



WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Digital Ethnography in Post-Pandemic Times: Reflections, Implications, and Innovations

Organizer: Suzana JOVICIC, Philipp BUDKA, Monika PALMBERGER

E-Mail Address: suzana.jovicic@univie.ac.at

Abstract: Since the COVID-19 pandemic has revitalised and boosted interest in digital ethnography, the question arises as to what remains in its aftermath. Has digital ethnography entered the mainstream, and the digital merged with ethnographic research in an obviously profoundly digitised and digitalised world? Or has it disappeared back into the fringes, unphased by the short-lived interest? What do we actually mean when we talk about digital ethnography: online, remote, post-digital and should we discard these terms altogether? What methodological and ethical insights, movements, setbacks, reflections, innovations and (inter)disciplinary cross-references have emerged in the wake of global developments that have forced ethnographers to rethink their research in unprecedented ways? In this panel organised by the Digital Ethnography Initiative (DEI), we explore the state of digital ethnography (defined as ethnographic research with and through the “digital” and not limited to remote/online) as it emerges from turbulent but perhaps also fruitful times. We invite a wide range of contributions discussing methodological issues, conundrums, dilemmas, twists and turns of contemporary digital ethnography, based on original research. The contributors will be invited to subsequently write a short blog entry for the DEI blog, based on the papers presented at the panel.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Tuesday, September 24, 2024 | Slot 3 | Room 1

Maria Schlechter: The digital ethnographer as translator between social worlds, On-site

Gabriella Shriner: Crafting Community: An Exploration of Fiber Artists’ Identities and Craft-Based Practices in Tucson, Arizona, USA, On-site

Gavin Xun Zhou: WeChat trade-off, On-site

Francesco Bachis: An Ethnographer Out of Place: Reflections on Time and Space in a TikTok Ethnography, On-site

Adriana Moreno: Profane Knowledge and Remediations in Digital Ethnography: The Via Regia to Empirical Knowledge about Vitality, Online

Tuesday, September 24, 2024 | Slot 4 | Room 1

Carmen Pereyra, Yolanda López García: Postdigital Practices and Migration: Challenges and Approaches in Studying Facebook Online Communities of Latin American Migrant Women in Germany, On-site

Deanna Holroyd: The Digital Flaneur: Moving towards a feminist ethnographic practice for studying cross-platform social media trends, Online

Tushnim Gangopadhyay: How the Pandemic Changed Gaming: An Autoethnographic Case Study of an Indian Gamer, Online

Luise Erbrant: Ethical Navigations in the Digital Research Sphere with Generative AI: Queer Image Practices of the Nude and the Challenges of Becoming Visible, On-site

SESSION PAPERS

The digital ethnographer as translator between social worlds

Maria Schlechter

Digital ethnography can be framed within a series of attempts to expand the focus of ethnography by crossing disciplinary borders, enlarging the methodical toolbox and blurring the boundaries between researchers and the researched. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, this facilitated an application of digital ethnography in multiple areas of society (e.g. industry, art, politics) and led to a shift away from genuine academic research. Research funds have become available that are particularly suited for digital ethnography at the intersection of different disciplines and social areas. These transdisciplinary collaborations offer some opportunities to leave the ivory tower of orthodox academic research, but also entail a lot of new questions, challenges, and tasks for researchers.

I will address these challenges by referring to the research Project “TELL” funded by the industrial research agency (FFG). In this project social researchers (Bertha von Suttner Private University) collaborate with app developers, youth workers and researchers of Human Computer Interaction (TU Vienna) in order to create an app that serves multiple purposes. One of these purposes is to provide a safe environment for collaborative storytelling of youth. Another aim is to support youth workers with an app and provide a tool for biography work. In addition, it is required that the app serves educational purposes (e.g. digital data literacy), and, last but not least, there should be concept for long-term financing of the app at the end of the project. The different actors involved in this project have diverse – sometimes even contradicting – interests. So, the main task of the social researcher is not only to explore the relevance systems in different fields (of youth workers, software engineers, app designers...) but also to mediate between these fields by acting as a translator between different logics and terminologies in the process of developing an app.

Crafting Community: An Exploration of Fiber Artists' Identities and Craft-Based Practices in Tucson, Arizona, USA

Gabriella Shriner

Guided by autoethnographic and ethnographic methodology and community-based participatory research methods (CBPR), the proposed presentation reports on ongoing doctoral research, which includes preliminary visual analysis of crafters and craft markets based in Tucson, Arizona, with special attention paid to fiber artists' identities and craft practices, as situated in the online and offline creative communities to which they belong. This work aims to build on the literature related to information embodiment, serious leisure, intersectionality, and online communities – including how fiber artists engage in communities online (e.g., via Instagram or Ravelry) (Luckman & Andrew, 2020; Black, 2018) compared with in-person (e.g., at craft markets).

Often, ethnographic studies focus on either the physical or digital realms. However, multisensory and visual methods like photovoice, which require greater levels of engagement to amplify participants' stories and allow for increased participant agency, may give a fuller picture of these dynamics, how they “play out” in physical spaces, and the ways in which the use of social media behaves as a “layer” augmenting the physical space (Walker, 2010), such as during a local craft market or similar community-centered event.

The author, who is a lifelong artist and knitter for over ten years, is in the process of conducting pilot interviews, engaging with potential participants in the field at local markets and adjacent spaces, and exploratory implementation of the photovoice method, first conceptualized by Wang and Burris (1994, 1997). Struggles and insights with the regard to the participant–observer, insider–outsider and artist–researcher continua will be explored, alongside efforts regarding rapport building and future possibilities for collaboration with local makers and artists afforded by ethnographic and CBPR methods.

WeChat trade-off

Gavin Xun Zhou

This paper is the core Chapter of my PhD thesis, which describes the use of WeChat and Chinese students in Melbourne after the Covid-19 epidemic, delving into the concept of WeChat stickiness. In this paper, I try to fill two gaps I discovered in the literature. First, I seek to present a detailed definition of WeChat censorship to deepen the understanding of the relationship between WeChat users and the platform. Specifically, I aim to clarify the nature of WeChat censorship and surveillance to frame a more nuanced conception of these practices. Second, considering the paradox of user privacy, I further contribute to the knowledge on the relationship between WeChat and younger users by combining different data and, ultimately, suggest yet another reason why WeChat has lost its charm. In this paper, I also describe a new type of relationship between platforms and users: the trade-off relationship. First, I resolve the confusion rooted in the concept of WeChat censorship and surveillance and provide a more precise definition of the censorship modalities that are unique to WeChat. This exercise is crucial to the chapter as an accurate definition of this concept is a prerequisite to further discussions. Second, I describe the relationship between WeChat users and the platform since the COVID-19 outbreak at the social level and elaborate on a series of online movements that have

taken place on WeChat along the control/resistance paradigm. I also more fully review the contextual factors of this new type of relationship on both the social and individual levels to provide a 'bigger picture' perspective. Finally, I narrow my perspective to individuals and review two aspects of the literature to explore further the phenomenon of the paradox between user privacy and platform censorship.

An Ethnographer Out of Place: Reflections on Time and Space in a TikTok Ethnography

Francesco Bachis

TikTok remains the least ethnographically investigated social network among the most popular ones, despite its significant rise over recent years. TikTok's growth accelerated particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown periods. This phenomenon has transformed the relationship between physical space and social network usage, reshaping some private spaces into public communication venues (Kennedy 2020). The youthful age of users and content creators is a distinctive feature of TikTok. This aspect significantly influences the nature of the contents. For instance, the "memification" often targets "zoomers" (adults) who use TikTok without fully grasping the "native point of view" (Zeng e Abidin 2021).

Drawing from ethnographic research on the self-representation of young migrants in Italy on TikTok (the so-called 'second generation'), this paper reflects on the physical spaces and time in the ethnography of social networks. From a methodological perspective, these dimensions are crucial even when digital ethnography is carried out without 'offline' interactions with users and content creators. The choice of time and space in daily life during ethnographic research indeed affects both the online positioning of the ethnographer and their daily social relations. Using TikTok "from the native point of view" (e.g., daily travels on public transport) can produce a mismatch between status (age, gender, social position, etc.) and fieldwork activities. This paper explores how this research posture places anthropologists "out of place" in their daily lives.

References

- Kennedy, Melanie. 2020. «'If the Rise of the TikTok Dance and e-Girl Aesthetic Has Taught Us Anything, It's That Teenage Girls Rule the Internet Right Now': TikTok Celebrity, Girls and the Coronavirus Crisis». *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23 (6): 1069–1076.
- Zeng, Jing, e Crystal Abidin. 2021. «'#OkBoomer, Time to Meet the Zoomers': Studying the Memefication of Intergenerational Politics on TikTok». *Information, Communication & Society* 24 (16): 2459–2481.

Profane Knowledge and Remediations in Digital Ethnography: The Via Regia to Empirical Knowledge about Vitality

Adriana Moreno

Each ethnographer builds her own field based on a robust technical, theoretical and ethical assembly that encapsulates what she learned during her professional training. However, the methodological approach usually requires a series of non-academic knowledge that contributes to attenuating the limitations of ethnography and making in

situ adjustments to overcome or remedy (Pink et. al 2015; Lassen, 2014) unforeseen events specific to the field. Therefore, in this space I will propose the notion of “profane knowledge” to characterize those skills and personal qualities that operate as a Via Regia for the construction of empirical knowledge.

To achieve this goal I will use backgrounds from anthropology, sociology (), and specific findings from my own research conducting digital ethnography in Mexico to highlight the importance of skills, dispositions, and practices that contribute to shaping the field device (Estalella & Sánchez Criado, 2021), especially through sports practices (such as boxing and wrestling), artistic activities (such as playing a musical instrument, embroidering, painting, photography, performances), or specific technical skills (such as creating Internet memes, programming, using certain software or devices) that facilitate the study of vital human processes (Gómez Cruz, 2022) and the role of the digital in the everyday life (Hine, 2015).

Postdigital Practices and Migration: Challenges and Approaches in Studying Facebook Online Communities of Latin American Migrant Women in Germany

Carmen Pereyra, Yolanda López García

The aim of this paper is to present initial approaches and challenges in the context of a research on Facebook (FB) communities of Latin American migrant women in Germany. In the context of migration, social networking sites (SNS) not only serve to unite diasporic populations and facilitate connections with the homeland (Georgiou, 2006; Miller, 2012; Moran, 2022), but also create spaces that enable new forms of self-expression and self-representation, while shaping how individuals make sense of their everyday experiences (Busso, 2016).

This study explores how members of FB groups reconfigure their everyday practices and aims to understand their lives, their struggles, and their strategies for navigating them. We argue that these practices take place in a postdigital field of action (López García, 2024), which means that there is no dichotomy between online and offline fields of action, but rather continuity and embeddedness (Knox, 2019).

To explore postdigital practices, we adopt a bricolage perspective (Kincheloe et al., 2017), which encourages researchers to create their own set of tools to approach each case of study. The methods therefore combine tools from digital anthropology (Boellstorff, 2012: 56-57; Horst & Miller, 2012) and netnography (Kozinets, 2015; Kozinets & Gambetti 2022), such as lurking, participant observation, interactions, and interviews.

The main ethical issues we plan to discuss is the conduct of this research within private FB groups, the process of obtaining consent from thousands of participants, and the intricacies of researching sensitive topics, as many of the women are in a vulnerable position, either because of their legal or economic status, or because of abusive relationships.

Finally, we wish to explore creative methodologies for effectively engaging participants in a sense of horizontal research (Corona Berkin, 2020) and avoiding research extractivism, as well as ensuring that the research benefits both the participants and the academic community.

The Digital Flaneur: Moving towards a feminist ethnographic practice for studying cross-platform social media trends

Deanna Holroyd

Digital ethnographic inquiry surrounding social media studies often focuses on user engagement, platform vernaculars and content creator experiences, and is primarily conducted on specific platforms. However, the tendency to conduct digital ethnographic research within the boundary of a particular platform is at odds with the ways in which users actually experience social media; as mobile apps have become increasingly optimized, streamlined and integrated with one another, it is not uncommon for social media users to frequently flit between apps and platforms, rather than staying on one platform for a prolonged period of time. Similarly, just as users move across apps, social media trends also migrate across platforms, with content frequently duplicated and reposted across Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, and even messaging services such as WhatsApp.

Building on my own digital ethnographic study into ADHD-related social media content, this paper proposes the research figure of the 'digital flaneur' as a methodological intervention for conducting ethnographic research into cross-platform social media content. The 19th century literary archetype of the flaneur (an affluent, yet curious, man of leisure who strolls through urban streets to observe the minutiae of modern life and architecture with no fixed destination in mind) has inspired urban ethnographic research methods within geography and spatial anthropology. Influenced by this, I adapt the 'flaneur' to the digital context, and demonstrate how it can be an especially useful approach for conducting feminist, digital ethnographic research across various platforms. I then suggest several strategies for becoming a 'digital flaneur' within specific research contexts, before concluding with a concrete case study to exemplify how the 'digital flaneur' offers an innovative approach to digital ethnographic practices for multi-platform social media research.

How the Pandemic Changed Gaming: An Autoethnographic Case Study of an Indian Gamer

Tushnim Gangopadhyay

The COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant lockdowns have profoundly affected gaming media and practices in the ensuing years, among them of some import, is India's introduction to the gaming zeitgeist in terms of participation and economy. However, the effects of the same on individual Indian gamers predating the pandemic have been more subtle and nuanced. The entertainment-first approach to gaming had, on instances, been replaced by gaming as a social activity, thus fulfilling a different emotional need. Pre-pandemic gaming practices have also undergone certain changes due to the constraints of the lockdown and the social, economic, and familial changes caused by the same. This paper seeks to explore the researcher's experiences during and after the pandemic, revolving around what it means for him to be an Indian gamer, his gaming practices, gaming companions, and extra-gaming aspects which have changed during and due to the pandemic, against the backdrop of India's emerging gaming scenario. In doing so, it also aims to discover the changing socio-emotional requirements of the individual in periods of crisis.

Ethical Navigations in the Digital Research Sphere with Generative AI: Queer Image Practices of the Nude and the Challenges of Becoming Visible

Luise Erbentraut

In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools received considerable attention in almost all areas of work. In addition to the resurgence of digital ethnography, there was a breakthrough in the field of generative AI. Since then, the use of generative algorithms such as ChatGPT and DALL-E 2 has been the subject of controversial debate in the scientific context. The prevailing sentiment is one of skepticism. The challenges of navigating the implicit bias of AI, the problem of the origin of the training material, and the question of intellectual property and authorship in an ethical way are significant. In my presentation, I relate these challenges to practical oriented considerations of researching Queer 'nudes'. In doing so, I combine digital ethnographic approaches of collaborative and participatory research with media anthropological approaches of photo-elicitation-interviews. As starting point serves the premise of investigating the digital images, which initially remain invisible within the research itself due to the vulnerability of the participants. Consequently, the aesthetic and visual aspects of the digital image practice is to be made visible collaboratively with the participants. Along a mixed-method approach in which digital group discussions and photo-elicitation interviews are combined, the question is posed as to what extent image-generating AI is a fruitful tool to collaboratively investigate the aesthetics and visual facets of Queer nudes. By situating image-generating AI in the context of collage creation, I elucidate the ethical quandaries surrounding the provenance of training material, implicit bias, and the vexing issue of intellectual property. Hence, I demonstrate the possibilities and limits of navigating these challenges in the practice of researching queer nudes.