# Digital Ethnography and Media Practices

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# ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with ethnographic methodologies used when studying digital media, social contexts, and cultural practices. The chapter starts with an introduction to ethnography and its challenges when going digital. It then provides an overview of the different approaches to digital ethnography depending on the object of study: (1) the ethnography of online communities, virtual worlds, and social media sites; (2) the connective ethnography proposal through online and offline field settings; and (3) the ethnography of everyday life and the issue of audiences and creative practices in digital media. Finally, we discuss methodological issues relating to how to conduct online ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, as well as digital tools for registering, analyzing, presenting data, and some ethical considerations.

# Introduction

Since the emergence of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and especially since the spread of Internet use and the World Wide Web boom, scholars and institutions have been interested in studying the social processes that accompany the devel-

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opment of these digital communicative and informational technologies (Silver & Massanari, 2006; Wellman, 2004). A growing body of work consists of methodological and epistemological reflections on how to study such phenomena. From many different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, ethnographic methods have been used as a research strategy to study uses of the Internet, online social practices, and how people engage in networked relationships, and to account for the moral order of their activities (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Mason, 1999).

At the same time, the cultural turn in communication research has raised the status of ethnography as an adequate methodology for studying the conditions of production, reception, and consumption of media. Media ethnography seeks to develop an understanding of active audiences by exploring genre readings, issues of race and gender, family living, and identity, in order to understand media as a cultural form (Murphy, 1999, p. 207). As a consequence, the ethnographic approach is well established today among the social sciences and its different fields of research, including Internet studies, the social studies of technology, and communication and media studies.

The conventional notion of ethnography within anthropology, as epitomized by Bronisław Malinowski's work, implies the understanding of cultural formations from an experiential point of view. Ethnographers must attend to people's sayings and doings, including their material condition of existence and their worldviews: how people build meaning in relation to their experiences and actions. Participant observation and in-depth interviews are at the core of ethnographic fieldwork. Through participant observation, ethnographers gain access to people's ways of life, not only by observing behavior but also by sharing their daily life routines and social meanings. In this sense, ethnographers' subjectivity and socialization play an important role in the construction of ethnographic knowledge (Lee & Ingold, 2006). They are not factors that should be avoided for the sake of greater objectivity but constituent elements that have to be controlled and put into work in the data analysis and interpretation (Bateson, 1972). The result of ethnographic fieldwork is a theoretical description of the cultural patterns that cross-cut different domains of social activity. Therefore, the ethnographic perspective is anchored in the "grounded" experience of the ethnographer, as well as being contextual and holistic in its scope.

Moving this ethnographic approach to the study of the Internet poses many methodological challenges. What is the purpose of Internet ethnography? How might the traditional methods in ethnographic research be used in online fieldwork? Are there other related methods that are specifically needed to study Internet communication? These kinds of questions have brought to the fore the need for methodological reflection about the specificity of the medium. Different categorizations such as virtual, connective, hypermedia, netnography, or digital ethnography had been proposed to indicate the particularities involved in "adapting" the ethnographic method to Internet research.

This chapter explores some of these different approaches to ethnography and how they also imply different ways of understanding the Internet as a field and object of study. We propose the term "digital" to embrace these varieties of Internet-based research approaches because it is more semantically neutral and more useful to refer to the different practices and contexts mediated by digital technologies.

# **Digital Ethnography**

Christine Hine (2000) argues that the Internet, as an object of study for the social sciences, has been theorized in two ways: either as a cultural form or as a cultural practice. As far as the cultural form is concerned, she understands the "cultures of Internet" as the study of the specific cultural forms based on the Internet, the paradigmatic example of which can be the development of netiquette, emoticons, and specific online norms and values. In other words, Internet cultures are cultural forms that emerge on the Internet like virtual worlds players, webcam girls, hackers, bloggers, and other collectives whose senses of self, belonging, and group socialization are shaped significantly by digital media. As a cultural practice, Hine suggests that, as happens with other creations, the Internet may be analyzed as a "cultural artifact." This implies the study of practices which are not necessarily specific of the Internet but acquire different dimensions online, for example, the making of videos for YouTube or sharing photos on Internet services like Flickr or Instagram.

Focusing specifically on the relationship between the ethnographic method and Internet studies, we distinguish three different approaches, which can be defined as follows: virtual ethnography or ethnographies of cyberspace, connective or online/ offline ethnographies, and ethnographies of Internet in everyday life. These methodological approaches have evolved in parallel to the different Internet development periods. The first starts from the Internet's beginnings to the late 1990s, the second coincides with the expansion of the World Wide Web, and the third corresponds to the development of the so-called social media or social network sites, from approximately 2005 until the present day. However, if there is a close relationship between technological stages, users' appropriations, and the elaboration of different ethnographic strategies, the fact is that, even today, these three ethnographic approaches coexist in several and remixed ways.

#### Virtual Ethnography

The first empirical studies applying ethnographic fieldwork to the Internet were conducted by scholars from different backgrounds mostly from communication and media studies and were based on triggering off metaphors that led to a conceptualization of the Internet as a new kind of social space. This "cyberspace" was conceptualized as an immaterial place where disembodied selves could freely interplay, forming "virtual communities," and where new social and cultural patterns flourished and gave birth to a brand new "cyberculture" (Jones, 1997; Porter, 1996; Shields, 1996).

The notion of cyberspace, taken from the novelist William Gibson who defined it as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators" and as a "graphical representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system of an unimaginable complexity arranged in the non-space of the mind" (Gibson, 1984, p. 30), was used by activists such as John Perry Barlow and academics like Michael Benedikt to refer to the social space made possible by the Internet. In the popular as well as in the sociological imagination, cyberspace or "virtual space" almost became synonymous with the Internet itself (Gómez-Cruz, 2007).

Furthermore, at this early stage, the role given to technology to transform culture and society was highly important. Thus, the first social studies of the Internet considered that the properties of the medium such as virtuality, spatiality, disintegration, and disembodiment were shaping new modes of social activity (Slater, 2002). For example, considering that, at this time, computer-mediated interaction was mainly textual, anonymity was taken as an intrinsic characteristic of the medium. This is illustrated by Peter Steiner's famous cartoon, in which two dogs are sitting in front of a computer and one says to the other: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Along the same line, in 1994 Howard Rheingold inspired another powerful metaphor: virtual community. Based on his own experience of participating in the electronic bulletin board system (BBS) known as The WELL, he argued that long-term participation in these electronic forums creates a shared system of beliefs, values and norms, and specific behaviors. These enact a collective sense of belonging and create a new kind of community, based solely on common interests, goodwill, and solidarity. Sherry Turkle (1997) coined a third compelling image: virtual identity. In *Life on the Screen*, and drawing on her research with multi-user domain (MUD) users, she explained how people could perform different and alternative online identities. The goal, then, was to establish whether computer-mediated interaction was changing our own understandings of self and self-identity, and to what extent virtual identities were free from the social and cultural constraints of "real life."

If the connection to the Internet was like "entering into cyberspace" and one could create alternative online identities, whose socialization shaped virtual communities, it was tempting to study these communities as though conducting exploratory research of a "primitive culture," as in the early days of anthropology. First, ethnography was considered the proper method for describing an unexplored territory (as the non-Western cultures were for early Western anthropologists), and, second, computer-mediated interaction seemed to give rise to new genres of discourse that could be described ethnographically (Herring, 1996; Mayans, 2002). Therefore, the Internet was conceptualized as giving birth to an entirely new culture that was going to transform our culture at large: the new world of Cyberia (Escobar, 1994). Meanwhile its population was studied as the "natives of the Internet Islands"

(Bakardjieva, 2005), following Malinowski's canonical work on the Trobriand Islanders.

Despite the fact that in anthropological studies the idea of fieldwork in a community bound to a single territory had long been questioned (see Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995), these conceptualizations led to the development of a large corpus of ethnographic fieldwork on Usenet, BBS, chatrooms, electronic forums, and so on, mainly focusing on social and cultural dynamics (Markham, 1998; Reid, 1994). The ethnographic gaze was focused on how individuals come together via computer-mediated interaction and developed common rules, collective norms and values, as well as a sense of belonging (Jones & Kucker, 2001, p. 217). Among these early ethnographic studies, most were related to communication studies and audience reception research, such as online fan communities of soap operas (Baym, 2000) and television series or films (Jenkins, 1992), showing how audiences were constructing meaningful online communities by taking mass media popular culture as their referent.

The idea that prevailed was that the nature of those online communities was metaphysical and, therefore, it was sufficient to study them merely by analyzing the "life on the screen." This was translated into a limitation of the field site to a single online community and into studying only online interactions. Scholars made aprioristic assumptions about time, space, and the differentiated nature of online culture, online identity, and online social ties. Virtual ethnographies were largely based on the *a priori* attribution of properties of the Web by establishing a contrasting comparison with the physical world and face-to-face relationships. Cyberspace worked as a unifying ethnographic field site to describe all kinds of social life occurring on the Internet, aligning different artifacts, uses, and practices. The metaphor of cyberspace has also contributed to the idea of the Internet as a unified object of study with inherent characteristics and properties (Ardévol & Estalella, 2012).

Throughout the 1990s and despite these conceptual constraints, the detailed descriptions of many different "virtual communities" demonstrated that computermediated interactions were culturally rich and that users engaged in a fully meaningful social life. Those studies were a first step to legitimize the ethnographic study of online social relationships, given that some earlier conceptions considered computermediated communication to be "less real," socially weak, or second-class communication, unable to create sustainable social bonds and culturally significant worlds (Walther & Burgoon, 1992).

The ethnography of virtual worlds is another approach that is currently growing (Boellstorff, George, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Ethnographers propose that online participant observation is an epistemological and methodological response to the challenges of "virtual worlds" or meta-verses, especially in online game cultures (Pearce, 2009). So, more recently, we found exclusively online ethnographies that justify their methodological strategy by pointing to the delimitation of their object of study to the particular "virtual cultures" that emerge from online interaction. For example, Corneliussen and Rettberg (2008, p. 1) clarify this position with the use of

a metaphor: "Being new to the culture of the *World of Warcraft* may be compared to being an immigrant in a foreign culture." The problem is focused on studying the process of socialization that takes place through online participation. In this sense, other authors propose that virtual worlds can be studied as examples of "subcultures" (Gelder, 2007). Boellstorff, for example, when studying *Second Life*, argues that the distinction between virtual and real is not an assumption of the ethnographer but something that has to be explained through fieldwork. He explains that this division is a consequence of a performative act of the players to set apart their "virtual world" from the "actual world" by the "worlding" of different cultural domains (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 18).

#### Connective Ethnography

The second ethnographic approach to the study of digital technologies, especially the Internet, could be called connective ethnographies. Although the concept of Virtual Ethnography coined by Christine Hine was a hallmark for the ethnographic study of the Internet, another book also opened a different understanding of ethnographic fieldwork: The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach, by Daniel Miller and Don Slater. Both of these texts were published in 2000. These researchers, with a background in material culture, media political economy, and social studies of science, abandon the idea of cyberspace in favor of a situated study of the Internet. Hine contextualizes Internet use in media practices, following the controversial case in 1998 of the British nanny accused of murdering the North American baby she was taking care of, while Miller and Slater locate it in the particular context of the cultural practices of the people of Trinidad Island. Both blur the divide between online and offline fieldwork. Instead of studying Internet cultures as separated and independent features from the real world, these authors begin to speak in terms of online/offline as a form of recognition of the multiple connections and the close relationship between these two social grounds.

Christine Hine herself was one of the first to reflexively apply the ethnographic paradigm of the constructed nature of the field in anthropology (Marcus, 1998) within Internet studies, systematizing her "principles for virtual ethnography" from a multisited and connective notion of ethnography (Hine, 2000). Hine approaches virtual ethnography through participant observation of different web pages, as well as their links with the mass media system, breaking with the idea of community and place as central for the definition of the ethnographic field site, understanding field site as the empirical locale where research is conducted.

At the same time, during the early years of the twenty-first century, Internet demography and usage was also changing, with a significant growth in the participation of various groups and communities in the network and the integration of the Internet into everyday mundane activities (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). As in the case of the monographs mentioned above, other scholars began to do

fieldwork "inside" and also "outside" the screen, exploring the relationships between online and offline interactions. As Bakardjieva noted: the "Internet is exactly the place where the online and offline meet. Its study should mean keeping the vision on both sides at the same time, especially because very occasionally Internet is only a bridge between one offline and another" (2008, p. 54). Thus, the divide between online and offline fieldwork progressively blurs. Instead of studying Internet cultures as separated and independent features from the real world, these authors began to speak in terms of online/offline as a form of recognition of the multiple connections and the close relationship between these two social grounds.

Authors like Leander and McKim (2003) and later Hine (2007) developed the concept of "connective ethnography" to address the issue of integrating research across online and offline situations. Fields and Kafai (2008) also adopted the notion of connective ethnography to focus on how gaming expertise spreads across a network of youths at an after-school club where they simultaneously participate in a multiplayer virtual environment, using online and offline participant observation, interviews, video recordings, and collecting online and offline social interaction data. For Jenna Burrell (2009), the notion of the ethnographic field linked to a placefocused concept of culture needs to be reformulated when studying social uses of the Internet. Connective ethnography is not only a question of mixing methods and combining online and offline strategies, but also of constructing the field site as a heterogeneous network mapped out from the social relationships of the subjects and their connections to material and digital objects and to physical or virtual locations. As Hastrup and Olwig have argued for contemporary ethnography at large, instead of viewing the ethnographic field as a "site" it is better to understand it as a set of relations, focusing on the connections between multiple locations where actors engage in activity. Thus, "ethnography in this strategy becomes as much a process of following connections as it is a period of inhabitance" (Hastrup & Olwig, 1997, p. 8). Translating these notions of an anthropology of the contemporary, Postill (2008) notes that taking the Internet as a field for ethnographic research does not imply using the notions of community or social networks but to understand that there are different forms of mediated sociality.

# Internet in Everyday Practices and Media Ethnography

Nowadays, the Internet has become so widespread and complex that attempting to describe a single platform ethnographically, even a massive one such as Facebook, would be to dismiss the multiple interrelationships and overlapping uses of digital technologies. The technological landscape has evolved and is no longer just about computers, Internet, and platforms. Wireless networks, mobile phone apps, video game consoles, and so on are all interconnected and we can say that our communicative ecosystem has been almost entirely digitalized. Concurrent use of multiple media has become a regular feature of everyday life and, quoting Mark Deuze (2011,

p. 137): "media have become so inseparable from us that we no longer live with media, but in media."

This third understanding of the Internet as media is enriched by a twofold perspective: that of the social shaping of technology as an approach to technological design (Bijker & Law, 1994) and the domestication theory in media studies. Both highlight users' agency in the innovation process and how technology is creatively appropriated by users (Haddon, 2005; Silverstone, Hirsh, & Morley, 2003). The move to ethnography occurred in media studies when researchers began to observe the media experience in everyday contexts (Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001), seeking alternatives to traditional social science research on media effects. Thus, media ethnography and Internet ethnographies converge in situating the focus in everyday practices.

Today, the Internet, associated with other informational technologies, represents a potential challenge (and complement) to mass media and entertainment industries. From a cultural studies approach, digital technologies are commodities that have symbolic value in the "circuit of culture" (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). In addition, this new media landscape forms new means of production, circulation, and consumption of media products that intertwine with significant practices of representation and reproduction of social identities. In this sense, the use of digital technologies is part of a process of appropriation, which develops as people incorporate these technologies in everyday life.

Several authors have explored the relationship between audiences and cultural production in new media (Harries, 2002; Jenkins, 2004; Marshall, 2002, 2004). Although they define this relationship in different terms, they agree on the rise of a productive audience and the blurring between the spheres of production, distribution, and consumption. For Nick Couldry (2004), theorizing media as practice implies a change of paradigm in media studies. It changes the focus of media research from semiotic analysis of text content to the people's doings and sayings. Then, media practices is defined as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media. One consequence of this is to anchor media theory in ethnographic knowledge, overcoming "media-centrism" to study cultural production. As Elizabeth Bird (2010) points out, one of the main problems of studying media in relation to cultural production has been that audience research has traditionally been based on the concept of "audience response" to specific media. So, in *The Audience in Everyday Life*, she argues that we need to

move "beyond the audience" as a theoretically definable construct, but we should not be abandoning the goal of understanding real people, living real lives in which media play an ever-increasing, if certainly problematic, role . . . Only ethnography can begin to answer questions about what people really do with media. (Bird, 2003, p. 191)

These authors put forward the potential for setting the analysis of media production and consumption within ethnography, as a methodological tool for understanding people's motivations and engagements with media. Moreover, media ethnography involves studying media practices beyond the parameters set down by theoretical assumptions of cultural production, based on the circulation of media products. Media practices may be understood as a wider set of practices most of them with, around, and through digital technologies relating to creative processes carried out by individuals, collectives, governments, transnational corporations, and other social agents with different goals and purposes. Coleman observes that the aim of media ethnography is, then, to explore "the complex relationships between the local practices and global implications of digital media, their materiality and politics, and their banal, as well as profound, presence in cultural life and modes of communication" (Coleman, 2010, p. 487).

Summing up, this analysis of the relationship between ethnography and the different fields and objects related to Internet and media research attempted to show the complex relationship between a work's theoretical framework, its object of study, and its empirical reference. On the one hand, we have pointed out the importance of theoretical concepts and epistemic approaches to shape the ethnographic field and frame our object of study. On the other hand, we have highlighted the development of a methodological inquiry about what it means to do fieldwork through and with digital technologies, and how to deal with technologically mediated practices. Therefore, we propose to talk about digital ethnography as a way to engage with the central role of digital technologies in everyday life, and also to understand the importance of field construction, reflexivity, and the development of tools as key elements of the ethnographic endeavor (not limited to digital objects). Next, we will see how the Internet has been conceptualized as a research tool and as a field for conducting ethnographic research, giving an overview of the different challenges an ethnographer faces when studying mediated digital interactions.

# **Carrying Out Digital Fieldwork**

Annette Markham (2004) argues that methodically the Internet has been understood both as a field site and as a research tool. The first concept highlights the way in which the Internet and its different platforms and technologies have become the context of participant observation that is, the field site or the locus of the social interaction between the ethnographer and his or her respondents. The second puts the emphasis on the Internet as a means for data collection. Several authors have explored the Internet's possibilities as a research tool (Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2005; Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008; Mann & Stewart, 2000; O'Connor & Madge, 2003) with which to conduct surveys, interviews, network analysis, and focus groups as well as to present research results (Dicks, Soyinka, & Coffey, 2006; Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003).

However, from an ethnographic standpoint, the question is how to integrate data gathering into a wider perspective of fieldwork. Ethnographic research does not

make a clear-cut distinction between data gathering and "being in the field." Although plain observation, interviewing, and other ways of collecting materials (e.g., questionnaires, etc.) are part of ethnographic fieldwork, what characterizes the method is the participatory approach: the social presence of the ethnographer "in the field." In ethnographic fieldwork, first we weave relationships and afterwards we collect data. Fieldwork, its continuity and its results, depend largely on the relationships we build during the whole process of investigation. Ethnography is a *slow science* methodology, as ethnographic fieldwork ideally must take at least one year in order to develop a glimpse of the different rhythms and moments that punctuate our social life.

Here we will take into consideration how we manage our relationships and conduct research in digital settings. While some authors argue that "virtual" worlds are a different kind of social space than those created by face-to-face communication, we will suggest that the nature of the social space does not depend on the characteristics of the medium, but on the kind of social interactions that people are engaged in.

#### Constructing the Field

As we have seen, carrying out fieldwork in ethnographic research involves tracing personal relations in different social contexts. Delimiting the field is not only a question of finding a place or a community within which to conduct research, but also of constructing our field site according to our research questions and objectives. As Vered Amit (2001, p. 6) clearly puts it:

The ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities of contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred . . . the construction of an ethnographic field involves efforts to accommodate and interweave sets of relationships and engagements developed in one context with those arising in another.

Digital fieldwork requires adjustments in how ethnographers define the empirical site of their research: Where should participant observation be conducted? How is access to settings and research subjects to be obtained? What ethical dilemmas do these decisions involve? Rather than deciding in advance to conduct ethnographic research on a virtual community or in a specific social media, the ethnographer should choose the topic of interest, and then define the field and how that topic involves different modes of communication, people, things, and locations. For instance, one could begin fieldwork by attending a rock festival and end up participating in chatrooms, visiting the blogs of musicians' fans, and sharing files with them through instant messaging on mobile phones. As the Internet forms part of the daily

life of many of the collectives we study, and as they do not necessarily make a distinction between their online, offline, and indeed phone relationships, we follow our subjects across different ethnographic contexts and settings.

Digital ethnography does not establish fixed dichotomies between online and offline realms. There are no substantive differences between online and offline ethnographies but rather different kinds of environments and ways of social co-presence. Digital ethnographers may conduct participant observation and interviews through an array of digital technology devices and therefore must develop the technological, social, and cultural competencies necessary to fully participate in these sociotechnical contexts. As image, sound, and movement are becoming more and more common features of social interaction, not only for web design and online communication, but also for instant messaging on mobile phones and GPS monitoring systems, the digital ethnographer has to move between different research contexts and methods. With this development, the division between online and offline ethnographies tends to collapse even more and digital ethnography must be conveyed as a mediated practice, as a remix of methods that has to be engaged with the researcher's experience. This means a technologically enhanced but always embodied ethnographic practice.

### **Conducting Digital Fieldwork**

Digital ethnographers use digital media to generate data in two ways: first, they use digital visual and sound recorders, notebooks, or PCs to write their field notes and, usually, the same devices to collect textual data, visual material, and sound and movement created by the subjects of study (Garcia, Standlee, & Bechkoff, 2009, p. 64). Moreover, the interaction of the ethnographer with the participants of the research also takes place in digital environments, and the whole interaction can be recorded and preserved.

By conducting participant observation, the ethnographer accomplishes three main methodological goals: to gain presence in a concrete social space, to define her or his identity as a researcher in the field site, and to let respondents know about the research interests in order to obtain informed consent (in the ethnographic method, this consent used to be tacit and not necessarily expressed through formularies). The last, but not least, important factor is to have first-hand experience of a particular technology, as any other participant would. Our experience of conducting digital ethnographic research suggests that participation observation depends largely on our skills in managing textual, visual, sensory, and kinetic components when interacting with research participants. Furthermore, the process of observation itself involves dealing with textual and visual information displayed on the screen, such as the use of emoticons, pictures, colors, page layout, and graphic designs, as key elements of the digital interaction, as well as the interactive capabilities of the technological scripts. Gómez-Cruz's ethnographic fieldwork on digital photography is presented as an empirical example of the former discussion. The author's fieldwork was conducted between September 2008 and March 2010 and was focused on digital photographic practices based on the photo-sharing platform Flickr. After a few months of observant participation on the site, uploading photos, commenting, and participating in different groups, he found a group of amateur photographers called SortidazZ. This group, geographically based in Barcelona, was very active and organized many physical encounters and photo walks (gatherings to take pictures in a chosen area). When confident enough, he decided to send his first public message to the group introducing himself and explaining the research he was trying to carry out:

Let me introduce myself. I'm Edgar Gomez, a Mexican based in Barcelona and currently writing my doctoral thesis on digital photography practices (an ethnography from a sociological and anthropological point of view). I told Carles (KaosBeast) my interest in joining the group and he politely told me to publicly launch. I am a novice in photography and this is a hobby I enjoy. However, my interest in the group is twofold as I'd like to share my concerns, questions and fieldwork. Finally, you are the experts and the idea is to learn from you, with you. Well, you will say what you think, for now, if you please, I'm in for the next photowalk.

regards Edgar

The group welcomed him with jokes ("are we so weird that somebody wants to study us?") and warm convivial messages. Soon, it was clear that the group's communication was not reduced to Flickr but was actively open and experimenting with different social media, apart from gathering together for photographic sessions or simply hanging out together. Members of SortidazZ tend to shoot; process; show each other photos, videos, and web pages; make comments on any platform while they are with other members; use WhatsApp (a mobile chat application) as a group's backchannel, and so on. All of this could easily happen while members of the group were drinking beers together on some Barcelona terrace. Therefore, the ethnographer decided to follow and trace those connections, which took him to Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, SMS, phone calls, Skype, as well as to some photographic walks and personal encounters. Through these trajectories, activities and "sites," the field was instantiated in different locations and devices.

At the same time, Gómez-Cruz's profiles in all the social media sites had a permanent link to his blog where, during the fieldwork, he wrote several reflections on photography, his life as a PhD student, and his daily experiences of the research process. The blog was but one of many devices to develop a constant "presence in the field." Although, at the beginning, the blog was only intended to be a "public face" for his work and not understood as a research tool, to his surprise, group members began to leave comments on the posts, send him links, or comment on the content of the blog in the blog itself and in other electronic forums. The ethnographer was not only actively creating the field, but also weaving himself into it. Along with Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, the ethnographer's blog served as a form of personal exposure: a way of performing his identity as a researcher while becoming an active "practitioner" of digital photography.

In this long-term ethnographic study of digital photographic practices of a heavyuse Flickr group, Gómez-Cruz observes that the photographic object itself is changing from a memory device to a connective practice, and from having a primary social cohesion role to becoming a key element in new groups' formations in daily life. Helping, further on, to understand digital photography as an assemblage of several practices (shooting but also processing, sharing, and exhibiting). These production practices are more and more related to digital mediated socialization, especially since photography is embedded in mobile phones, social networks, and sharing sites.

While participant observation allows the ethnographer to get to know the collective life, norms, values, and dynamics of a group, the in-depth interview is a gateway to the perceptions and meanings that respondents attach to their actions. At the same time, the interview is a unique setting that gives the research participants an opportunity to reflect aloud on their own practices and express their thoughts, emotions, and feelings related to their experiences. Moreover, ethnographic interviews are useful for contrasting the feelings, impressions, and conjectures raised by the researcher during immersion in the field. It is obvious that during fieldwork there are many occasions for engaging in conversations with our respondents about the ambiguities of social life and that these are a valuable source of understandings. Although some conversations naturally occur, while others are directly addressed by the ethnographer or the social actor, in-depth interviews undoubtedly constitute a different social context than conversations.

In-depth interviews are explicitly set up by the ethnographer and are typically open-ended and more flexible than structured or semi-structured interviews while being more focused than natural conversations. The nature of the questions depends, again, on the research topic and the kind of contextualization that the ethnographer needs for interpreting data, but it is useful to have some kind of script that helps conduct the interview. As happens with online conversations, online interviews can be conducted through different Internet technologies, from chat or instant text messaging systems, electronic forums and email, to voice and video conferencing webcam devices. Some authors argue that the characteristics of the sociotechnical context or medium impose communicative restraints, while others argue that they open new research possibilities. For example, textual interviews (and especially those based on anonymity) are considered useful for approaching sensitive or elusive topics, since they tend to allow people to express themselves more freely (Illingworth, 2001; Orgad, 2005; Sanders, 2005). Although this will pose problems of authenticity and spontaneity, textual interviewing allows respondents to put more thought into their responses. The anonymity factor may also balance the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee because the latter may feel freer to challenge researchers online than in a face-to-face interview. In general, online methods allow the interviewee to gain control of the course of the interview but, ultimately, his or her commitment will depend on personal motivation and engagement with the research. Nevertheless, anonymity may be overestimated, since an ethnographer usually knows the person before the interview and has previously established a rapport. Besides, it is not imperative to acknowledge the "real" name of the person when studying online interactions and patterns.

In Gómez-Cruz's work, some online interviews using instant messaging systems and Skype proved to be very useful as a way to establish a complex chronology because informants "showed" examples by copying and pasting the specific URL of the photo they were referring to, not only from their own streams but also from other people's photos, blogs, or web pages. At the same time, while dealing with the issue of self-portraits, specifically women's nude or erotic self-portraits, the respondents were more comfortable talking about their experience online with a sense of trust in the interviewer and, at the same time, with the feeling of being protected by their own private space. Interestingly enough, this is exactly the way these individuals produce photos in their private/intimate space to then upload to the "public" space of social networks. One of them even preferred to create a diary of her thoughts about her practice than to be interviewed. Here is a pair of short examples of the different narrative styles about online self-portraits that arose in the research:

[Chat interview fragment]

JESSICA: For me public photos are those on the web and private are not?? Hehehehe No, this is not true;) There are private public photos, but do not know if the right word is private = S

[Email interview fragment]

EMMA: Pictures of Emma [her own pictures uploaded] are to me almost like the images of a character (but do not think I have problems with multiple personalities). In any case, the nudes are of her . . . It's not the same to see the image of a woman to see her in person. Even many people who know me personally cannot believe that I'm the one shown in these pictures.

While in chat interviews, the ethnographer must deal often with emoticons, short and nongrammatical sentences, email interview answers more closely resemble the epistolary genre. These different narratives bring up the fact that, in the social sciences, the instruments with which we investigate are always part of the context of research and shape the textures of our data, but this does not necessarily mean that online interviews are better or worse than face-to-face ones for ethnographic analysis. Furthermore, online interviews may generate new interview genres, since it can take the form of an epistolary genre, as shown in email interviews, or it can enter the online universe of the respondent, as in the case of an interview conducted in a virtual world or the interchange of hyperlinks during an instant messaging chat interview. The flexibility of online techniques allowed the ethnographer to gather important data that could probably not have been gathered any other way.

#### Digital Data Analysis and the Ethnographic Description

Field notes and field diaries are essential to ethnographic research. Traditional field notes, tables, and drawings are handwritten, and some online ethnographers still employ this method in addition to the multiple forms of capturing and registering information as audio and video records, printouts, screen captures, navigation videos or social bookmarking, and the visualizing social network software available to us today. Some ethnographers also use wikis and blogs as their fieldwork diaries. Online field notes or logs, however, should not be confused with the web pages, blogs, wikis, or social media profiles that ethnographers create to present themselves and to share their research with participants and respondents. These online sites are usually open to a general audience while field notes are kept private.

Field notes help researchers catalogue, describe, and develop theories from their observations, as well as record their emotional reactions and impressions. For example, in his ethnographic study, Gómez-Cruz's field notes were handwritten in a fieldwork diary while, at the same time, he used his smartphone to take notes and photos on (and of) the field. The smartphone was, at once, a field data gathering tool and a constant connective device with the group members. Another example of new ways to carry field notes was the use of "annotated screenshots," which became very helpful as "images of connections" to be used in the interviews about specific topics discussed, as a sort of photo elicitation technique. For example, Gómez-Cruz used his own self-portrait photography in order to create a threat in his fieldwork Flickr site. The answers he got included accounts about self-portraits, but also several photographs taken and commented upon by the respondents.

At the end, the results of the ethnographic fieldwork are an array of very different kinds of data, from field notes to visual, aural, and textual data or transcribed interviews. To analyze them, we must consider our theoretical assumptions as well as the broader context in which the data has been extracted and objectified. Qualitative data software analysis may help us in that process, using programs such as ATLAS.ti or NVivo. This software is useful for archiving, coding, hyperlinking, sharing, and representing visual and other digital ethnographic material but it does not replace analysis and ethnographic description (Pink, 2007, p. 139). Thus, the ethnographer becomes a reflective and heuristic figure who bridges the gap between the reliance on ethnographic techniques (participant observation, in-depth interviews), field experience (immersion, building of trust, bodily engagement), and analytical tools (software for textual and visual analysis, analytical categories).

It is imperative that we distinguish the analytical categories of our theoretical framework from those that come directly from the field, that is, between *etic* and *emic* terms, categories, and conceptualizations. For the sake of clarity we say that the role of ethnographers is to meaningfully explain the studied universe, taking into account the vernacular categories of their research subjects (emic) and developing theoretical frameworks that help to organize them (etic), so that they can bring some

light to their research questions. It means to displace the researcher from her or his own vernacular categories, even when these may be largely shared with their correspondents in the field. As Coleman explains, "the fact that digital media culturally matters is undeniable but showing how, where, and why it matters is necessary to push against peculiarly narrow presumptions about the universality of digital experience" (2010, p. 488).

#### **Ethical Dilemmas**

Finally, the outlet of an ethnographic process is usually a *monograph*, a theoretically oriented description of the object of study we have constructed while following our subjects' practices in different field contexts. Thus, ethnographers must make decisions about how to present research findings to their respondents, taking into account online audiences (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2001). This raises ethical issues regarding the fact that, in most digital ethnographies, the field is constructed and maintained through online interaction that is open to general view. Maintaining privacy and anonymity on the Internet is not only difficult but may come into conflict with the ethnographic task. This was the case with Gómez-Cruz's ethnography of digital photography practices, which was mostly carried out through social media platforms. He contacted the group under study via their site profile, and the process of gaining acceptance by the group could be followed by any outsider, as well as all the fieldwork interactions that took place in his profile and in his field blog. This being the case, the ethical requirements of informed consent might be clearly exposed but respondents were very aware that full anonymity could not be guaranteed.

Digital ethnographers are troubled by the same worries about self-exposure and privacy as their research subjects. A website or a blog may be regarded as a public space, as it is publicly accessible, yet interactions that occur within that social space may be perceived by the participants to be mainly private. Therefore, Internet ethnographers would be well advised to consider their initial self-presentations to their research subjects carefully and to be aware of the fact that some of their online interactions are permanently and publicly exposed. The digital ethnographer should negotiate the level of anonymity that participants wish to maintain when data are fully elaborated and results presented in different formats. Not all the interactions with the participants during fieldwork have been carried out in public social spaces, and the ethnographer must preserve participants' confidentiality by changing names, nicknames, and other traceable footprints when it is required.

We propose, along with other authors such as Forte (2004), to think of digital ethnographic ethics from the point of view of reciprocal and mutual collaboration. The co-production of the field is an activity that can also afford ethical values, such as sharing knowledge and experience with our respondents. Ethnographers use different terms such as "informants," "participants," "co-participants," or even "co-researchers" in contrast to quantitative research, which traditionally uses the

term "subject" to refer to the people who participate in their research. These different terms tell us something about the relationship between researchers and researched as they describe the kind of involvement that the ethnographer expects from the research subjects. What is important to note is that, in any case, the people who participate in the ethnographic research not only are familiar with the ethnographer but also contribute to the configuration of the object of study and to the ethnographer's knowledge of the empirical situations. They are more than passive subjects of study, but active respondents and, somehow, co-participants of the research process with the ethnographer.

This collaborative aim must be transferred to the ethical concerns when writing the ethnographic results or monograph. Digital technologies are well designed for sharing information at distance and make it easy to let participants know about the final product. As we have seen, Edgar Gómez-Cruz shared his own findings along the way through his blog and profile in Flickr and later he allowed participants to comment on the chapters of the monograph related to the group's experience. This practice is not exempt from conflict, as people may not agree with the results. The researcher has to ensure that the participant's opinions are treated with respect and the *emic* interpretations accepted, but the *etic* part of the analysis depends entirely on the ethnographer. Whatever the level of involvement of the participants in the research might be, ultimately it is the ethnographer who controls the process of interpretation, the theoretical framework, and the accountability of the final product.

# Some Final Remarks

To conclude, ethnography, as access to knowledge of the intersubjective experiences and contexts of interaction, brings a new perspective to the empirical study of media. It goes beyond the qualitative and quantitative audience studies focused on hermeneutic or semiotic interpretation of the media text and political economy. On the one hand, from a critical perspective, the close study of media experience allows us to analyze the local effects of an unequal allocation of resources and rights and the processes of moral valuation (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998, pp. 172-173). On the other hand, ethnographic studies of digital media particularize the role that digital media play in the different spheres of social activity and among a great variety of collectives, from teenagers to political activists, and from audiences to media industries and government bodies. Indeed, digital media ethnographies are central to the reformulation of studies in journalism, democratic free expression practices, and current debates about market and commons models of property. Ethnographic accounts complement other kinds of studies, not only by representing people's hopes, desires, and expectations, but also by pointing to asymmetrical relationships, opposite values, and challenging visions of futures.

Digital ethnography is ethnography by other means, and the question is to what extent these other means transform ethnographic practice. We must ask, with Sarah Pink (2012, p. 12), how "the developments in digital, mobile and locative media challenge us to rethink the ways in which media(ted) research and the ethnographic encounter is understood." On the one hand, as we have demonstrated, the digital ethnographer needs to be co-present in the field using the same technological devices as the participants in his or her study. On the other hand, digital ethnography incorporates new technologies of recording, analyzing, sharing, and presenting data and results along with new ethical challenges. Last but not least, digital ethnography refers to the emergence of new topics of research for example, virtual worlds and to the transformation of our objects of study. The field of media studies as a whole has to come to terms with how digital media is articulated with everyday practices and with the new dimensions of our notions of sensoriality, spatiality, and temporality.

Methodology is also about how we create knowledge, and technological shifts have implications not only for the way in which we experience and research media, social relations, and cultural formations, but also for how they are theorized (Lapenta, 2012, p. 131). Sarah Pink (2012, p. 13) addresses this point when she notes that "our experiences of new technologies are . . . encouraging us to think in new ways theoretically which in turn reflect back on how we theorize old media and on how we engage with media as researchers." Digital methodologies may be fueled by old understandings but, at the same time, they might take us to different ways of knowing and to different types of knowledge.

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