

The Where, How and Who of Digital Ethnography

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“I found it on the internet.” I am convinced that I am not the only one who has received this answer when asking a student to specify the origin of her/his material. “The internet” is part of everyday life for most of us, to some extent and in some form – in our homes, at work or in our pockets via a smartphone. “The internet” is, however, not a satisfying answer, I would say. The broadness, messiness and multitude of contributors and channels “out there” make this kind of place ungraspable, undefinable, and often (not least from the perspective of a teacher and a researcher) unreliable. But still, our cultural and research practices imply that we often turn toward the internet to observe, find, collect and create data. Many cultural practices have become digital: the way we communicate, share information, play games, buy items and share moments of everyday life as well as major events. Many students are well acquainted with internet content and more digitally skilled than many teachers. Nonetheless, approaching and using the internet as a place, a source and a research context requires perspectives, a reflexive approach and ethical considerations that are not necessarily obviously relevant (although rarely superfluous) in everyday use of the internet, but that are central for us in folkloristics and ethnology (see for instance Cocq & Johansson 2017).

With a disciplinary interest in the study of culture, its expressions and practices, we have naturally found in the internet an extensive and rich source of materials. And it is not only the increased number of digital sources and examples of digital practices that influence our research practices – it also implies increased possibilities through available methods, tools and so forth. And when our habits, practices and methods gain ground on the internet, the need for studying the internet cannot be ignored. Our usage and application of digital sources, methods and materials have motivated a rapidly increasing body of research and literature about what is called netnography, netnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography or digital ethnography (Hine 2000; Hjorth et al. 2017; Kozinets 2015; Pink et al. 2016; Underberg & Zorn 2013).

What Is the Internet?

“But *where* on the internet?” would be my first follow-up question. I would restrain myself from asking “*What* is the internet?” for the risk of giving the impression of being too troublesome (or too old!) – although I am convinced that I would receive many interesting and diverse answers, from access to favorite applications on a smartphone (regardless of the form of connection) to patterns of communication and monitoring of time and space, or illustrations of how the internet can be a tool, place or way of being (Markham 2004; Markham & Baym 2008).

“*Where?*” can be on traditional media platforms, websites and homepages, or on the web 2.0 – as often when students come with references to the internet. This is the web as we know it today, constituted of social participatory and interactive online media – the web as a place where we meet, create and so on, which became possible when new technologies increased possibilities of access and a higher degree of interaction than with the previous rather static web 1.0. Social networking services (SNS) such as Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook have in common their participatory nature and ease of access but they differ in many other ways: demographic groups – for instance, a survey among US teen shows that YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat are the most popular platforms among this group (Gramlich 2019);¹ politico-geographical factors, not only due to digital divides, but also to political and ideological choices (as a Nordic citizen would rapidly experience when traveling for instance to China); or in terms of affordances, i.e. the relationship between an object (for instance here a website) and the human being and how it affects how we can interact with it: a tool’s properties give clues to what can be done with it (Norman 1999). For instance, a website offers us the possibility to interact with it in a certain way or a specific SNS invites us to do things by showing what is possible (upload a picture, how to comment or react to it, etc.).

1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/16/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/>

Everything digital is not online

“Where?” should not be restricted to online contexts. Studies in digital ethnography do not have to take place solely online; depending on the phenomenon to be examined, it could be offline, online or both. In a similar manner to how we may experience the difficulty of not taking the digital into account because of its omnipresence, what takes place offline cannot be excluded either. Therefore, digital ethnography often combines online and offline methods and sources. Offline data allows us to include contextual and additional data, to put a greater emphasis on the users and their intentions, and so on. In contrast to early internet studies talking about virtual communities, contemporary research emphasizes how groups, phenomena and so forth exist both online and offline, infuse each other, and become integrated. Most cultural practices and so-called communities exist both online and offline and it is therefore difficult – and not suitable – to draw a sharp line between the two. As C. Hine reminds us, we have to “take account of movement between online and offline spaces and between different online activities” (2017: 317). However, the distinction between online and offline realms is still relevant for methodological purposes, because online ethnography requires some adaptation of traditional methods. For instance, our modes of presence as researchers have to be adjusted when we approach the study of digital expressions and phenomena online or in relation to the internet. Physical, face-to-face interaction such as we know it from traditional fieldwork can be combined with other forms of presence and co-presence: remotely, mediated or through a virtual presence for instance in the case of games or virtual worlds – combining ways of “being there”. (Geertz 1973; Pink et al 2016)

Tracing the Way There

The question of “where” on the internet is as valid as asking “where” in Europe or in the US. But the question of “where” is actually just a first step for digging further into the process of the collection and creation of data, because “where” – i.e. identifying the source – leads us to the issue of the reliability of the source and how to relate to it. It is about the contributor, the intended audience, if it is produced within an institutional frame, or if it is a vernacular initiative, and how the institutional and vernacular might interplay (e.g. Cocq 2013). It is also about the patterns of distribution, for instance in the case of a meme that has spread virally through several platforms.

And from there, we get to my favorite follow-up question: “How did you get there?”. The importance of tracing our choices and patterns of selection cannot be overestimated. Documentation is key in the ethnographic process, and this is also relevant when it comes to internet

navigation. Search entries in a browser might lead to new terms, new entries; a page might lead us to click on a link, on yet another page; a thread in a conversation might lead us to another discussion thread, and so forth. Nevertheless, a search on Google gives us what can be seen as a selection of data already at that stage. The hits that it shows on my screen can differ from someone else’s screen and be influenced by my previous searches or by what the search engine has learned about my (assumed) interests and patterns of online behavior. Neutral search engines that do not save our data can help us to get a better start – i.e. leave the selection to us. Still, the intuitiveness of internet navigation implies that we need support if we want to remember and be able to retrace our way back to the source that we eventually identified as what will be included in our data. Screen captures (photos and videos) are easy ways to do this, and also have the advantage, as a side effect, of making us more conscious about our modes of navigation.

Teaching digital ethnography therefore also comprises a practical dimension focusing on “How?”. The hands-on part of digital ethnography should thereby provide examples of tools (for instance screen recording, digital diaries, etc.). Here, I find particularly important to strive for lowering the threshold when it comes to the technology, to not focus on the instrumental but to keep in sight the analytical purposes of the study. Students’ relation to technologies vary a lot – from the tech-savvy to those who are easily overwhelmed by new digital tools. Whatever the case, the technologies applied for conducting a study in digital ethnography should be selected, applied and motivated by the purpose of the research. A strong focus on the instrumental always implies a risk that the choice of methods is influenced and limited by technical knowledge or attitudes to new technologies. Introducing open access, free tools or tools made available by the home university can prevent such risks.

Who Is behind the Data?

Back to our inquiries about internet data. Yet another key question for evaluating selected material would be “Who?”. Here, I want to focus on the subject and the intentions behind the data, and thereby address issues of ethics and ownership. Identifying who is behind the data is necessary in order to ask for informed consent, to evaluate and consider if and when we are entitled to use the data, how to quote (if applicable), to estimate the research benefits etc. Internet research ethics is a field under constant development, and we can benefit from the extensive work of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the guidelines they continuously develop. Their first ethical guidelines were published in 2002, revised 10 years later in a second edition of the report (Markham & Buchanan 2012), mainly adapting to a digital media landscape influenced

by the development of social media, mobile technologies and the emergence of big data. Presently, in 2019, the AoIR Ethics Working Committee is updating the guidelines into a third version. In an age when digital media channels and platforms keep multiplying, and bearing in mind the development of new dimensions such as Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence, a continuous review of current and upcoming ethical challenges is greatly needed.

Core to the ethical guidelines are a processual approach and a context-oriented day-to-day ethical practice. Other central aspects emphasized in internet research ethics and in line with perspectives in ethnology and folklore are the values of cultural awareness and ethical pluralism, i.e. the recognition and inclusion of the diversity of perspectives, practices, cultural backgrounds and so on that we meet during the research process. Ethics, cultural sensitivity and respect for the research subjects are nothing new to our fields. I see these as important contributions that we can offer to digital research and methods when ethnography is being applied in many other disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, design and so forth.

Research subjects are to be found behind all data, even if their presence is less visible in, for instance, big data samples. Large data collections are made possible thanks to more powerful tools and technologies and this big data opens possibilities to ask new questions. Digital ethnography has a fruitful role to play in the field of digital research, also when it comes to putting forward the benefits of small sample analysis (Cocq 2016; Hitchcock 2014; Kaplan 2015; Wang 2013). Our disciplines' ability to conduct in-depth analysis of small samples, what T. Wang (2013) describes as

"thick data", is in this context even more central than before. The concept of "thick data" – built on the concept of "thick description" developed by Geertz in his seminal essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973), a description that explains not only a phenomenon or a behavior, but its context as well (compare also Honko 2000; Pekkala & Vasenkari 2000) – brings to the fore how big data analysis needs small data perspectives.

The contribution of ethnology and folklore in digital research

The list of questions to be asked in order to grasp the complexity and richness of digital resources does not stop here. The concepts, methods and approaches in digital ethnography keep pace with developments of practices, platforms and so on, and not least the entwinement and interplay between online and offline spaces. But the *where*, *how* and *who* of digital ethnography are, I believe, a good start for highlighting the contribution, need and value of ethnography in the study of the digital in a broad sense. The study of routes and places (the *where*), the value of documentation (the *how*) and the key role of research subjects (the *who*) are familiar themes in our disciplines. Folkloristics and ethnology have indeed been driving forces in the production of knowledge about these topics. It is therefore both evident and expected that our disciplines continue to be major actors in developing the field of digital research.

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