Anthropology from Home

Advice on Digital Ethnography for the Pandemic Times

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ABSTRACT: The coronavirus pandemic has made ethnographic fieldwork, as traditionally conceived in anthropology, temporarily impossible to conduct. Facing long-term limitations to mobility and physical contact, which will challenge our research practices for the foreseeable future, social anthropology has to adjust to these new circumstances. This article discusses and reflects on what digital ethnography can offer to researchers across the world, providing critical insight into the method and offering advice to beginners in the field. Last, but not least, the article introduces the phrase 'anthropology from home' to talk about research in the pandemic times – that is, geographically restricted but digitally enabled.

KEYWORDS: anthropology from home, coronavirus pandemic, digital anthropology, digital ethnography, media studies, research

Being a digital anthropologist who studies health communication, I was immediately aware that the pandemic would make my fieldwork change rapidly. It has suddenly grown in size, intensified, and become more timely and of interest to broader audiences. This is not, however, the case for the majority of anthropologists, who have found themselves facing various obstacles, both personal and professional. Postponed, extended or even cancelled fieldwork means financial loss from non-refundable or unplanned fieldwork expenses, and it can even mean going jobless. With no certainty on how the post-pandemic world will look, and when 'the post' part will begin, many ethnographers are left waiting to learn what the future holds and what changes they will need to introduce to get back to work.

With digital ethnography being temporarily the only way around pandemic restrictions, this article offers basic advice on what to be aware of when beginning the adventure with online fieldwork. Building on the expertise of other digital anthropologists and my own experience, as well as my observations of the challenges that the first three months of the epidemic have brought to the discipline, I give an honest critique of the limitations to the digital method and discuss the obstacles some of the more offline-trained researchers can encounter. Proposing the term 'anthropology from home' in the last section of this article, I share my worries on the future challenges and adjustments that anthropologists will be forced to make to return to their fieldwork, and I muse about what post-pandemic anthropology will look like.

Home Alone

It is late in the evening, and both the sun and my laptop's screen have gone down long ago. I sit frozen on the sofa in my living room for the third hour straight, hypnotised by what is taking place online. My body is beginning to stiffen uncomfortably, but I am too absorbed with my phone to bother. I am following a particularly vivid Facebook discussion on the use of vitamin C injections – I take snapshots and notes. It is my fieldwork, but an unaware observer would probably assume that I am just wasting my time before bed, like other human beings tend to do at this time of the day. Evenings figure prominently in my re-

search on popular health advice groups that I study on Polish Facebook. The free time of others is the busiest time for me, as group members post questions on their way back home, or later, when their kids fall asleep and they finally have some time to think. To be fair, it is not only the evenings that see me spend time with my face staring at my phone. I get to do my fieldwork at all times of the day and night – that is, if I follow a link that makes me travel in time to another geographical location whose population has not yet gone to sleep or has already woken up!

What am I studying exactly? Health knowledge production across digital platforms on the Polish web since 2016. I work from home, as my digital fieldwork makes it impossible to have a regular work schedule, unless I am writing something. Like many other digital ethnographers, I am used to #stayingathome, but the past two months have turned out to be particularly intense and worrisome. Expressions of anxiety and fear have flooded my fieldwork, ever since the restrictions on mobility and social gatherings were introduced, making everybody realise how serious the pandemic has become. Now, millions of people across the world, amongst them anthropologists, are locked at home, their phones in their hands – they read, re-share, post and take notes, day or night, trying to navigate the crisis, make sense out of it, stay healthy and avoid going broke, and wondering what the future holds.

The pandemic has turned people's lives upside down, not only posing a danger to their health, but also affecting their social relationships and financial situations. While it is hard to predict whether the coronavirus pandemic will indeed become the generational experience some are predicting it will be, many things will certainly change. As anthropologists, we seem to be very well suited, along with other social scientists, to enquire in depth into the pandemic. Some could say that it is our code of conduct to act for the common good and contribute to the understanding of its widespread consequences. Besides, are we not standing in front of an unprecedented opportunity to produce the biggest collective ethnographic record and analysis in the history of our discipline? Why should we not go online and do some digital ethnography, given that so many people are stuck at home just like we are? After all, the coronavirus epidemic is not like a war; we are all doing nothing being bored, right?

Based on the conversations I have had over the past few weeks with my colleagues, from Poland and abroad, and based on anthropological commentaries that are now being published daily from across the globe by various blogs and journals,[1] the opposite seems to be true. Some ethnographers were caught by surprise, as not everybody follows the news so closely. Some have found themselves unable to be creative in a lockdown, even though, or maybe because, the fourth week is passing by. Some have small children or older parents to take care of. Some are stalled in their fieldwork activities, unable to conduct their research. They are often alone, as they do not have a relationship with their research participants that would be close enough to ask them for help or companionship. Some have faced hostility when foreignness has begun to be feared as a potential source of the disease. We have a right to be afraid and to feel vulnerable confused like everybody else, without being afraid of missing out on studying an event of such scale and complexity if we do not feel fit to do so. The global aftermath of the coronavirus's agency will be waiting for us anyway, wherever our fieldwork is.

Eventually, when we are ready or forced to get back to work, we will confront the minor or major changes that the pandemic has brought to our ethnographic practice. As it might take not weeks but months before movement restrictions will be lifted, allowing us to travel again, digital ethnography could indeed be an option to consider. It can help us maintain the fieldwork we have invested so much time and energy in; it can help us take care of our research participants and include the pandemic times into our study without further ado. It just needs to be approached with caution, as it is not as straightforward as it might seem. In the following sections, I show how challenging and unsettling the digital method can be, especially during a pandemic, and propose ways that make it easier to work with.

Deep Dive into the Digital

Digital ethnography is a method used to study societies and cultures in the digital space – on the Internet, online, without a necessity to travel. Digital field sites can comprise anything that the web is made of – texts, videos, images, platform infrastructures, user behaviours, social relations, or an information network. Unlike conventional fieldwork, it is not geographically constrained, nor does it require clear boundaries. It can be open-ended and dispersed, with the researcher being the binding force of the fieldwork (Burrell 2009).

Such an understanding of digital ethnography was built over the past 25 years of the method's

development (Pink et al. 2015). Even though the anthropological interest in new media and the Internet has been with us for quite some time now (Ito 1996; Nardi 1996), digital fieldwork is still the subject of various stereotypes amongst anthropologists as well as other social scientists. Except for the most common remark that the online field site is not as valuable as the offline one as it does not require a physical relocation, another popular misconception assumes that it digital fieldwork is easy. I have often found myself needing to explain how complex, complicated and difficult my fieldwork is to shush those voices, both in and out of my head, that say 'you are just scrolling Facebook and surfing the web all year long; it is not real research!', which represent all those generations of 'conventional anthropologists' who need *the real feel*. In conversations, even without being asked explicitly, I would always make sure to casually point out that my fieldwork also includes going places and meeting people – like actually meeting them physically, shaking hands, catching viruses and all that. But truth be told, I am scrolling Facebook and surfing the web for the most of my fieldwork, which is particularly network-like and open-ended, and I do not necessarily need to meet my interviewees physically. It does not make my work less real, less challenging, or easier. On the contrary, the 'digitalness' creates a whole range of new challenges that us digital ethnographers have to address.

Digital methodology is perhaps the most untamed of contemporary fieldwork theories, as it takes to another level the post-modern fieldwork deconstruction. For better and for worse, there is much to choose from when it comes to approaches to digital fieldwork definition, which usually has blurry boundaries, confusing research strategies that make up the 'being there', or a handful of novel ethical dilemmas (Airoldi 2018; Boellstorff 2012; Horst and Miller 2013; Miller and Slater 2001; Pink et al. 2015). Digital ethnography is a fluid work-in-progress that still gives a lot of liberty to researchers to develop their strategies of dealing with the digital field site and to learn from their own mistakes (Beaulieu 2004; Postill 2017). In her recent article, Gabrielle de Seta writes about the difficulty of navigating the fieldwork in her study, whose aim was to understand various forms of creativity performed by young Chinese across the social media they use (Seta 2020). Writing honestly about the difficulties she came across over the years, she well illustrates how confusing and methodologically challenging an attempt to work with the messiness of the Internet can be. Here, the illusion of clear fieldwork boundaries, which often comes when a field

site is more of an actual place, holds even less. With the researcher being sometimes the one to both open and close networked fieldwork, much responsibility rests on her shoulders: where does she cut, how does she justify such a decision, when the only reason for doing so is having enough empirical data?

While the general rule of the thumb is that researchers should have the liberty to define and construct their fieldwork out of the messy web, ethical dilemmas are still a matter of concern and a source of controversy. Zizi Papacharissi, danah boyd, and other scholars have contributed to the debate on networked publics and the blurry understanding of what users perceive as private and public in the digital space (Boyd 2011; Dobson et al. 2018; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Z. Papacharissi 2002, 2010, 2015). The discussion on the ethicality of lurking in the public space of the Internet is ongoing across the social sciences, and it puts into question whether researchers should always oblige objection to their research or seek explicit informed consent for use of data that is in this arguably public domain (Simpson 2016). Pointing towards another digital fieldwork peculiarity, Luc S. Cousineau, Harrison Oakes and Corey W. Johnson, on the other hand, propose the term 'appnography' to navigate the app-based culture of contemporary dating and sexual social relations (Cousineau et al. 2019), which is private yet public space of intimate relationships. Another matter that should be of concern to anthropologists, in this context, is the predominantly commercial character of the majority of free-of-charge social networking sites and communication apps. While the user does not pay directly to use Facebook or Google, the data generated by his usage generates profits. While the omnipresence of social media has somewhat normalised this power dynamic, making it hardly noticeable, or even invisible, the ethical aspects of how the digital spaces happen to exist and what price users must pay must be taken into consideration by those wishing to study them.

My work also makes a good case in point. I study networked knowledge production about health across digital platforms that operate in the Polish language, plus transnational and translingual links that are brought in to my fieldwork by the Polish diaspora in Germany, France and English-speaking countries. Trained as a classical European cultural anthropologist, I became interested in digital ethnography because I was intrigued by the information chaos and polyphony of the web in general and of social media in particular. So, I went down the rabbit hole of teaching myself the craft without knowing what awaited me. In 2016, I began to form

my networked fieldwork, and I soon realised that interviews would not play the central role of the field site – which was new to me, as I was trained to give them the utmost importance. It was the participant observation that would come to inform my understanding of social relations that form around various networks of knowledge-sharing.

The thing is, however, that conducting participant observation online is an extremely troublesome task. First, there is the ethical dilemma of lurking – the Internet allows us to be an invisible observer, which in the offline setting would have to be justified by special circumstances to pass as an acceptable research method. On the Internet, however, much of what I am studying takes place in the so-called 'networked publics', which are (in theory) publicly accessible. I just need to be particularly careful to pay attention when it is the private sphere that I am entering. The differentiation of the two, based on the digital platform or the medium we digital anthropologists focus on, is unclear and a matter of debate in itself. Digital private spheres can also be studied, but cannot be wandered into: I need to acknowledge my presence and ask for permission to use any of the data coming from private spaces on Facebook, such as the secret groups or walls of my research participants. People may want to object to being looked at and studied, but online they will not notice if someone is 'spying' on them; in an offline setting, they probably would.

While digital ethnography seems like a thing to do when stuck home alone, away from the fieldwork, it is not an easy nut to crack. Not everybody will be able to save their existing or future work by going partially or fully digital. Not all anthropologists can be considered digital natives, who can perhaps more easily adjust to conducting ethnography at their 'digital home', not to mention engage in adding a digital component to their fieldwork located not 'at home'. The Internet and ICTs (information and communications technologies) in general are used differently across the world, mean different things, bring new possibilities, or take them away (Chan 2013). Just as non-digital fieldwork, digital fieldwork takes time and there many mistakes to learn from. But we may have no choice if we want to carry on with ethnographic fieldwork in the near future.

DIY: Field-Brewed Advice on 'Going Digital'

In this section, I have compiled some basic, subjective advice in no particular order of importance to help

beginners in digital ethnography start their journey more smoothly, having in mind the special pandemic circumstances. You can either have just decided to add the digital component to your already existing fieldwork, or you were inspired by the #stayathome times to design an entirely digital ethnographic study – either way, this list is for you. After getting yourself familiar with some of the basics of digital ethnography,[2] please consider the following:

(1) The pandemic effect – even though the pandemic has locked many people at home, and they may have limited pastime options, it does not mean that they will be eager to talk to you. The pandemic is stressful, and it might be harder, rather than easier, to establish new relationships through digital communication only. Patience is a virtue that every digital ethnographer must possess because the interview refusal rate online seems way higher than it is offline. If you cannot smile at someone, it is harder to make them care about your research, even if it is 'for science' or for 'the common good'.

(2) Participant observation – read up very carefully on the practicalities and the ethics of participant observation online. It is important, as ethical and legal matters are much more blurred and tricky to navigate here than in conventional fieldwork.

(3) Overabundance – while in the beginning you might feel disappointed and confused with how much time it might take for a digital fieldwork initiative to really take off, you might eventually find yourself overwhelmed with the amount of empirical data you will collect. It takes time to learn how to catalogue and navigate thousands of screenshot notes in addition to complex, much hyperlinked field notes that you will find yourself producing in really high numbers. It is way more than what you bring from offline fieldwork (unless you really like writing and taking pictures), and much of your collection will not turn out to be useful. It does not matter – it is what informs your understanding as the study moves forward, so go ahead and screenshot your digital fieldwork as much as possible.

(4) Mental and physical health – for your own sake, control the time you spend with your digital

fieldwork, especially if you are in a lockdown. While we are all quite used to spending long hours in front of our computers when writing up results of our research, digital ethnography will add considerably to your screen time. With the pandemic, ensuring your well-being is even more important. Take regular breaks, and clearly schedule your working hours (if possible) to both keep yourself healthy and keep your enthusiasm high for digital fieldwork for as long as possible (we all know that it will not always be there). Also, 'physical' fieldwork tends to be healthier if only because it allows you to walk and get exercise.

(5) Deep immersion – for many anthropologists, their work is their passion and their life, and with digital ethnography it is way easier to overdo it with inhabiting one's fieldwork. If you can carry your fieldwork in your pocket wherever you go it might be tricky to maintain a healthy work–life balance. Do not let the fear of missing out get into your head – digital fieldwork can usually wait for you, and if not, there will be (probably) another chance to take part in whatever is that you think you missed. At first, it can be hard to distance yourself from the 24/7 accessibility and the scale of what you can simultaneously observe online. Again, make sure you set yourself clear boundaries not only for the sake of your own mental health, but for the quality of your research – drowning in too much data will not help you interpret it.

(6) Less is more – as a beginner, you should set yourself clear fieldwork boundaries. The most reliable is time frame. Digital ethnographies tend to be shorter than the non-digital ones, as there is more data that can be collected in less time. Conducting a long-term digital project means more self-discipline and more data to deal with. Consider it when planning your first digital ethnography.

(7) Extending fieldwork online – it might be the safest way to start learning about digital ethnography in the pandemic times: just add a digital component to your already existing, predominantly offline fieldwork.

(8) Going back to school – 'going digital' in ethnography might make many anthropologists rethink the research strategies they developed over the years. Just keep your mind open, and do not get put off if things get a bit messy.

We are yet to see whether the coronavirus pandemic will mean digital ethnography becomes more popular in the anthropological community and more established in the longer term. Maybe the abundance of new contributions to the field will help us further our methodology; address some of the downsides of digital fieldwork I have highlighted in this article; and make our online ethnographies more respectful and worthy. Whatever the future holds, the pandemic has suddenly made our fieldwork land again on our desks, although we had once thought that 'the desk has collapsed into the field' (Mosse 2006: 937). This time around, however, our desk-field is actually a window onto a whole universe of human sociality and cultural creativity that happens somewhere in between material infrastructures, international treaties and corporate policies that make up the worldwide Web.

Post-Pandemic Anthropology

Digital ethnography is not the universal glue that will help us cope with all the changes the pandemic will bring to ethnographic practice. Nonetheless, it can help us enquire further into global structures and locations of power, cultural practices and social phenomena when the only option we have is 'anthropology from home'. With every week that has passed by since the pandemic outbreak, ethnographers have been jumping back onto the fieldwork wagon, trying to put things back together or enquire into novel corona-related social and cultural phenomena. In both cases, due to the present circumstances, they are usually turning towards the only accessible way of collecting ethnographic material, which comprises the variety of digital technologies that make up the digital places we go to and the ways we communicate with others. One can only hope that the multiplicity of coronavirus/lockdown/quarantine ethnographies will not turn out to be an overabundance of ad hoc interpretations. While those also have some value of their own, much of the quality associated with anthropological enquiry comes from the time spent on a particular topic, in a particular place, amongst particular people.

While we wait to see what post-pandemic anthropology will look like, the concept of 'being in the field' seems to be the first aspect to be affected. For

ethnographers, going away to a place (travelling) to talk to people (take part in social interactions) is perceived not only as crucial, but also as fundamental. While the current change in the field site locations is just a necessary adjustment, it might be a starting point of a larger paradigm shift that will challenge even more the still procuring fetish of far-away fieldwork. It is hard to assess right now which restrictions will be imposed, in the long term, on local, regional and international travel. It might be that the first two will be more accessible to ethnographers, giving us a chance to again rediscover the importance of 'anthropology at home'. While 'going online' is also 'going away' to do fieldwork, doing 'anthropology from home' and taking up digital ethnography should be a choice and not a necessity.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Journals such as *The European Sociologist*, the *Journal of the European Association of Social Anthropology*, and *Curare: Journal of Medical Anthropology*; and anthropological blogs such as *Somatosphere*; and research institutions such as University College London's (UCL) Medical Anthropology and Centre for Digital Anthropology, have issued open calls for contribution that were announced between mid-March and mid-April 2020. While contributions to the journals' special editions are yet to be published, blog posts are available here: *Somatosphere* (http://somatosphere.net/series/dispatches-from-the-pandemic/); UCL's *Medical Anthropology* blog (https://medanthucl.com/); UCL's Centre for Digital Anthropology's *Collecting COVID-19* project (https://anthrocovid.com/); and Curare's *Witnessing Corona* blog (https://boasblogs.org/witnessingcorona/) and *Corona Diaries* project (https://boasblogs.org/witnessingcorona/curare-corona-diaries-project/).

2. The London School of Economics' (LSE) Digital Ethnography Collective has put together a collaborative open-ended reading list. You can find the PDF of it here: https://zoeglatt.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/LSE-Digital-Ethnography-Collective-Reading-List-March-2020.pdf.

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