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Collecting rich data from afar

Inserting the digital into ethnographic research in conflict (-affected) settings

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Abstract

As ethnographers, we plan our fieldwork thoroughly in advance, but circumstances on the ground sometimes force us to abandon our plans. Especially in conflict(-affected) settings, access to the field is not always guaranteed and circumstances can rapidly change. In this paper, we discuss how digital ethnography can be integrated into ethnographic projects, when researchers find themselves unable to travel or return to the field. We argue that embracing the digital, both as a tool and as a space, is a viable avenue to continue ethnographic fieldwork under such circumstances. We discuss the opportunities and challenges that such an approach offers, by discussing existing research and by drawing from our own experiences in Lebanon, Kosovo and Medellín (Colombia). The discussion encompasses the two focal components of ethnography: participant observation and interviews. In the part on participant observation, we make a distinction between two different approaches of using the digital for ethnography. The first is approach is grounded in digital ethnographic work, where the digital spaces are considered as field sites. The second approach uses digital tools for collecting data from physical spaces. The objective of the paper is to provide methodological tools to ethnographers who are not trained in digital methods, and to offer practical yet sound and rigorous tools. Our focus is on ethnography in conflict(-affected) settings, which presents rather specific challenges.

Keywords: fieldwork; digital ethnography; conflict research

1. Introduction

It is the spring of 2019 when most of the world comes to a sudden halt because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. At that time, Marije is in Kosovo, conducting ethnographic fieldwork for her doctoral research. Health concerns, physical distancing, and curfews come to describe most of everyday life and she is forced to abandon her fieldwork, including a subsequent fieldwork trip to Colombia the following year. Fast forward to the fall of 2023. Esther is working on her PhD dissertation in Lebanon. On October 7th, Palestinian groups in Gaza commit a major attack on Israel. Israel retaliates with a campaign of unprecedented genocidal violence against the population of Gaza. On October 8th, Hezbollah enters the conflict from Lebanon, by shooting rockets at Israeli territory. As Esther is preparing for a fourth round of fieldwork, Lebanon is dragged into the war. It is unclear if and when Esther might be able to return for fieldwork.

In both instances, the authors of this article were forced to rapidly pivot and adapt to the circumstances at their field sites by finding alternative ways of continuing research. Faced with funding deadlines and finite contracts, waiting out the crises was not on the list of viable options. We both found a solution in moving the remainder of our ethnographies online. For Esther, this was a matter of adjusting her methodological framework, which already included digital ethnography and consisted of a combination of on- and offline fieldwork. Marije integrated digital methods into her existing methodology as the project was already in motion. The situations are indicative of doing research in conflict(-affected) settings, where access to the field is not always guaranteed. As researchers, we may plan our fieldwork thoroughly in advance, but changing circumstances on the ground sometimes force us to abandon our plans. This might be because we need to heed our own safety and/or because we feel constrained by ethical considerations towards our interlocutors (Krause 2021). Digital methods can provide opportunities in these situations, as moving aspects of the planned fieldwork online can be a way to continue the work. Following this, this paper draws on knowledge from the field of digital ethnography in order to provide strategies and tools for researchers working in conflict-affected settings who wish to adopt digital ethnographic methods and collect data from afar. We contend that digital ethnography offers ways of meaningfully connecting to interlocutors, even while the researcher is at a physical distance. Making strategic use of digital tools, in other words, can provide access to people's intimate lives and to the places in which they live. At the same time, the successful use of such tools depends on their methodologically sound and rigorous implementation. In this paper we draw from the field of digital ethnography and from our own experiences doing digital ethnographic research. The objective of this paper is to make our insights accessible to researchers from various disciplines working in conflict settings, including political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and others. Although we are both outsiders to the community conducting research in geographically distant locations, our approach may also be useful when the field is closeby yet inaccessible, and to researchers who are part of the groups they study.

This text is divided into three sections. The first section addresses how digital transformations have changed ethnography throughout the last decades, both looking at the internet as a tool in the hands of researchers and as a part of life that is radically altering the social life of people everywhere. The other two sections discuss the two main methods associated with ethnographic research: participant observation and interviewing. In each instance we pay attention to the specific opportunities and challenges that the methods pose. In the section on participant observation we highlight two different approaches of digital ethnography: the first approach is grounded in digital ethnographic work, where the digital spaces are considered as field sites. The second approach focuses on using the digital as a tool for collecting data about physical geographical spaces. For both approaches we emphasise the importance of thoroughly selecting the fieldsite, the available tools for data collection and the challenges that come with conducting digital ethnography. The section on online interviewing presents various interview methods, the challenge of building rapport, and strategies to realise data reliability. Throughout the text we take into account how online research presents both new questions and challenges around key issues like reflexivity, ethics and building rapport. To ensure that this text is helpful to researchers working on a broad range of subjects and in different contexts, whilst also remaining relatable and concrete, we use vignettes that draw on our own work in Colombia, Kosovo and Lebanon to bring to life the various methods.

2. Ethnography transformed: The fieldsite, the digital, the interdisciplinary

Ethnography has always derived its strength from an extended engagement with the field, which allows ethnographers to become privy to the intimate and informal aspects of their interlocutors' lives by 'being there'. The core methods of ethnography are participant observation and qualitative interviews: both allow for informal and repeated interaction with the same interlocutors, predicated on an intimate

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understanding of everyday life in a certain location (Bernard 2011; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Howlett 2021; O'Reilly 2005). This provides an immersive engagement with the field and helps with untangling the complex social life to develop an intimate understanding. It is through participating in mundane activities and interactions of everyday life, that aspects not easily communicated through words can be analyzed and that the researcher is able to center the interlocutor's perspective. These characteristics make ethnography unique vis-a-vis other methodologies, which do not offer the same depth of insight into social and cultural life. Traditional ethnographies are based on months, if not years, spent living with interlocutors.

Much has however changed in the field of anthropology in the last decades. Funding schemes have made it more difficult to spend long periods of time abroad for fieldwork; integral concepts like insider/outsider have been questioned, blurring the distinction between being in and out of the field; and recognition has grown for the need to make ethnography compatible with the demands of everyday life, in order to make it a more inclusive science (Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020). Moreover, the growth of interdisciplinarity across the sciences also allowed for ethnography to be embraced by researchers in other disciplines. Their engagement with the method transformed and opened up ethnographic practices in the process, in many cases because they implemented ethnographic methods in line with the expectations and possibilities of their own disciplines. While no one would deny the great value of spending a long time in the field, these transformations demonstrated that it is also possible to collect sound ethnographic data over a shorter timespan. This has made ethnography a more approachable methodology, which is no longer exclusive to anthropologists, but practiced by researchers across the social sciences and the humanities.

Alongside these developments in anthropology, radical digital transformations have presented both opportunities and challenges to ethnographers, particularly since the turn of the century. Digital ethnography - also popularized under other names such as 'netnography' and 'virtual ethnography' - has been developed in order to study social life on the internet, operating at the intersection of anthropology and media studies (Hine 2015; Kozinets 2021; Miller 2018; Pink et al. 2016; Hjorth 2017). The insights of such work is becoming ever more relevant, as the lives of people across the world now takes place partly via digital mediation. Most ethnographers today will encounter that their interlocutors live digital lives in one way or another and ethnography is in the process of becoming a practice that integrates embedded online research (Miller 2018). At the same time, digital affordances are also tools in the hands of researchers, as we are now able to access our field sites across geographical space, for example by (video-)calling interlocutors, walking the streets on digital maps, and attending live meetings via conference calls.

The COVID-19 pandemic sped up acceptance of using such methods, as researchers everywhere were suddenly restricted from leaving home. As many researchers had to deal with deadlines and time restrictions by funding schemes, they found a solution in using digital methods to conduct their ethnographies (Eggeling 2023; Forberg and Schilt 2023; Howlett 2022; Kozinets 2020). Yet, further methodological reflections on the integration of digital methods did not take place and broadly speaking, the academic community quickly returned to the status quo in the aftermath of the pandemic. We – the authors - had many discussions about this, arriving at the conclusion that in fact, the need to integrate digital methods into ethnographic work extends beyond the pandemic and benefits researchers in other situations, such as those working in warzones or otherwise conflict affected contexts. In this article we therefore ask ourselves how we can integrate the digital into ethnography in a way that helps generate meaningful, rigorous, and ethically sound research. As such, we are embracing the notion that in a digital age, 'being there' is not per definition limited to a geographical location; and that while being physically present cannot be substituted, digital tools allow us to enrich our research especially in situations where we cannot access the field.

3. Participant observation when mediated by the digital

In this section we differentiate between two approaches to participant observation that integrate the digital into this quintessential ethnographic method. A first approach takes digital spaces themselves as field sites and aims at participating in and observing social life on social media, forums, games and the like. This approach is grounded in digital ethnographic work, which takes the online world as a realm of social life in itself (Hine 2015; Hjorth et. al 2017; Kozinets and Gambetti 2021; Pink et. al 2016). A second approach focuses on gathering data of physical spaces, but uses digital tools - such as online mapping tools and video calling - to do so. Whereas the former centers on *the online field site*, the latter is mostly concerned with *the digital as a tool for collecting data* about the analogue world. Creating a sense of 'being there', the main objective of ethnographic research, is for each approach the objective of adopting participant observation as a method.

3.1 The online fieldsite

Is it possible to employ a method which is defined by informal and everyday encounters with interlocutors, without physically being in the same place as they are? Digital ethnography is predicated on the notion that the internet is "embedded, embodied, and everyday" (Hine 2015). In a digital ethnography, participant observation is generally conducted in interactive, social spaces of the internet, such as social media, online games, and conference calls. Although these social interactions are decidedly different from physical encounters, this does not make them any less real or integral to the lives of our interlocutors. Moreover, like other social interactions, our online communication is highly complex, and often incoherent and contradictory. As such, digital life merits the ethnographer's attention. We need to be attuned to the fact that while our research may be situated in a certain geography, our respondents might be invested in social realities that exist beyond that location (Dong 2017, p. 221). People engage in digital relationships, consume culture and media produced elsewhere, and create and share ideas in online communities. None of this is new, however it has become amplified as digital media have become more and more a part of everyday life to so many people across the world. Taking part in these digital lives can therefore be an essential aspect to understanding the social realities of the people and phenomena we study. In order to do so well, we need to be equipped with the right tools

When conducting ethnography in digital spaces, we search for ways to take part in the everyday aspects of digital life, which generally entails 'hanging out' in digital spaces. The objective is to disentangle the meanings of what can be observed on the surface, what Clifford Geertz (1973) has famously called "thick description". The reasons for choosing participant observation as a method are therefore essentially no different online from when participant observation is employed in geographically situated locations. More specific to the objectives of this paper, the method lends itself well as an addition to on the ground fieldwork. To conduct participant observation in online spaces can help the researcher to stay up to date on developments in the field while they are elsewhere; it can provide an avenue for informal interaction with interlocutors via private messaging and other types of online engagement (such as 'liking', 'commenting', or 'sharing' information); and it provides a way of observing social interaction between interlocutors in (re)posts, comment sections, fora and so on. As such, it can provide an avenue to being there to witness and partake in everyday social interactions, while in fact being physically distant. This might be particularly advantageous when traveling to the fieldsite becomes restricted, but the researcher wants to maintain regular contact with interlocutors, as well as remain up to date about developments in their social environment.

A first step in conducting participant observation in online spaces is to determine the online fieldsite. The researcher needs to determine the space, generally a specific social media platform, as well as the people and/or groups (organizations, parties, etc.) to include. For researchers seeking to add digital tools to collect data, the selection might be relatively easy and center around the interlocutors and/or groups that are already included in their research. In this way, the online and physical field can inform one another, as the researcher builds the network using existing knowledge and expands it by locating other potential interlocutors online. When the objective however is to conduct more extensive participant observation, which goes beyond an already familiar group of people and organizations, it is necessary to construct the fieldsite. This requires specific attention, because where traditional field sites (such as neighborhoods or cities) are defined by geography, online field sites require a purposeful construction. Instead of imagining the online fieldsite as a place, it is perhaps better visualized as a network. Drawing on the work of George Marcus about multi-sited ethnography, Jenna Burrell (2017) has set out an approach to constructing the online fieldsite as a network. In his work, Marcus described the field as "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (1995, p. 105). Adopting this definition for online ethnography, Burrell argues that one needs to follow people, stories, objects, and/or metaphors to construct the fieldsite (Burrell 2017, p. 52). A first effective strategy is to ask gatekeepers and interlocutors about the online spaces in which they engage and who they follow on these platforms. For Esther, these gatekeepers were three interlocutors that she came in touch with early on in the research. Their thoughts on who were worthwhile accounts to follow and why, were Esther's starting point for the network. By continuing this process with more interlocutors, the network then continued to grow. Moreover, after identifying a small number of initial accounts to include, a network can be expanded by following hyperlinks and reposts to discover others. It is worthwhile to devote considerable time to constructing the fieldsite and developing a clear sense of the boundaries of the online community the ethnographer seeks to observe. Moreover, researchers need to keep in mind that whereas the boundaries of a geographical area are more or less stable (or at least generally so), the online fieldsite is continuously in motion. New accounts are created, old accounts might disappear or become inactive, and platforms might be abandoned for other spaces by whole communities of users.[1]

Whilst conducting participant observation, the researcher should take rigorous fieldnotes of their observations, noting down frequently recurring themes, particularly relevant content, as well as notes on the interaction between different interlocutors, and between interlocutors and the researcher themselves (Boelstorff et al. 2012, pp. 82-85; Emerson 2011). There are various ways of taking effective field notes, but given the high volume of data on social media, taking screenshots is one way of making data collection considerably less laborious. Qualitative data analysis software processors (such as Atlas.TI, nVivo and MAXQDA) can be helpful tools for labeling and ordering screenshots in a meaningful way. Yet, this should always be done in tandem with writing up reflections. Kozinets (2020)[2] stresses that it is imperative to write an overview of what the researcher encountered at a given time (without recording everything), including reflections on what was and what was not saved and the motivation behind it. This is what distinguishes this use of digital tools from content analysis of social media. As an example, Esther's fieldnotes consist of elaborate typed documents, which include screenshots (and their metadata) and written reflections. The latter include comments on why she found it important to record this data, what it signified, and general observations on social media activity of her interlocutors. At moments where events took place that were particularly relevant to the research, it proved important to write down general observations about the atmosphere on social media as well as her own affective relationship to them. Especially when intense violence occurred at the research site, the images shared on social media were overwhelming, both in volume and content. The reflections on how this impacted Esther personally proved important both as research data and as a means of dealing with the emotional load from a mental

[1] Think for example of when social media platform Twitter was bought by tech-giant Elon Musk, who renamed it 'X'. Many users migrated to other digital spaces, such as Mastodon. Even more recently, changes in the policies of Meta (after the ascent of the new Trump administration in the USA), motivated many users to close their accounts on Instagram and Facebook. More in general, social media are susceptible to fads and it is not uncommon for users to stop using one, when another becomes more popular.

[2] See also Kozinets (2015) page 390-394 for a more elaborate discussion about taking fieldnotes of online observations.

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health perspective. On a more general level, the need to record accurate fieldnotes is twofold. Firstly social media content is ephemeral, content disappears after a set amount of time, it is removed, or becomes otherwise difficult to find later on. While the internet gives many of us the sense that everything is archived and thus can be retrieved, data storage is dependent on the social media company with which the data are entrusted. We cannot trust that material we observe at a particular time can always be retrieved at a later moment. Secondly, it is the decisions that go into collecting certain information rather than others which inform critical reflection on validity and reliability during data analysis.

For researchers conducting digital ethnography it can be a challenge to build rapport and gain trust, two key components to conducting sound ethnographic work, as this requires different strategies than in face-to-face settings (Kim et al. 2023; Millar 2018; Kozinets 2015). A major step that builds the trustworthiness of the researcher is to have an active account, and to clearly communicate about their identity as a researcher (Kozinets 2015, p. 312). An account that contains information about the researcher and posts regularly is likely to be seen as real, rather than as a potential bot, troll, catfish, or even spy. This might be somewhat of an open door, nonetheless it should be noted that it takes effort on the part of the researcher to determine what information and tone they should adopt while participating actively in an online community. Preferably, the researcher creates a new account specifically for the project (see also the discussions on ethics and on algorithms below), meaning that they enter the research with an 'empty canvas'. They consequently need to decide how to use this account and what to reveal about themselves to their interlocutors on it. In some cases, such as when doing activist research or when the researcher is an insider to the community, finding a voice can be easier and the researcher might want to actively make their political stance or personal opinions be heard. In other situations, it may take some time to find out what is an appropriate way of presenting oneself vis-a-vis interlocutors.

> It is an icy cold morning in January 2024. A large crowd of protesters has gathered at the Hague's Peace Palace, and I am among them. We are there to express our support for the South African case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, accusing the Israeli state of committing genocide on Palestinians in Gaza. As we walk the street circling the palace we are chanting, holding up banners, and documenting the protest on our phones. I take ample photos and videos of what feels like a historic moment. While I am there, I decide to share some of my images on the Instagram account that I use for my research with Lebanese social media activists. Many of my interlocutors are preoccupied with the war on Gaza, since the start of the war they have actively spoken out against the atrocities taking place merely a few kilometres from Lebanon's southern borders. While the protest continues, responses to my photos start coming in. Some like my stories, others send a message to express support or to ask about the atmosphere, and one person asks if he can share my images on his own account. I agree, I am happy for the images to reach a bigger audience. The exchange brings about a different dynamic in my online communication with my interlocutors. I am now an active contributor to the production of information and images on social media, rather than an observer.

This situation took place about two-and-a-half years into Esther's research. During that time she has been following a little less than one-hundred Instagram on a near daily basis. While in Lebanon for fieldwork, she also interviewed many of the interlocutors that she followed using online participant observation. Nonetheless, Esther struggled to position herself online. Working with political activists, there was a necessity to be open about her own politics to gain trust. At the same time, as an outsider from another continent with an obvious distance to the struggles of her interlocutors, it was also a challenge to find where and how to do so. That morning in The Hague was one particular moment where Esther was not only able to share in the conversation, but also contribute original and authentic content (a much valued attribute on social media), allowing for a different way of connecting with her interlocutors. What the vignette demonstrates is the importance of continuously reevaluating your position as a researcher, and how it affects the way interlocutors engage with you throughout the research process. Of course, the best way of creating trust and rapport often remains meeting face-to-face. Speaking to interlocutors, via video call if the researcher is geographically far away, can provide an opportunity to develop a better

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understanding of who is behind the screen. Participant observation and interviewing (discussed further below) thus mutually reinforce one another and allow for creating a robust data set.

Finally, these issues touch upon ethical considerations that factor into this type of data collection. Unfortunately, there still are few clear guidelines for this methodology, nor are most Institutional Review Boards equipped to address them either. This is even though researchers conducting this form of online participant observation are presented with rather particular ethical dilemmas around transparency and informed consent.[3] One of the major dilemmas revolves around determining what is public and what is private information (Markham 2005; Townsend and Wallace 2016). Spaces that require a user to pass through a gatekeeper to gain access, are regarded as private (legally and morally). The researcher should request permission from the manager(s) of such spaces or accounts to conduct participant observation on them. Even so, this leaves the members, which can sometimes be thousands of people, to whom it is difficult to obtain informed consent individually. This makes conducting research in, for example, WhatsApp groups ethically tricky territory. Also with publicly accessible content the question is not clear cut. Information might be publicly accessible, but users are not necessarily expecting to be observed by strangers (Townsend and Wallace 2016: 10). Again, there might not be a one-solution-fits-all kind of answer, but the researcher does need to tread carefully and prioritize the interest of their interlocutors, whenever possible in dialogue with them. This should be informed by an assessment of the expectations of interlocutors, their vulnerabilities, and the sensitivity of the information. Beninger (2022) furthermore suggests distinguishing between different online users: creators, sharers, and observers (4). This distinction can be used to inform the way in which the researcher treats the data obtained from these interlocutors and how they are informed about the research. When the researcher engages more actively with someone's online activities and also engages in private conversations with them, they need to inform them about the purpose and use of their information proactively and obtain consent (Kozinets 2015, pp. 308-315). When conducting research in conflict settings - where social media content often is highly contentious and closely monitored - additional measures should be taken to protect the person's anonymity. Two strategies to prevent information from being traced back to individuals include 1) refraining from using direct quotes (which can be traced back with the help of a search engine) (Townsend and Wallace 2016), and 2) critically reflecting on how the analysis can create new risks for interlocutors because it draws attention to their activities and presents them in a new light.

3.2 Challenges specific to the online fieldsite

In addition to methodological considerations, researchers conducting digital ethnography must take into account several other challenges when collecting their data. In this section we discuss three key challenges that structure social life online and that are markedly distinct from physical environments. The first pertains to how algorithms affect what we observe (and cannot observe) online; the second to the particular aspects of online social behavior; and the third addresses how censorship and repression shape online environments.

Digital ethnographers cannot ignore the politics of the social media companies on which our interlocutors move. We become subjected to the same policies as them, meaning that we are targeted by advertisements and - crucially - algorithms. By now, most of us are under no illusions anymore about any progressive aspirations of companies in Silicon Valley and its counterparts elsewhere in the world. We know that social media companies are money making giants, whose currency is people's attention span. The spaces they have created do not resemble a Habermasian public sphere, but are commercialized echo chambers. Talk of "the algorithm" and its effects can sound intimidating to many researchers. Tech companies keep information about algorithms purposefully secretive, referring to it as a black box that even they do not fully comprehend (Cotter 2021). Yet, the direct implications for the digital ethnographer

[3] For a more elaborate discussion of the ethics of conducting participant observation in online spaces, see for example Kozinet (2015), chapter 6 'ethics'.

are perhaps less complex than they seem, while no less important to consider. First of all, whether we are confronted with algorithms depends on the online environments in which we move. Closed groups are not subjected to it, and can generally be scrolled through chronologically. When observing the so-called 'timeline' or 'feed' however, its logic is structured by the algorithm, which now determines what we see first and most often, or in other words, what appears on the top of the feed. This is one reason why it is important to start a fresh account for a research project, as on a personal account the social media is already attuned to the researcher's private interests. It also means that a digital ethnographer needs to be aware that what they see is guided by algorithmic politics, and that in order to systematically follow certain accounts they need to make the conscious effort to manually visit them. If they do not appear in the feed, this does not always mean they are not active. Moreover, the behavior of the individual user determines what their feed looks like, meaning that the researcher should be aware that what they are seeing is unique to their account. In order to get a sense of what interlocutors might be seeing, they thus need to ask them about it, for example during an interview. Of course, the particularities of algorithmic maintenance differ across social media platforms and are also subject to frequent change.

Secondly, digital interactions are structured along their own internal social logics, determined both by people's online behaviors and by the economics and politics of digital platforms. The issue at stake here is that what we see on social media tells us less about reality than it does about what users want to share about that reality. It can be hard to tell if something represents what it says it does, or whether the people we follow are who they claim to be. Fiction and facts intertwine easily, as social media filters alter physical appearances, users construct carefully crafted presentations of the self, or hide the political agendas behind their online communication. These phenomena also bear increasing impact on social media interactions in conflict settings. Think, for example, of fighters posting videos of combat on their private social media accounts. Moreover, the development of artificial intelligence is rapidly making it more difficult to distinguish artificial from authentic. Recently, we have witnessed how AI-generated images of violence have quickly gone viral, as users unwittingly spread such imagery under the assumption that these are real photos or videos. In other instances, real images were taken out of their geographical or historical context and spread as if they were taken elsewhere. Major tasks of the digital ethnographer are therefore to assess content for truthfulness, as well as to make a concerted effort to grasp the perspective from which their interlocutors speak.

Digital authoritarian practices are also increasingly part of social media dynamics (Jones 2022; Kavanaugh and Maratea 2020; Michaelsen and Glasius 2018; Poell 2015). We are witnessing the rapid spread of new ways of repression and censorship online, as well as the intentional spreading of mis- and disinformation, all of which have become part and parcel of modern warfare. This poses additional challenges, because it demands recognition of fake news and propaganda, which requires contextualized knowledge of the situation. It is also not necessarily always discernible if an account is under attack by hackers or bots. In fact, Esther observed that her interlocutors were not even always aware when this happened to them. The reason being that social media companies implement so-called "shadow bans", putting restrictions on an account without notifying the user (Cotter 2021). Again, this indicates the need for digital ethnographers not to rely solely on their own observations and to engage in discussions with interlocutors about their online behaviors. Other useful sources of information about digital repression are digital rights organizations, which often conduct excellent monitoring research of digital rights breaches in particular locations.[4]

This paragraph only touched on three major challenges with the intention of drawing attention to them. The specifics of these challenges differ according to platforms, locations, and (sub)communities, and change continuously with the development of new technologies. As such, addressing them is always highly context specific.

[4] i.e. SMEX for the MENA region, and 7amleh and Sada Social for Palestine.

3.3 The digital as a tool for collecting data

Having discussed how the online can function as a fieldsite for participant observation, the next section focuses on how to gather data of physical spaces while using digital tools - such as online mapping tools and video calling. Here, the digital becomes a tool for collecting data from the physical world. During the global pandemic of Covid-19, this form of data collection spread and became more widely accepted within academic communities - if only for a short while. We consider this a moment of innovation on which we would like to build, ensuring that the insights gained by researchers continuing their work from afar are capitalized on, rather than done away with in the pandemic's aftermath.

When collecting real-world data using digital tools, the objective is to obtain data that can only be retrieved by 'being there'; by participating in the mundane activities and interactions of everyday life (see for example Bernard 2011). A helpful way to understanding this approach to digital ethnography is presented by Kathleen and Billie de Walt (2011, pp. 23-24) who use the work of e.g., Adler and Adler (1987) and Spradley (1980) to explain the existence of varying degrees of participant observation. This can range from passive observation whereby the researcher is present but acts as a pure observer, to 'complete participation' when the researcher becomes a member of the group that's being studied. Spradley (1980) explains that the degree depends on the 'membership roles' that the researcher upholds, whereby a pure observer holds no membership to the community at all, while an active participation comes with 'active membership'. While the type of membership logically depends on various factors, and is not only up to the decision of the researcher, most physical fieldwork entail some form of active participation and active membership. This implies that researchers engage with interlocutors and are visible in the field, which helps with 'untangling the complex social life to develop an intimate understanding' as described above.

When using digital tools to conduct participant observation, the degree of participation is logically already limited by the physical distance between the ethnographer and the field. As Hine (2000, 23) indicates, being visible as a researcher in the field, allows for interaction and engagement with interlocutors. Yet, while there are certainly limits to this visibility when using digital tools, it is not impossible to adopt a more active form of participation. The effectiveness of using digital tools to collect data from analogue research contexts depends on the 'help' from interlocutors[5], which, next to the personality and general willingness of the interlocutors, depends for a large part on the successful creation of rapport. The creation of rapport when using digital tools, will be discussed more in depth in section 3.3. In the case of Marije's online fieldwork in Medellín, there were numerous interlocutors who were eager to help her 'be' in the city through the use of digital methods. The vignette below, which describes a situation in one of the most written about neighborhoods of the city, demonstrates this.

> When I call, Alejandro happily answers the phone. He is sitting in his shop at the entrance of Comuna 13. We have spoken a number of times before, but we finally managed to agree on a time to hold a walking interview, meaning he will show me the neighborhood. As he steps out on the street, showing me his view through the camera, people immediately start talking to him, asking him how he and his mom are doing. We find ourselves on a wide street, where, despite the pandemic, various taxis stop to drop off tourists. One side of the street contains a large wall, which is spray painted with colorful murals, and the other side is dotted with various houses and shops selling food and memorabilia. While walking it quickly becomes clear everyone knows Alejandro and he introduces me to various people, who I have short conversations with over the street noise which consists of chatter, blended with reggaeton and salsa music coming from the various stores and houses along the street. As we slowly reach higher ground a view of Medellín becomes visible. We continue to climb the hill, though only using the 'main road' because "the steep and small side streets can better be avoided still". As Alejandro shows me the entrance into one of the alleyways, he explains how much life has improved since the infamous 'Operacion Orion'[6] in 2002 and the construction of the main roads, which makes it possible to avoid the smaller alleyways where most

[5] Another potential avenue is conducting research in cooperation with local researchers, who could provide on-the-ground data.

[6] Operation Orion (October 2002) was a military operation aimed to finish with the presence of various armed groups in Comuna 13, involved the use of helicopters, tanks, and automatic weapons; as a consequence various human rights abuses have been reported.

> crime takes place. He gets slightly emotional when he explains how special it still feels to him, that he can safely show me these parts of the neighborhood and especially when visibly holding a phone in hand.

It was this situation particularly, that showed Marije the effectiveness of using digital tools to gather data from physical spaces. This became especially apparent when Marije was finally able to visit Medellín in December of 2022; she made an appointment to meet Alejandro and when arriving to Comuna 13, there was no need to check the map or wonder where his shop was, as the streets were already familiar to her and she knew where to go. It was a strange experience, having 'been there', without ever having been physically present. On top of that, it is an interesting exercise whereby the researcher can obtain insight into the ways in which their interlocutors view their environment; as a limited version of the street vision is available to the researcher when viewing it through the screen. As such, there is a form of agency of the participant that should be taken into account; in the example of Alejandro, he particularly showed the parts of streets of Comuna 13 that he found relevant to share. As such, this provided Marije with the valuable opportunity to observe the neighborhood through the eyes of Alejandro.

While the data obtained through this digital form of participant observation offered crucial research data, it is impossible to deny that certain details are missing, as not all senses can be used. For example, when physically being in Comuna 13, Marije noticed not only the sounds and colors, but also the smell of food that was sold along the street. Despite this, data obtained through these PO exercises is undeniably participant observational data, and not 'merely' interview data. When combined with a visit to the field, using digital tools to conduct PO can certainly bring an interesting addition to existing methods.

Our discussion of participant observation is not a complete overview, and does not address all opportunities and challenges the method offers. It does however provide an overview of some of the main aspects to be considered by researchers seeking to add participant observation to their existing research methods in order to collect data from afar. It is essential to reiterate the interconnection between the online and the offline, and to emphasise the opportunities that digital tools offer to continue the data collection process in research settings that are difficult to access, for example due to violent conflict. Without contextualizing online interactions, we miss out on how face-to-face relations intertwine with digital interactions, which individuals in the community engage in these online environments (and which do not), and how they are rooted in physical places and spaces. Both forms of online participant observation can therefore serve well to add to or strengthen fieldwork on the ground, but not to replace it. It is vital to keep in mind that online interactions take place between real people in real locations, whose lived environments shape and influence what they say and do online (Hine 2105). One way of building on participant observation is by conducting interviews (online or not), which is the main focus of the next section.

4. Interviews at a distance: Connecting across space and time

Interviews are another integral part of ethnographic research, as they provide the opportunity to ask in depth about our interlocutors' perspectives. As such, we focus specifically on finding interview methods that aid the sense of being present in far away places. This section is therefore divided into three parts, starting with various *interview methods*, followed by *building rapport,* and lastly a focus on *data reliability.*

4.1 Essentials: Finding the right techniques and building rapport at a distance

Over the course of the last decades, there has been an increasing availability of platforms offering video calling, which has made it significantly easier for interviewees to participate in interviews online (Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Howlett 2021). The use of video in online interviews is crucial, because it allows for interpreting body language. The availability of video conferencing, means that 'phone interviews' has

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come to resemble onsite interviews closely (Hine 2015; O'Connor and Madge 2017). We have used a variety of platforms to conduct interviews throughout our research, the decision on which platform to use depends on two main factors. Firstly the preferences of interviewees, their level of comfort with using a particular platform, which tend to differ across places and for example generations. And second, the researcher must take into account the trustworthiness of a particular platform. Not all platforms are equally secure and therefore safe to use. This is a particular concern in contexts where there might be risk of governments tapping phone lines, but researchers must also be aware of whether companies gather and store activity on their platforms for commercial purposes.

After having agreed upon the use of the online platform, a decision needs to be made regarding the degree of *structuredness* of the interview. In other words, the level of control that the research and/or interlocutor has during the interview. As Kathleen deWalt and Billie deWalt (2011, p. 139) outline in their book, in structured interviews the interviewee has no control over the questions asked and a questionnaire is used, whereas in open interviews the researcher mostly follows the lead of the interviewee and merely uses a short interview plan. In ethnographic research the interviews are largely unstructured in nature, as it provides the best 'insight' into the lived experiences/thoughts of the interviewee (deWalt & deWalt 2011; Bernard 2011; Bernard & Gravlee 2015.). According to H. Russel Bernard, semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, are largely beneficial when it is clear that there will be only one interview opportunity (2011, p. 157). When conducting interviews through the internet the chance of a single interview opportunity increases, and as such the likelihood of conducting semi-structured interviews increases too. At the same time however, the borders between these interview *techniques* are not strict, and especially when conducting interviews online, knowing there is only one opportunity to speak to someone, it is beneficial to combine both unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Based on the experience of using digital ethnographic methods in Kosovo, Medellín and Lebanon, a good set-up is to start the interview with informal conversation and hence a low level of structure, and then move gradually towards a more semi-structured interview style. This allows for the creation of the crucial basis of rapport (which will discussed more in-depth in the next section), while at the same time making it possible to lead the interview in such a way that both sufficient data can be obtained and that there is space for unexpected discoveries when acquiring the 'interviewees' perspective.

Besides the more generally applicable decisions around setting up interviews, there are various promising interview methods and techniques particular to conducting interviews online. During research in Medellín three types of interviews proved particularly useful: *participatory mapping exercises*, *walking interviews* and *photo elicitation*. These methods helped to understand the structure of the interviewees' social environment (Kingsolver et al. 2017). More specifically, participatory mapping exercises are applied throughout various social sciences, and have become more integrated into ethnographic research at the start of the 20th century (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011; Kuznar & Werner 2001). Participatory mapping is, in the words of Cochrane and Corbett (2020, p. 706) a "mapmaking process that strives to make visible the relationship between a place and local communities through the use of cartography". To do so, the researcher works together with interlocutors to 'map' a neighborhood, community or institution, and to locate the locations/aspects that are important to them within this given context (see for example: Aspect Network, n.d.). Using such exercises help to better comprehend the research context, and as such this method can be used well as a digital method. For Marije, this method has proven especially useful during the online research in Medellín, as she would ask interlocutors to map their *barrio*, and the most important aspects within it. Doing so, especially multiple times with the people from the same area, provided her with a better understanding of the area.

A second method that is receiving growing attention, and which can be relevant when scoping the research context, is a walking interview (See for example: Kinney 2017; Evans & Jones 2011). Not surprisingly, a walking interview refers to conducting an interview while walking in an area of importance to the interlocutors, during which they indicate which places are of meaning to them and why. While it is of course not possible to physically accompany an interlocutor on a walk when doing online research, the method can be very useful to explore the different research locations through the eyes of the interlocutors. Walking interviews can for example be held when the interlocutor presents their surroundings when video calling, or even when 'walking' simultaneously (researcher and interviewee) through Google Maps street view. There are of course situations in which the use of Google Maps, or overtly using a phone while walking the streets are not possible[7], and in such situations the use of photo elicitation could offer an interesting solution. With this method, the research uses photographs or images to solicit a conversation with, or prompt a reaction or insight from the interlocutor (See for example: Copes et al. 2018; Richarch & Lahman 2014). It is moreover also possible to use the photo voice-method, where the researcher gives the interlocutor the 'assignment' of taking photos of interesting places in their environment. This helps to better comprehend both the way in which the research population views their environment, and to obtain an understanding of the research context (especially when used in combination with for example walking interviews and/or mapping exercises). When not present in the research context, it can be very useful to ask interlocutors to share photos/videos of their environment, which can then be (anonymously!) used during other interviews to obtain more insight into the environment. When conducting research in Medellín, for example, a protest took place in the form of, after sunset, projecting politically activist slogans on the walls of large buildings in the city. Via her research network, Marije received various photos of these events, which she then shared (with consent) with others during later interviews. Doing so not only confirmed to other interlocutors that she is aware of current on-goings in the city, thereby obtaining credibility, but the pictures also helped with starting a conversation about often difficult topics.

Next to these varieties of interview methods, there are various techniques that can help to assure the validity of the findings and reliability of the data. Specifically when conducting interviews through the internet, it is crucial to assure the validity of the obtained data. There are various techniques that are of importance in this process, as for example the establishment of good rapport to reduce the potential of 'reactivity bias'[8] during the interviews (Bernard 2011, p. 354). It is impossible to fully eliminate (any kind of) bias, but the establishment of rapport plays an important role in reducing its impact. The importance of rapport will be further discussed in the next section. Two other techniques that can be of significant importance to secure the quality of your data are 'probing' and 'baiting'. Probing refers to for example remaining silent long enough, or portraying naivety, which can help to create space for the interlocutor to share crucial information. At the same time, through echoing an answer of an interlocutor, probing can be used to check the answers (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Baiting means the interviewer acts as if they already know something, which often helps people to open up during a conversation (Bernard 2011, p. 165). These techniques function similarly when conducting interviews through a video conferencing platform, as the researcher can "access verbal and nonverbal cues, providing an equally authentic experience to in-person interviews" (Howlett 2021, p. 4; Sullivan 2012). While these methods and techniques have been discussed above as mostly separate, there is a great benefit in combining a number of these techniques within one interview session. Doing so helps to observe the context from various angles, and as such, are crucial when conducting ethnographic research at a distance.

It is however important to reiterate that within ethnographic research establishing *rapport* is crucial to obtain high-quality data. While there is not one accepted definition of rapport, there is a core understanding that rapport entails the creation of a relationship based on mutual trust and cooperation between the researcher and informant (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Jorgenson 1989). In the words of Musante (2014, p. 277): "We want our companions to forget, for a time at least, that we are outsiders", as this makes it possible for the researcher to observe information that only an 'insider' would know. There are various ways to establish rapport, of which informal conversation (either via phone or video calling or through a platform such as whatsapp) or 'being present' within a certain context are crucial.

[7] This will be discussed more in-depth in the 'challenges' section

[8] Reactivity bias implies that people change their behavior as a consequence of being studied (See e.g., Bernard 2011, 265).

Hanging out simply refers to 'being present' in a certain context and informal conversation refers to a conversation on any kind of topic, most likely close to the interest of the interviewee.

Naturally, being present takes a different shape when using digital ethnographic methods. Mario Guimaraes (2005, p. 151) who argues that the creation of rapport in online settings is similar to offline settings, as there are enough opportunities to informally connect via various social media platforms. An indication of the establishment of rapport is a rapidly growing network, as there is a certain level of trust between the interlocutor and the researcher necessary before people share their network. In the research in Medellín, Marije solely used digital methods to establish rapport and the ability to have various informal conversations through all different types of social media platforms (i.e., instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) has been crucial to the fruitful establishment of rapport. There are, of course, various challenges and opportunities to the creation of rapport, which will be discussed below.

While there are various levels of rapport that can be achieved with interlocutors, it is crucial to establish a minimum level of rapport in each interview. When there is a feeling of mutual understanding, it creates a space in which the interlocutor feels more comfortable to share what is on their mind. In order to achieve this, it is important for a researcher to show genuine interest in the interlocutors, which can be done in various ways. Establishing rapport offline can be a time consuming activity, as it requires hanging out, informal conversation and often drinking lots of coffee and tea with people. On the contrary, creating rapport through digital methods lowers the bar of having informal conversations, often with multiple people at the same time. On top of that, as also argued by Ilmari Käihkö (2021), it makes it possible to to stay in contact on a continuous basis, which also creates an invitation to easily share other relevant data such as photos, articles, or videos. And, when the researcher is simultaneously conducting online participant observation, by communicating via liking and responding regularly to interlocutors' social media updates.

In line with challenges discussed above, being dependent on the internet (and are therefore limited to the interlocutors who have access to the internet) certainly creates challenges to conducting interviews, as well as to the creation of rapport. Added to that is that certain people are more inclined to have small talk via chat or voice messages, where others prefer to refrain from that, or simply cannot 'keep up'. This also reflected in the research in Medellín and Kosovo, where mostly people between the ages of 18-35 would be more open to small talk via messaging apps, where especially people above the age 40 are less inclined to share. As such, this can lead to a bias in the selection process, where the emphasis could come to lie on a younger age group for example. Especially when reaching out to interlocutors via social media, it is important to be cognizant of the particular subgroup that is predominantly using a platform, and to avoid the pitfall of assuming this to necessarily be a reflection of a certain community.

This however only goes for the continuous or frequent conversation via online platforms, and does not apply to the interviews itself. It is, logically, during the interviews also of importance to establish rapport, and one of the added challenges is that using digital methods often results in more one-time interviews. This is because the entry bar is lower, people can call in from the comfort of their own home, but this also means it is crucial to obtain as much relevant data as possible in one go. In order to establish this form of rapid rapport it is important to take time at the start of the interview for small talk, to establish a connection based on mutual understanding, for example by providing personal details from the researcher.

4.2 Getting access and finding connection to spaces and people

When conducting online interviews the decisions on where the interview takes place lies with the interlocutor. As a consequence, the interview might be perceived as less 'interrupting' of daily life, as there is no necessity of travel or the distractions of a 'new' environment. This notion is corroborated by researchers such as Salmons (2016) or Gruber et al. (2008, pp. 257–258), who argue that conducting online interviews might be less stressful, or even more relaxed, as the interlocutors find themselves "in the comfort of a familiar online setting" (Salmons 2016, p. 62). Marije's research in Kosovo provides an interesting insight into the contrast between the online and the on-site interview, as the second half of interviews took place online after the country 'closed down' due to the spread of COVID-19. During these interviews it quickly became clear that being able to talk to someone in the comfort of their home helped to build quick rapport, while at the same time providing the research with an interesting insight into their private spheres. The vignette below describes a situation where Marije obtained valuable data during a first interview, such as the private space of one's own home, which in physical reality often takes longer.

> In Colombia it was mid-afternoon, but in the Netherlands – where I was – it was already late at night. Maria answered my zoom-call to conduct the interview we had agreed upon a week before. While I tried to begin with informalities, aiming to quickly establish some form of rapport, she mentioned she did not have too much time and that it would be good to start right away. A bit taken aback I collected my thoughts. I asked her about her daily life, about her idea of peace, and slowly she started to open up. She told me about her son, who was doing well during his first year in college, about her beautiful neighborhood which she was so proud of living in, and about other things on her mind. While the hour passed rapidly, Maria did no longer seemed pressured for time, she had visibly relaxed and enjoyed our conversation. I answered her questions about life in the Netherlands, and the home I lived in, and she eagerly showed me around her home. We talked about her favorite paintings on the wall and their meanings, the movies she owned and loved, and the noise of street life that entered her living room. Before we knew it, we were speaking for nearly three hours, at which point Maria needed to get on with her day and I, on the other side of the world, had to go to sleep.

Conducting online interviews also made it possible to 'enter' areas that would otherwise not have been accessible due to safety issues, this became especially clear in Medellín. In various instances interlocutors could provide an insiders view, and also show Marije a 'live stream' from the street they lived on, or provide insight into their *barrios* from the rooftop of their house. These are images that would have been difficult to obtain if it weren't for the use of digital methods. On top of that, the ability of joining an interview by simply calling from the comfort of Marije's home made it easier for people living in dangerous or remote areas to participate. As a result the accessibility of hard-to-reach parts of society might be increased through the use of digital methods, as it offers the opportunity to 'digitally be' in an area that one otherwise could not enter.

When discussing the challenges however, it is crucial to also acknowledge the limitations to participating in online interviews. Obviously, people need to have access to the internet in order to participate; this access can be limited due to for example electricity cuts, internet shortage or high internet and phone prices. As an example, in Lebanon telecom fees are among the most expensive across the Arab world and poor and remote areas of the country are less well connected and suffer regular power- and internet outages. Simply put, in order to be eligible for an interview you need to have a phone and (fast speed) access to the internet. Hence, there is an automatic exclusion of those who do not. When moreover aiming to use walking interviews, it is important to keep the context in mind. For example, many less affluent or insecure parts of the world have not been mapped (in detail or at all) on Google Maps street view, while in other places it is by far not safe enough to conduct walking interviews. Thus, as all other resources, digital access and connectivity are not equally distributed across space and across different groups in society.

Of course, all of this is linked to not *physically* 'being there', which is also discussed as a challenge of participant observation. In a similar manner, there is a lack of 'tacit knowledge' when not being able to sit in front of the interviewee. For example, even though the use of video calling makes it possible to observe certain aspects of cultural body language, you will not be able to make a holistic observation. While challenges as such are of course impossible to circumvent fully, building strong rapport is again crucial to obtaining in-depth data and to understanding both the tacit and explicit aspects of a society.

5. Conclusion

Embracing the digital, both as a tool and as a space, can be a viable avenue to continue ethnographic fieldwork under difficult circumstances. Such strategies are vital, because when violence erupts, our work in many cases only increases in importance. Whether it is about studying actual violence or about studying other phenomenona within a violent context, continuing knowledge production in conflict affected-settings is important. It can be a way to remain committed to the people we have been working with for a long time; continue work on important local issues; or to strive for social justice in the face of violence, crimes, and oppression. Whereas spending time in the fieldsite can bring with it too many safety risks, for both ethnographers and their interlocutors, digital ethnography can be a solution (although we certainly do not claim it always is).

As we have discussed in this paper, there are important considerations to be taken into account when moving fieldwork (partly) online. Conducting online research requires critical reflection on and methodological grounding in existing methodological frameworks. In this text we have set out various strategies for doing so, discussing two key methodologies of ethnography, participant observation and qualitative interviewing. All of this is with the thought in mind that, as we have also stated above, an online presence cannot replace being physically at the fieldsite. The key, according to us, is to make a careful consideration which balances the possibility of access to the field and the limitations of collecting data from afar. Beyond safety considerations, additional considerations may also be part of this decision, such as the environmental impact of fieldwork.

We end with a note on the ethical issues that online ethnography raises. The American Anthropological Association has 'do no harm' written as rule number one and it is a general agreement among anthropologists globally that this rule is essential to all aspects of doing research. While, reasonably, this rule also applies to using digital methods when conducting research, there is growing attention on the importance of ethics in digital ethnography, also referred to as 'digital ethics', such as discussed in section 2.1. This however does not cover the manifold ways in which we use the digital as a tool for doing observations or interviewing, as we have discussed. Many ethical dilemmas resemble the larger debate on ethics applicable to ethnography in general, which is why we do not elaborate on them in this article. At the same time, a number of particular questions also come forward. For example, how do we avoid promoting extractivist research, where the researcher extracts information for their own benefit, while in the comfort of their own home? Other questions revolve around the particularities of reciprocity and remuneration in an online context. For example, should researchers reimburse internet costs of interlocutors when interviewing them online? These and other questions indicate the many discussions that still need to be had among ethnographers about how to integrate the digital into everyday ethnographic practices.

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