnographic accounts of social media networks or online gaming communities, for example — such digital ethnographic methods are generally expected to be supplementary to a larger, more “embedded” piece of long-term fieldwork, which typically requires studying these communities *in situ*.

Through combination of these methodologies, there have now been numerous accounts of the multiple ways in which digital technologies are central to contemporary human experiences of life (and beyond). Moreover, anthropologists have widely documented the ways in which these digital technologies afford new types of community, new bonds of kinship, new senses of belonging, and can draw together groups of people in unexpected ways (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Miller & Sinanan, 2014;

Leurs, 2015; Madianou, 2016; Miller et al., 2016). Digital technologies have been shown to provide certain affordances to what James Ferguson terms “presence” or “co-presence” (2019); in short, they provide new ways of allowing us to “be there” (Schroeder, 2010).

This is something that will not come of great surprise now to a pandemic-struck socially distanced world where social interaction is overwhelmingly mediated by the likes of Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. If we weren’t before, many of us are now experts are navigating these digital technologies to create some sense of proximity or presence with our friends and family. Of course, digital ethnographers have used these technologies in order to get closer to research participants for over a decade now, and there are numerous handbooks of method available summarising the benefits of such methods (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Miller & Horst, 2012; Hine, 2015; Sanjek & Tratner, 2016; Hjorth et al., 2017). Digital technologies have restructured space (Jensen et al., 2002; Christensen et al., 2011), meaning that for many of us, our studied environment is now never far away (Sundén, 2012; Bengtsson, 2014). In other words then, in our adoption of digital ethnographic methods, we as anthropologists have continued to prize *proximity* or *presence* over *distance* or *absence*.

Yet, arguably, digital technologies simultaneously hold multiple affordances: just as they may draw us closer together, so too can they effect distance. It is my argument here that this can in fact be of equal value when it comes to ethnographic research.

4 DIGITAL ESPIONAGE AND ETHICS (OR, THE RIGHT TO FACEBOOK STALK)

I’ll admit I resorted to using digital methods during my own fieldwork (in Cuba and the Cuban diaspora in Miami) largely due to my own increasing desperation and sense of failure regarding what I myself thought would count as “legitimate” or “authentic” fieldwork. While many anthropologists don’t discuss such fears out loud, it would appear these concerns are more common than we’d care to admit (Pollard, 2009; Cearn, 2018). In my own case, I found conducting ethnographic fieldwork amongst a community of Cuban exiles (and, moreover, a group of people who work at the margins of the law within a growing informal economy, or “black market”) to be emotionally and ethically charged, and understandably many of them didn’t want to talk to me. Realistically, they had little to gain from doing so. Moreover, my physical presence (on a few occasions naïvely walking into potentially dangerous situations, either for me or for my research participants), was a cause of potential concern for both the people I was researching, and for me. Of course, numerous anthropologists have also encountered such hurdles, whether also in the case of Cuba (Bell, 2013),

in other politically charged contexts such as Iran (Walton, 2018), or in areas with less centralised state control, such as across Africa (Gokah, 2006; Chakravarty, 2012). Physical presence is not always a beneficial thing, either for the researcher or the researched.

In my case, many of the people I was trying to engage with suspected me of being a spy, something which, given the tense political climate and history between Cuba and Miami, was not in fact so far-fetched. Nor is it the first time that anthropologists have faced such accusations (Borneman & Masco, 2015; Driscoll & Schuster, 2018). As James Faubion points out, in ancient Greek, the *anthrôpologos* is someone “fond of conversing about the personal affairs of others who in his less flattering incarnations might exhibit a curiosity bordering on or perhaps even passing into nosiness” (2017, p. 146); it is hardly surprising, then, that the Cuban smuggling community I was trying to gain access to wasn’t particularly interested in having a quick chat with me. The tipping point, however, became when I enabled them to “spy” (Spanish: *espíar*) back on me in return.

For all of us, one of the most important steps in the participant observation process is to take care in initiating relationships with informants. Success in establishing rapport and trust can shape an entire research project (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 76). In the cases where I did manage to build up enough rapport and trust with participants to enable a meaningful interaction (for both of us), such instances were instigated online, in almost all instances. Early on in my fieldwork, I had decided to create a public social media profile and a website, where I set out (in both English and Spanish) exactly who I was, what I wanted to do, and why. At first, I only included links to my university profile, which weren’t met with a great deal of interest, but as the months went by, I populated the profile with increasing amounts of content. Videos, photos, likes and comments: the kind of content I would typically put on a personal Facebook page, but not somewhere where I wanted to appear “professional”. I had the growing impression that I was being researched by this Cuban community far more effectively than I was researching them. By about three months into my fieldwork, I was receiving as many as 30 direct messages per day from Cubans (that I didn’t know) who wanted to know more about my research project. Who was paying me to do it? Who had I already spoken to? Did I know about so-and-so? Facebook “stalking” became an instrumental part of the research process for my participants and, in turn, for me (de Zwart et al., 2010).

In retrospect, most of the research participants I ended up having the closest relationships with were those that initially contacted me, secure in the knowledge that they had “checked me out” in advance. More often than not, my own attempts to approach people were met with a combination of fear, disdain, or disinterest. Through the general cacophony

of voices messaging me, I eventually came to the attention of a small number of Cuban digital entrepreneurs, who, it turned out, had been observing me from a distance for a while, and who ultimately proved instrumental in facilitating much of my research. Instagram and Twitter also proved useful platforms for people to find me, especially given the affordance of a hashtag (boyd, 2011; Costa, 2018) as a search method. This also had the added bonus of allowing them a “safe space” in which to research me (and cross-check this research) from a distance, and to decide whether or not they were willing to know me. It also meant that by the time I did eventually meet them in person, I had benefited from a length of time in which to introduce them to my research, explain my motivations, and also explain their rights regarding data and anonymity. Indeed, for several of my interlocutors, the mediation provided by social media platforms such as Facebook was a valuable veil of privacy in parallel with intimacy; I found that several of my participants wanted to speak with me, indeed sought me out, yet were reticent to meet me face to face.

Perhaps the best instance of this was a young woman named Yani, who had moved to Miami from Cuba a few years earlier, and quietly ran a small business moving items back and forth between the two countries (often in breach of U.S. law). She was the friend of a friend (of a friend), and knew of my own research interests long before I had ever heard of her. Initially she added me on Instagram, and for several months the only interaction we had was her liking my posts, but then not responding to my comments on hers. Eventually, she privately messaged me her WhatsApp number, saying she wanted to speak to me, but only through a platform that was encrypted (which WhatsApp is). Over the following six months or so, I tried on numerous occasions to physically meet with her, to which she always showed resistance or evasion. On two occasions we made plans to meet for a coffee, and she cancelled at about ten minutes’ notice. And yet despite this, she continued to send me long written and audio messages with some of the most valuable information I collected in my entire fieldwork period. She was also adamant she wanted to be involved in my research, as she felt that what she was doing, and what she represented, was a crucial emerging element of Cuban culture that goes largely unnoticed.

Finally, on the day I was due to fly home from Miami for good, I messaged her saying I wanted to meet her and that this would be our last chance. She agreed and suggested I meet her at her business, a mere four hours before my flight was scheduled to take off. I drove across town, and on route I received another message, directing me to go to her apartment (which was in the opposite direction). I duly turned around and headed over there instead. Once I’d pulled up in the driveway, I rang her to let her know I’d arrived, only to be told that now was not such a good time after

all. The baby needed changing. She hadn't brushed her hair yet. Her mother might call her. But she stressed that she *did* want to talk to me. By this point, I was sitting in my car, parked a mere five metres from her front window, and could in fact see her shadow though the blind. In the end, we did have a long conversation — a two-hour interview in fact — over WhatsApp audio messaging, five metres apart, separated by her front door.

When I look back, I realise that my own sense of urgency — that I was *leaving* the field — simply did not translate for Yani. Did I not have WhatsApp back in London after all? My own interpretation at the time of such encounters as indicative of my own failure, and my sense that I had only managed to gain “partial access”, haunted me for some time, yet I now look back upon this interview (and several others like it) as some of my greatest ethnographic successes, insofar as Yani and I found a place, mutually, where we as researcher and researched could meet on more equal terms, that met (more or less) both of our needs. I credit this in large part for the candidness and depth of information she was then willing to share with me. Digital technologies certainly permitted the proximity that I gained with Yani — in fact, our entire relationship has consistently been mediated by the digital and I doubt I'd have “met” her otherwise — but it was also the distance that such technologies afforded between us that was instrumental to her comfort in speaking with me. I, in turn, came to see this as one of the most ethical decisions I took throughout my fieldwork, albeit one I later had to defend to other anthropologists. In this way, digital technologies ultimately enabled me to engage in far more meaningful interactions, and in fact experience what some might term more “authentic” experiences of Yani's own social world — one of fear, anonymity, and reliance upon digitally mediated networks — than I ever could have gained purely offline.

5 TO [BE] CONSTRUCT[ED BY] THE FIELD

Given how central our construction of the notion of a fieldsite is to our discipline, it seems surprising just how many anthropologists admit in their writing to having practically “stumbled across” their fieldsite “by chance” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 11). This was certainly my own sense of my fieldsite: I had set out to understand informal economies of material circulation in a politically fraught part of the world, and what I perceived as my inability to “really see” what I was looking for (not least because I am a woman, and this particular world I was exploring is highly male-dominated) created a growing sense of failure and frustration on my part. It took a few months for me to realise that I was in fact already “in the field”, but that my participants (rather than I) were dictating the terms of engagement, as it were, and where this field-encounter would take place.

In this case, they decided that Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp were most comfortable.

Of course, this is arguably the case in far more fieldsites than some of us might care to admit, and the knowledge we are given access to is inevitably always partial in nature. The nature of this particular (digital) field of encounter, however, arguably reversed many of the power dynamics to which many of us are so accustomed. Typically, an anthropologist might fly into the field, and then leave at the end: here, my participants were the ones to “arrive” (online), and they chose when an encounter would finish. Even two years after my fieldwork ended, they still choose when and where to get in touch with me; the fact that I am now back in London is of no significance. The digital landscape is no longer merely a research tool but a transnational field in its own right, and one which “fundamentally repositions the person of the researcher” (Bluteau, 2021, p. 5). While “the field” and its corresponding method of ethnographic fieldwork has long been perhaps the central component to the anthropological tradition, so too does anthropology teach that “traditions are always reworked and even reinvented as needed” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 4).

Advocates of digital ethnography have done much to rework and reinvent our traditions, detailing the various affordances that digital methodologies lend us. My interest here, however, has been to highlight also what the affordances of digital technologies take away from us, and from our discipline, and to argue that this might signal a positive development for anthropology more broadly. Digital landscapes can also somewhat level the power dialectic that too often dictates the relationship between researcher and research subject; moreover, in the case I presented here from my own ethnographic fieldwork, I found these positions largely reversed, as I felt myself coming under increasing online scrutiny and research from the counter-gazes of those I was seeking to engage with. Such a shift renders the ethnographer an even more central agent in the construction of the field; the fulcrum of the entire informal network I documented was in fact me (or rather, my digital avatar). Research participants conducted snowballing methods themselves, researching me from a distance and then, when they decided it was appropriate, pushing me in various “right” directions according to what they thought important to reveal. This was not, therefore, a coherent collectivity that existed independently of myself (see also Pink, 2003).

While it is easy to assume that face-to-face interactions might be somehow more “genuine”, the most meaningful interactions I had throughout my fifteen months of fieldwork were with those who trusted me most, and in several cases this trust was largely premised upon a glaring absence of face-to-face interaction. In Yani’s own words, online I “wouldn’t

be able to hide so well.” It was this that facilitated a shift from participant observation to observing participant. Although ethics is often considered a philosophical stance that precedes and grounds action, it is arguably a “value-rationality that is actually produced, reinforced, or resisted through practice” (Markham et al., 2018, p. 2). Ethics quickly become a matter of method. It has been my argument in this article that while digital technologies afford particular kinds of intimacy, so too can they foster social distancing. In an era where social distancing becomes enforced and physical mobility restricted then, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that this need not portend doom and gloom. From the perspective of my research participants (or perhaps I should say, research designers), a little distance need not always be a bad thing.

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