

**Remote ethnography, digital co-presence: exploring visual anthropological
methods for research on the web’
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Introduction

Digital technologies have developed methodological, epistemological and ontological scope for social scientific research. Digital technologies and landscapes shape not only *what* aspects of social life can be engaged with, but also *how* and *where*. For anthropologists – who are primarily in the business of studying social lives and phenomena – nascent theoretical and methodological digital pathways hold much contemporary currency; both within the discipline, and its ability to speak to and engage with other epistemological traditions. Emergent digital and visual methods in particular are opening up innovative avenues for conducting ethnographic research *with* (and not just *about*) participants. At the same time, while ‘new’ media are giving rise to novel methodological avenues, they also grow out of older technologies and epistemologies. Technology-linked visual research has been a part of the discipline of anthropology from the outset. Beginning in the nineteenth century, photography and film have been used to record ethnographic information, generating ‘scientifically’ posited data in the field, about ‘others’. Margaret Mead and Geoffrey Bateson (1942) had famously used photography to try to objectively capture what they called the ‘spirit’ of the Balinese character, namely by producing and compiling photographic ‘documents’ of Balinese cultural customs and practices. Following the reflexive turn in anthropology in the 1980s, and a greater engagement with subjectivity, visual anthropology began experimenting with alternative epistemologies in research and representation. Participatory video making with indigenous groups during the 1990s forms a salient example within this milieu (Ginsburg 1991; Turner 1991; Ginsburg 1994). Such practices, and their more recent conceptual and technological manifestations, lend themselves to what Pink (2006) envisaged as the future of visual anthropology in a *digital* age: a public anthropology capable of making critical interventions.

Today, in a contemporary world saturated by social networks and global flows of digital images, research on and using the digital yields up a range of potential research sites and methods, and epistemological and ontological frameworks - as a growing corpus of digital anthropological/ ethnographic literature illustrates (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor 2012; Horst and Miller 2012; Underberg and Zorn 2013; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis et al. 2015). However, digital methods are still not often the first port of call for anthropologists. For the most part, this can be put down to the discipline’s characteristic method of studying ‘others’ *undigitally*; through long-term fieldwork engagement in everyday lives and practices of people in remote physical settings. The notion of field-based research was first established by

Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), who based on his long-term research in the Trobriand islands, established the view that being in the field for a significant period of time was the main method by which anthropologists could understand and represent peoples and cultures, authentically. For Malinowski, fieldwork provided a methodological corrective to what had preceded it, namely, the Victorian practice of ethnology and representing others remotely, based on travel/colonial literature and other secondary media. This dominant methodological perspective is based on a dual epistemological and ontological presumption, which places virtue in presence, and by the same token, is inherently distrustful of remote enquiry. The strength of Malinowski's legacy has arguably left anthropology slow to adapt – and fully commit methodologically – to the digital, relative to other social science disciplines. A main issue in this regard stems from the assumption that conducting research *on* the digital *via* the digital negates the researcher's presence, and thereby negates the authenticity of her research. Conceiving of the digital landscape as an anthropological field site thereby generally remains a poorer supplement for being there 'for real', where not being there *physically*, equates to not being there *at all*. Indeed, even in cases where digital anthropology comprises the overarching epistemological and methodological framework of the research – such as in the study of digital technologies and ICTs in a said physical location – there is still the underlying expectation that one will go to the physical field site for a sustained period of time studying digital practices and cultures *in situ*.

Two main ontological and epistemological challenges posed by conducting anthropological research not just *on* the digital, but *within* the digital landscape therefore relate to two basic assumptions about anthropological practice more generally, which shall remain the overarching epistemological anchor of my discussion in this chapter. These pertain to: (a) the field or locus of research; no longer necessarily a geographical place or society, but conceivable as a virtual network of social relations in flux, and (b) the researcher's embodied participation in their research; no longer contingent upon physical presence, but capable of being undertaken remotely and digitally, online. In this chapter, I explore these two principal features, both of which comprise the epistemological basis of my anthropological research studying popular photography in/of Iran - physically in the country, in the UK and remotely, online. As I will detail throughout the chapter, the topic of my research and the methodology developed to study it was, from the outset, connected to the epistemological and ontological approaches that I encountered and subsequently developed throughout the project; namely – transferring the ethnographic tradition to online digital environments, and the personal, professional and ethical implications of doing this. I will normatively suggest that topic-specific research quandaries and established ethical schema should reflexively inform methodological choices made in digital research (as in non digital research). In particular, I will anchor my discussion in the potential 'problem' of my restricted physical presence in Iran as an anthropologist, revealing how by engaging with digital methods, what might be traditionally perceived as an obstacle to 'authentic' anthropological research can actually render visible and inform the adoption of other suitable methodological choices and trajectories carved out from within the digital landscape itself. Following from my own research in/on Iran, I conclude by suggesting that methodological potentials in digital and visual anthropology offer broader insights into ways of designing and conducting ethically rigorous qualitative digital research via mobile digital technologies and the web, particularly where transnational, Internet and image-related work is concerned. To begin my discussion,

below I give an overview of the topic of my research: photoblogging in Iran, before linking this with how I generated research questions, developed my methodological apparatus and ethical framework, and made certain choices studying the practice in Iran, the UK and online.

Photoblogging in/of Iran: context, questions, and quandaries

My PhD 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, involving the often-daily posting of digital photographs on photography-orientated blogs (Cohen 2005). Its emergence in the early 2000s coincided with the development of the camera phone, which popularised amateur photography, making it even more mobile. In more recent years, photoblogs have been integrated into social networking sites and broader mobile media ensembles. In Iran, photoblogging is largely carried out by middle-class Iranian men and women in their twenties and early thirties, though many Iranian photobloggers also live outside Iran, partaking in the associated practices and activities in virtual Iranian photoblogging communities. While there is much technical and visual commonality in the practice across the globe, photoblogging, like social media at large, is also locally distinct. For many Iranian photobloggers, inside and outside of the country, Iran itself appears to be a chief visual subject of their photography; photographs are purposefully taken in and across Iran on digital cameras and camera phones in order to be shared with global viewers online. My study reveals how photoblogging emerged as a popular means of consciously (and some less consciously) exploring and debating various visual and symbolic aspects of Iranian culture, everyday life and experience. 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 which serve as visual testaments of everyday life in a much-misunderstood country. As I have discussed elsewhere (Walton 2015), much of this showing reflects a desire on behalf of the photographers to visually 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' since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. More specifically, this cultural polarisation was seen during certain key moments of social and political conservatism and economic hardship brought about by sanctions imposed upon Iran, as was seen in the post-9/11 international climate from 2001, and particularly under the Ahmadinejad administration in Iran (2005-2013). As a result of these broader political tensions, many Iranians feel that the monolithic representations constructed during these eras have 'de-humanised' the image of their country and crudely simplified understandings of Iranian people the world over. The anonymous photographer behind one of the most popular photoblogs 'Life Goes on in Tehran' (LGOIT), and one of my main research participants, summarises a central point about the practice of photoblogging 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, 2012)

Here LGOIT conveys the broader significance of photoblogging in Iran, highlighting the overall importance placed on mobile digital technologies (such as camera phones) by Iranian photobloggers such as himself, as appropriate vehicles for deploying alternative systems of capturing and representing a certain everyday ‘truth’ about Iran ‘from below’¹. Here, as he puts it, even a ‘tiny barely functional camera phone’ is suitable for facilitating the kind of popular cultural self-representation LGOIT seeks to capture and communicate to viewers via the Internet. Historically speaking, photography has always been mobile, and linked with epistemological questions. Pinney (2008) shows how as photographic technology became increasingly miniaturised and increasingly mobile in the early twentieth century, its *habitus* changed – it was no longer dependent upon official support or the same levels of financial investment as in the nineteenth century. LGOIT’s remarks above reflect these broader theoretical observations about changes in analogue photography, but at the specific historical juncture wherein *digital* photography became increasingly *mobile* in the early 2000s with the advent of camera phone photography. As my study more broadly reveals, photobloggers emphasise these novel socio-technological potentials, while drawing on the documentary realism of mobile digital technology, in order to ‘set the record straight’ about Iran through their practices. On another note, photoblogs also serve as alternative low-cost/free exhibition venues for showing Iranian photography beyond official galleries and public museums inside and outside of Iran, and their respective politics, policies and restrictions. Given the relationship introduced above between nascent mobile digital technologies and their facilitating of an epistemological shift in ways of seeing Iran, at this point, I will turn to discuss how I became interested in the topic of Iranian photoblogging. Here, as I will describe below, early theoretical observations and methodological/ethical considerations influenced the development of both my research questions, and how I chose to set about answering them.

Developing the research questions

My introduction to Iranian photoblogging came about in 2011, when I was conducting research as part of a master’s project in social anthropology on the visibility of Iranian blogs. My master’s project stemmed from two personal observations at the time (a) the thriving online cultural life in the Iranian blogosphere, detailed most comprehensively in a seminal study on the subject by Sreberny and Khiabany (2010), and (b) my observations of the striking locality to the digital, visual and online cultural practices that I had observed amongst Iranians inside and outside of Iran during the Presidential Election protests in Iran in June 2009. From the symbolic use of the colour green to signify reformist banners, graffiti and make-up, to the more general popular photography and filmmaking activities taking place on the streets amongst the new citizen journalist, in what scholars and journalists alike have since called the ‘Twitter Revolution’ (Sreberny et al. 2010; Mottahedeh 2015). The protests of 2009 in Iran seemed to render digital/visual communication a *new modus operandi* for both domestic and transnational Iranian communication, as has been duly observed by scholars (Dabashi 2010; Khatib 2013; Khosronejad 2013). Given (a) and (b), I was surprised, at the time, to find that literature on Iranian online visual-cultural

production beyond studies of 2009 green wave activism was scarce, nigh on altogether absent. My interest in studying cotemporary Iranian visual culture online developed further in line with these observations, coupled with a growing personal interest in and broader awareness of the socio-political commentaries and acute aesthetic sensibilities of Iranian contemporary art, photojournalism and New Wave Iranian Cinema (Balaghi and Gumpert 2002; Tapper 2002; Naficy 2011). Beyond the official domains of art production and activism, what could be said of the nascent popular digital visual cultures witnessed on the Iranian social web? This I set out to investigate. Through a casual and almost haphazard online search of ‘Iranian photoblogs’, I came across the photoblog *Life Goes on in Tehran* (LGOIT). Intrigued by the title, I investigated a little further, and soon discovered it to be an intriguing combination of art praxis and a what it more prosaically was: a blog. Curiously here, aesthetic sensibility and cinematography loomed large. These elements were evident in the design; including the choice of images, the unique horizontal scrolling layout of the image galleries, and the witty and subtle politics of the captions (figure 1).

[Figure 1]

The overall *mis-en-scène* of the photoblog formed the impression that something at once global in form, and yet intimately Iranian – and with unmistakable use of western cultural references and aesthetic markers – seemed to have popular global appeal, judging by the photoblog’s global fan base and comment streams (figure 2).

[Figure 2]

This led me to deduce that perhaps Iranian photoblogs deserved further critical attention than had (and still have) been observed by scholars. Online environments, for Iranians, seemed to be not just a profoundly social arena as they are elsewhere across the globe, but also appeared to be a place for articulating something of a shared subjectivity and experience in local/global contexts, whilst providing a space for taking photography and transnational visual communication seriously.

For my master’s study I proceeded to investigate LGOIT as a case study, based on online interviews conducted with its publically anonymous creator. These interviews fed into my wider visual analysis of images on the site, and discourse analysis of samples of posted comments. Back then in 2011, the literature on digital ethnography was sparse, and my approach during my master’s project was thus largely one of experimentation, trial and error. Nevertheless, I conducted my research within the established ethical code of conduct in anthropology, which chiefly condenses the protection of research participants and their data, along with the researcher’s ethical conduct in the field – however physical or virtual. Both the analyses and methods of enquiry I conducted at this early stage set an important methodological and ethical precedent for the rest of my doctoral project: namely, that online data collection is only one part of the process of excavating and generating meaning in digital research. Hookway’s (2008) ethical discussion of conducting qualitative research on blogs highlighted a useful distinction, early in on my research process, between what he terms the ‘trawling’ and ‘soliciting’ of blogs; the former being a passive form of browsing the presented web material, and the latter an active form of enquiry involving deeper strategies such as making contact with the blogger, and soliciting meaning beyond the surface of visible/publically available content. That such a qualitative distinction exists between the two I had intuited

myself; from investigating the existing literature on ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000; 2008), and from my theoretical training in classical ethnography and visual anthropology. The epistemological basis of these three areas, which treated both virtual data and images as social objects – worthy of (material) cultural analysis, between processes of production, circulation and consumption – in effect made the process of translating established theoretical and methodological approaches in anthropology and sociology to the digital context, theoretically reasonably straightforward. Specifically, the qualitative/ethnographic researcher’s commitment to contextualising the social ‘object/subject’ of enquiry would involve an equally rigorous processes of contextualisation in broader (and offline) social and political networks and subjects’ lifeworlds. As an anthropologist, above all, the process would require getting to know the people with whom one is conducted research over a length of time. These established social scientific principles, I suspected, could hold equally true in online research and data collection as it does with offline practices, though the precise carrying out of these processes would inevitably involve a certain amount of ontological, conceptual and experiential reorientation, as I discovered, and will discuss below.

Having conducted a preliminary study of a small sample of Iranian photoblogs purely online, I developed my research questions for a larger, transnational enquiry into the practice in my doctorate. This would involve further in-depth case studies of photobloggers lives, movements and practices, and include a larger sample of what in the end totalled 250 photoblogs. I initially conceived of the project as being carried out for the most part in Iran, whilst conducting digital-ethnography, online, simultaneously. In the original conception of the project, I had planned to spend time ‘being there’ with Iranian photographers in person in major cities such as Tehran and Esfahan, where their practices appeared to be particularly prevalent. Prior to the official start of my fieldwork term, I had established some core research questions based on my previous study, namely, how Iranian photoblogging was signalling the development of a new popular documentary/art form in Iran, and the impact of these ‘new’ types of images on local and global social imaginaries, particularly regarding Iran’s relationship (cultural, political and ideological) with the west. From the UK I solicited preliminary contacts in Iran and begun to prepare the logistics of my trip. The form the ethnography eventually took however – involving one month in Iran, and the remaining eleven months in London, Oxford and online – relates to certain constraints that I then faced at the specific political ‘moment’ that I began to undertake my research in October 2012. I will reflexively account for these below, showing how these issues raised certain epistemological and ontological issues, which informed the methodological strategies I adopted for doing digital-visual anthropology online.

The autumn of 2012 was a particularly heightened moment of political tension between the conservative administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran and western countries. In addition, American Republican party campaigns during the US presidential election in November 2012 were, along with various political figures in Israel, threatening to coerce Iran into a war over their suspected nuclear programme, contributing to an overall tense international political climate. Concurrently, the Iranian embassy in London and British embassy in Tehran was closed, following a violent attack on the latter the previous year in November 2011, thought to be carried out by members of Iran’s volunteer *Basij* militia, in connection with UK-imposed sanctions on Iran. As a result of these fraught international and domestic political climates, travelling to Iran, particularly for British citizens, became

a significant point of contention. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London had warned against all travel to Iran for British citizens, and this warning was, in turn, presented to me, a sole British passport holder, by the health and safety and Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) bodies of my university, who both advised against, and could not officially sanction my proposed fieldwork in Iran. Determined to continue pursuing my research, I solicited advice from personal contacts in Iran, and eventually managed to obtain a visa for travel from the Iranian consulate in Paris, aided no doubt by my being half-Iranian. This personal dimension, I believe, had left me somewhat prioritised in administrative processes since I had much of the required documentation for obtaining a visa in hand, and familial connections in place. I proceeded to spend one month in Iran between October and November 2012. I fully engaged with my own subjectivity during my visit, where inevitably personal and biographical aspects seeped into my observational frame, as I set about learning all that I could about Iran from Iranians while physically present in the country. I had never before visited the country, and spoke the Persian language familiarly, but with a certain modesty stemming from having learnt it in a haphazard manner in a familial context in the UK. Regardless of my subjective attachment to the country, my second generation diasporic sensibility and sense of remove from Iran itself and Iranian culture *in situ*, meant that in effect (and particularly in hindsight), my psychological experience of physically travelling there was ultimately not unlike that of the classical anthropologist travelling to the land of ‘others’, in order to learn something of culture and social practices by way of comparison. In Iran I was able to meet with local photographers I had connected with online from the UK, and undertook some rudimentary fieldwork activities involving semi-structured interviews, gallery visits, and participating on what are locally known as ‘photo tours’ (*safarhā-ye akkāsi*): social occasions linked to group travel and photographic activities undertaken by photography enthusiasts across the country. Back in the UK, I had to devise ways to continue with my fieldwork remotely, including maintaining presence and connection with research participants that I had met in Iran, as well as those who I had connected with purely online. This brings me to a discussion of the specific manners, modes and affordances through which I principally conducted online qualitative research throughout my doctoral project, and retrieved my ethnographic data online.

Remote ethnography: developing digital and visual methods for research in/on Iran

So far I have accounted for my lacking a certain physical experience of ‘being there’ in my research for a sustained period of time. Given the classical definition of anthropological research described earlier in this chapter, this predicament presented me, as a student anthropologist conducting digital research online remotely, with an epistemological quandary. In this case, I was faced with what Postill suitably describes as a certain ‘epistemological angst’ (Postill 2016); an anxiety linked to the process of conducting remote ethnography, stemming from a sense of thwarted purpose and method, given the virtue of physical presence upon which anthropological fieldwork is traditionally based. This requires further reflection here, in order to epistemologically situate the digital-visual research methods I eventually took up in my research. In the first instance, the fact that difficult and limited access to Iran was/is not uncommon for fieldwork-based researchers more generally provided a certain level of acquittal to my epistemological angst at the time, as I began exploring my digital-ethnographic research remotely. Hegland (2009:53) terms

this limited access to Iran for non-native anthropologists as a ‘professional dilemma’, stemming from the broader history of political tensions between western powers and successive post-revolutionary governments, which largely accounts for the dearth of anthropological research in the country since the revolution of 1979. As a result, research trips to Iran (sometimes on tourist visas) have not been uncommon for Iranian and non-Iranian researchers. In these cases then, as in my own experience, the rationale of doing ‘quick ethnography’ or ‘zip in and zip out fieldwork’ (Hegland 2004) in Iran is a pragmatic antidote to travel injunctions, outweighing ideals of ‘being there’ for sustained periods of time. Moreover, the issue of lack of physical presence is not exclusive to anthropological research on Iran, nor necessarily tied to geopolitical factors. Anthropologists are often faced with restrictions of multiple kinds, affecting how one accesses and how much time is spent in the field, ranging from war and natural disasters to local political turbulence, or more prosaically, lack of funds. All of these have been cited, to varying degrees as factors *contextualising* – but not *excusing* – the conducting of remote digital ethnography today (Postill 2016). Remote ethnography, Postill notes, can prove a useful option for researchers in both planned and unplanned circumstances, and in shifting socio-political circumstances (Ibid: 5). Remote ethnographic research can also 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, which contribute to and make up the researcher’s mediating lens (Ibid: 5). In the case of my research, as I will demonstrate below, remote methodologies proved central to much of my understanding of photoblogging in/of Iran, and the people whom partake in it as producers and viewers of images across the globe.

In the following section, I consider the specific choices I made in pursuing my research remotely online through digital and visual ethnographic methods. The principal research participants taking part in my study were all born and grew up in Iran. They had then either stayed living in Iran or migrated abroad, often to pursue higher education. Mobility is therefore a central aspect and conceptual metaphor in photoblogging. It involves: (a) the *physical* movement of photobloggers across the globe, (b) the *digital* circulation of digital images they produce, as well as (c) the *epistemological* mobility many photobloggers themselves seek to initiate by sharing ‘normal’ photographs of their country online as a way of ‘moving’ the country’s international image beyond dominant visual tropes, as I earlier described. At the time of my research the photobloggers who became my main participants were based in six countries: Iran, the US, the UK, Germany, Italy and Australiaⁱⁱ. Their multimodal activities of producing subjective visual discourses in multitemporal frameworks (including different time zones) begged the question of how to study them online over an extended period of time? 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, which provided a stand-alone digital space for the research project, aside from my and my participants’ more general social media platforms (Figure 2). Through the research photoblog I aimed to provide a personalised account of my own photographs and experiences as a researcher in and travelling across Iran. This fieldwork method, and the images that it contained, subsequently formed a useful basis for discussion with research participants. In recent years, and 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 termed ‘e-Fieldnotes (Sanjek and

Tratner 2016) and have become increasingly widespreadⁱⁱⁱ. The process of actively including research participants (and/or co-collaborators) in this manner indicates what Horst (2016: 7) describes as a ‘knowing beyond the self’ of the solo researcher, involving an epistemological framework that is collectivised/socialised and developed through the research process itself. Technology-facilitated collaboration was something that I developed instinctively throughout my research with Iranian photobloggers, given the very subject matter of my research: mobile individuals/groups and their digital-visual practices. As part of this pursuit, I co-constructed a unique methodological apparatus with my research participants, in direct conversation with my thematic focus and sites of research: a digital photography exhibition: www.photoblogsiran.com (Figure 3) (Walton, under review).

[Figure 3]

The exhibition was designed and employed in my doctoral project with the participation and approval of the exhibiting photobloggers. The rationale for developing it directly relates to the broader epistemological framework of my digital-ethnographic research. The exhibition aimed to show a range of self-selected digital photographs from the photographers’ pre-existing digital archives on their photoblog sites. These selected images would then form a basis for discussion amongst participants and myself, and used for research purposes with broader on- and offline publics. In developing the digital exhibition as a method, I effectively 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 attending fully to the ethical implications of this endeavour^{iv}. Ethical considerations were intrinsic to the theoretical conception of the exhibition. Participants would maintain copyright of all of their photographs, and these would be featured on the site with their permission. The photographs would be introduced, contextualized and presented as part of a wider research process, as described in the ‘about’ and background’ sections of the site. Apart from LGOIT, who officially maintains public anonymity, each photographer is introduced with their real name. This reflects a conscious ethical policy agreed with all participants in my study that real names would be used, as they exist in other public online platforms, including in their own photoblogs. Here, I effectively treat photobloggers in the digital research process akin to artists – a common practice in the anthropology of art for instance, is to refer to the artist and their work, but also to anonymise sections of interview material where desired or deemed appropriate. More broadly, this strategy of using real people’s real names in online research reflects Bruckman’s (2014) broader conceptualisation of online participants as ‘amateur artists’, describing the process by which the researcher honours public individuals’ desires to be named in order to acquire the recognition of their work and/or views. Overall, the digital exhibition forms what I term a ‘site-specific methodology’; whereby the *form* of research method (a digital exhibition of digital photographs/photoblogs) was carved out of the *field site* (photographers practices in online environments). Here, participants and I could ‘meet’, reflect upon and explore the research theme within the safety and confines of a platform we co-created precisely for this purpose. In more general terms, curating a digital research environment such as this can prove beneficial in all kinds of research in/on the digital, 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, physical

world. In this sense, digital-visual methods offered ways of knowing and being in my research than other, physical fieldwork methods could not provide.

In 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 of the individuals I was conducting research with, 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.^v 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). Technologically-facilitated ‘being there’ together allowed me to be with participants as they were out and about taking photographs in Iran, as well as in their own homes where they attend to the technical maintenance and social lives of their photoblogs. According to Urry (2004:35), blogs are ‘one of those machines, that allow people and networks to be connected to, or to be at home with “sites” across the world — while simultaneously such sites can monitor, observe and trace each inhabited machine’. Conducting this kind of ‘home ethnography’ (Larsen 2008:156) in my study of Iranian photoblogs invariably involved being virtually present with participants in their own homes, which, incidentally constituted one of the main *physical* manifestations of my various digital research fields. Invariably, individuals would also move between platforms and mobile devices in their daily digital practices. I needed to be attentive to these online digital migrations, as well as maintaining a clear sense of where they physically were, in Iran or otherwise through our wider communication. Here, photobloggers’ uses of locative media and the geotagging of their images (to Google Maps) helped me, as a researcher to locate them, physically. These digital traces also allowed me to experience being both ‘in’ the live moment of the event, and accessing their logged activities as an archived online record afterwards on their photoblogs and social networks pages through what has been termed as ‘trace ethnography’ (Geiger and Ribes 2011). In such cases, as has been noted by (Gray, in press) ‘being *then*’, or the researcher’s ‘presence’ in *past* moments digitally mapped/traced online, becomes as important as being *there* (cited in Postill 2016).

At this point a more general theoretical note on the specificity of the *ethnographic method* in digital research will help to situate some of the methodological choices described above. Digital anthropology involves the conducting of what was originally termed ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine 2000)¹. The methodology follows an epistemological and ontological approach that ‘transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the Internet’ (Ibid: 8). Here, the ethnographer studies physically disparate peoples by creating meaningful social relationships that are not necessarily less ‘authentic’, or *more* mediated than offline face-to-face communication, as Goffman (1959; Goffmann 1975) earlier argued. In digital anthropological/ethnographic research then, it is just as important to ‘be with’ participants, observing them in the routine practices of everyday life, as it is to actively solicit information from them. In fact, this soliciting should be carried out in conjunction with wider processes of proximity building with individuals. In this

¹ (Digital) anthropologists such as Horst and Miller (2012) supplant the term ‘virtual’ with ‘digital’. This follows from their emphasis on continuity between on- and offline spheres, as opposed to the implied ‘unreality’ of *virtual* reality.

notion, a certain amount of trust is established for having been knowingly present in participants' everyday lives and lifeworlds over a period of time. Beyond bouts of actively retrieving data through direct forms of direct contact with individuals in interviews and other digital forms of communication, one can therefore explore and orientate ones self within what may be termed the 'negative spaces' of the research; involving other kinds of latent endeavours taken up and explored during the research. One term coined to describe these kinds of latent online activities is 'lurking' (Hine 2008), a notion that recognises the importance of obtaining unelicited data in social research on the web. Lurking created a passive form of 'being there' that I found useful in situating myself as a participant observer of Iranian photoblogging. An important aspect of my research was the fact that photoblogs could be viewed and revisited at any time provided they remain public, online. Hence, part of my digital-ethnographic portrait of photobloggers was drawn from unelicited, pre-existing knowledge sources on the Internet. To illustrate; as public social actors, my research participants had shared information online over a number of years. Some of them had conducted interviews with or provided information about themselves and their practices to other parties, including journalists, photographic organisations and other bloggers, and much of this remains publically available information online. Revisiting and recording information online in this manner, retrieved and used within the overall ethical framework of the research, proved a useful source of 'para-ethnographic' (Holmes and Marcus 2008) material, akin to obtaining relevant historical documents, (which I also pursued online), that contributed to my budding corpus of online data.

The digital and visual methods used in my research on photoblogging that I have described in the latter part of this chapter contribute broader theoretical insights in to why and how researchers might engage in 'remote fieldwork' (Postill 2016). Here, as Postill (Ibid:8) observes, this type of enquiry is much more than a remedial measure, or a 'second best choice for anthropologists unable to reach their field sites...it often helps us to observe familiar people and things from a different perspective, thereby creating a richer engagement with the world of our research participants'. In the case of my research, the fact that I was able to maintain presence remotely – in a digital *and* ontological sense – with my participants by participating in the kinds of digital practices they do (updating their photoblog, commenting on each others work, and communicating locally and transnationally), all the while being critically self-aware of our physical distance from each other, made for a curious but creativity-inducing epistemological and ontological predicament. The research dialectic, being primarily a digital one, was in one sense rendered even more visible a construct than one based purely on physical proximity. Connections speeds, arranging online availability, and censorship of many websites in Iran all heightened my awareness of the digital ethnographic research process *as* a consciously constructed process. At the same time, this is arguably no substantively different, despite an ontological shift to the virtual space, to problems of access, integration and disruption encountered in offline research pursuits. Furthermore, this heightened awareness of the digital-ethnographic research framework, as I have discussed, also had a qualitative impact on the *type* of information that I was able to retrieve by virtue of being online and virtually connected with people. Having spent months getting to know each other online, my research participants would voluntarily share with me photographs, stories, memories, anecdotes, URL links and people to connect with that they deemed to be relevant to the research, trusting that it would be used in an ethical manner. In this sense, the digital methods I employed stemmed from and operated

within the ontological and epistemological parameters of the digital environment, the research and the established rubric of ethics.

In sum, in the case of my research on Iran, the unplanned nature of having limited time in Iran essentially begat my multi-sited and multi-modal methodology. The methodology was incrementally crafted and pieced together along different ontological and epistemological axes, involving off- and online research conducted in situ and remotely, via a range of technologies. From a classical anthropological perspective, as I have discussed, a ‘professional dilemma’ stemmed from the fact that I was left at least 11 months short of conducting *bona fide* anthropological research, traditionally involving physically ‘being there’ for a sustained period of time. The contemporary remote ethnographer is hereby left in a liminal position, floating between orthodoxy and innovation in their dealings with the digital. In the strict epistemological context of discipline-based knowledge regimes, heavy claims are staked on how such research is authenticated and ultimately validated. It is comforting to learn now what was unbeknown to me at the time as I stepped into the digital unknown, that anthropologists finding themselves in similarly restricted conditions of physical access have equally admitted to doubting the validity of their research based on traditional epistemological and ontological parameters. The stringency of these disciplinary dogmas make those operating outside of the methodological status quo feel that they are somehow ‘cheating’ (Postill 2016: 8). Addressing this predicament, this chapter has sought to explain how digital and visual methods, rooted in both the ethnographic tradition and in cross-disciplinary engagement, are ushering in a nascent epistemology and ontology for anthropological research and beyond.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have introduced and critically discussed a range of digital and visual methods employed and developed in my research with Iranian photobloggers, inside and outside of Iran. In presenting these methods, I have discussed how they can be applied and developed to develop specific (social) research questions, or to help raise them in the first place. In the case of my research, I showed how the predicament of having limited access to Iran at a particular period of political and diplomatic capriciousness had a direct influence on some of the choices I made to engage with digital research methods online in the decidedly visual and ethnographic manners in which I did. I showed how a range of these methods allowed me a unique way of collaborating with individuals based in different countries, and with other participants in Iran, without necessarily always being physically present with them – as traditionally characterises the anthropological *modus operandi*. In my partial supplanting of *physical* presence with a *digital* one, I found that relationships with participants in ‘the field’ could be forged effectively and maintained through long-term digital-visual communications. This effectively allowed me to overcome the so-called ‘professional dilemma’, or ‘epistemological angst’ of not physically being in Iran for a sustained period of time. Digital and visual ethnographic methods, I suggest, therefore raise a host of timely epistemological, ontological and ethical questions concerning how qualitative digital researchers ‘be in’, mediate and represent an increasingly interconnected world. The broader implications of this prospect, I contend, extend beyond the disciplinary concerns of anthropologists, offering a host of researchers working in/on the digital a range of relevant tools for accessing and understanding nascent epistemologies and research ontologies evolving alongside fields of study with which they are connected.

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ⁱ For a focused discussion on the specific issue of 'truth' in Iranian photoblogs, see Walton (2016).

ⁱⁱ My research sample reflects strongholds of the Iranian diaspora, the largest being in the US (Los Angeles), with sizeable communities across various parts of the UK, Australia and Germany.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a relevant discussion on producing ‘live fieldnotes’ using digital applications see Tricia Wang’s (2012) report: <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/>

^{iv} For a relevant discussion on the ethics of making digital research material public, see Gubrium and Harper (2013). Pp.45-69.

^v See Horst (2016).