2nd Edition

INTRODUCING ANTHROPOLOGY

WHAT MAKES US HUMAN?

Text

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HOW DO YOU CONDUCT FIELDWORK ONLINE?

Online fieldwork can be undertaken by participating in a range of online activities. For example, this might be in online forums, in social media and though engagement with participants in other online practices and platforms, always with their permission. My own research brings together online and offline as part of the same context; however, other researchers have usefully developed methods for doing research online.

DO YOU COLLABORATE WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES IN YOUR RESEARCH?

Interdisciplinary research underpins much of my work and this enables me to do research that would have been impossible for me as a lone anthropologist. I have collaborated with researchers from many disciplines, including, engineering, design, arts practice, media studies, cultural studies, art therapy, safety science, organization studies, pedagogy, sociology and geography. I collaborate with researchers based both in universities and in industry. This allows me to develop projects that advance academic theory and methodology, on the one hand, and, on the other, that make a contribution outside academia.

WHAT IS YOUR LATEST WORK?

My current work focuses on the anthropology of emerging technologies – such as new modes of automation and artificial intelligence, and how they are experienced in technologies like self-driving cars and future mobility systems, energy futures and healthcare environments. I want to understand how we can best engage such technologies for the benefit of human futures, and I argue that anthropology has an important role to play in guiding such futures.

WHAT ARE THE ETHICAL ISSUES REGARDING DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethical issues tend to be specific to different research contexts and questions rather than being particular to digital ethnography per se. My recommendation is to underpin any digital ethnographic research with rigorous and reflexive anthropological ethics that attends to questions of participants' informed consent, privacy and wellbeing and regards research as a collaborative relationship.

Interview with Crystal Abidin (2020)

Crystal Abidin (aka 'wishcrys') is an anthropologist and ethnographer of internet cultures, particularly young people's relationships with internet celebrity, self-curation and vulnerability. Her books include *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (2018), *Microcelebrity Around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame* (2018, co-edited with Megan Lindsay Brown), *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (2020, co-authored with Tama Leaver and Tim Highfield) and *Mediated Interfaces: The Body on Social Media* (2020, co-edited with Katie Warfield and Carolina Cambre). She is listed on Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia as well as Pacific Standard 30 Top Thinkers Under 30. Here, she talks about her work and what it means to be an anthropologist of internet cultures.
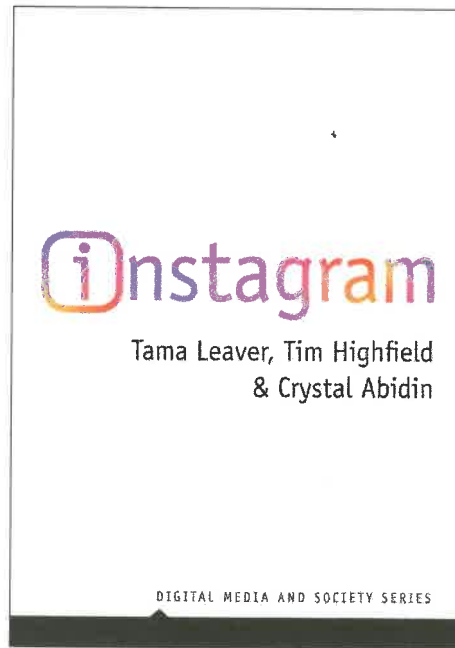
Instagram by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield
and Crystal Abidin (Polity 2020)

WHAT IS DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY?

This could be an anthropological framework, perspectives, theories, concepts, even an ethos and belief system regarding how you study things that are digital. Digital ethnography is less of a framework or system of beliefs but more of method, and is employed by many people especially in the social sciences, cultural studies as well as media studies. It provides a sustained way of doing ethnography adapted for the internet age. But at the heart of the discipline of anthropology, we are most focused on people, culture and social practices, which means that these interests guide my focus when I am doing my research.

HOW IS DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY DIFFERENT FROM CLASSICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK?

I do a mixture of traditional and digital ethnography even when I study internet celebrities, influencers, and internet popular culture and platforms. A lot of my fieldwork involves going to meet with these people face-to-face to observe and participate in their activities – when I say 'in the field', this could be when I was researching social media influencers and serving as their personal assistant or secretary, or when I studied online fashion stores and worked as a packer or administrator. I orchestrated a situation where I would be able to meet with my informants on a daily or weekly basis, for weeks or months at a time depending on the field context, to understand what they do behind the screens and how they produce content. At the same time, I continue to observe them online, so there is this very nice juxtaposition and corroboration of different methods. The first leg of my fieldwork usually includes serial meetings and interviews, before I commit to extended participant observation with a selected group of informants.

CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR OWN WORK?

I am looking at people, on platforms, and also on internet phenomena like memes and gifs that do not have people as units of empirical data. In the latter, I may conduct textual or object analysis akin to physical anthropology or archaeology looking at artefacts.

Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online (2018, Emerald Publishing) is one of a four-part series that I have planned. It is pitched at the general public, for students, for anyone who is from any discipline and for people in the industry. The language is public-oriented, and the theories and concepts are surmised in reviews of literature and a brief introduction to some of my empirical research. I consider this the primer among my books.

Microcelebrity Around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame (2018, Emerald Publishing, co-edited with Megan Lindsay Brown) is an edited collection of how people become or practice internet celebrity cultures around the world, but especially in the global South. I really enjoyed putting this book together with my co-editor because almost every one of our contributors was an early career researcher or a PhD student at the time of writing. As a result, these authors tended to be positioned to look at new phenomena or bring fresh perspectives on established research, and we were honoured to have worked with them.

The third and the fourth books in the series are long-form, in-depth ethnographic works based on my traditional and digital anthropological research. One looks at the prehistory of Influencers before this vocabulary came into being, focused on a few networks in Southeast Asia and how young women were setting up and organizing blogshops (online shops hosted on blogs) to sell used, newly imported and eventually exclusively manufactured clothing online. I started this research in the early years of my undergraduate research education and continued it into my PhD candidature. The other book focuses more specifically on influencer cultures in Singapore, looking at the front-to-back end of the industry, the microcosms and macro industry organizations, across several years of fieldwork from my Honours Year and PhD to the present day. At the heart of both books is a focus on everyday cultures and practices.

WHAT ARE THE ETHICAL ISSUES REGARDING DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

I will probably address this question as ethnography more generally and extrapolate to the digital context. In anthropology we are trained to be attuned to, or sensitive towards, our informants, and this might mean that we pay closer attention to the ethics, nature and practice of consent and data collection. For instance, online data that is publicly accessible by default, say social media posts, is not necessarily 'free' for researchers to lift and study. We have to think about the conditions and environment of the content and poster, whether or not they are intended to be public, whether or not they can be traceable, whether or not we need to implement specific forms of anonymization. For example, if I was conducting a content analysis of publicly circulating YouTube videos and Instagram posts belonging to internet celebrities or prolific account holders, I would probably be able to make the case that these are posters who have intended for their message to circulate and reach the widest audience possible, and in attributing and acknowledging them as authors I will consider whether or not they can and should benefit from being

publicly named rather than assume pseudonymity as the default – I almost always allow my informants the opportunity to decide how they would like to be attributed, which has in the past required some persuasion on my part to various institutional ethics committees. But if in another instance I was looking at a subculture that, while still publicly accessible, is not yet mainstream, I consider whether they wish to continue sitting under the radar or whether they would benefit from more general exposure. This requires consultations with key gatekeepers and opinion leaders even at the research proposal and pre-fieldwork stage of a project initiation, and will require more lead time to prepare before I can kick off fieldwork more formally. Amplification and visibility labour, whether by human action or platforms and algorithms, is something I have been focused on in my recent research.

Further, in traditional ethnographic fieldwork, researchers often have the privilege and time to build rapport and even genuine friendships with informants over time. This will mean that, at times, there will be sensitive or contentious information and situations that I am privy to, under conditions where we may be 'off duty' or 'off stage' as a friend. Good, ethical ethnographers will take the time to consider these ambiguous boundaries and not partake in research or produce outputs that may do their informants harm. In the past I have chosen to forgo some very rich and exciting data in order not to jeopardize the trust and friendship I share with some informants, which are simultaneously research, political and humane decisions that require quiet consideration. In digital spaces where rapport is built through online relationships, networks and reputation, presence and footprints, or content and contributions, these decisions take a little more effort and care, especially as it can feel more convenient or easy to dismiss or displease someone when interactions are mediated through a screen.

This ethics of care is something I am still learning to hone. One of the most memorable of such experiences from my fieldwork was when I was made aware that a few of my heterosexual-appearing influencer informants had 'Instagram boyfriends' or 'Instagram girlfriends' that wore 'beards' or 'covers' to protect their sexuality, for various reasons. When I was introduced to their (prospective) partners in confidence, I had to remember to respect their wishes whenever we were in group or public settings. For instance, where in groups mutual friends would tease these women influencers about prospective boyfriends, I would join in the banter and jokingly recommend other male candidates as well, despite fully knowing their sexual orientation, in order to maintain the group dynamic and keep the conversation tension-free.

In another memorable instance, I was out late at night with a few in-the-closet queer informants who were slightly tipsy and more expressive with their body language with (prospective) romantic partners. I noticed that a group of young people – probably their followers – recognized them, and began to secretly snap photographs of them embracing or holding hands. At this moment, I instinctively decided to 'interrupt' by introducing myself into the embrace, as if were just 'tipsy young women' merely engaging in a group hug or handholding to express 'girl friendship', so that we could avoid a situation where my informants accidentally out themselves. This required quick decisions to transit from an ethnographer to an advocate, ally and friend.

Similar incidents in this vein also broke out as 'small scandals' online when my informants were caught up in controversies or attacked by haters, anti-fans or rival

Influencers. Instead of only observing these events as they unfold, I was sometimes also asked for my expert opinion and friendship to assist my informants in crafting 'crisis response' messages. These were moments when, as an ethnographer, I had to decide and prioritize between wanting to 'collect' rich data, and desiring to be a good friend and person. Throughout the years of fieldwork, some informants and I 'debrief' and reflect on these incidents, which, while seemingly small and mundane, were perhaps some of the most meaningful parts of my research experience, even if the full accounts will never make it to print.

STOP & THINK

What are the challenges that anthropologists face when studying people online and offline?

Conclusion

Anthropology is defined by its research method: ethnographic fieldwork. This method allows the researcher to gain valuable information without disturbing and intruding on the privacy of the people being studied. The researcher participates in all daily activities of the community, observes the group or individuals, records their findings and then reflects on those findings. The body of data collected is often substantial and is used selectively in analysis and in writing up the results. Fieldwork data is usually supplemented by other data collected in libraries and museums. Nowadays fieldwork is used in many other disciplines outside anthropology and is recognized as a valuable way of gathering rich and valid data. In the world of technology, anthropology is adapting to new forms of media and plays an important part in studying cultures online and virtual worlds as well as using new technologies in processing gathered data.

End-of-chapter questions

- Outline the history of research methods by earlier explorers, missionaries and colonists in the nineteenth century and demonstrate how the approach to qualitative research subsequently developed.
- Highlight the key elements of participant observation and discuss the skills required by a participant observer.
- Explain the differences between overt and covert participant observation and discuss and defend the approach you think is most appropriate in anthropological research.
- Identify key elements that distinguish qualitative from quantitative research, and, in the process, suggest which of the above approaches would work best in ethnographic research, and why.
- Digital ethnography is the same as traditional anthropological research. Discuss.