Ethnography Upgraded

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Abstract

The basic practice of ethnography has essentially remained unchanged in hundreds of years. How has online life changed things? I contrast two transformative inventions, the telephone and the internet, with respect to their impact on fieldwork. I argue that our current era has created entirely new constraints and opportunities for ethnographic research.

Keywords Digital ethnography · Qualitative methods · Online fieldwork · Telephone

Over the course of hundreds of years, the basic practice of what today we call ethnography has essentially remained unchanged. A scholar visits a site, observes its social interactions, interviews whoever will talk, and takes copious fieldnotes. This basic practice is essentially what friar de las Casas (2007 [1689]) did in his 1552 account of the indigenous populations in the Americas and the atrocities perpetrated by the Spanish conquerors; and it is essentially what sociology ethnographers did in the first decade of the 21st century when studying neighborhoods and organizations. Certainly, the practice has varied in scope, focus, theoretical orientation, and degree of self-critique; and ethnographers have surely explored many alternative objects of study, such as imagery and video. But in spite of major societal and economic transformations, deeply consequential changes in our means of communication, and multiple conceptual leaps in what researchers decide to observe, the basic expectation

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about what an ethnographer is supposed to do—travel to a site, observe interactions, talk to people, and take notes—has barely budged.

We are now, as others have argued, in the midst of a change (e.g., Baym 2015; Hine 2015; Lane and Lingel 2022). Two inventions, the internet and the smartphone, have produced a social order (Rainie and Wellman 2012) that, though less radically different from that which preceded it than, say, the industrial age was from the agrarian one, is actually far more impactful to the basic practice of ethnography. Our lives are now online. Buying clothes and groceries, renewing a driver's license, borrowing money, paying taxes, listening to music, consuming news, and even visiting the doctor or therapist, are now routinely done online. We socialize and form relations (Baldor 2022), and eat meals with others (Bascuñan-Wiley et al. 2022), online. Even those who resist the online world, who insist on traveling physically to places to obtain goods and services, cannot escape that companies are increasingly intruding virtually into their lives, capturing their experiences digitally, tracking their behavior—their credit card swipes, the movement of their cellphones, their web browsing—and using it to sell them products or services. Virtual life is inescapable. And ethnography is trying to evolve to capture this new reality.

The depths of what ethnography must confront is best understood historically, by comparing the impact of this reality to that of an older technology, the telephone. As Fischer (1992) reminds us, the invention of the telephone changed just about every aspect of social communication, eliminating for the first time in history the barriers of space and time to people's ability to talk to others, probably contributing more than any other aspect of the industrial revolution to the ramification of social ties, to the fact that people today create and maintain social ties across the entire world (Wellman 1979; cf. Small and Adler 2019). Telephones changed as many aspects of everyday life as the internet and smartphone have. Yes, everything from grocery shopping to visits to the therapist can now be done online. But when the telephone emerged, one could, for the first time, call one's butcher and order groceries for delivery, or talk to one's therapist by phone. One could ask stock brokers to make real-time trades on one's behalf. One could report during wartime on conditions on the frontline and wait for an order on the spot. One could simultaneously speak to three family members living in three different continents. The impact of the telephone on society was at least as radical as that of the internet.

Strikingly, however, the telephone barely changed the basic expectation about what an ethnographer was supposed to do. Consider that over the past two decades, ethnography has faced a number of powerful critiques over many important issues, including its approach to confidentiality (Jerolmack and Murphy 2019), its standards of evidence (Lubet 2017), its potential for exploitation (Rios 2015), and its politics of representation (Small 2015). Yet almost no one complained that ethnographers, by and large, have ignored phone calls. The ethnographic method, everyone seemed to agree, has its limits, and those limits include taking the telephone into account. One could therefore be forgiven for believing that, from a sufficiently informed historical perspective, the changes brought about by the internet are unlikely to alter ethnographic practice.

But ethnography survived the telephone unscathed because conducting the basic practice I described—travel to a site, observe interactions, talk to people, and take

notes—requires the existence of a *space* in which one might observe social *interaction*. The ethnographer loiters, mingles, socializes—essentially hangs out in some place. But the phone call was private, intentional, and exclusive, such that the ethnographer could at best observe one party, and not the interaction between both (except through some highly impractical obtrusion). Ethnographers rightly or wrongly were thus forgiven for largely ignoring calls.

That is not the case with today's leap in communication. Virtual space is of course a space of interaction, a kind of place where one can certainly hang out. And to the extent virtual interactions multiply and take over more of our lives, ethnography will not escape this change, as scholars in communications have insisted for several years. The consequences will be significant. Many researchers in sociology, communications, anthropology, and other fields have reflected on such topics at length (e.g., Baym 2015; boyd 2014; Hine 2015; Lane 2018; Lane and Lingel 2022; Lingel 2017; Stuart 2020). But three changes to traditional ethnographic practice in sociology seem important to note here.

The first is a *constraint*: the increasing inability to escape digital ethnography. For example, while urban ethnographies in the early 21st century barely made mention of the internet (e.g., Deener 2012; Jones 2010; Pattillo 2007; Small 2004), such studies could not get away with doing that today (e.g., Lane 2018; Stuart 2020). Fifteen or twenty years ago, a study of how neighborhood conditions affect, say, access to financial institutions might have examined the presence of banks, payday lenders, and other local organizations in a neighborhood; it might have probed how historical factors, ecological conditions, and local social networks play a role in people's financial decisions. A study of that same topic today would need to consider that banks and payday lenders now make borrowing online easy—such that ecological conditions of the physical location may not matter—that new institutional players such as PayPal, Venmo, CashApp, and even Facebook provide means of seeking funds not historically available, and that the social networks that matter, at times precisely because of these apps, need not be located anywhere in the neighborhood. There are parallel examples—of the requirement to now study online activity in pursuit of traditional questions—on the topics of violence (Lane and Stuart 2022), network formation and maintenance (Baldor 2022; boyd 2014), dating and family formation (Rosenfeld et al. 2019), and much more. In fact, part of what is exciting about new ethnographic works is the many ways they demonstrate the co-constitution of online and in-person activity—in topics as different as artistic production (Evans 2022; also Stuart 2020) and political activism (Ferrari 2022; also Tufecki 2017), digital and non-digital action are inextricably linked.

The second is an *opportunity*: the newly found ability to conduct *only* digital ethnography. For the first time in history, the ethnographer need not be a "field" worker. The heart of ethnographic practice has always been travel to a place—whereas the armchair theorist sat comfortably in the office, the ethnographer went out "in the real world" to study. But many socially important communities—such as Reddit, Wikipedia, countless affinity groups, and more—exist either primarily or exclusively, as communities of interaction, online. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, many people had no choice but to socialize, even have dinner or drinks with others, exclusively online (Bascuñan-Wiley et al. 2022). Indeed, for some kinds of studies, such as

of groups scattered about the globe or with uncommon medical conditions (Ross Argueda 2022), online fora may even the only plausible form of existence (see also Lingel 2017). An ethnographer can now do all the research, much like the arm-chair theorist, from the office or the coffeeshop. Ethnography is therefore amidst an inevitable transformation in identity. The classical fieldworker will have no greater claim to authenticity than the coffeeshop ethnographer. The extent to which the field splinters or instead becomes some new, comprehensively inclusive entity, remains to be seen.

The third is a *re-evaluation*: the space for new conceptual categories that might force us to rethink the world. As shown in the papers in this special issue, ethnographers have already begun comparing and contrasting physical and virtual spaces, examining how interactions in one space affect those in the other, assessing how conditions known to operate in physical space do not operate in virtual space, and so on. They have begun asking new ethical questions, such as how much to disclose as an ethnographer participating in an online forum. All such changes are natural and expected, and they will lead to new ideas. But properly studying the online world will, perhaps most inspiringly, require entirely new conceptual categories that should in turn, eventually, alter our understanding of the world as a whole, including outside the digital realm. For example, as Rosa (2022) argues, code—the lines of computer programming that turn our thoughts into online content—is the very heart of what makes possible the digital content we see, and it deserves ethnographic study. Studying the data centers, people, design architecture, and other aspects of code, which is here very broadly defined, brings to light the significance of technological infrastructure to the social content we see in the digital world—and by extension, I believe, to the role of social infrastructure to the cultural content we see in the non-digital one (see Klinenberg 2018). Understanding the digital world in its own terms inevitably forces a re-evaluation of our assumptions about our non-digital existence. In fact, consider that, in the context of this very essay, reflecting on how the invention of the internet is changing ethnography forced me to re-examine why the invention of the telephone did not—and should force all of us to consider whether ethnographers were actually justified in that neglect. Digital ethnography, if the researchers are up to it, will be the site of the most important new social theory.

And yet, to be clear, much of how we evaluate the method does not really change. As always, the researcher must seek to understand people's actions, meanings, and motives, must follow-up on issues that emerge in the field, must approach their work with thoughtfulness and self-reflection, and so on. The criteria that distinguish good from bad ethnographic research will remain (Small 2009; Small and Calarco 2022). But what must change is, inevitably, the relationship between the ethnographer and *space*. Of the four basic practices—travel to a site, observe interactions, talk to people, and take notes—the first is now altogether different, much broader in scope. In spite of a rapidly and dramatically changing world, physical space has stubbornly continued to matter and likely will matter for many years to come (Small and Adler 2019; Small and Fekete 2019). But space is now permanently both physical *and* virtual, such that a "field" worker cannot remain what it was. The promise behind rethinking our work is enormous. Whether we live up to it remains to be seen.

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