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*Special issue*

# DOING DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY: PRIVATE MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD

Guest edited by:
*Crystal Abidin & Gabriele de Seta*

**INTRODUCTION: PRIVATE MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD**
*Crystal Abidin & Gabriele de Seta*

**DISRUPTING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGINARIUM**
*Alexia Maddox*

**DIGITAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHERS ON THE MOVE**
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*Special issue introduction*

# PRIVATE MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD: CONFESSIONS ON DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS DISCOMFORTS

Crystal Abidin* and Gabriele de Seta**

## Abstract

This special issue collects the confessions of five digital ethnographers laying bare their methodological failures, disciplinary posturing, and ethical dilemmas. The articles are meant to serve as a counselling stations for fellow researchers who are approaching digital media ethnographically. On the one hand, this issue's contributors acknowledge the rich variety of methodological articulations reflected in the lexicon of "buzzword ethnography". On the other, they evidence how doing ethnographic research about, on, and through digital media is most often a messy, personal, highly contextual enterprise fraught with anxieties and discomforts. Through the four "private messages from the field" collected in this issue, we acknowledge the messiness, open-endedness and coarseness of ethnographic research in-the-making. In order to do this, and as a precise editorial choice made in order to sidestep the lexical turf wars and branding exercises of 'how to' methodological literature, we propose to recuperate two forms of ethnographic writing: Confessional ethnography (Van Maanen 2011) and self-reflection about the dilemmas of ethnographic work (Fine 1993). Laying bare our fieldwork failures, confessing our troubling epistemological choices and sharing our ways of coping with these issues becomes a precious occasion to remind ourselves of how much digital media, and the ways of researching them, are constantly in the making.

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## 1 DIGITAL BACKCHANNELS

This special issue began to take a life of its own – even before we editors realized it – as a series of Direct Messages (DMs) we started exchanging via Twitter in July 2014. That year, we were two of the thirty PhD candidates selected for the Summer Doctoral Programme offered by the Oxford Internet Institute (OIISDP), a two-week program in which aspiring academics could enjoy guest lectures by renowned internet studies scholars, interactive methodological and pedagogical workshops, and focused feedback on our research presentations. As exciting and prestigious all of this might sound, no matter if happening at scholarly events or in the field, first interactions between strangers are always wrought with uncertainty and anxiety. After the officious rituals of Day 1 (roundtable biographical introductions that served as verbal status markers; group photo-taking for corporate collateral during which strangers had to navigate personal space boundaries through bodily touch; inaugural lectures in which haphazard sitting arrangements birthed early friendships out of convenience; the first meal break over which we relied on small talk about catering to glide through awkward silences) the lot of us eventually stumbled into an empty pub for a nightcap. It was there that this issue's editors sat across each other by deliberate happenstance and talked to each other for the first time, learning that we were the only two members of that year's cohort who described themselves as "anthropologists". Like migrants chancing upon kinsmen in faraway places, we soon slipped into the familiar language of ethnography and found refuge in deploying our shared anthropological lens to help process and make sense of the stimulating but displacing revelries of a strange academic place among strange academic others.

Pubs have long served as segue spots, post-event comfort holes, and transient places of affect-making in the tired wake of academic events. Pubs are the place where after a long day of professionalism, posturing, and banter, some academics retreat into smaller groups to shed their conference room bravado and their scholarly "personal front" (Goffman 1956, 13) in a neutral "third place" (Oldenburg 1998) away from spaces of work (i.e. conference venues) and residence (i.e. hotel rooms). This does not imply that these post-event spaces are devoid of personae curation – in fact, these transitory comfort spaces demand a different form of "face work" (Goffman 2003, 7-8). Sitting at pub tables, academics unravel bits of themselves in the safety of a "back region" (Goffman 1956, 69-70) where they can selectively disclose usually "unseen" practices (1956, 21) and "suppressed" facts (1956, 69) of their profession as they work through "correct[ing]" and "conceal[ing]" their "errors", "mistakes", and failures before returning to the front region with an air of "infallibility" (1956, 66). In order for this performance to work, its participants must engage in reciprocity, care and mutual trust, bringing their own faults, failures, and frailty to the table. Finding comfort and camaraderie in the late-evening bookend to a day of academic sociality, academics forge solidarity and intimacy and establish networks of support and care.

As it quickly dawned upon us, the pub was only one of the possible venues for off-stage academic solidarity to happen. Having started as an extension of our post-workshop pubbing, the backchannel of Twitter DMs shared between the two of us evolved into a meeting place for commiseration, consolation, and collegiality that extended our co-presence throughout the following four years of fieldwork, thesis writing, job-hunting, and early careering in geographically distant locations. Populated with pictures, reaction gifs, emoticons, kaomoji, emoji, URL links, and text, this running stream of co-constructed presence has over time become an intimate archive of the theoretical, methodological, practical, and emotional struggles of two early-career academics who brand themselves as "digital ethnographers". Yet, no matter how precious and unique this specific digital space might have seemed to us, we quickly realized that ours was not a particularly innovative practice: Each of the authors contributing to this special issue does also find solace in scholarly social media backchannels, and readers will recognize how they similarly work through their own professional dilemmas, one private confession at a time. Just like the "great good place[s]" at the "heart" of every community (Oldenburg 1998), these private bubbles carved out of digital third spaces function as crucial professional resources, "remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that [they] exten[d]" (1998, 42). Keeping contemporary, dialogic versions of Malinowski's secret fieldwork diaries tucked in the private folds of our smartphone apps, we exchange and accumulate private messages from the field through the affordances offered by the very same digital media we do research on and about.

With the pervasive popularization of networked communication technologies, an increasing number of graduate students and early-career researchers in anthropology and the social sciences at large have directed their inquiries towards internet usage, online communities, mobile devices, social media platforms, and so on – a familiar collection of topics that we broadly indicate through the shorthand term "digital media". New generations of ethnographers are often as familiar with digital media as their research participants, and yet this familiarity does not necessarily grant smooth entrées, flawless interactions, effortless participation and clean-cut conclusions. Rather, despite their interactional proficiency and insider positioning, digital ethnographers can encounter deadlocks, rejections and failures. Moreover, as post-graduate students and early career researchers using ethnographic methods to approach digital media, many of us find ourselves grappling with an overwhelming proliferation of manuals, handbooks and lexicons that increasingly feel as a cyclical exercise in academic branding. Confronted with a puzzling variety of methodological nuances, we are at the same time asked to address the fault lines in our epistemological choices, negotiate the visibility of our failures, and come up with an original perspective. How to take into account the problematic breakdowns in our own research work? What is the relationship between methodological branding and ethnographic failures? How do

"private messages from the field" help digital ethnographers work through moral and ethical quandaries?

This special issue collects the confessions of five ethnographers laying bare their methodological failures, disciplinary posturing, and ethical dilemmas. Three of the authors included in this special issue came in contact through similar forms of professional backchanneling (e-mail, social media private messages, closed discussion groups, etc.) in the wake of academic events (graduate seminars, summer schools, conferences, workshops, symposia), exchanging private messages from the field through which they shared and worked through the moral confessions and ethical dilemmas that would otherwise be too taboo, too amateurish, too career-threatening and too persona-breaking to make public. The other two were introduced to us rather serendipitously by an academic who had read our works and found striking similarities in the personal and methodological challenges we were navigating. The articles selected for this special issue are meant to serve as a counseling stations for troubled digital ethnographers. On the one hand, they acknowledge the rich variety of methodological articulations originating in the lexicon of "buzzword ethnography", including media anthropology (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005; Postill 2009), media ethnography (Horst et al. 2012; Murphy 2011; Murphy & Kraidy 2003), cyber-ethnography (Hallett & Barber 2014; Keeley-Browne 2010), virtual anthropology (Reid 2012; Weber et al. 2011; Weber 2015; Wong 1998), virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), digital anthropology (Horst & Miller 2012), digital ethnography (Murthy 2008; Underberg & Zorn 2013), netnography (Kozinets 1997; 1998; 2002; 2006), social media ethnography (Postill & Pink 2012; Postill 2015), and networked anthropology (Collins & Durington 2014). On the other hand, this issue's contributors seek to evidence how doing ethnographic research about, on, and through contemporary digital media is most often a messy, personal, highly contextual enterprise fraught with anxieties and discomforts.

While edited collections of methodological literature tend to push for clarity, closure and refinement, leaving readers asking themselves the "what next?" question (Jankowski & van Selm 2005, 199), this issue acknowledges the messiness, open-endedness and coarseness of research in-the-making, and prefers to offer answers to questions such as: "what now?", "where did you fail?", "why didn't it work?". In order to do this, and as a precise editorial choice made in order to sidestep the lexical turf wars and branding exercises of 'how to' methodological literature, we propose to recuperate two forms of ethnographic writing: Confessional ethnography (Van Maanen 2011) and self-reflection about the dilemmas of ethnographic work (Fine 1993). By juxtaposing four confessions by digital ethnographers who work on insider accounts of geographically and socio-culturally distant aspects of networked communication, this special issue invites readers into the private bubbles of academic backchannels and offers an intimate portrait of the dilemmas and difficulties of applying qualitative research methodologies to digital media. Laying bare our fieldwork failures, confessing our troubling epistemological choices and

sharing our ways of coping with these issues becomes a precious occasion to remind ourselves of how much digital media, and the ways of researching them, are constantly in the making.

## 2 BUZZWORD ETHNOGRAPHY

Before delving into the intimate backchannels of digital ethnographers, we want to clear up the methodological ground and offer a short critique of what claiming to do an ethnography of something 'digital' has come to mean over more than two decades of anthropological approaches to media. As early-career academics who have come across media anthropology during the early 2010s, both of this issue's editors have painstakingly crafted their own research approach in dialogue with bookshelves bending under the increasingly heavy weight of research handbooks and methodological manuals. From widely recommended staple readings like Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and Markham & Baym's edited collection *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method* (2009) to more recent discussions of the subject such as Boellstorff et al.'s *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method* (2012) and Pink et al.'s *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice* (2016), we have read, skimmed, quoted, criticized, built upon and recommended a growing repertoire of methodological literature. Confronted with the necessity to position ourselves in clear epistemological terms while keeping ourselves up to speed with the proliferation of increasingly specialized approaches to digital media research, we have devoted sincere efforts to explain, in the meaty methodological sections of our doctoral dissertations, why "digital" might be a better descriptor than "virtual", why "platforms" might be a better metaphor than "cyberspace", or why "praxiography" might be a more precise term than "ethnography".

The complex disciplinary tree of ethnographic approaches to digital media has its roots in the qualitative intersection of communication research (which also includes quantitative methodologies, network analysis and others) and social science studies of technology (which include HCI, digital sociology, STS, and others). Directly borrowed from the anthropological canon, ethnography (sometimes confused with participant observation or other components of ethnographic research) has been successfully repurposed as a toolkit of participatory strategies for qualitative inquiry by researchers in the widest array of disciplines (Ingold 2014) – including media, communication and internet studies among them. As Markham notes, emerging communication technologies like the internet are very popular areas of study across the humanities and social sciences, offering the opportunity to shed light on undescribed phenomena, outline new theories, and experiment with innovative methodologies (2009, 135). The popularity of internet research is characterized, according to a prophetic observation by Christine Hine, by "the introduction of new epithets to familiar methods", a practice that "marks the air of innovation around the field and also provides for a sense of anxiety" (2005, 5). Despite its popularity and the wealth of related methodological literature,

designing and conducting online research remains a tricky endeavor navigated by newcomers through the help of expert advice by colleagues or supervisors (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009, 1). One of the first quandaries regularly encountered by researchers trying to figure out how to apply ethnography to digital media is strictly terminological: what is the difference between cyber anthropology, virtual ethnography and netnography? Is digital ethnography better than Internet anthropology? Does collecting Facebook posts count as online ethnography or web archaeology?

Over the years, methodological literature has closely followed the development of communication technologies, incorporating its buzzword lingo and sometimes preserving it way past its heyday of popularity in tech-related linguistic domains – this is nowhere more evident than in the persistence of locutions like "cyberspace" or "real life" in ethnographic writing about the Internet in a time when hardly anyone talks about digital media in these terms anymore. Throughout this special issue, we refer to ethnographic research on, through and about digital media as "digital ethnography", a choice we have both substantiated and embraced, over the years, in our own writing. While other researchers might object to this terminological choice, or prefer other ways of referring to their application of ethnographic methodologies to networked communications-related inquiry, we feel it necessary to highlight how these approaches have been articulated in a dizzying variety of variations, branding their peculiar emphasis and perspectives by attaching different tech buzzwords to the word "ethnography".

The earliest proposals of applying ethnographic methodologies to emerging communication technologies (see, for example, Baym 1994 or Ito 1996) put forwards intuitions that keep reverberating in the most up-to-date digital ethnography manuals. In the early 2000s, the exploratory efforts in applying anthropological methods to new media could be placed in a spectrum going from two opposite poles. On one side of this spectrum is the "ethnographic approach to the Internet" proposed by Miller & Slater (2000, 21), who argue for a relatively conservative application of canonical ethnographic inquiry to Internet use in situated social contexts. On the other pole is the "virtual ethnography" outlined by Hine (2000, 30-33), a more adaptive and less traditional approach that understands the Internet as a "site of interaction" in its own right, allowing forms of sociality defined by new concepts like mobility, flow, and partial participation. Hine's use of the adjective "virtual" to characterize her methodological proposal is closely connected to a historical moment in which terms like "virtuality" and "cyberspace" were current in discussions of the Internet and computing at large.

The persistence of these concepts is evident in Marshall's description of "online ethnography" (2010) and in Keeley-Browne's definition of "cyber-ethnography", research approaches that all involve "becoming immersed in virtual culture and observing on interactive websites and in virtual communities as issues are discussed" (2010, 33). Closer to Hine's virtual ethnography, both online ethnography and cyber-ethnography emphasize the need to move beyond

traditional ethnographic concerns when studying cyberspace, paying attention to the imaginary divides of its rhetorics and giving centrality to online interactions and Internet cultures in their own right (Hallett & Barber, 2014, 308). In parallel to these methodological refinements inside anthropology, ethnographic methodologies were also being retooled to conduct quick and dirty market research on the Internet. Kozinet's "netnography" (1997; 1998; 2002; 2010) is a paramount example: a "written account of on-line cyberculture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology" (Kozinets, 1998, 366) tailored towards the study of consumer behavior, with the advantage of being "faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews" (Kozinets, 2002, 61).

Once the ethnographic cat was out of the disciplinary bag, meddling around with cyberspaces and virtual realities, anthropologists have actively worked towards luring research on communication technologies back into their scholarly domain. Shored up by a renewed interest in practice theory, the "media anthropology" outlined by several authors throughout the mid-late 2000s moves beyond the mere application of an anthropological lens to media, and strives to come up with its own conceptual vocabularies to understand the role of media in modern societies (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005; Murphy & Kraidy 2003; Postill 2009). "Media ethnography" is its methodological correlate, an approach grounded on the "observation of and engagement with the everyday situations in which media are consumed, the practices by which media are interpreted, and the uses to which media are put" (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005, 2). Given the breadth of its descriptor, media ethnography can refer to pretty much any ethnographically-grounded study of media-related activities and phenomena, from audience reception and fandom to production practices and creative industries (Murphy 2011, 385), and researchers have increasingly felt the need to narrow down their field of inquiry by proposing more specific methodological descriptors (Horst & Miller 2012, 86). One of the most fortunate among these formulations is "digital ethnography", which narrows down the scope of media under analysis according to their underlying technology – the binary code (Horst & Miller 2012, 3) – and emphasizes the messiness, ambiguity and materiality of digital mediation. As with any other term, different authors have defined "digital ethnography" by emphasizing different methodological choices: Murthy (2008, 839) argues for "a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography", Underberg & Zorn (2013, 10) stress the need of immersive participation and storytelling, while Hsu (2014) pushes for experimentation with the very same digital technologies under study.

With the propagation of digital technologies in virtually any domain of social life across large areas of the globe, digital ethnography has also started to feel too all-encompassing a term for some authors, leading them to seek further refinement of their domains of inquiry, and resulting in a truly vertiginous collection of methodological brands. Here is a compressed overview with no pretense of

comprehensiveness: Howard's "network ethnography" (2002) foregrounds social connections among actors; the "hypermedia ethnography for the digital age" proposed by Dicks, Mason, Coffey and Atkinson (2005), along with the "multimodal ethnography" outlined by Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey (2006), both propose ways to make sense of complex media environments; Boellstorff's "virtual world ethnography" provides principles to investigate peculiar social contexts like Second Life and massively-multiplayer online games (Boellstorff, 2008; 2012); Dirksen, Huizing & Smit (2010) envision a "connective ethnography" sensitive to the imbrications of information resources across systems and texts; Geiger & Ribes (2011) explore the possibilities offered by "trace ethnography" to the study of user interactions and activities on collaborative digital media platforms; Pink & Postill's "social media ethnography" (2012) zooms into the affective intensities of interactions online and offline; Hochman & Manovich's idea of "data ethnography" extends the dream of big data analytics to the possibility of following individual users throughout large-scale aggregations of content (2013); Collins & Durington's "networked anthropology" (2014) emphasizes a processual engagement with ecologies of actors. The overlaps and similarities between these ethnographic brands and other (not explicitly ethnographic) methodological proposals such as "global technography" (Kien, 2009) or "web archaeology" (Leung et al. 2001; Rauber et al. 2002; Foot & Schneider 2006; Foot & Schneider 2007; Harper & Chen 2012, p. 67) further compound the confusion.

Often made under pressuring disciplinary demands, a choice of methodological wording drawn from such an over-defined literature carries implications and epistemological assumptions that might be opaque to graduate students or ECRs new to the canon of ethnographic approaches to media and technology. The condensed overview of two decades of ethnographic research on communication technologies provided in this section highlights the unacknowledged similarities and drastic differences that are often obfuscated by terminological proliferation in methodological literature. In light of this short review, our use of "digital ethnography" in the title of this journal issue should seem less prescriptive and more inclusive – a methodological common ground for scholars doing ethnographic research on, through and about digital media. Standing on a slightly more solid ground, the following section moves beyond terminological quibbles and introduces the major sources of anxiety, doubt and concern of putting digital ethnography in practice.

## 3 ANXIETIES, CHALLENGES, CONCERNS, DILEMMAS, DOUBTS, PROBLEMS, TENSIONS AND TROUBLES

Perhaps the first "private message from the field" sent by a digital ethnographer can be found in Vol. 35(9) of the 1994 AAA *Anthropology Newsletter*. Here Jen Clodius, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison researching community

formation on the internet, shares a "report from the field" with other list members. In the short roundup of her pioneering research experience, Clodius (1994) warns:

> Conducting ethnography on the InterNet presents a whole new series of challenges and problems for the anthropologist. In addition to questions of how DragonMudders use the InterNet as a Goffmanesque "backstage" to practice attributes which they want to incorporate into their lives away from the InterNet, and how they use textual descriptions to create the illusion of "space" in a non-geographic community, one of the areas that most fascinates me is how gendered roles are complicated in a variety of ways. In spite of the diverse cultures from which people log on, the InterNet seems to operate, for the most part, on Western perceptions of "proper" behavior.

More than two decades after Clodius's field report from DragonMUD, doing research on, through and about the internet remains challenging and problematic – an observation shared almost unconditionally across methodological literature of all sorts. At the most general level, Hine (2005) notes, the urgency of researching new media contexts comes along with a "considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions" (1). The relative novelty of digital ethnography trades off the stability of a tried-and-tested toolbox for the thrill of largely uncharted domains of inquiry: the sharing of research precedents among peers becomes then a fundamental help against epistemological anxiety (2). Despite the wealth of professional reassurances and coping strategies, the "irresolvable tensions" of digital ethnography can still paralyze researchers and grind down entire projects to a halt (Markham 2009, 191). As Hine summarizes,

> the Internet has […] become almost unavoidable, but is also often troubling in the extent to which it seems to challenge our starting premises about who we study, where they are, and what they do there. (Hine 2013, 2)

There's no denying it: The practice of digital ethnography entails anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles. The source of discomfort most consistently described since the earliest attempts at approaching the Internet ethnographically is the disconnect between traditional notions of participation and the new forms of interaction made possible by digital media. In her review of the field, Anne Beaulieu highlights how the lack of face-to-face interaction and the absence of a traditional notion of place are regularly invoked to challenge the reliability of digital ethnography. Through a survey of methodological literature, Beaulieu identifies the main articulations of this pressing concern: "questions of presence", "field relations", and "new possibilities of observation" (2004, 139). When much of participant observation, surveys and interviews happen through media channels like emails, chatrooms, message windows, virtual world interfaces and social media profiles, interactions and relationships with informants might seem to be confined behind a starkly delineated online/offline divide (Orgad 2005). What happens to reliability, ethnographic

rapport, immediacy and intimacy when presence is mediated across space and time by digital technologies? Supported by a wealth of successful and inspiring ethnographic studies of digital media, the most recent consensus around this troubling disconnect is that mediated interactions are a perfectly adequate subject for qualitative research:

> It is time to realize that there is now a generation for whom using the Internet may be an obvious, sensible, unproblematic thing to do, and the old debates about whether the Internet is, in itself, good enough for qualitative research may have been overtaken by events. (Hine 2013, 118)

Another long-standing source of anxiety and concern for digital ethnographers is the application of human subject research ethics to qualitative studies of mediated interaction. Recognized as a pivotal question since the earliest participatory approaches to mailing lists, MUDs and online communities (Paccagnella 1997), the tweaking of ethical decisions in light of the new kinds of interactional routines, identity construction and privacy management afforded by digital media has been extensively debates across the methodological sections of many academic articles and book chapters. An important result of digital ethnographers' growing displeasure with the existing guidelines for human subject research (Bassett & O'Riordan 2002) is the compilation of ethical frameworks tailored to the specificities of Internet research, designed to help decision-making with flexible and situational parameters (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee 2002). The central intuition behind these efforts is the acknowledgement of unavoidable dilemmas between the definition of ethical concerns provided by IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) or national regulations and the contextual, situated understandings of concepts like privacy or fair use in online communities and among different user groups (Sveningsson Elm 2009). The productive outcome of these ongoing debates, as Sarah N. Gatson concludes, is the realization that the ethical frameworks of digital ethnography are constantly in the making:

> in a sense, we have to remake our guidelines for each online ethnography we decide to do, without at the same time abandoning our connections to professional and socio-legal ethics that we must simultaneously work under. (2011, 253)

The most widely recommended remedy to assuage epistemological anxieties, participatory doubts and ethical dilemmas is self-reflexivity. Being reflexive about one's own choices in the design and practice of research is necessary for "finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions" (Baym 2009, 173) and stabilizing a research project through self-disclosure and transparency. Seen from outside the ethnographic experience, this inward turn in methodological design might be criticized as self-absorbed navel-gazing, but it is in fact an almost innate reaction used by researchers to find their balance when all their certainties are shaken by emerging realities and unruly data. Baym & Markham summarize

this feeling by describing the practice of digital ethnography as a matter of making "smart choices" on "shifting grounds" (2009, viii); self-reflexivity provides an indispensable tool to unpack the complexities hidden behind research accounts presented as logical flows and smooth progressions (ix), while also helping the researcher gaining flexibility and feeling less "trapped by method" (Markham, 2013, 436). Ultimately, as Beaulieu notes, a reflexive stance is in itself a marker of professionalism, and the production of self-reflexive methodological publications (including the articles contained in this special issue) serves to establish helpful precedents and claim legitimacy for digital ethnography (2004, 145).

The bundle of methodological choices called "digital ethnography" is an unstable construct, a nested toolbox of practices filled to the brim with potentialities and failures. Nearly any researcher who chooses to adopt an ethnographic approach to digital media ends up dedicating some thought to the anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles that result from practicing it. Since the earliest ethnographic approaches to networked communication in the 1990s, some of these sources of discomfort have been recurrently discussed in methodological literature: challenges to the reliability of digital ethnography as a whole; doubts about the role of mediated presence and participation-at-a-distance; concerns regarding the ethical treatment of people and data. With a good track record in helping researchers out of epistemological impasses, self-reflexivity has consistently pushed digital ethnography towards more flexible and fine-grained sensibilities – or, in the broad terms described by John Law, "better equipped to deal with mess, confusion and relative disorder" (2004, 2). As Law continues:

> Parts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and our statistics. But other parts are not, or if they are then this is because they have been distorted into clarity. […] Perhaps we will need to know them through 'private' emotions that open us to worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals. (2004, 2-3)

This is our vision for this special issue: knowing things that might not be caught in our ethnographies through private emotions, discomforting confessions and shared intimacies – showcasing the variety in the contemporary practice of digital ethnography beyond the "hegemonic and dominatory pretensions of certain versions or *accounts* of method" (Law 2004, 4) enshrined in the normative vocabulary of disciplinary branding exercises. This is what the four 'private messages from the field' gathered in this issue hope to do.

## 4 FOUR PMS FROM THE FIELD

As hinted above, the articles collected in this special issue share similar origins in the professional backstages of academic events and in the intimate backchannels of collegial communication. Some of these contributions have begun as complaints

voiced in-between conference panels, others as disciplinary rants ricocheting across Twitter threads; some have developed through email exchanges between distant fieldsites and workplaces, others through instant messaging conversations in the close quarters of classrooms and seminar rooms. What these 'private messages from the field' share is a methodological dedication to digital ethnography and the wish to push its self-reflexive drive beyond the sanitized disclaimers of good conduct, and towards intimate (and at times provocative) confessions about research and its discomforts. As editors, we have decided to sequence the four contributions to this issue in a linear fashion that roughly follows the arguments developed throughout this introduction. Just like many intimate confessions, these four articles sometimes privilege a righteous and self-centered urgency over smooth scholarly agreement. By encouraging each other to tip our writing towards the personal rather than the professional, we hope to highlight how the methodological practice of digital ethnography is still a deeply human and individual experience.

Regardless of all the theory we grapple with while preparing to embark on fieldwork, there are moments of revelation often masked by crises and anxiety that reveal how practice often entails the ability and willingness to adapt to ambiguities.

The experience of fieldwork has traditionally been a rite of passage for anthropologists-in-training, a baptism of fire during which our sense of being and relationality to our informants, our fieldsite, our fellow colleagues, academia as an institution, and our own internal belief systems are reassessed and recalibrated. Often, in these messy and confounding moments, the lived experience of our fieldwork changes us. Alexia Maddox's "Hacking the ethnographic imaginarium: Challenges of immersion in a cryptomarket community" is an account of the practical challenges and ethical dilemmas experienced while researching a volatile and contentious digital fieldsite. Maddox reflects on equipping herself with "crypto-literacy" prior to entering the virtual community of Silk Road, noting the "tension between visibility and vulnerability" for herself and her informants during fieldwork, and describing a shift in her value system after a period of sincere engagement with informants respected as "sovereign subjects". In her riveting account, Maddox takes readers through the intimate dialogue she co-constructed with her participants in a "Digital Bermuda Triangle", to illustrate how mutual sense-making, believe-canvasing, and opinion-shaping occurs through her terrains of "visibility, vulnerability and contention".

The peculiar features of digital fieldsites force ethnographers to confront new epistemological challenges and adapt interdisciplinary methodologies to their needs. As exemplified by the proliferation and diffraction of news events on digital media, grievous incidents quickly become transitory fieldsites emerging across clusters of hashtags, trends, and comment threads, requiring our immediate attention and archival capabilities. Johanna Sumiala and Minttu Tikka's piece follows one such news media event, reflecting on their ethnographic study of the Strasbourg Christmas shooting in December 2018 as it unfolded. The authors discuss the unsettling dilemmas of tracking a tragedy in its earliest hours, explaining

how they had to make a series of quick ethical and methodological decisions as they transited from processing personal grief to conducting a research project. Specifically, the authors considered how the scale and extensive range of digital data trickling in during a viral event, the need for researchers and methods to be mobile and flexible to adapt to the evolution of the digital fieldsite, and the agency of humans and non-humans around the media event they were tracking, were continuous evaluations they made to determine the eventual scope and outcome of their study.

Evidently, even the most precise and invested armchair reading and mental preparation can never truly and wholly prepare us for fieldwork. Given the spectra of diverse fieldsites, lines of inquiry, intellectual underpinnings, and personal motivations that comprise every budding anthropologist, perhaps the best advice would be to embrace fieldwork with open eyes, minds, hearts, and ears. In so doing, we learn to "tune in" to the field, adjust and modify our approaches on the go, and empathetically invest in the translation of cultural literacies between persons and places. Crystal Abidin's "Somewhere between here and there: Visibility labour and literacies between academia and the Influencer industry" is an intimate negotiation of transitions between the attention economies of academia and the Influencer industry. Abidin enacts different vocabularies of visibility practices and self-branding that vary across place and audiencing, in order for her informants in Singapore to place her within their cultural loci. The author suggests the possibility of selectively mobilizing aspects of an anthropologist's intersectional identity to position themselves favorably with informants in the field, through the practice of 'spectrums of conspicuousness'. The paper offers six tropic positionalities that anthropologists may adopt when conducting fieldwork between digital and physical spaces, including the esteemed guest, the exotic inbetweener, the willing apprentice, the trophy acquaintance, the concealed consultant, and the passing confidante.

Allying with the culture of our fieldwork and fieldsites can be one of the most personally rewarding and uniquely memorable experiences for any anthropologist. Any one from the founding scholars of our discipline to a grad student three-months deep into fieldwork will undoubtedly be able to recall moments of magic from their journey. That said, for many of us, publishing our research and engaging with our intellectual community necessitates a strategic positioning, posturing, and packaging of our work as part of building pools of knowledge. Gabriele de Seta's "Three lies of digital ethnography" is a (perhaps impossibly) honest unpacking of some of the "professional illusions through which digital ethnographers justify their work" within the domains of anthropology. Drawing on fieldwork on digital media use in China, de Seta reflects on the usually concealed backstage work of self-editing and expertise-building in producing ethnographic writing. The article is a distillation and confession of some of the unwritten black holes in claims of truth-making, and proposes to update Gary Alan Fine's foundational article "Ten lies of ethnography" (1993) for today's digital ethnographers. The article outlines the intellectual and emotional acrobatic work undertaken in a digital media field site

through the roles of the networked field-weaver, the eager participant-lurker, and the expert fabricator.

Bringing together different global contexts and disparate research topics, the articles collected in this Special Issue share a common thread: digital ethnographers negotiating their positionality in social spaces. Where Sumiala and Tikka struggled to pragmatically grapple with their voluminous corpus of data while navigating the highly charged terrain of grief and loss in their fieldsite, de Seta overrelied on the safety net provided by the idea of "being there" and other ethnographic tenets; similarly, while Maddox grappled with the implications of her fieldsite disappearing overnight, finding herself "in the middle of nowhere" online, Abidin's navigating her informants' online dealings in offline spaces necessitated occupying a position "somewhere between here and there". In closing, as early-career ethnographers of internet cultures who spend a significant portion of our personal and professional lives in various domains of "the digital", we noticed that in our everyday life, in and outside of work, we end up finding professional comfort and affective fixes in subtweeting and getting social media likes and comments, and in exchanging distressed private messages or receiving consolatory email about digital ethnography and its discomforts. This collection of academic articles should be read like a compilation of private messages from different fieldsites, or as a thread of confidential emails exchanged among your closest colleagues. If you are just starting to carefully delve into the ethnographic ways of researching digital media, if you are doubting everything you have done during your fieldwork, or if you are an early-career scholar disillusioned by methodological cynicism and bureaucratic nonsense, let us divulge in one last intimate vulnerability and learned confidence: It is going to be okay.

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# DISRUPTING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGINARIUM: CHALLENGES OF IMMERSION IN THE SILK ROAD CRYPTOMARKET COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a contemplation of a digital ethnography with the community surrounding Silk Road, the first widely used cryptomarket for drugs on the Dark Web. To position the study within the broader field of illegal anthropology, it provides links between the existing literature on the study of cryptomarkets with relevant anthropological scholarship. A theory of piracy is interrogated for its explanatory capacity of the digital pirates of the Dark Web. The start of the study unexpectedly coincided with the FBI seizure of Silk Road in October 2013. The field site disappearance provoked a practice-based and conceptual rewiring. The paper unpacks how the 'hydra effect' introduced to conceptualise resilient innovation within cryptomarkets can also apply to the multiplicity of identities linked to research practice. This effect also raises how the knowledge production within digital ethnographic practice may be reconfigured through notions of opportunism, replication, obsolescence, regeneration, iteration, adaptation and proliferation.

Keywords: cryptomarket; digital ethnography; digital frontier; online community; contentious visibility; illicit drug use

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Media reports sensationalise the Dark Web as a seedy digital location where drugs, guns, hitmen and child pornography circulate through eBay-style marketplaces that are only accessible to your hacker types. Here, elusive fringe behaviours proliferate in plain sight, with identities hidden through encryption technologies and secretive user cultures. In 2013, I began collaborating on a digital ethnography of the most popular Dark Web drug market, Silk Road. The social impacts of an online drug market defined by high-choice drug purchasing, visible yet anonymous user cultures and customer-to-customer (C2C) drug sales were unknown. The research was led by Dr. Monica Barratt (MB), a social scientist, through the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University. When MB and I launched our study, Silk Road had successfully avoided ongoing law-enforcement efforts to shut it down through vigilant anonymization practices and encryption technologies. This successful resistance to state regulation lent the website a sense of stability that made it seem impenetrable. Yet, just as we launched the data collection component of the research the site was suddenly shut down by the FBI. Silk Road became a marker for the study of unstable field sites on the Dark Web.

There is an emerging field of scholarship into cryptomarkets that draws together criminologists, media scholars, sociologists, and computer scientists (cf. Barratt and Aldrige 2016). However there remains a disconnect between existing literature engaging with the cryptomarket space and relevant anthropological scholarship that may illuminate its social adoption, user cultures and the meaning making that arises through the social appropriation of technological innovations. To address this gap, I will situate this research within anthropological literature on illegal practices (Thomas and Galemba 2013; Roitman 2006) such as drug use and distribution (Polson 2013) and piracy (cf. Dent 2012). I will also draw in literature on platform affordances (Nardi 2015) specific to hacker cultures (cf. Coleman and Golub 2008; Coleman 2014), and online visibility, especially in the negative/dark sense such as trolling (Philips 2015) as a way to frame cryptomarkets and their surrounding users and communities.

In order to articulate the forms of digital ethnography that can represent this space, I will draw an initial definitional narrative around the research approach used. Throughout the paper, however, we will see how the frame through which I approached the research, my ethnographic imaginarium, is rewired by practice. Antunes and Dhoest (2019) usefully begin this process through their digital ethnography in autism communities. They start with an assertion, drawn from Horst and Miller (2012), that the basic characteristic of digital culture is that it can be converted to bits. Building into this the work of Bell (2006) they also highlight the notion of replication as a key component of both the affordances of the environment and the cultures arising. Here we can understand that digital ethnography is a study of digital cultures that are transmitted by bits, which afford replication. They then move from defining the nature of the object of study within

a digital ethnography to the practical nature of this approach. Drawing on the work of Boellstorff (2012) they highlight that digital ethnographic practice combines participant observation with elicitation techniques of online group discussion, interviews and participation in the community.

As the ethnographer on the ground, my aim for entering the Silk Road cryptomarket was initially to immerse with the microcosm of a digital culture forming and reforming in the Dark Web. In digital field sites such as this, community activity is made visible through forum posts, online chat spaces, hyperlinks to audio files, news snippets and visual stimuli, user-produced content, and changes to platform architecture. Accessing the field site requires a series of routines best described by Postill and Pink (2012, p. 123) in their characterisation of digital ethnographic practices as including catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. This data collection approach can then be combined with Pink's et al. (2016) broader parameters in which digital ethnography encompasses the full range of research practice, including the writing of this article. They also provide us with a thematic frame that guides digital ethnographic practice, that of multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy. In taking up this invitation to think broadly about digital practices, in this paper I will utilise these frames to generate an endogenous understanding of digital ethnography based upon what it means to be human in the world of the Silk Road.

## 2 THE STUDY OF PIRATES IN THE DARK WEB

Yet again, I found myself in strangely familiar territory that occurs in uncharted or under-theorised waters where charismatic radical actors develop fiefdoms that give rise to a confluence of private actors, permissive moral fields, global exchange networks, innovative technologies, and unstable field sites (cf. Cox 2013). To anchor this experience, I draw parallels between the anthropological literature on piracy, the pirates of cryptomarkets, and digital ethnography. As has been previously argued (Dawdy and Bonni 2012; Johns 2010), there are significant continuities between the pirates of the open seas and the pirates of digital spaces. One main difference between these two 'genres' of pirates may be the medium of activity and the vessel. The ocean and the boat versus the infrastructure and platform affordances of digital environments. The infrastructure in the context of this study is the persistently unchartered and dynamic nature of Dark Web alongside the Silk Road cryptomarket platform, an autonomous and self-directed technology of the 'high seas'. These parallels may speak to the continuity between actors, environments and vessels within piracy scholarship.

However, in further interrogating the platform-infrastructure metaphor of the cryptomarket-Dark Web-pirate nexus, we may also see a discontinuity between sea-faring pirates and digital pirates. The site administrator, moderators and users, who may have emerged from hacker cultures, were opportunistically acting within a cyber-libertarian dream of weak state regulation and anonymizing technologies.

For these actors, the private nature of the platform and publicness of infrastructure is conflated. As argued by Gehl and McKelvey (2019) in their discussion of darknets as media systems, of which the Dark Web is one, darknets impose a radical making public of our private platforms and exist in between the platform and the infrastructure. The notion of the cryptomarkets as a 'leaky vessel' in which the ocean is both inside and outside of the boat may not sit well with our sea-faring pirate types. The question arising here is how digital ethnographic practice can adapt to this liminal space constituted by radical shifts between private platforms and public infrastructures.

To begin to unpack this question of operating within the radical shifts of liminal space, I move to the role of the tacit knowledge in research practice. In order to articulate the reflexivity of a digital ethnography, I introduce my own story of pirates. In doing so my aim is to illustrate the emic lens or tacit knowledge that has informed my research practice within the radical social contexts of 'pirate states' of the Dark Web, cryptomarkets. This framing will also assist in situating the study in the longer arc of illegal anthropology (Thomas and Galemba 2013). Through the hands-on nature of ethnographic practice, I was exposed to the interwoven personal, social, and regulatory logics and practices of the local, regional and international trade in reptiles (Maddox 2016). This global trade seamlessly shifts gears through legal to illegal yet socially licit and illicit practices. Within this murky context, autonomous actors building networks of access and exchange through the affordances of digital platforms and personal connections.

During ethnographic immersion, at two different points in time in this study, I was in the Netherlands and Italy viewing collections of rare or unique reptiles that had originally been collected by pirates in Indonesian waters. These pirates were opportunistically daylighting as animal collectors for a local Indonesian reptile export business and accessing unique animals by sailing through hard-to-reach and sparsely monitored islands up the Indonesian archipelago. The animals were captured, and brought to the facility for a 'per head' bounty, with the more unique captives (by colour, geography, or species) gaining a higher bounty. The animals were then quarantined, vet checked and conditioned from wild to domesticated behaviours at the facility. Finally, they entered the global commodity trade and were freighted in custom-made boxes to buyers from around the world who bought and paid for them online via the business website. This whole process could support the generation of an entire body of theory, however for our purposes here, we will focus on the imbrication between digital contexts, the global commodity trade, and autonomous actors who act within and beyond state regulation and intersect with the logics of maritime law, the pirate code and economic incentive. My personal exposure to the complexities and interplay of global economic and regulatory logics, institutional and personal moral orientations/ justifications, affordances of digital social space and uneven consequences surrounding these licit to illicit animal trade practices has broadened my imagined space and context for community action. I

often refer to my practice now as peering under the carpet of social convention, where social reality has been swept.

The Silk Road cryptomarket was a domain of activity for marginalised populations who prefer high-choice drug access. Silk Road alludes to an ancient network of trade routes that connected the East and West, along which many pirates, and carpets, are likely to have passed. In contrast to the illegal yet socially licit blackmarket described by Roitman (2006) in the Chad Basin, the moral economy surrounding the site etched out a space of independent economy, collaborative creativity and political resistance. The cryptomarket encoded Johns' (2009) notion that digital pirates undermine property and enact security through technical designs that avoid centralised control and harness peer-to-peer architectures. The justification for the retail of illicit commodities rested on anarchist values of formative internet cultures (Levy 1984) that argue for user privacy and the free circulation of information (and drugs). We can connect these observations to define Silk Road as an autonomous pirate state in the Dark Web that was operating on decentralised and securitised principals of trade. The early work of Barratt (2012) describes both the peer-to-peer architecture of Silk Road as producing an eBay for drugs and the central role of encryption and cryptocurrencies for decentralised exchange and privacy practices. Because of the site founder and initial core member's orientation towards information liberty, anonymity and personal privacy linked to notions of self-sovereignty, they initiated a secure platform and marketplace based upon anonymising technologies that bootstrapped cryptocurrencies and started a whole wave of e-commerce innovation.

In a more obvious connection to pirates, the site administrator used the pseudonym, Dread Pirate Roberts (DPR), and has been described in the literature as a charismatic figurehead who promoted Silk Road as an anarcho-capitalist resistance to state power (Zajácz 2017). The continuities here with an anthropology of (digital) piracy include the practices of undermining the secured movement or transmission of property (McKelvey 2015, p. 736), a.k.a. smuggling or moving contraband, and appearing on the scene as a charismatic folk hero when contradictions and inequalities built into a political economy reach breaking point (Dawdy and Bonni 2012). The breaking point in case of the US and more globally may be considered the moral panic articulated through a long-standing 'war on drugs' (Hawdon 2001). In his discussion of the moral panic surrounding methamphetamine-related crimes in the US, Linnemann (2010) draws on the work of Cohen (2002) to connect the media and authorities' exaggerated reaction through the war-on-drugs narrative to the behaviour of a particular group or cultural identity 'the folk devil'. While in Linnemann's case, the folk devil was the media construct of the 'meth mom', in the case of the Silk Road, the digital pirate /folk devil construct articulated through news media, digital media, social media and his own forum spaces, was DPR.

Perhaps positioned as a cultural scapegoat (Linnemann 2010), I would argue that an influential reason that Silk Road became a target for US law enforcement

was the constructed 'folk hero/devil' persona and media presence of its site administrator, Dread Pirate Roberts (DPR). As described by Ladegaard (2018), and in an unusual decision for an anonymous actor(s) administrating an illegal drug market online, DPR responded to inquiries from journalists and did a full profile interview for Forbes Magazine (Greenberg 2013a), that he later promoted through his account on Twitter. In this interview he asserted that he was a 'radical libertarian revolutionary' who was providing an anarchic digital space that was (apparently) beyond the reach of the taxation and regulatory powers of the state. He also asserted that Silk Road was about standing up for 'our rights' as human beings and refusing to submit. As Greenberg also reports, within the site forum itself DPR posted manifestos about Silk Road's libertarian political ideals and was regarded by many as a hero. The first participant (Participant 1) I interviewed for the digital ethnography of Silk Road (Barratt and Maddox 2016, Maddox et al. 2016) prior to the site shutdown articulates this from an insider's perspective:

> 8:18:16 PM Participant 1: . I believe the creator of sr created it with a moral fight in mind. I see the other sites as just competitors making money. Obviously dpr(the sr creator) is making money, but his agenda is to point out something that is wrong in this world. That being the way drug users are looked down on. ... in the deep net, there are plenty of private drug dealers. The sr created a central market, but.I think it also is representative of a group of people that think alike about the world..'

In this statement, we get a strong sense of the moral fight related to the pervasive 'war-on-drugs' narrative and a ground-swell of people seeking social change through the charismatic leadership of a pirate. For Weber, this notion of charismatic leadership was a crucial element of social change (Friedland 1964). Charismatic leadership in the Weberian sense was a socially-validated, saviour-leader, which speaks to our digital pirate on a moral mission. In this sense, we can also understand that whilst libertarian, the Silk Road community was not actually anti-authoritarian in terms of seeking its own leader. This suggests that Silk Road was led by a charismatic digital pirate who practiced nodal governance (cf. Martin 2014b and discussed in the next section of this paper) and used the media to promote his newly emerging cryptomarket whilst simultaneously responding to the moral panic articulated through the 'war on drugs'.

In terms of 'being with' a culture of digital piracy, the Silk Road cryptomarket was a space rich with metaphorical connection to folk heroes and charismatic leadership, a blackmarket economy of socially licit contraband and a narrative of anarcho-capitalist resistance to state power. However, as McKelvey (2011) has problematised, we are all digital pirates. Within the peer-to-peer/C2C platform affordances and social practices of the Silk Road marketplace and the collaborative nature of maintenance within the forums and software, this concept of collective piracy is deeply embedded. As an ethnographer in this space, are we a pirate too?

## 3 THE STUDY OF CRYPTOMARKETS IN THE DARK WEB

What are cryptomarkets and how do they actually work? Cryptomarkets are e-commerce websites that operate in the Dark Web, commonly referred to as darknet markets (DNMs). The Dark Web (a darknet) is an overlay network. It is a securitised Internet network operating over existing networks through encrypted traffic on those networks (Hunsinger 2015, p. 58, discussed in Gehl and McKelvey 2019). More simply put, it is an encrypted part of the internet that is not accessible to clearnet search engines such as Google (Martin 2014a). The encrypted space of the Dark Web is created through the Tor network, which is a free and open-source software that anonymises users, particularly through techniques that circumvent traffic analysis (Tor Project 2019). These infrastructure characteristics, alongside the use of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, afford the trade of illicit goods and assist cryptomarkets to avoid external regulation. Essentially, this is achieved through their ability to hide internet user activity and incorporate the use of a digital, non-identity-carrying payment system (Barratt and Aldridge 2016, p. 1). Vendor/seller trust was moderated by reputation systems including ratings and user feedback and a community forum (Van Hout and Bingham 2013a). Trust was also built into the transaction systems of the cryptomarket, whose technologies removed the need for a third party to arbitrate disputes and deliver an escrow service (Barratt and Aldridge 2016, p. 4). On the Silk Road platform, 'anybody' (with a computer, the capacity to use Tor and the correct IP address for the marketplace) could set up an account to buy or sell.

Silk Road cast itself as an autonomous fiefdom that operated beyond the reach of the law. Barratt and Aldridge (2016) describe their first exposure to the marketplace:

> 'When we first discovered Silk Road in 2011, on opposite sides of the globe, we could not believe it was real: people were buying illegal drugs anonymously through a global marketplace that resembled eBay or Amazon.' (Barratt and Aldridge 2016, p. 1)

However, this retail of illicit drugs did not mean that Silk Road was a lawless zone. Silk Road was characterised by internal community regulation (Honeycutt 2005) rather than external regulation such as by the state. I saw it as bounded by encryption, with a clear value system and norms of behaviour being socially regulated amongst the users and through the platform affordances (Nardi 2015). This was particularly evident in the 'pruning' and blocking of unruly members by forum moderators and epic flame wars between community members. Another example of this complex internal regulatory process can be seen in the types of content and products that were permitted in the space. In the history of Silk Road, the sale of guns, for example, was vetoed by community members and there was a clear 'no child porn' policy. In early work characterising cryptomarkets, Martin (2014b) refers to this phenomenon of online communities characterised by

collective identities, inter-site migration, digital refugees and self-regulating cyber networks as nodal governance. In responding to Martin's notion of nodal governance, Van Hout (2015, p. 263) synthesises the community governance activity as characterised by community and political affiliations, indigenous harm reduction, communal folk pharmacology and with vendor-buyer consumer relations grounded in trust and mutual responsibilities centring on service quality, feedback, contracts and refund policies.

This nodal form of community governance resonated with American anarchist author Hakim Bey's prefigurative politics articulated through 'Temporary autonomous zones' (TAZ) (cf. Armitage 1999); an idea flagged by cryptomarkets researcher Rasmus Munksgaard on social media during our respective fieldwork practice (see Munksgaard and Demant 2016). As Truscello (2003) brings to the fore in his discussion of the different architectural metaphors of postmodern anarchistic spaces, the TAZ is a liberated area (of land, of time, of imagination) that can be thought of as a guerrilla operation which dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen before the state has built the capacity to 'crush it'. The similarity of this idea to how cryptomarkets operate, and can be conceptualised, demonstrates the common libertarian roots between Bey's description of a TAZ and the material realisation and properties of cryptomarkets. These autonomous pirate states were leveraging the 'free hand' of the market to trade in goods and services that are usually heavily controlled, regulated and taxed by nation-states.

The sense of successful resistance to state regulation over time led to a community experience of continuity and perceived impenetrability. The evocation of an impenetrable online community making a moral fight for existence is not unique to Silk Road however. This homesteading mentality was conceptualised by Howard Rheingold as a characteristic of virtual community during the early days of internet scholarship (Rheingold 2000). In the context of a TAZ-style platform structure, I argue that the notion of a homesteading mentality be reframed as 'nodal attachment' in which identity construction at an individual and collective level is both stable and ephemeral. I would argue that the combination of a charismatic leader and the sense of continuity against the odds evoked nodal attachment within Silk Road. This dynamic of attachment to a site operating through nodal governance, often focused by a charismatic leader, occurred in the face of probable internal (hacking) and external (law-enforcement) disruption to site location and market function. Nodal attachment in this context of contention, disruption and obsolescence drove the community to collaborate, construct and iteratively transform the function and process of the platform. I have elsewhere referred to the collective output of community resistance that results from nodal attachment as constructive activism (Maddox et al. 2016). If we are to further reconfigure out understanding of ethnographic practice in light of the attributes of the Silk Road cryptomarket discussed in this section, then we are to incorporate contention, disruption, obsolescence, collaboration, construction and iteration into our knowledge production practice. Perhaps it is in the interconnectivity of disciplinary

fiefdoms, an interdisciplinary stance suggested by Pink et al. (2016), that we can perform these radical acts of being with as digital ethnographers.

## 4 A DIGITAL BERMUDA TRIANGLE

The Dark Web can be thought of as a digital Bermuda Triangle. It is dynamic space with websites regularly changing their IP address, the unique identifier of each device connected to the internet. The notion of a digital Bermuda Triangle also articulates the cartographic vacuum within the Dark Web where cryptomarkets appear through emerging logics of aggregation (cf. Juris 2012), just as they disappear within an instant through submerging logics of disaggregation. In linking back to the discussion of digital pirates and the platform as the vessel, we can understand that the affordances of the technologies that make cryptomarkets is generative, iterative and degenerative. The transitory nature of this environment was also a construct of its dynamic digital context, previously conceptualised through the notion of a TAZ. A cryptomarket can fall out of favour and its seemingly established community engagement may disaggregate. Security flaws may be revealed by self-righteous hackers that create a mass exodus of users. In such instances, users close their accounts, change their avatars and passwords and start up again at another marketplace. In addition to these technologically induced social currents, a marketplace may be shut down due to scams, internal disputes, and law-enforcement activity. While we knew this theoretically at the outset of the study, Silk Road looked set to stay.

The growth in its use had affected the culture, transitioning it from a small select inner circle - where most people held similar values - to a public access site with a diverse user base there to buy drugs. This trend fitting with study objectives, on 1 October 2013 MB launched the study through a Twitter announcement and I conducted our first interview shortly thereafter. It was exciting to finally begin the project that we had spent painstaking hours researching and working with existing and emerging technologies in preparation for. The next day, however, I awoke to a string of urgent messages relating that the site was seized and shut down. I attempted to log into the site, only to be confronted with the law-enforcement notice that the site had been seized. Our field site was gone. For a period of time, the forum associated with the Silk Road marketplace remained active and the community shared their grief at the loss of this space, their space. During an interview, Participant 18 encapsulated this experience:

> 12:23:31 pm [Participant 18]: Also, while I was sort of taking the piss out of the whole DPR cult thing, when the site was shut down, there was a serious sense of mourning in the 'community' and I was stunned to find I felt it too, a little bit . It was like the death of Martin Luther King or JFK or Kurt Cobain, maybe. People were shattered and vented rivers of grief and fury in the forums and I felt a serious sense of loss too

I too felt a similar sense of loss and confusion to that which poured out over the forums. I had come to take these digital structures for granted and had invested my online identity (directly linked to my identity as a researcher) and field time in learning its functionality, culture and the norms of interaction. As discussed in our methods paper describing the study, we subsequently followed the community to other online spaces where those who had used Silk Road gathered (Barratt and Maddox 2016). I refer to this as a movement from nodal attachment (to a single site) to distributed attachment, which I define as a multi-sited identification with and enactment of the overlapping values, history and characters of, and social connections made through, Silk Road. This mobility of people and practices across the environment taught me a key lesson as a digital ethnographer. This lesson was not to get attached to any one 'site' as the location of community and to be prepared for some form of site instability during the course of field work.

From the conceptual movement between nodal and distributed attachment, I would argue that digital ethnographic practice can be transformed through the study of online behaviours that border between innovation and illegal, yet socially licit, practices. Drawing from the social shaping of technology (SST) studies I would rearticulate that in the case of cryptomarkets, innovation is indeed a garden of forking paths (Borges cited in Williams and Edge, 1996). Rather than forking paths, the community metaphor of resilient innovation in the face of cryptomarkets disappearance was that of a hydra. The hydra, describes Martin (2014b, p. 64), is a dreaded mythical beast whose magical powers of regeneration allowed it to grow two heads wherever one had been cut off. The 'hydra effect' was coined by media commentators (Greenberg 2013b; Ormsby 2013) who observed the digital replication and proliferation of new cryptomarkets to fill the vacuum after the closure of Silk Road. Martin (2014b, p. 65) observes that the 'hydra effect' occurs upon the closure of a cryptomarket, which provides 'an opportunity for new sites to establish themselves and capture an unclaimed proportion of the illicit market share and profit'. From a digital Bermuda Triangle and resilient innovation to digital ethnography, the arc of continuity is in questions of opportunism, replication, regeneration, adaptation and proliferation in response to a knowledge vacuum. To support an agenda towards articulating the hydra effect within digital ethnographic practice, the challenge raised by the cryptomarkets space is in the capacity for practice-oriented innovation to harness these affordances. Essentially, how can we articulate a hydra effect within digital ethnographic practice? The following section considers multiplicity and resilience in light of a culture of contentious visibility.

## 5 VISIBILITY, VULNERABILITY, AND CONTENTION

In this section I will reflect on the moral and ethical conundrums that arose during my attempts to raise the visibility of our research project and conduct interviews amongst the community. This reflection introduces a central issue of the study for both myself and participants: on Silk Road, personal visibility was negotiated to

avoid vulnerability in a highly contentious (and performatively so) social context. I identify this central theme as contentious visibility, which I will unpack through a discussion of the research (and researcher) visibility as well as considering how my sense of vulnerability and exposure in the space was met in equal and opposite dimensions by my participants. As has been previously discussed, the Silk Road cryptomarket was built on a backbone of libertarian principles that were articulated through a socially pervasive mantra of self-sovereignty. In line with the findings of Gehl (2016) in his study of a Dark Web social network, I observed that the autonomous self, the protagonist of the Silk Road, was cloaked in anonymity provided by encryption and enhanced by social conventions where real-life identities are separated from online personas during interactions (cf. van der Nagel and Frith 2015). Such agents operated effectively within the ephemeral conditions of nodal governance and a culture of anonymous engagement that was mediated by technologies of trust.

In order to establish researcher credibility in the field, I used the alias of my research Twitter handle consistently across all platforms of interaction to identify myself in forums and on chat channels. In discussion with the moderators of the space, the role 'researcher' was linked to my online persona. Within my forum profile page, I also provided links to the research homepage, a blurb about the research and the different ways participants could contact me online. These online contact points included by forum direct message (DM), through Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels, my institutional email, and through my research-oriented presence on Twitter and Reddit. In this sense, I was highly visible and identifiable across online spaces and through my professional identity. My visual appearance was revealed through a shared YouTube video of me conducting a member check on research findings. This consistency of connection between my online persona with my real-world identity was unique in the space.

Through the research practice, I was exposed to and needed to take account of the liberal values embedded in internet cultures such as freedom of information, personal sovereignty, and distributed collaboration and information dissemination (cf. Coleman 2014). Working with the community was about engaging with anonymous others who may be a drug dealer, a drug user, an undercover cop, a programmer with a side interest in hacking, a 'tourist' just visiting for the novelty, a devout libertarian philosopher, or a forum moderator (or a combination of these identities at the same time). The intertwining and interstitial space through which these masked characters paraded was one of technologically induced smoke-and-mirrors. Perhaps it is here that the 'hydra effect' can also be understood at the micro level as an identity-construction toolkit and that it is through multiplicity of identity that resilient innovation within the self could be achieved. A lesson I was yet to work out for myself.

I had followed the Silk Road community within the Dark Web to another cryptomarket-related forum, The Hub. The Hub was a discussion forum set up within the Tor network by digital refugees fleeing Silk Road. It positioned itself as

an omni-forum for the discussion of the cryptomarkets emerging in response to the void and opportunity left by the closure of Silk Road. Here I gained approval from the forum moderators to discuss the research and to recruit possible participants. To promote the research, I used strategies to increase the visibility of the research thread through the practice of 'bumping', which harnesses forum technology to raise the thread to the top of a section each time it gets a new post. This approach was recommended to me by an early cryptomarket ethnographer, Tim Bingham (Van Hout and Bingham 2013a, b, 2014), as one way to garner attention from the community. This attention took the form of positive engagement (support for the research agenda) alongside scepticism and blunt negative assessments of the capacity of the researchers to contribute positively to the community. Other more archivally minded community members made dooming associations with previous research projects that had launched in the environment and not been able to meet the standards of technical awareness required to operate convincingly. The thread puttered along with polarised responses from forum members until a known troll took deep offence at my presence as a researcher on the forum and issued a series of threats, culminating in a death threat. Even though the threat was merely digital, I immediately let the thread drop. I took a series of preventative actions to deal with these personal attacks, yet these initial negative experiences continued to shape the ways in which I raised the visibility of the work in the environment. This dynamic of known researcher interacting with anonymous personas as research subjects and actors created a conflicting power dynamic in a contentious social space, and meant that I experienced a strong sense of personal vulnerability.

Given the extensive literature on trolling in online environments, it is definitely something that the visible researcher must expect when actively engaging in online spaces. Philips (2015) argues that trolling is a spectrum of behaviours that constitute an expression of one's online identity, and a celebration of anonymity. In a return to the platform affordances concept of Nardi (2015), the technical affordances, structures, and policies of online platforms may either impede or facilitate trolling behaviours. The Silk Road forum space was conducive to online trolling through its ethos of online anonymity, socio-historical link to hacker cultures and the platform affordances of the environment that enshrined anonymity as a technical possibility. Through the non-identifying sign up process, one user was able to have multiple disconnected accounts and thus multiple discreet identities. Here we can see parallels with the hydra concept evoked through the discussion of piracy and the cryptomarkets environment of replication at the outset of this paper. The capacity for multiple active identities supports a spectrum of behaviours where the individual can display different personas based upon diverse agendas (Turkle 1999). The ability to switch or fragment between these identities may diffuse personal accountability and shield the individual from the consequences of community regulation. In terms of the platform affordances for this, it is only possible for a forum moderator to ban the account that has been actively identified as a troll and as breaking the communicative conventions and community norms of

the environment. All other accounts that may be occupied by this user remain active and new ones can easily be generated to avoid the invisibility enforced by forum banning.

As Philips (2015) argues online trolls troll in order to receive a reaction, commonly referred to from the recipient's point of view as 'feeding the trolls', with receipt of the spotlight of attention and engagement fuelling truly vicious trolling behaviour. In addition to the culture and platform affordances, I contend that the shutdown of the marketplace by law enforcement had created an unstable and paranoid social environment where trolls sought to trigger conflicts among the community of users (cf. Hardaker 2010) and 'everyday sadism' (Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhus 2014) could gain a solid foothold. The negative aspects to this transparent use of a research statement (that is linked to the ethical conduct of research) to engage the community through their forum space is similar to that found by Hudson and Bruckman (2004) and strongly raised the question for me as to whether covert engagement or the use of a dual identity would have been more appropriate. The approach taken by Gehl (2018) melds both of these approaches in which he followed the convention of the environment and used a pseudonym, but offered to reveal his real-world identity to participants should they wish to know. The effect of this approach is that it would be more likely to act as a shield for researchers active in contentious online environments, particularly in its act of conformation with rather than confrontation of community expectations and norms.

The Silk Road forum space was characterised by discursive parrying, posturing, and a more forthright and attacking narrative style – all of which, alongside drug-use, was fuel for the extended 'flame wars' (Franco et al. 1995). As an illustration of the risks they had experienced while purchasing drugs on Silk Road, Participant 18 shared their experience of receiving blackmail from a vendor. They also shared their response to the blackmailer, which was feisty and forthright in expression. The following extended quote provides an example of how such attacks were dealt with in the environment.

> 1:51:50 pm [Participant 18]: I replied instantly and told him to go fuck himself and that I was already doxxing him (for the purposes of this elaborate bbluff I said I was a forensic computer expert and an authority on stylometrics) and that he had stuffed up in a big way aand that when he hears his front door being smashed in he had better hope it was the police and not me - with several heavily armed associates and a serious case of the shits.
>
> […]
>
> 1:53:21 pm [Participant 18]: Some things are the same on dark markets as they are in the real world. Bluff, bluster and bullshit can be very effective when undr threat

The forthright and combative communication style that characterised this response was not uncommon to see when delving into the deep archives of the forums. While this style would have been difficult for me to emulate, I consider now that it would have been appropriate to develop a communication style that did not at least appear 'soft' or empathetic in this space. This ethos was not unique to Silk Road and has been previously described by Gabriela Coleman, in her work on internet cultures, as enacted 'for the lulz'. This dichotomy in communication styles, however, explicitly revealed the climate of contention in this community and brought into play an ethos where community members gained traction (and satisfaction) through their capacity to attack another, while masking themselves through posturing and belligerence. These performative communication styles may be referred to as a form of contentious visibility. I argue that contentious visibility is engendered by the playful and purposive splitting of online identities and movement of users between multiple sites, associated activities that make forum banning and blocking practices ineffective. These disruptive, fragmented and evasive practices are also characteristic of the distributed attachment that drives individual and community identity creation in the cryptomarket space.

## 6 CONCLUSION

While actively engaging with a community through ethnographic immersion is an incredibly rewarding experience, it is not without its risks, especially when the space of engagement is undergoing a period of upheaval, transition, and contention. In turning on a beacon for participatory engagement during data collection, the researcher can consider themselves as bait, a goat on a rope, with the community watching from the stalls, largely for entertainment value. This risk is largely avoided through the passive monitoring (Décary-Hétu and Aldridge 2015) and automated content analysis approaches (Munksgaard and Demant 2016) often taken by researchers in the study of cryptomarkets. I would argue, however, that the intense nature of immersion provides socially meaningful insight that results in a conceptually rich vocabulary to direct future practice. This is the rewiring of the ethnographic imaginarium.

Prior to the seizure of the marketplace, the community had a sense of impenetrability which made them relatively open to newbies and observers. However, after this first sign that the dream was over, the environment fostered paranoia and became ripe for trolls to create divisions between them and us and to target outsiders, which I was initially regarded as. I have argued that the multiplicity of identity, both a community norm/expectation and platform affordance in environment, may be considered as a resilient response to a culture of contentious visibility. I have flagged some approaches that the researcher may take, some of which may be unorthodox but correspond to the endogenous concept of the 'hydra effect'. In terms of resilient innovation within digital ethnographic practice that this effect speaks to, the arc of continuity for practice is in questions of opportunism,

replication, regeneration, adaptation and proliferation in response to a knowledge vacuum.

Throughout this paper I have argued that if we are to further reconfigure our understanding of digital ethnography, then we must consider practices of contention, disruption, obsolescence, collaboration, construction and iteration into our knowledge production practice. Returning to Pink's et al. (2016) thematic proposition towards digital ethnography, this essay articulates for the researcher how openness is the tension raised by in operating in such spaces. I would argue reflexive knowledge must be accompanied by transparent vulnerability, a common element of being human. Perhaps, on the high seas of the Dark Web, it is only through this practice that there can be a context collapse between the digital ethnographer and the digital pirate.

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# DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHERS ON THE MOVE – AN UNEXPECTED PROPOSAL

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## Abstract

This article explores what digital media ethnography as a methodological approach can offer to the study of contiguous media events with an unexpected, violent and fluid nature. Emphasising the role of media events in the present organisation of social life, we as digital media anthropologists acknowledge the tendency in the current digital media environment to eventise and spectacularise social life. This development serves the power-related purposes of attention seeking and public recognition in the digital world. The article is structured as follows: first, we provide a brief outline of the field of digital media ethnography in relation to the study of media event; second, we identify what we claim are three key methodological dilemmas in applying digital media ethnography to the study of today's digitally circulating media events (scale, mobility and agency) and reflect on them in the context of our methodological positioning; third, we conclude this article by considering some epistemological and ontological implications of this methodological endeavour in relation to what can be called the 'meta-field' and the related instability in current digital research.

Keywords: digital media ethnography; scale; mobility; agency; meta-field; media event; unexpectedness

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## 1 INTRODUCTION—DIGITAL RESEARCH ON THE MOVE

Late on the evening of Tuesday, 11 December 2018, one of our co-authors, Johanna, received a WhatsApp message while attending a faculty seasonal party in Helsinki. The message came from a colleague, and informed her and the rest of the research team about a shooting in Strasbourg. In this attack, a gunman who had a terrorist motive opened fire near a crowded Christmas market in the French city of Strasbourg, killing five people. After a massive manhunt, the police shot the perpetrator dead. Johanna received the message through the WhatsApp Hybrid Terrorizing chat group created for immediate communication about acute research matters. The next morning, when the research team members switched on their computers, the Strasbourg shooting continued to be breaking news on several international media outlets, and hashtags such as #strasbourg, #strasbourgattack and #strasbourgattaque were circulated prominently on Twitter and remediated elsewhere on digital media. Affected by the tragedy, and also reflecting on the intense character of the initial social media response, the team decided to systematically collect data on this disruptive media event. While the event kept unfolding on diverse digital media, the team had to direct its focus to making decisions concerning the data collection: which hashtags to scope, which media to scrape, who would do so and on which platforms to conduct qualitative digital ethnography. By Wednesday evening, the team had utilised computational and ethnographic tools to gather and store news articles, tweets, Instagram posts and YouTube data.

This example of the first twenty-four hours of data gathering in our research project illustrates the high pace and fluid process by which digital media ethnographic projects may take off in today's hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2013; Sumiala et al. 2016). Most importantly, in this article, we wish to methodologically highlight what the 'liveness' and related unexpectedness of these events demands in research design and what it means to try to 'catch up' with digital media on the move. We may well call this empirical exercise a 'live experiment', following Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford's (2014, p. 1–24) insight into the methodological thinking in present digital life worlds. In the following, we identify three key methodological dilemmas (relating to scale, mobility and agency), and reflect on them in the context of 'liveness' of digital media ethnography.

By no means do we claim to be the only researchers working on concerns such as these. Lury and Wakeford (2014), Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis (2014), Christine Hine (2015), Noortje Marres (2017) and many others have made significant contributions to this methodological endeavour to critically reflect on how to do research on 'what is happening in the present digital world' and to better grasp the present digital world's ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness in all its varieties and shapes (Lury and Wakeford 2014, p. 2).

In our methodological effort, we wish to reflect, in particular, on what digital media ethnography as a methodological approach can offer to the study of such

contiguous events with an unexpected and fluid nature. Our approach to this enterprise draws on our continuing research on events in digital media worlds and ethnographic investigation of them (see e.g. Sumiala et al. 2016; Sumiala et al. 2018; Valaskivi et al. 2019).

In the following, we first provide some key definitions, and a brief outline of the field of digital media ethnography in relation to the study of media events, and we contextualise our approach within the research field and approach of media anthropology and digital ethnography. Second, we identify what we claim are three key methodological dilemmas in applying digital media ethnography to the study of today's digitally circulating media events (scale, mobility and agency) and reflect on them in the context of our methodological positioning. Third, we conclude this article by considering some epistemological and ontological implications of this methodological endeavour in relation to what can be called the 'meta-field' (e.g. Caliandro 2018) and the related instability in current digital research.

## 2 MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY GOES DIGITAL

To begin this exercise, we need some preliminary definitions to position ourselves. As a research approach, digital media ethnography draws inspiration from various intellectual sources and traditions, particularly media anthropology and digital ethnography. Media anthropology is often described as an anthropology of contemporary societies (see e.g. Coman 2005). It is interested in the multitude of ways in which people connect to (or disconnect from) their social worlds through media technologies (see e.g. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002). In addition, media anthropology explores how the interplay between people and technologies shapes their social experiences and the ways in which individual and collective lives become mediated, or mediatized, in both 'old' media and 'new' media settings and contexts (see e.g. Spitulnik 1993; Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005; Askew 2008). Media anthropologists, in line with their anthropological heritage, thus encourage scholars' conceptual engagement with not only the material and rational aspects of human life but also the affective and symbolic construction of mediated reality (see e.g. Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005, p. 1).

Accordingly, media anthropologists have turned their interest to the study of media events (Dayan and Katz 1992) and their social and cultural implications for contemporary individual and collective lives (Pink et al. 2016). Emphasising the role of media events in the present organisation of social life, media anthropologists (Sumiala and Räisä 2020) acknowledge the tendency in the current digital media environment to eventise and spectacularise social life, which serves the power-related purposes of attention seeking and public recognition in the digital world (cf. Rojek 2013; Wagner-Pacifici 2017). Media anthropologists are also interested in the diverse ways in which media events are mediated and engaged by multiple publics in a range of local and glocal settings (Pink et al. 2016, p. 147–165). For

that purpose, media anthropologists have developed a processual view of media events that approaches events not simply as distinct ritual affirmations but also as relational processes in which series of things come together and create new relationships between events and their mediated perceptions (Pink et al. 2016, p. 147–165). Consequently, media anthropologists argue that digital ethnography provides useful tools to give nuanced processual attention to such dynamics in today's media events, along with the means to investigate them in a variety of digitally saturated contexts.

## 3 'REAL' AND/OR 'VIRTUAL' IN DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

A main issue in applying digital media ethnography to the study of today's media events concerns the following question: how to think about and describe the relationship between 'real' and digital, online and virtual environments in ethnographic fieldwork. This question takes the reader to the very core of the work of (digital) ethnography (see e.g. Hine 2015; Pink et al., 2016; Postill and Pink 2012; Rogers 2009). In the 1990s, sometimes called the Web 1.0 era, digital ethnographic research primarily focused on online communities perceived as separate from the 'real world' (Rheingold 1994). The conceptualisations of these virtual communities commonly held at that time are said to have resembled the early-twentieth-century anthropological ideas of far-away fields (Dicks et al. 2005, p. 116–117).

As is well recognised, in recent decades, the digital environment has transformed in many ways, and the digital, in its different forms, has become an essential, inseparable component of everyday life, including the experience of and participation in today's media events (cf. Postill and Pink 2012). This digitalisation of everyday life, if you will, has implications for ethnographic studies. According to Sarah Pink (2016):

> …ethnographers have long since worked with media, both as a research method, as a research topic, and perhaps most importantly as something that we acknowledge is an almost inevitable and universal element of everyday life. As digital technologies are increasingly ubiquitous in everyday life, as well as in the more extraordinary events and activities in which people become involved, then it becomes important to do research in a way that accounts for this' (Pink 2016, p. 161).

Expressing an even more explicit position on the incorporation of the digital into ethnographic practice, Ronald Hallett and Kristen Barber (2014, 307) argued that 'it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces'.

These methodological advancements have shifted the ethnographic focus from isolated, virtual communities to transient, fluid, ephemeral fields of social media (Airoldi 2018; Caliandro 2018). Simultaneously, ethnography has faced new

theoretical and methodological challenges. According to Alessandro Caliandro (2018, 557), 'the fact that social media tend to structure online interactions across very fluid, ephemeral and dispersed social forms' presents novel challenges to classical anthropological and ethnographic categories such as field, community, identity and ethics. Caliandro (2018, p. 557) argued that:

> …on the methodological level, social media configure themselves as environments that provide the ethnographer with an array of present tools that actually organise the space and flow of interaction (think about Twitter's retweets and hashtags) (Marres and Gerlitz 2015), which in some ways channel and constrain the scope of action of the ethnographer and challenge the approach itself.

Against this background, what seems to be both methodologically challenging and promising for contemporary ethnography is not adapting classical analysis qualitative techniques to online environments but, instead, understanding what we can learn from online environments about new methods and languages useful to re-innovate the discipline of ethnography (Ruppert, Law and Savage 2013; Pink et al. 2016). Digital media ethnography, as we argue in this article, constitutes one such attempt.

Today's digital media ethnography thus has a methodological scope that gives serious consideration to the contemporary mobile condition of social media (Hine 2015; Kozinets 2016; Airoldi 2018; Caliandro 2018). From the perspective of digital media ethnography and the study of media events, this new empirical thinking must include three interconnected dimensions. First, in digital media ethnography, the line between 'the real' and 'the virtual' should be thought of as a continuum rather than two separate realms of reality. This follows naturally from the rich literature in digital culture and internet scholarship that has long discussed and problematised such distinctions (see e.g. Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2015). It follows from this that empirical researchers need to be able to move from one realm to the other and think them as two profoundly intertwined realms of people's reality. Second, in digital media ethnography, 'the real' and 'the virtual' have a relationship of mutual dependence. Media events cannot be created *ex nihilo*; instead, they take place in certain physical locations (in the aforementioned case, the shooting in the Christmas market) from where they instantaneously spread to digital media and communication networks in the form of information and messages exchanged by actors. In this context, various actors including journalists, authorities, ordinary media users and, in some cases, perpetrators participate in the communicative construction of events on and outside the digital media. This communication is dispersed across both social media and online news media, creating a unique empirical context for the ethnographic study of such events (Chadwick 2013; Sumiala et al. 2018; Sumiala and Räisä 2020). Third, digital media ethnography can be understood as a method to study 'natively digital' data.

Richard Rogers (2019, p. 6) distinguished between digitised and natively digital data and methods. The former refers to 'old' methods that have migrated to digital environment; virtual ethnography is a case in point here. The latter refers to digital methods designed to use born-digital data, hence 'native' in the name (Rogers 2019, p. 4).[1]

Moreover, digital media ethnography allows scholars to follow connections through a variety of digital media landscapes instead of being fixed to certain platforms (whether social media or professional news media). Digital media ethnographers can consider multifaceted views, travel among different sites, platforms and channels (including, when necessary, the complex interplay between online and offline communication) and explore how things are made meaningful and are experienced in varied digital contexts (see e.g. Hine 2015). Through this flexible, reflexive research practice, we argue, it is possible to begin to gain new understandings of the workings of today's media events and how people connect to them at various levels for diverse purposes.

## 4 THREE DILEMMAS TO GRASP IN DIGITAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY

Based on our real-time ethnographic exercise on the Strasbourg shooting, we argue that studying contemporary media events and the related eventisation of social life of individuals and collectives in today's digital environment raises three key dilemmas demanding further investigation: the scale of digital media ethnographic research, the mobility of the digital field and the relationships between human and non-human actors when following such events in real time. In the following sections, we address these three dilemmas in more theoretical detail and combine our discussion with empirical issues triggered by our fieldwork on the Strasbourg shooting.

### 4.1 Scale

The first dilemma to be tackled in digital media ethnography of violent and disruptive media events has to do with scale. This dilemma is triggered by the fact that the scale of the data that emerges as a response to violent media events is well beyond the human perception. It is widely acknowledged fact that digital media, combining both news media and social media, has the power to expand time–space communication among people in different locations and contexts during events (see e.g. Kraemer 2017; Sumiala 2013). Digital media thus extends the scale of communication beyond the micro and macro spheres of social reality (see also Couldry 2012). By doing so, it also unwraps the place–society isomorphism in

[1] See the introduction to this special issue for an extensive literature review of digital ethnography and related methodologies.

which people are thought to construct meanings and to create and maintain social worlds during media events (cf. Inda and Rosaldo 2002). These conditions shaped the experience of fieldwork on the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting in many ways. Our research team was able to follow the media event unfolding on our screens while we were physically thousands of kilometres away from the crime scene in Strasbourg, France. Moreover, we were geographically spread throughout towns and cities in Finland, yet through digital media, we were able to communicate in real time to exchange field notes and share observations on the field and the data gathered.

In theoretical terms, we can identify at least two ways of thinking about the implications of scale in the empirical study of digital media ethnography of media events. The first and perhaps the most conventional way of thinking about scale relates to its globalised scope. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (2002, p. 9) described globalisation as the increased interconnections of people, goods and ideas shaped by compressed spatial and temporal horizons. This compression of space and time in communication enables media events to make action possible from a distance. In this frame of thinking, digital media communication may be carried out simultaneously on local, national and global levels. Simultaneous digital presences on various scales pose major challenges in digital media ethnographic research collecting data on events as these presences unravel any fixed ideas about the ways in which data and place are connected in this empirical reality. It follows that in the flow of media events, the local typically is embedded in the global, and vice versa.

When the shooting in Strasbourg took place, news, hashtags, videos, posts and memes provoked by it began to circulate on diverse digital media platforms including both online news media and social media, particularly Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Hence, to try to better grasp the scale of this incident, we had to look beyond local and national contexts for our ethnographic observations. In other words, it was not enough for us to focus on one platform, one discussion forum, one online community or one national media such as *Le Monde* or even 'French Twitter'. To match the scale of this violent event, we had to expand the scale of our data gathering and simultaneously collect data from various digital platforms and across diverse platform. Nevertheless, we came nowhere close to gathering the 'complete data'; instead, we grasped fragments of diverse, rather heterogeneous data sets. In other words, the scale of the event is so vast that it can never be fully empirically grasped. Yet, we argue that this approach of immediate fieldwork simultaneously expanded into variety of digital platforms, although not complete, allowed us to follow multiple digital field sites and collect both computational and ethnographic data on the event as it unfolded in multiple locations simultaneously. This decision made it possible for us begin to tackle the scale of the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting as a disruptive media event of global measure (cf. Couldry, Hepp and Krotz 2010).

Another way of thinking about scale in the study of digital media ethnography of media events is what we may call 'flat ontology' (cf. Couldry 2012, p. 27). Following Bruno Latour's (1999, 2005) Actor Network Theory, we may claim that there is no 'natural' scale in digital media. 'Largeness' and 'smallness' are merely extensions of the same social reality. For Latour (1999), scale, therefore, is best characterised as flat and folded (see also Couldry 2012, p. 27).

In the case of the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting, the idea of flat ontology referred to an interpretive framework in which the social lives surrounding the event took place 'here' and 'now' in the digital encounters with no outside references beyond digital media. This approach has certain limitations as it does not recognise the relationships of events to the contexts in which people's digital actions take place. Here, for example, we can think about the eyewitnesses to the attack in the Christmas market who posted about it on social media such as Twitter. We may well assume that these people did not witness the attacks in the vacuum, but interpreted them in a framework of broader histories related to such terrorist attacks – the Berlin Christmas market attack in 2016 being one possible point of reference (see e.g. Sumiala and Räisä 2020). The idea of flat ontology nevertheless provides certain useful ways of thinking about scale as one horizon along which digital activities are performed. For digital media ethnographers collecting data on media events from digital media, this flatness of scale also opens up new ways of thinking about the construction of the social in such occasions—not so much as a place but as an encounter-specific activity. We argue that the issue of flatness also encourages digital media ethnographers to apply new technological tools to conduct ethnographic research that incorporates computational methods to explore new scale social encounters in such violent media event (see also Sumiala et al. 2016).

Aligning with Hine's (2015, p. 4) insights, ethnographers always have limited ability to encompass the whole situation. In other words, ethnography is conducted on a scale determined by human perceptual capacity. To mitigate this limited capacity to do research, digital media ethnographers prefer the collective ethnography approach as a methodological strategy. Following this line of thinking, our research team studied the same event but from different perspectives by combining computational data collection methods with ethnography (see also Caliandro 2018). During the data collection, one team member started to collect Twitter data through a streaming Application Programming Interface (API) that allowed adding search terms. We also employed other 'methods of the medium' (Rogers 2019) to grasp the ongoing and constantly updating situation, such as manually scraping YouTube, screen-recording Instagram and taking screenshots of Twitter and news media sites.

### 4.2 Mobility

The second dilemma in digital media ethnography of today's disruptive media events involves the empirical handling of ongoing flows of data, people and ideas

during data gathering. John Urry (2007, p. 6, 9) famously called this shift in research the 'mobility turn' to a research focus on the movement, mobility and contingent ordering of social life in a variety of social and cultural contexts. In digital media ethnography of media events, this turn entails paying special attention to the multiple ways in which data, people and ideas move and travel across digital contexts and the kinds of flows their movement creates (Urry 2007, p. 6). Research methods, in short, need to be put 'on the move' as they must be able to efficiently follow their research objects (Urry 2007, p. 41). Urry (2007, p. 40) introduced three methods applicable in digital media ethnography. The first method consists of 'directly observing mobile bodies or observing them in digitally enhanced forms' (Urry 2007, p. 40). In the second approach, the researcher, in a kind of 'co-present immersion' (Urry 2007, p. 40), moves with 'modes of movement' and employs a range of observations and digital data gathering in this process of 'travelling with' the research objects. Third, Urry (2007, p. 40) suggested an approach in which the objects of study are asked to keep 'time–space' diaries and make notes about what they do, where they do these things, how they move during these periods and what modes of movement they use in these situations. These diaries can be textual, pictorial, digital or, in many cases, combinations of these three.

Urry's (2007) proposal of the mobile turn resonates with the older idea of multi-sited ethnography introduced by George Marcus (1995) and later elaborated by many digital ethnography scholars such as Jennie Germann Molz (2006), Christine Hine (2015), Massimo Airoldi (2018) and Alessandro Caliandro (2018). The main proposition of Marcus' (1995, p. 96) multi-sited ethnography is that ethnographic research should move 'out from the single sites and local situations of ethnographic research design to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space'. Within digital media ethnography, digital world(s) provide such multi-sited field(s), and in recent years, the idea of multi-sitedness has been applied and elaborated in various social media contexts (see e.g. Airoldi 2018; Caliandro 2018). Another crucial aspect of Marcus' (1995, p. 96) thinking that is highly relevant to digital media ethnography is the methodological rule to 'follow the thing'. This imperative 'to follow' encourages digital media ethnographers to trace different types of actors and messages across a variety of online platforms.

Such following is rarely linear (Sumiala et al. 2018) but instead consists of circulating moves among multiple actors, platforms and messages (see also Latour 1999). To give one example, one team member followed the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting event on Twitter. This task included following streams of messages based on emerging hashtags such as #StrasbourgShooting and #JesuisStrasbourg. However, these messages contained links and referred to different actors that led to other platforms. 'To follow the thing', therefore, requires following diverse representations and actors, often across multiple digital sites, which may easily blur the boundaries between the event and other flows of

messages. Those conducting fieldwork thus may get lost in multi-sitedness of the digital field. To avoid this trap, it is important to reflect on the process of following the event and to collectively discuss potential digital paths and their relevance to it. This is a lesson we learnt while conducting fieldwork on the Strasbourg shooting. Sometimes, a link that looks a side-track may lead to an important finding in the field. It, therefore, is important to keep the digital fieldwork process organic and open to immediate reflections.

The last aspect of mobility raised in this context relates to the question of how to keep up with the cyclical movement in these digital platforms and their related research subjects. This concern is closely connected to the 'liveness' (see e.g. Zelizer 2018) of today's media events. Indeed, 'the live' circulation of data, people and ideas creates media events in the present digital age. This very liveness of events and the related, intensified speed of circulation have been increasingly discussed within the framework of the concept of acceleration (see e.g. Hassan 2009; Rosa 2015). In this context, the idea of acceleration points to the temporal and spatial speeding up of events and draws scholarly attention to the speed and the consequent instability of movement in digital media ethnographic analysis of such events. The logic of acceleration forces the participants in current media events to post and share messages and make sense of these events at ever faster paces (e.g. Sumiala et al. 2018, p. 21). This greater speed of communication poses major challenges for digital media ethnographers' attempts to keep up with the rapidity and instability of floating transmedial communication. Acceleration also has ethical implications for digital media ethnographers. Research has demonstrated that the acceleration of communication in today's media events tends to facilitate stereotypical, untruthful and prejudiced communication, polarising the event participants and other affected parties in society (see e.g. Zelizer 2018).

When conducting fieldwork on the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting, we had to take into account that not only people but also messages such as tweets, memes and videos were circulating and in constant flux. Consequently, new information was uploaded on online news media all the time as new facts about the event were established, and new ideas were associated with it. One such affective dimension that vividly circulated after the Strasbourg shooting was public mourning performed on and via digital media. In this process typically involving sharing messages of solidarity and sympathy for victims, certain symbols such as white storks—a symbol of Strasbourg—began to circulate on digital media in different forms, styles and shapes.

Moreover, old information disappeared and was reshaped and remediated. During the process of immediate fieldwork, it often is difficult to identify the truth value of the information on the event circulating on digital media. In the Strasbourg shooting, as in other violent events, immediate uncertainty surrounded the cause of the attack and the identities of the perpetrator and the victims. The digital media ethnographer's ethical problem is to decide whose fate to follow in a disruptive media event in which battle over media attention, visibility and recognition is a

typical feature (Sumiala et al., 2018). To give an example, perpetrators may well have left digital traces such as manifests or live recordings of their violence (Sumiala et al., 2018). In such as case, one has to decide whether to focus on the public representations of the perpetrator and their self-scripted narratives or to turn more attention to the victims' suffering and the solidarity offered to them in and via digital media. In real-life ethnographic encounters, this issue rarely is either/or but, instead, is both/and. However, when writing ethnographies on the disruptive media event, one cannot escape the question of to whom and what the research gives visibility in the present condition characterised by constant attention seeking.

### 4.3 Agency

The third dilemma in digital media ethnographic study of violent media events deals with the issue of agency. One needs to ask, who qualifies as an actor in today's disruptive media events (cf. Marres 2017, p. 185). And what is more, can we think of technologies as actors possessing agency in such events? When discussing mobility as a dilemma in the digital media ethnographic study of violent media events, we briefly mentioned that the imperative to follow targets both human and non-human actors. Here, we wish to explore this idea in more detail. In the digital media ethnographic study of media events, this idea of human–non-human interactions typically is associated with Latour's (1999; 2005) attempt to unravel the dichotomy between people and things. This frame of thinking invites digital media ethnographers to examine the various ways in which people and objects (e.g. news, tweets, memes, posts and videos) are assembled and reassembled through time–space in the multiple digital environments of today's media events (cf. Urry 2007, p. 50). This multitude of connections resonates with John Law's (1994) ideas posed in the 1990s, arguing that humans are intricately networked with technology. Here, we may think of the software, databases and algorithms that shape the ways in which the digital social worlds of media events are created and shaped today.

The social reality of today's media events thus is brought to the fore through complex processes of human actions embedded within computational logics and algorithmic constellations. Simply put, the more (human) actors click and share certain types of materials related to events, the more these actors are offered those contents on their screens and in their news feeds. Jose van Dijck (2013) called this quantified sociality. Consequently, digital media ethnographers must adopt a methodological orientation that enables them to empirically trace these human and technological associations and encounters in a variety of networks created in and around today's media events. During the 'mass media' era, actors also played a central role in creating media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), but we argue that rigorous digital media ethnographic analysis of today's media events requires conceptually broadening the category of actors to include non-human actors and agency in events. Furthermore, it is necessary to pay close attention to the

intensified, globalised dynamics among the actors contributing to events (see e.g. Sumiala et al. 2018, p. 17–18).

In the case of the Strasbourg shooting, we identified three different groups of actors that all played important roles in constructing the event: representations, platforms and humans (whom we encountered through representations). In our digital media ethnography, representations were given a central role in the fieldwork. We followed tweets, news stories, YouTube videos, memes and Instagram posts—all media representations. Memes were one example of the social lives of representations identified in the fieldwork. Soon after the attack took place, two visual representations started to circulate on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram: imagery related to Strasbourg Cathedral and storks, which both had symbolic relevance to Strasbourg. These visual representations appeared in different forms as both drawings and photographs and were used to express collective mourning and solidarity with the victims.

As discussed, digital platforms such as Twitter and Instagram were actively used in the case of the Strasbourg shooting, as in many other terror attacks, to disseminate information and express collective emotions (Eriksson Krutrök and Lindgren 2018). We argue that as techno-social constellations, these platforms also shaped the event by giving more visibility to certain representations than others. Moreover, based on our previous research on the Charlie Hebdo attacks, we knew that digital platforms are harnessed to spread violent imageries (Sumiala et al. 2018). It, therefore, was important to acknowledge the agency of the platforms in the course of fieldwork and reflect how this platform agency may shape the flows of messages and related interpretations of the event.

Lastly, in the case of the Strasbourg shooting, we could identify that the human actors who appeared in our fieldwork were journalists, police and ordinary people, and all these actors were identified in our digital media material. For example, YouTube was soon filled with news videos from media agencies in which journalists on the scene reported about the unfolding events while police officers in bulletproof vests and helmets conducted security operations. Moreover, ordinary people posted videos and messages about their experiences of the event on social media. Many of these people were visiting Strasbourg when the attack took place. It thus appears that we were dealing with a complex mixture of actors and related potentials to shape and influence not only our fieldwork but the social reality created around the Strasbourg shooting as a media event.

Digital media ethnography thus challenges conventional anthropocentric thinking about how the social worlds of media events are created and maintained in their current condition and who puts these social encounters into action. Digital media ethnography also pushes scholars to re-think the centrality of human agency in managing these processes and to contest fixed anthropological attempts to interpret such events and the related interactions and encounters (cf. Tsing 2002).

# 5 CONCLUDING REMARKS—DEALING WITH 'UNEXPECTEDNESS' IN DIGITAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY

In this article, we have examined digital media ethnography as a possible methodological means to more fully grasp the empirical complexity of the digital research environment as a research site, particularly within the study of violent media events of disruptive and global nature. We acknowledge our limitations to offer any inclusive solutions for digital research scholars. Many issues still require further intellectual inputs and efforts. For instance, more work needs to be carried out to better combine computational methods of data science with an ethnographic orientation. Making this work successful demands addressing the idea of the meta-field (Airoldi 2018). As when using other digital research methods to focus on digital media worlds, digital media ethnographers have to develop a certain dual understanding of the idea of the field as a research site. The digital field is a research site that not only is deeply multi-sited, as described in this article, but also consists of different layers. According to Airoldi (2018, p. 666), the meta-field comes to exist due to the very act of following a key word or an algorithm as a practice of ethnographic fieldwork. Airoldi (2018, p. 665) distinguished 'liquid' meta-fields from 'solid' digital sites but argued that they have overlapping natures. To be able to navigate these complex meta-fields always present in digital media research, digital media ethnographers need to better understand the underlining algorithmic logics of these digital media sites (which often demands more intense collaboration with data scientists) and the cultural and social logics embedded in these encounters.

In our experience of fieldwork on the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting, we, as digital media ethnographers, had to cultivate a highly complex epistemology to enable coping with the issues of meta-field, scale, mobility and agency in such research simultaneously. We, as ethnographers, could grasp the immediate social life of the representations of the event dispersed throughout diverse platforms such as online news media, Twitter and YouTube. Although partial, our fieldwork yielded empirical evidence of a phenomenon that consisted of global elements, was constantly moving and involved a rich variety of actors. However, our ethnography did not make visible how the logic(s) of algorithms shaped what we were able to follow on digital media. To help fill this gap, we applied computational methods. For example, our colleague, a data scientist, was able to build an API that helped us gather data from Twitter. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the data are available only as long as Twitter and other social media corporations allow such mining. How open or closed these interfaces are depends on number factors, including business models, profit purposes and many factors beyond the influence of data scientists.

Achieving this end connected with the issues of meta field, scale, mobility and agency requires questioning certain pre-digital ideas of research. Instead of aiming to achieve all-embracing, transparent, stable data collection of today's media events, digital media ethnography, as a methodological approach, must acknowledge the partial, incomplete nature of present digital data as always 'broken' (Pink et al. 2018) and unfinished, no matter how much data scientists' tools used to complement ethnographic data gathering. By so doing, digital media ethnographers can attempt to adapt to the epistemological and ontological conditions of the present digital age shaped by ongoingness, relationality, contingency (Lury and Wakeford 2014) and—we would like to add—unexpectedness, which so profoundly characterises digital research in our time.

Finally, the Strasbourg Christmas market shooting in December 2018 did not become a large-scale, global media event. However, it was a human tragedy powerful enough to stir contemporary digital lives and push communication on the move. At the moment of deciding whether to follow this event and what data to gather, the outcomes could not be known. Digital media ethnographers working on such 'live experiments' (Lury and Wakeford 2014) must make decisions in real time in real-world situations that cannot be predetermined, let alone measured or controlled. This very condition of unexpectedness, in our view, poses the major challenge for digital media ethnography and practitioners today. The uncertainty of communication in digital social worlds during violent media events contests all static positions imagined for ethnographers to take. Hence, today's digital media ethnographers have to tackle with new dilemmas triggered by the amount and quantity of material circulating on the event (scale), multi-directional movement and accelerated circulation of data (mobility) as well as expansion of the category of actors involved in shaping the event including both human and non-human actors. To confront these dilemmas a media ethnographer has to be willing to problematise any canonised, fixed, pre-digital ideas about the nature of the knowledge achieved by conducting ethnography, relationship between an ethnographer and their field and the material gathered during fieldwork. This type of orientation, we argue, demands willingness to search for new forms of collaboration with data scientists and readiness to bring ethnography as a methodological approach into a more profound dialogue with computational means of doing research in digital contexts. Even more so, it requires ability to tolerate abruptness of one's field work and brokenness of the data gathered in such ephemeral conditions. Beginning to realise how massive this challenge is marks the first and the most crucial step as we seek to understand how profoundly not only our ethnographic research but also we, as ethnographers and our ideas about research, are put on the move in the present digital age.

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# SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HERE AND THERE: NEGOTIATING RESEARCHER VISIBILITY IN A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY

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## Abstract

Despite our preparation for fieldwork, a majority of what ethnographers actually do in the field is based on 'gut-feeling', 'sensing', and 'whim'. This paper is a piece of reflexive ethnography detailing a series of minor but important methodological decisions pertaining to researcher visibility throughout fieldwork in a digital community of social media Influencers. It details one anthropologist's private negotiations during the foray into the Influencer industry by situating the self along various spectrums of conspicuousness. These confessional anecdotes of 'behind the scenes' labour can be taken as suggestions on how to negotiate one's positionalities during ethnographic encounters between and betwixt physical and digital fieldsites. I detail these through six experiences from the field – as the esteemed guest, the exotic inbetweener, the willing apprentice, the trophy acquaintance, the concealed consultant, and the passing confidante – in which I negotiate being 'seen', being on 'show', and 'seeing' from somewhere between here and there.

Keywords: digital ethnography; visibility; influencers; microcelebrity; fieldwork

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of my PhD research into internet celebrity in Singapore in 2011, I had expected that sending out officious invitation emails with the University letterhead (in colour, no less), my supervisor's signature and contact details (a clearly non-Singaporean, foreign-sounding name with the status-elevating designation, 'Professor'), and documentation of my ethics clearance (in bureaucratic legalese peppered with strings of numbers) would signpost my legitimacy as an academic researcher. After all, I did as I was told after spending weeks being instructed at workshops on research methodologies and ethics; surely this would be the golden ticket for access into the field. These would-be informants were ordinary internet users who had accumulated such sizable followings that they could monetise their viewership by embedding sponsored advertorials into the narratives of their social media updates. As 'microcelebrities' (Senft 2008) who had become full-fledged 'Influencers' (Abidin 2015), they of all people appreciate the value of self-posturing via identity markers as status symbols, having done so with romantic relationships (Abidin 2016b) and even 'girl talk' (Abidin 2015). Further, Singapore was a country that prized the value of higher education (Mok 2000) and especially one that comprised some international certification as a mark of legitimacy (Olds 2007). But I could not have been more wrong. My initial posturing had very little currency among the prospective informants, for what we had each valued as status symbols were different. For instance, during a return visit to some of my informants in 2017, I learnt that they were more thrilled by the fact that a blogpost of mine was cited by the international social news website Buzzfeed, than by the fact that I had published dozens of scholarly articles on their life stories in the last six years. Identifying the status symbols – or the visual, discursive, and behavioural icons that could represent my 'status sets' (Merton 1972) – that lubricated my interactions with my informants, either through tools of proximity or distancing, became a constant exercise as the yardsticks fluctuated with the times.

To groom the trust and acceptance of my informants as I spent prolonged periods in their presence, it was crucial that I enacted my visibility – via both physical interactions and digital traces – as an ethnographer who was curious, sincere, and invested in their work. In positioning ourselves in relation to our informants, anthropologists often adopt the dichotomic framework of 'insider/outsider' (Merton 1972) or 'emic/etic' to find our footing. In his cornerstone work on the sociology of knowledge, Robert K. Merton posited that 'as a matter of epistemological principle… particular groups in each moment of history have *monopolistic access* to particular kinds of knowledge… some groups have *privileged access,* with other groups also being able to acquire that knowledge for themselves but at greater risk and cost' (Merton 1972, p. 11). Anthropologists often toe the line between being 'insiders' with empathetic knowledge and intimate access to their community, and 'outsiders' with more neutrality and a natural curiosity to critically examine cultural repertoire that is otherwise overlooked or presumed to be

mundane. Yet, these demarcations are not always so cleanly distinguished as 'there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between these two states' (Merriam et al. 2001, p. 405); further, ethnographic tales from the field usually reveal tender negotiations betwixt and between (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, Innes 2009, Kerstetter 2012, Mercer 2007, Merriam et al. 2001, Shahbazi 2004). In my fieldwork among these highly visible internet-based celebrities, navigating the 'insider' and 'outsider' scapes necessitated the continuous reinscribing of my body visually, discursively, emotively, and symbolically as I felt – literally and figuratively – my way around. In other words, alongside my constant 'seeing' and witnessing of the scene, it was also important for me to manage my decorum, and specifically how intensely each part of my intersectional identity should be 'seen' or audience.

Early on in my fieldwork, I coped with such tensions by imagining these visibility labours and literacies as 'spectrums of conspicuousness' that simultaneously operate in parallel. In this setting, each aspect of a researcher's intersectional identity corresponds to a dial scale. In my case, my (mixed) race, gender, age, class, education background, vocation, migrant status, and marital status were some of the demographic markers that stood out to my informants and were dialed on a scale, in order to personalise a specific version of my self-identity and persona for different audiences (Figures 1 & 2). Like the Influencers who used social media prolifically for their commerce, I too used social media to self-brand my academic work, and my digital personae, technology competence, and social media currency became important elements to consider. The performance of each of these elements operates in a gradient from low visibility to high visibility. By mixing and matching and managing simultaneous dials, I could tailor make versions of myself with small variants in identity inscriptions to be flexible and adaptable, rather than be forced into a rigid master status. For instance, I could exaggerate my gender while obscuring my race, or emphasise my generational competence with social media use while only hinting at my vocational status. Much like the role of an audio mixer or soundboard for a band of instruments, 'spectrums of conspicuousness' is the visual culmination of one's public persona as a result of conscientiously mobilising and performing selective aspects of one's identity inscriptions (see Figures 1 & 2). As a research strategy, playing with spectrums of conspicuousness enables researchers to present ourselves genuinely, while selectively dialing up or down facets of our identity that could facilitate or parlay our entry into the field, and lubricate our interactions with informants. This focus on mixing and remixing a cocktail of externally visible and performable attributes and 'conspicuousness' is unlike Goffman's (1956) 'facework' that is focused on a dichotomous presentability, in which actors construct front and backstages in order for some persona labour to be hidden from an audience; and unlike Hochschild's (1983) 'emotional labour' that is focused on an actor's internal negotiations, in which corporeal performances for an audience guide and are guided by one's actual felt emotions.

While I generally felt welcome by my informants, I had to engage in varying extents of 'visibility labour' (Abidin 2016a) among these young women whose craft

was contingent upon their own presence on social media in the public eye. Visibility labour is 'the work enacted to flexibly demonstrate gradients of self-conspicuousness' (Abidin 2016a, p. 90) in order to win favour among your audience. In other words, despite the attention economy (Goldhaber 1997) of social media, here actors are not aiming for maximum visibility. In the context of my fieldwork, the nuance was in negotiating what visibility literacies I had, how much visibility currency I held, when to display and conceal visibility, and what types of visibility were appropriate for specific contexts. For starters, displaying an overt visibility (such as dressing too similarly to my informants or being too outspoken at social gatherings) might be misconstrued as a threatening aspiration to emulate my informants' microcelebrity, or that I was competing with them for attention or 'stealing their thunder'; I would risk a festering sense of threat and distrust towards myself within our homosocial settings. Yet, being under visible (such as underdressing for exclusive events or not participating in social media conversations) might also be read as a general disinterest in the craft of my informants, or worst still, that my apparent inability to acquire the appropriate insider literacies would permanently mark me as an outlier who would never qualify to inhabit their life worlds. Like the Goldilocks of ethnographers (Miller 2016), I had to be visible towards and among my informants, but not too little and not too much. In navigating the spectrums of conspicuousness, I had to glide along the gradient of low to high visibilities, and hop between the spectrums corresponding to specific facets of my intersectional identity (Figures 1 & 2).

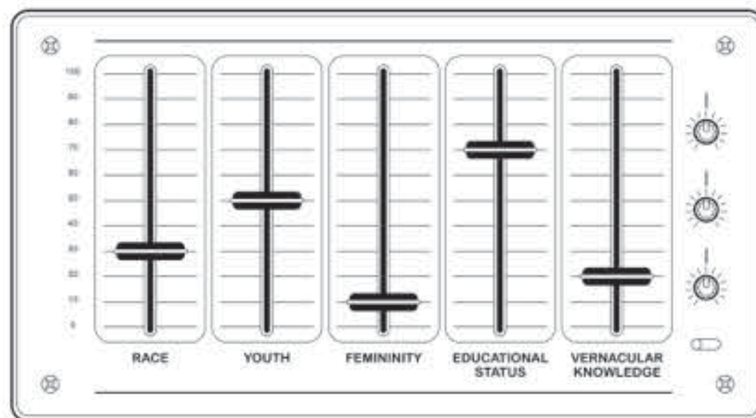


*Figure 1: Example of one permutation of low to high visibilities for a researcher's performative intersectional identity.*

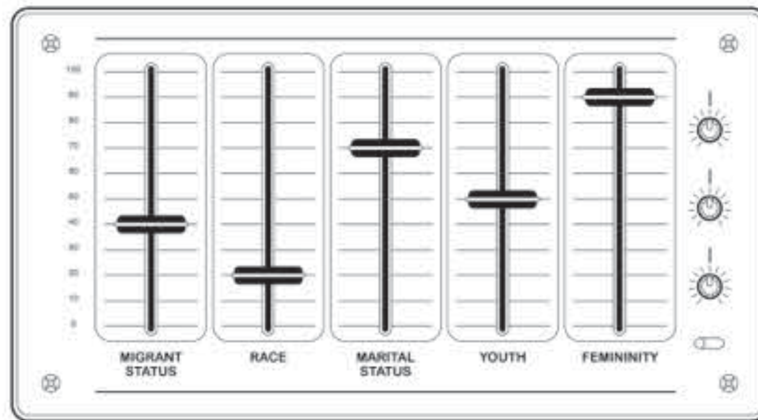


*Figure 2: Example of another permutation of low to high visibilities for a researcher's performative intersectional identity.*

This paper is a piece of reflexive ethnography detailing a series of minor but important methodological decisions pertaining to researcher visibility throughout fieldwork in a digital community of social media Influencers. Specifically, I detail how a series of seemingly minor but eventually critical decisions during fieldwork came to shape the presentation of my visibility, literacies, and trustworthiness to informants by negotiating placement along various spectrums of conspicuousness. These involved adopting tropic roles including: The esteemed guest, the exotic inbetweener, the willing apprentice, the trophy acquaintance, the concealed consultant, and the passing confidante. I hope that these confessional anecdotes of 'behind the scenes' labour can be taken as suggestions on how to negotiate positionalities during ethnographic encounters between and betwixt physical and digital fieldsites, embodiment, interactions, and intimacies.

## 2 THE ESTEEMED GUEST

My initial visits to 25-year-old Jane's office were cordial but distant. Like many of the Influencers I was studying, Jane was also an owner of a 'blogshop', a predecessor economy to the Influencer industry in Singapore, and a vernacular form of online commerce in which these women modelled and sold used, imported, or manufactured clothing on blog platforms (Abidin & Thompson 2012). Besides working with Influencers, I also assisted at their blogshops in various roles. One such experience involved me visiting a few blogshop warehouse-cum-offices every week to assist blogshop owners and Influencers with their operations.

Jane had instructed me to devise branding strategies and advertising campaigns for her business; we would have long chats about vision planning for her business before I was left on my own to draw up drafts on Jane's laptop. Often, these conversations took place on a comfortable couch while three other women were spread out on the floor between boxes and stacks of folded clothes in plastic

wrappers, profusely packaging parcels to be posted to their customers. When I had completed my task, I usually volunteered to help with the parcels since the blogshop regularly received a high volume of orders and the women were rushing to get to the post office by the close of business hours. In the first two weeks, Jane would politely turn down my offer, explaining in a pastiche of English and Mandarin that 'someone who is doing a PhD' like myself was more suited to *yòng nǎo* (trans. 'use my brain', or to do intellectual work) than to perform *shǒu gōng* (trans. 'handiwork', or to do manual labour). She was worried that the 'manual labour' they needed help with was beneath me: 'Are you sure? I feel like it's such a waste… you've studied for so long and now you're packing parcels, doing like "no brain" work.' It took some gentle persuasion before Jane accepted that I was sincere about experiencing her daily work life 'as is', and she eventually released the imagined hierarchy of 'intellectual work' and 'manual work' that she had upheld out of courtesy towards me.

In a similar instance, another 25-year-old blogshop owner with whom I was working was concerned for my face work and reputation (Goffman 2003) as a researcher. A group of eight of us, five young women and three young men, had accompanied Christine and her business partner to the Central Business District (CBD) area to hand out flyers for her blogshop business. It was a couple of weeks to the Lunar New Year and her flyers had discount codes to entice prospective customers to make an online purchase. Christine brought along eight brightly coloured cotton t-shirts (four each in neon orange and lime green respectively) for the 'helpers' to wear as a uniform of sorts while we walked around the CBD. She handed out the orange t-shirts to the four young female helpers, and gave me and the young male helpers the green ones. Those in orange were to hand out flyers at the busiest pedestrian square of the CBD, while those in green were stationed at a smaller square a distance away with much lower human traffic. I had presumed the four young women had known each other before this and did not question Christine's arrangement. As Christine and I were crossing the road to the smaller square while the three young men were trailing behind, she hinted that she was experiencing vicarious embarrassment on my behalf: 'Crystal, the green is not as eye-catching as the orange yah, so I thought you will prefer green… [this square] also has fewer people so maybe you won't meet people you know.' Christine had pre-empted that I would be averse to the 'dirty work' of her business, and took preventive measures to mediate my face work (Goffman 2003) by reducing my visibility as a flyer distributor in public. I expressed my gratitude for her care, but also asserted that I did not perceive or experience the 'groundwork' with stigma.

For some ethnographers (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, p. 30), being granted 'the status of a guest' accorded them care from their informants that would not otherwise have been extended to others of the same demographic. In my fieldwork among women who shared the same nationality and age cohort as I did, I was initially deemed a 'guest' because my informants demarcated my work as a researcher as 'intellectual labour' and the groundwork they were performing as 'manual labour'.

Where I had assumed that my cultural familiarity and similar age would endear me to my informants, they instead read my educational background and vocation as a class marker that distinguished us, and thus showered me with more respect than I had anticipated. Further still, this care and respect was gifted because informants like Christine wanted to protect and maintain my visibility and reputation as an academic in public spaces. Sociologist Katherine Irwin (2006) wrote a beautifully gripping account of how a key informant of hers – whom she had dated, married, and later divorced – expended labour and effort to help maintain her research project, to the extent of putting off their breakup so that she could continue with her fieldwork. To a lesser degree, Jane and Christine's consideration of my supposed 'status' meant that they momentarily valued my research work above the personal interest of their businesses – I was after all hired as an in-house 'intern' to assist with their company, but they discounted and reduced my duties and responsibilities to maintain my 'face'. Rather than interpreting their goodwill as mere kindness, I saw early on that these were genuine peers of mine (all of us were born in the same year) who sincerely wanted me to do well in my work. I often wondered if I would ever be able to reciprocate this care, and this early experience motivated me to cultivate sincere relationships throughout fieldwork as much as possible.

It was pertinent that I quickly shed this impression of an esteemed guest and give them the confidence that I did not mind 'being seen' doing 'dirty work', even when in public. I learnt that to the Influencers with whom I was working, this was seen as a significant concession on my part because so much of the actual labour behind their craft is consistently obscured by the apparent glitz and glamour carefully orchestrated, curated, and publicised on their social media feeds, and that such aspirational labour was largely invisible (Duffy 2017). As their new acquaintance, I needed to signpost my acknowledgement of this behind-the-scenes labour, and my willingness to experience it alongside my informants.

## 3 THE EXOTIC INBETWEENER

When I began fieldwork I did not see myself as an outsider because I believed that my informants and I shared many biographical experiences, but I soon realised that I was perceived as one nevertheless. Feeling 'exotic' was a consistent mode for me throughout fieldwork, which was equal parts bewildering and contentious, given that I had lived in Singapore for twenty years by the time I began fieldwork. I was in the same age cohort as my informants, had received the same public schooling that they did, and spoke the same creolised Singaporean English. As a young anthropologist, I thought I had ticked most of the boxes on the 'insider' card. Yet, in retrospect, I now see that it was my acceptance of the process of being exoticised, my positive response during these exchanges, and my later emphasis on the minor 'exotic' differences, that warmed my informants up to me on most occasions. These also proved to be important conversation starters as I was introduced to friends and friends of friends as part of snowball sampling.

For instance, I had permanently immigrated to Australia a couple of years prior to fieldwork, and was often asked about my experiences about having left Singapore. Different informants would query about this milestone in my personal life for aspirational knowledge towards their own potential moves or out of simple curiosity, but never in disdain or to question my patriotism; this was most likely because as young twenty-somethings during those years, immigration among our peers for education, work opportunities, or lifestyle choices was a common occurrence. We spoke about where our lives had diverged, despite us having undergone the same mainstream national education system. Given Singapore's notorious reputation of overwork culture (Saadan 2017), the women were also curious about the myths of my newfound 'Anglo-cised life', 'work-life balance', and 'quality of life', which made for easy conversation starters when they were introducing me to their social circles: 'This is Crystal. She lives in Australia! That's why her Mandarin is so lousy…'; 'She looks so relaxed right? It's cos the Aussies have good work-life balance…' – for the record, I thought my Mandarin was passable and my 'Australian' work-life balance a mere work-in-progress.

As fieldwork progressed, most of us had slowly but surely adapted to integrating 'work talk' with 'girl talk', and 'girl talk' often featured 'the boys'; there were informants who had same-sex partners but for the most part it was the heterosexual women who often initiated conversations about our romantic relationships, perhaps because public displays of love have been productive and even lucrative in the Influencer industry (Abidin 2016b). My informants grew increasingly curious about my living arrangements abroad, and I revealed that I had immigrated with my partner. We were living together and had been in a relationship for almost ten years when I first began fieldwork. I soon noticed that this 'fairy tale' romance easily gained traction and solicited much affection from the informants who asked about my 'lifestyle', not unlike the experience of anthropologist Anna Cristina Pertierra who fell in love and got married during fieldwork in Cuba, then soon learnt that "acquiring a husband was a useful fieldwork strategy (2007)". After all, in my case it was rare for unmarried couples to be able to move in together because of the extremely expensive rental market in Singapore and because the heavily subsidised public housing was only available to married couples or singles above the age of 35. And thus I channelled these personal experiences into conversational 'props' (Goffman 1956) during fieldwork.

I was also learning that unabashedly displaying my fringed femininity and engaging in homosocial intimacy accumulated more currency for me than academic posturing. In other words, the spectrum of 'girl sociality' often had more legitimacy than that of a 'career woman'. Although I was primarily researching an ecology of Influencers who predominantly peddled their craft on the internet, physical corporeal inscriptions still mattered and gatekept access and sociality. Like anthropologist Mohammad Shahbazi who had returned to her home country Iran from the US to conduct research, having lived abroad and my higher educational status 'interrupted the growth of my social circles' (2004, p. 599) in my field. I did

not set out to emphasise my demographic distinction, but I found myself following in the footsteps of many anthropologists who 'not only can present themselves as different but can use the difference as a way of stimulating discussion' (Abu-Lughod 1985, p. 18).

An ethnographer's identity shifts in flux and flows over time, depending on the place and time of research, one's demographic and cultural affiliations (Narayan 1993), and the quirks of individual informants (Mercer 2007). In order to overcome this 'gap of the exotic', in the metanarrative of hyper-reflexivity, I had to become my fieldwork, by exoticising the mundane and brandishing the ordinary – in other words, I had to take after my informants by commodifying my everyday life. This entailed cultivating an active willingness to divulge personal stories of my own, invest in the interests of my informants, and eventually trading life experiences as equals. Girl sociality necessitated an undercurrent of selective disclosure, during which secrets freely given and closely guarded formed a baseline of risk and trust within my homosocial circles.

It took me some time to acculturate myself into the intricate intimacies of exotica and the mundane. The demarcation between the exotic researcher and the familiar friend was not always clear, as my relationships with these Influencers instigated new affective ties over time. This is perhaps especially true for anthropologists for whom rapport and empathy with our informants shape our framing, understanding, and analysis of their life worlds (Glesne 1989). As I continue to research my field in more depth post-PhD, moving between Perth (where I live) and Singapore (where I conduct fieldwork), I regularly inhabit the role of the exotic inbetweener whenever the situation calls for it. Yet, this visibility labour has begun to feel less like work and more like variants of kinship as my informants have come to embrace me as the returning visitor with regular homecomings over the years.

## 4 THE WILLING APPRENTICE

While spending extended periods of time with young women who were perceived as role models and opinion leaders by hundreds of thousands of followers, I realised that much of the social currency I needed to access my field was tied to performing a very particular type of femininity. Growing up, I had only ever put on makeup twice in my life during choir competitions in primary school. But in my second week of fieldwork in Singapore, I begrudgingly acquired my first cosmetic products. I was catching up with three old friends and discussing my game plan for fieldwork, when they became convinced I would never 'pass' in the Influencer industry without any cosmetic skills and other associated 'girl literacies'. The next thing I knew, I was whisked into a pharmacy and accumulated a basket full of feminine face-care products: Concealer, sun block, facial toner, facial masks, and anti-blemish cream. Later that evening, I spent two agonising hours with my friends at an ice-cream parlour attempting to negotiate a horrifying device known as an 'eyelash curler': My

friends took turns trying to hold my head still by cupping my chin with one hand and tilting my forehead with another; another pair of hands stretched the skin around my eye socket while delicately bringing the eyelash curler towards my lashes. My fashionable friends were under the belief that learning to look as glamorous and stylish as my informants would earn me their favour. Yet, just like the *faux pas* of my initial officious email invitation, my friends could not have been more wrong. (PS: Amz, Auds, and Yins, thank you for our shopping adventure, even though I shortly misplaced every single cosmetic item I was cornered into purchasing!)

As fieldwork progressed, it became clear to me that my very lack of feminine 'beautifying' skills endeared me to the women whom I was studying. I sometimes wondered if their selective downplaying of my local 'nativeness' and feminine 'naturalness' helped them make sense of – or even negate – my more privileged and highly-skilled profession as an academic, and so I often laughed along with productive self-mockery in a bid to cultivate rapport (Swinkels & de Koning 2016). With this in mind, I was always candidly honest about my lack of cosmetic expertise, and my informants almost always subconsciously and patiently took me under their wing, and educated me about the wonders of makeup and dress up. Live demonstrations took place in the privacy of their homes and offices, as well as in many not-so-private cafés and food courts. I also bought my first pair of high heels during fieldwork, under the coaxing of 23-year-old Influencer Charmaine who had first let me try hers on. With very clear hand gestures, she bent down to my knees and explained how the high heels straightened my posture, gave my leg muscles 'more definition', and made my body more 'proportionate'. I felt much like an inept prepubescent girl, attempting to master the basics of femininity before I could graduate into glamorous womanhood – *My Fair Lady* style. Charmaine chuckled at my attempts, and recounted her teenage memories of learning to walk in heels, while I reflected on what it meant to learn about my informants' life worlds through imitation (Fiske 1997).

My corporeal experiments had won the favour of some Influencers, who in turn signposted their approval of my attempts in person and on social media. It seemed to matter to them that I was invested and sincere enough to 'try' out their worlds – not too little that I was merely a dispassionate auditor, and not too much that I was attempting to emulate and compete with them in their 'game'. Their exchanges with me in digital spaces contributed to raising my profile and prominence among other Influencers, who later warmed up to me when we met in person. Discursively, my new acquaintances signalled that it was the new in-group visibility accorded to me by the gatekeeper Influencers that facilitated the expansion of my networks: 'Oh yah I saw your picture with Charmaine'; 'You're the one who's working with Jane right?'; 'I think I've seen your comments on Instagram'. Much like Abu-Lughod's (1985, p. 20) experience of being accepted as a guest and daughter of a Bedouin household, being acknowledged as an 'us' by different groups of people brought me a sense of comfort and accomplishment. In fact, this rhetoric of an 'us versus them' was more evident when I accompanied Influencers and their

management agencies to bigger events with a more diverse assortment of peoples. Despite extending hospitality to me as a guest in our daily interactions, at events where we had to meet with several other groups of people such as sponsors, clients, followers, and the press, the Influencer agencies and Influencers with whom I worked would introduce me as a staff member (my official titles included 'Research Scientist', 'Intern', 'Customer Service Assistant', and 'Marketing Assistant', among others). This integration into the Influencers' institutional system and vocabulary made me feel formally accepted into the community, much like anthropologist Liza Dalby's foray and subsequent acceptance into the community of *geisha* she was studying as a young American woman in Japan (2008). On occasion, Influencer managers would put Influencers under my care and assign me with duties, such as safekeeping their valuables or lubricating introductions to clients on their behalf until the managers were freed up. A couple of Influencers with whom I worked adjusted differently: When we were at such large-scale public events they would ignore my presence completely, so I responded to their cues and faded into the crowd as a faceless stranger.

These experiences taught me how to visibly posture myself as a willing apprentice. In the field, I learnt to selectively put my lack and inferiorities on display as an invitation for my informants to guide me and role model the 'right' way. As a living work-in-progress, entrusting my informants with the access to witness my learning and growth while risking the fear of scrutiny solicited their care and affirmation.

## 5 THE TROPHY ACQUAINTANCE

Initially, my snowball sampling was slow but steady. By endorsing their interview and/or observation experience with others, some Influencers became my gatekeepers to other Influencers; many of the latter turned out to be prospective informants I had initially emailed to no avail. Upon making my acquaintance via a gatekeeper who had lent me their credibility, these women often apologised for not having responded. They variously explained that they had been doubtful of my intentions, that they were not interested, or that they had simply forgotten about my email or social media comment or instant message. In a key turn in my fieldwork, at the midway mark my snowball sampling had shifted from 'personal endorsement' to 'friendly competition' – a small surge of Influencers approached me and offered to be interviewed. I later learnt that word had spread among small factions of the industry that some Influencers had been interviewed by an academic researcher, while others had not. Like ethnographers Ergun and Erdemir (2010, p. 32) who were attentive to the status, reputation, and feelings of their informants in Azerbaijan and Turkey, being interviewed gave my informants 'a sense of self-respect... as the recognition of their personalities and the treatment of their views as valuable'. This was a coming together of academic and Influencer literacies, meeting at the convergence of pragmatism and visibility labour: I wanted to

interview Influencers for my research and career as much as some of them wanted to be interviewed by me to acquire validity for their reputation and prestige among their peers. And thus was a lesson that exchanges between an anthropologist and informants during fieldwork are 'bidirectional' processes, where each of us carries our own agendas and intentions (Ashkenazi 1997).

At that time, I was selectively documenting (non-confidential) snippets of interviews and observations with high-profile Influencers (with their permission) on my blog throughout fieldwork, and this archive turned out to be a useful reference for potential informants to gauge their interest in my project. Additionally, after each interview I would add my informants as 'friends' on my research Facebook and Instagram accounts, and prospective informants could trace these digital networks to ascertain my credibility. These social media biographies served as avatars that reflected my 'social life inworld' identity (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 75) and my membership and conspicuousness in these digital spaces (2012, p. 76), which my informants could use to assess and validate my status. In other words, my social media accounts became vehicles for entry into the terrain of Influencers, and also the interfaces on which I interacted with them in their native spaces (Jarvis 2011). I found myself in a favourable position because the small but friendly competition that broke out among my (potential) informants meant that many of them did not want to be left out of this experience, thus echoing Senft (2008, p. 100–101) who notes that such 'explicit affirmation' from a trusted circle on social networks solicits a 'social autopilot' among secondary circles of friends.

In group settings, especially in casual contexts such as informal dinners, some Influencers would playfully ask each other if I had interviewed them. On one occasion, a particular Influencer was the only person in the group of six whom I had not yet had the chance to interview. I asked if she would like to set up a time to meet the week after, to which she immediately responded that she would prefer to speak to me right there and then, among her peers. Despite being in a rather noisy food court and cumbersomely navigating dinner utensils, I seized the opportunity and recorded our conversation on my iPhone. This turned out to be an exciting insight for me, as I observed the other Influencers eavesdropping and comparing their experiences to our interview, my questions, and their answers, in an ad hoc approximate focus group ('Hey, I also said the same thing *leh*!', 'Oh shucks! I forgot to say that.'; 'You see, she is like acting so professional, damn funny!'). Towards the end of my fieldwork, I learnt to leverage the allure of this 'group experience' when I wanted to persuade friends of fellow Influencers to be included in my study.

In fact, in a confounding reversal of roles that confirmed my transient status as a trophy acquaintance, one Influencer requested that we take a photo after we had concluded our interview. They handed their camera phone over to a friend, and grabbed a few props to stage our interview setting – I was handed a stack of blank paper and a pen, the Influencer placed my audio recorder prominently on the table, we shifted to the middle of the room where the ceiling lamp provided better lighting for the photo, and the direction given to me by the Influencer was to 'look intense…

like you're asking me a serious question'. I looked into their eyes with a slight frown as our makeshift photographer took a series of shots in portrait and landscape. This was quite unlike the actual state of our interview which was much more casual and much less glamorous, with the Influencer slurping on noodles in a takeaway box and intermittently surfing YouTube while I sat next to them comfortably conversing over snacks. The Influencer uploaded the image on Instagram, and in our next casual meeting with a group of Influencers at a back alley, announced that they had been interviewed. That evening, I managed to recruit another informant for my study and interviewed them in semi-darkness in that very back alley.

Arriving at this juncture of my journey as an ethnographer was a milestone; not only was I able to witness how my informants perform visibility labour, and the symbols, totems, and icons that were ascribed high status value, I had unwittingly become a transient status symbol for some of them. As a trophy acquaintance, I was ascribed proximate microcelebrity from my informants, and the flows of prestige by association was inversely flowing from myself to them.

## 6 THE CONCEALED CONSULTANT

Being immersed in my field between digital and physical spaces highlighted to me the ritualised aspects of everyday life both exotic and ordinary (Goffman 1956). I was able to observe 'ritual in relation to the operations of everyday business' (Malefyt and Morais 2012, p. 45) and investigate how seemingly mundane everyday practices were in fact crucial processes that structured the performance of Influencers – for instance, how the cross-platform announcement of new blog posts on Twitter and Instagram was a reaction to declining blog readership and had became a common practice among Influencers (Abidin 2014, p. 124).

I had also obtained a digital camera and voice recorder to use throughout fieldwork. However, I quickly realised that these instruments were not only cumbersome, but also affected my informants' composure. At various events where I accompanied Influencers, the digital camera tended to encourage others to wonder if I was a (prospective) Influencer. In those instances, I realised that my 'managerial', 'personal assistant', or 'intern' back-end position was not clearly marked at events because such 'high-tech' devices were visual symbols of Influencers who engaged in self-documentary work to produce social media content. I had inadvertently come across as a wannabe-Influencer of whom no one had heard, and prospective informants seemed hesitant to divulge much when I approached them for interviews, perhaps contemplating if I was planning to 'steal information'. As soon as I acquainted myself with the repository of status symbols among Influencers, I decided to switch to using my portable and nondescript iPhone 5 for audio recordings and to take photographs. This was not only convenient, but also allowed me to blend in with young followers in Singapore, among whom there is a high smartphone penetration rate (Media Research Asia 2013, Singh 2014). In other words, despite carrying out the same recording activities, simply changing the

device that I (conspicuously) used had reduced the visibility I drew to myself and reduced my likeness as an aspiring Influencer.

My ability to navigate the digital spaces that these Influencers inhabited without drawing too much attention to myself, and my similar ability to adopt their practices in physical spaces without presenting myself as a threat proved to be a useful skillset. In a memorable incident, I found myself as a co-chaperone for three Influencers at the Social Star Awards, the inaugural awards show held in Singapore in 2013 to acknowledge the most popular stars in social media. Prior to their red carpet debut, the Influencers whom I was accompanying were moving between changing rooms and waiting venues at the posh Marina Bay Sands, in full view of followers who had gathered in designated barricaded areas; many of them were yielding placards and banners in support of their favourite Influencer. I assisted the Influencers as they changed out of streetwear into glamorous gowns and suits, and the hierarchy of our status became instantly reinscribed the moment they stepped out of the changing room; I was clad in a plain dress and sneakers, having been reminded by the Influencer manager whom I was shadowing the night before to dress casually in preparation for 'a long day'.

As we readied ourselves to walk past the crowd of followers once more, one Influencer asked if I would help to carry their bags and change of clothes and if I could perhaps trail behind them as we walked past the crowd – it seemed I was tasked to appear as if I was a personal assistant or managerial staff of sorts to boost this Influencer's image for a short while. In that moment, I really treasured this Influencer's open display of vulnerability in my presence, to the extent of soliciting my compliance to help construct and sustain their ideal 'front stage' (Goffman 1956) in the view of followers. I felt as if I had been accepted into the 'backstage' (Goffman 1956), through this invitation to uphold the 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997) of my informants' staging, by 'not revealing intimate secrets' that could shame them or cause them to lose face (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, p. 18). This act cost me little, and I was happy to oblige.

At the same event, 17-year-old Sarah began to receive Tweets from followers who had spotted her at the venue: Some of them celebratory, others contentious. One Tweet was particularly confounding, with the poster observing that Sarah's dress was far too long for her short frame, and that the tail end of the gown must have been 'sweeping the floor'. Sarah contemplated between a curt or cheeky response, and came to me for advice. We toyed with variations of responses, and eventually co-constructed the coy response, 'Did I sweep you off your feet?', which we felt displayed Sarah's confidence without coming off as arrogant. However, concerned that this prospective hater might read her response as an instigation, I suggested Sarah close her message with an emoji. After spending some time deliberating over her choice 'smiley face' emoji (she settled for a cheeky wink), Sarah thanked me, and I receded to the background until called upon again.

In these instances, I was experientially learning about the formulation, sustenance, and life cycle of backchannels among Influencers and their networks of

support and care. This was not a simple dichotomous matrix where backchannels were constructed in digital spaces to sustain 'front stage' (Goffman 1956) performances in physical spaces. Instead, backchannels were established in both physical and digital spaces through an assortment of vocabulary and solicitation of favours contingent upon affective relationships, to concoct seamless enactments of microcelebrity personae between physical and digital spaces. I had to demonstrate my capacity and willingness to 'take one for the team' by sacrificing my own self-image to maintain the reputation of an Influencer, concealing my role as just one of several actors sustaining their self-branding practices.

## 7 THE PASSING CONFIDANTE

While navigating Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms with my informants, I learnt that my focus on the technical procedure of obtaining formal consent was sidelined by Influencers. The Influencers I had approached were largely unconcerned about sharing their personal lives with me through participant observation and personal interviews, much less the publicly accessible data on their blogs and social media platforms. Instead, these informants tested their confidence and trust in me and my research in different ways, such as through the guises of female friendship, like secret-keeping, engaging in small intensities of risk, and performing care labour – all under the radar and away from the watchful eyes of other actors in the ecology. Having developed close relationships with several Influencers and backend staff, many stories were revealed to me in the capacity of a personal friend. These exchanges would take place when my informants were in particularly vulnerable states, such as being inebriated at 0300hrs in the morning or being seeped in sorrow from a breakup.

Depending on my personal relationships with each informant, I learnt to read and assess when these intimate exchanges were a natural progression of reciprocal friendships, and when my informants were speaking to me as a researcher who could also put on the hat of a pragmatic intervener. As Irwin (2006, p. 158) notes, many researchers in the field 'have all expressed feelings of "inauthenticity" in their research relationships and have noted that friendships and friendliness can be false and easily manipulated to hide the true goal of the relationship: to obtain rich data'. I wanted to avoid this exploitative scenario as best as I could, and was committed to reciprocating care towards my informants; my earliest interactions with Jane and Christine, whom I noted earlier as being concerned for my face work, set the precedence for how I wanted to cultivate genuine friendships as much as possible. To do so, I very quickly learnt to glide between my roles as inquiring anthropologist and supportive female friend.

25-year-old Nicole was experiencing some frustration with her clients and her manager, and asked if I would mediate the situation by hearing her out and representing her in a conversation with them. In our three-hour long conversation one afternoon, she indicated that asking me of this favour might potentially be

detrimental to my research if her clients and managers were to deem me meddlesome or to be speaking out of line; but Nicole still sincerely hoped that I would help her, since I was merely 'passing through' and would not be around if any repercussions emerged, because I was to return 'home' to Perth after fieldwork. Nicole invoked the metaphor of a transient traveller for whom the aftereffects of such tricky interventions might not have as dire, direct, or lasting an impact than it would if she had personally negotiated the conflict. She sought my empathy and allegiance, and earned my trust and care by the heartfelt sharing of her struggles. At one point in our exchange, she took my hand, looked into my eyes, and sighed deeply as she struggled not to tear; these tangible, fleshy intersections between my body and hers moved me to commune in her pain, and I agreed to represent her in a meeting that was to take place later.

A similar exchange took place between Debra and I, who when tipsy late one night, started confessing the struggles of her impending breakup to me via text message. Prior to this, my impression of Debra was that she was an assertive, independent, and successful young entrepreneur. She hardly spoke of her relationship and often displayed impressive linguistic acrobatics when deflecting conversations about her romantic life in group settings. In her texts that night, Debra said she felt I would be able to 'understand' her 'situation' because by that point I had been spending time with her and her peers on a weekly basis for almost six months. She also said she felt 'comfortable… baring [her] soul' to me because I had not known her for as long as the other Influencers in our group have (many of them had been friends for between 2 to 10 years), and thus she would not feel 'judged' by me. Besides this, she said I was 'going to leave' in a month's time and could take her secrets away with me. I contemplated that Debra thought me a suitable audience for her romantic drama because many of the Influencers had known about my long-term partner; as earlier mentioned, this fact was one of the lubricating mediators for our small talk throughout my fieldwork. Perhaps sharing this 'common ground' of being a young twenty-something in a long-term relationship 'increased [my] perceived trustworthiness', solicited 'openness' from my informants, and facilitated 'rapport' (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, p. 18) between them and I.

Like Nicole, Debra seemed to see me as a transient person, a willing listener whose intermittent presence lubricated their affect and trust in me as a passing confidante. This trust was tested later on in group settings, when groups of Influencers queried Nicole or Debra about their situations. In the presence of proximate others, I did not divulge the information made privy to me, and performed this by expressing the polite curiosity or surprise that would be expected of anyone hearing about these incidents for the first time. I knew Nicole and Debra could observe my response in these exchanges, and I felt that it was my measured reaction (or lack thereof) that affirmed their faith in my secret-keeping skills. I was learning about the behavioural norms of my informants' social spaces (Martey and Shiflett 2012, Turkle 1995), of the Influencer ecology, and of 'girl world' more

generally, so that I could adopt the appropriate corporeal posturing to sustain our relationships. Here, performing visibility labour was less about distinction and more about integration – specifically, the ability to fade into the background on cue when necessary to corroborate with my informants' intended self-presentation among other actors and audiences.

## 8 SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HERE AND THERE

A common belief among scholars in academia and Influencers in social media commerce is that one should aim for maximum visibility. Surely in such industries where content production is growing, attention spans are declining, metrics culture is intensifying, and saturation fatigue is kicking in, it is the most visible of the lot who survive? Well, not quite.

Amidst the disjuncture of theory and praxis, the acrobatics of confidence and vulnerability, the politics of competition and friendship, the labour of self-promotion and self-care, we are allowed to feel multiple feelings at once, just as others around us may also be feeling multiple feelings at once. For all the bravado we academics are socialized into partaking, it is our empathy and care for each other that will carry us through the systems and structures that are turning us into mere anonymous labourers.

In this vein, learning my informants' visibility literacies and learning to perform their genre of visibility labour at the juncture of our multiple intersectional identities allowed me to present myself as a legible body, legitimate presence, and learning being. As a research strategy, playing with spectrums of conspicuousness allowed me to present myself as genuinely as I was, while giving me the allowance to selectively dial up or down specifics facets of my identity – all with the intention to better parlay my entry into the field and lubricate my interactions with my informants. As a personal politic, abandoning the master status of an academic researcher and relating to these informants on their terms enabled me to interact with them on their comfort level, and to reciprocate some of the care I had received.

In this paper, I reflected on new hybrid forms of visibility labour between digital and physical spaces that were highly embodied despite my fieldwork being focused on an online community. This required that my digital and physical presence and self-presentation frequently shift along spectrums of conspicuousness. I discussed visibility labours and literacies through six experiences from the field: As the esteemed guest navigating intellectual status and one's face work; the exotic inbetweener navigating racial corporeality and romantic displays; the willing apprentice navigating cosmetics, fashion, and touch; the trophy acquaintance navigating the exclusivity and prestige of selecting informants; the concealed consultant navigating Influencers' face work (Goffman 2003) and the researcher's voluntary one-downmanship; and the passing confidante navigating conflict and secrets. Turning away from the folkloric dictums of academia, my fieldwork with Influencers was a space in which I shed the academy's conditioning to hide my fears

and failures, and instead learnt to selectively put my lack and inferiorities on display as an invitation for my informants to guide me and role model the 'right' way. Such experiential intimacy cannot be taught in graduate classes, deportment workshops, or scholarly textbooks. These open invitations to witness and trade in each others' intersectional identities and vulnerable experiences would only succeed if my informants chose to reciprocate. Admittedly, I had experienced several unanswered calls and cold shoulders. But from the informants who did come to play with me on spectrums of conspicuousness, we learnt to shift between visibility literacies, of academics and Influencers making sense of each others' lexicon and skills, attempting to place each other within our own social realities, levelling our statuses and understanding our distances, in order to borrow social capital and maintain relational care.

Perhaps no other online or offline space solicits more relational care and exhibits more embodied performance than that of public toilets. Toilets are where I have helped Influencers dress and undress between photo-shoots, where we have struggled with zippers and hair before red carpet moments, where we go to puke or cry during a rough night of socialising, where secrets are traded and emergency phone calls are made. In toilets bodies share close proximity, our bodies are vulnerable, there are few 'props' (Goffman 1956) that serve as distractions or sustain distance, and it is here that our spectrums of conspicuousness collide and make sense of each other and inform the intimacies between two bodies.

Toilets also feel so levelling at academic events: You enter an enclosed space with strange others; You smile and nod at those who secure eye contract with you; You make small talk with people you only know by sight while queuing for the stalls and maintaining composure but bursting with pee; You hear farts and pee and poops from the next stall from anonymous bodies; Women in various dress ask each other for emergency tampons and pads; You wash your hands and prim yourself in the mirror next to a superstar scholar; You make more small talk and compliment each other on fashion and accessories and scents; You wait your turn to use the hand dryer. And then you leave the toilet and the hierarchy of official academia is reinscribed onto your body. But in the transient moments inside the liminal space of a toilet, academics suddenly suspend institutional decorum of rank and are led again by anthropological legacies of 'gut-feeling', 'sensing', and 'whim' to reach out, connect with, and care for each other. The hallmarks of legitimacy – University letterheads, signatures, designations, and documents – seem to fade into the background. All that we really 'see' in the space of toilets are equal bodies in a queue to negotiate the same stalls and sinks for everyday bodily functions. We should spend more time in toilets at conferences, where our bodies stripped bare (metaphorically and sometimes, literally) are seen by others and seeing others. Toilet breaks in public can be precious moments for the trainee ethnographer to hone their gut-feelings, for these spaces are the somewhere between here and there.

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# THREE LIES OF DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The relative novelty of digital ethnography as a research methodology, along with the challenges that it moves to classical understandings of fieldwork, participation and representation, results in a repertoire of professional illusions through which digital ethnographers justify their work when confronted with the disciplinary culture of anthropology. This essay is based on the author's reflexive experience of researching digital media use in China, and updates Gary Alan Fine's 1993 article "Ten Lies of Ethnography" by identifying three lies of digital ethnography. Illustrating each of these lies through an archetypal figure – the 'networked field-weaver', the 'eager participant-lurker' and the 'expert fabricator' – this article argues for the need to confront methodological illusions and embrace the tensions behind them as useful heuristics for conducting ethnographic research on, through and about digital media.

Keywords: digital ethnography; disciplinary culture; epistemic community; ethics; fabrication; fieldwork; lying; participation; self-reflexivity

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## 1 ELEVATOR PITCH

Here is my elevator pitch, a professional mantra I have been practicing during my two years as a postdoctoral researcher at each new encounter with a fellow academic:

> What do I do? I am a media anthropologist, I study digital media use in China. Yes, mostly urban areas, young people... I focus on creative practices. I've written about several things, from independent music and contemporary art to selfies and dating apps... no, I don't just go on the internet, I do on-site fieldwork. Where? Mostly in Shanghai, but my doctoral fieldwork included eight cities in total, it was a multi-sited project, yeah. How long was my fieldwork? The 'actual' one was six months, but I've been doing online ethnography for a whole year before that, so... oh, fifth floor, I get down here. Bye, bye.

I usually exhale a deep breath after each time I recite my elevator pitch. I am honing it, I am getting better, and the better it gets, the less truthful it feels. The more the weeks of traveling between cities on night trains, sleeping in hostels and friends' houses and transcribing social media interactions recede back in the past, the more I realise that the assemblage of disciplinary imperatives, epistemological nudges and promises of legitimation I integrated into my research project keep determining how I carefully massage its description according to the needs of the moment. This is not to imply that my fieldwork was an elaborate act of fakery, nor that it is now time for me to come clean about some sort of methodological cheating – it is just that my elevator pitch remains an intimately distasteful performance. But why?

I realise that most of the times I describe my research project to colleagues I end up performing a gentle choreography of professionalism and persuasion – I avoid talking about the challenging aspects of my research or my actual methodological practices, and instead carefully piece together a string of keywords and abstracted data points meant to prove my disciplinary belonging. One of the things I tend to do is emphasising the anthropological nature of my fieldwork in order to preventively justify my own self-labelling as a media anthropologist (I have a PhD in Sociology, which makes of me a suspect disciplinary outsider). Another choreographic figuration is the stretching of my fieldwork period to one year and its subdivision into two segments – one 'online' and one 'offline' – through which I manage to avoid the doubtful remarks of anthropologists who evaluate my work against the golden minimum of a year spent in a bounded locale, while also responding to the occasional insinuations of methodological laziness: 'Internet fieldwork... you're so lucky, you can just sit at home and browse Facebook, right?'. A third rhetorical strategy is offering a few examples of popular topics I have written about to cover up the apparent lack of a central research focus: unfortunately, digital media practices are not yet a staple domain of anthropological inquiry like religion, kinship or performance, and claiming that I do ethnographic research about emoji, selfies or trolling often drives the point home well enough, if with some lingering puzzlement.

The tensions motivating my resort to these half-truths, strategic simplifications and circumstantial lies are nothing new: like many other academic domains, anthropology has its own disciplinary cultures, and methodology is perhaps the level at which these are most evident. As the central rite of passage for anthropologists, ethnographic fieldwork remains a marker of authority (Hastrup 1990, p. 43) and an experiential focus for the construction of professional identity (Moser 2007, p. 243). We measure our epistemological decisions and methodological descriptions against prescriptions on what is (or is not) 'ethnographic', on how long or focused a period of research should be in order to qualify as 'fieldwork', on what counts as 'data', and so on. We are also tempted to deploy these choices as tepidly confrontational probes among colleagues: as with any other methodological approach, staking claims about one's own ethnographic experience is a central routine of scholarly performances of community, and doing a hatchet job of one's actual research process becomes part and parcel of the collegial negotiations of professional identity and standards of competence (Hine 2005, p. 8).

The relative novelty of certain research topics in any disciplinary domain (in my case, communication technologies in anthropology) makes them more prone to generalisations and requires simplifying the presentation of one's work. The grass seems always greener on the neighbour's disciplinary turf, and twenty years after the earliest calls for 'anthropologies of the Internet' (Ito 1996; Nardi 1996) I still find myself in need to counter the assumption that studying digital media is 'so fashionable now' or 'very easy to find a job with', often paired with attempts at signposting my research under other disciplines such as media or cultural studies. Despite the wealth of methodological discussions of the topic (Baym & Markham 2009; Hine 2000; Pink et al. 2016), approaching digital media from an ethnographic perspective remains something seemingly in particular need of excuses and apologetic remarks (Hine 2013, p. 28).

## 2 THREE LIES OF DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In navigating disciplinary contexts fraught with performative gatekeeping and methodological tensions, which lies do we digital ethnographers most often tell ourselves and others? My question isn't novel – as a matter of fact, this entire essay is the consequence of revisiting Gary Alan Fine's *Ten Lies of Ethnography* (1993), an academic article that I found extremely liberating while I was preparing my own doctoral research proposal. In this widely quoted piece, Fine skirts the fascination for laying bare the uncomfortable truths of the trade and instead focuses on the unavoidable instances of lying that accompany much ethnographic research.[1] According to the author, illusions about ethnography, regularly hidden in its methodological backstage, are necessary for both the production of good work and occupational survival, but become problematic when they take root and become taken for real by its practitioners (Fine 1993, pp. 267–268). Fine decides to use the

loaded word 'lies' to indicate the illusions that result from the choices made by ethnographers responding to their work conditions, textual forms of output, and requirements of secrecy (p. 269), and identifies the titular 'ten lies of ethnography' hidden behind archetypal professional figures such as the friendly ethnographer, the precise ethnographer, the unobtrusive ethnographer, the chaste ethnographer, the literary ethnographer, and so on.

In a later essay, Fine and Shulman revisit these ten lies in the context of organisational ethnography (2009), observing how the relatively new methodological approach is also prone to similar forms of sanitisation and make-believe: ethnographers doing organisational research might tend to obfuscate the details about their information-gathering, skirt the practicalities of ethical dilemmas (p. 177), stash away fieldnotes and data analysis in an inaccessible backstage, accept secrecy for granted (p. 178) and hide the way access is sometimes obtained through acquaintances, friends or even family connections (p. 179). It would be quite straightforward to rephrase these epistemological warnings for ethnographic approaches to digital media, and in fact years of methodological discussions have already covered these grounds. For example, according to Anne Beaulieu's review of methodological literature, researchers tend to articulate the peculiarity of digital ethnography through four 'strategies of objectification' responding to specific tensions: the fuzziness of the field, the agency of technology, the reliance on intersubjectivity and the allure of capture (2004, p. 146). In the following sections of this article, I put forward three lies of digital ethnography. The three archetypal figures of digital ethnographers I describe are stylistically inspired by Fine's pantheon of disciplinary illusions and include obvious overlaps with long-standing methodological conundrums, but are also distinctive in how they personify, combine and question Beaulieu's four strategies of objectification.

In writing this article, I am not in search of scandalous unveilings, and my goal is decidedly not telling ugly or cynical truths in the (ideally) public space of an academic journal, nor accusing others of engaging in dishonesty and deception. Instead, the three illusive figures that follow embody discursive strategies, performative masks, and illusory identities that I regularly confront in my thinking, speaking, and writing about my own research work. The hope is that both colleagues approaching the disciplinary domain of digital ethnography as well as fellow researchers already familiar with this methodological assemblage can recognise their own doubts and concerns in some of these portraits. This is not an essay that tells you how to 'do' digital ethnography, but rather one confessing some of the lies that necessarily accompany the practice. In the following sections, I discuss three lies of digital ethnography through three archetypal figures: the 'networked field-weaver', the 'eager participant-lurker' and the 'expert fabricator.'

## 3 THE NETWORKED FIELD-WEAVER

The first lie of digital ethnography is related to one of the most widely debated ethnographic constructs: the 'field'. Questioned, fragmented and deconstructed in much anthropological scholarship in the wake of the writing culture debates (Clifford & Marcus 1986), the field remains an anchor for debates around the practice of research (Amit 2000), and functions as one of the main concepts around which digital ethnographers expound the peculiarities of their methodology (Beaulieu 2004, p. 144). Undeniably, the proposal for a 'multi-sited ethnography' outlined by George E. Marcus has become a foundational text for researchers seeking to articulate ways of doing fieldwork outside of the limitations and biases inherent in bounded fieldsites. In order to move across multiple sites, the ethnographer has at her disposal techniques to follow and trace people, things, metaphors, narratives, biographies, conflicts, and so on (Marcus 1995, p. 105). After Marcus's proposal, authors writing about the ethnographic field in the context of new technologies have expanded and refined his ideas by arguing for trans-local (Ito 1996), multimodal (Dicks et al. 2006), or connective (Hine 2007) ethnography (among many other similar formulations). And yet, in spite of wide-ranging debates regarding the new possibilities offered by multi-local, multi-sited or multi-modal fieldwork, the prescriptive model outlined by Evans-Pritchard and based on the 'both celebrated and mystified notion of "being there"'(Hannerz 2003, p. 202) has

> for very long remained more or less the only fully publicly acknowledged model for field work, and for becoming and being a real anthropologist. Perhaps it works with full force especially in the continued instruction of newcomers in the discipline. (p. 202)

As a disciplinary outsider, I experienced first-hand the force of this idea when I started putting together the methodological section of my doctoral research proposal: eager to push back against a large body of existing research on Chinese digital media that was largely based on quantitative studies and cursory engagement with online phenomena, I embraced the promising ethnographic tenet of 'being there' and elected it as the central research strategy guiding my epistemological choices. Throughout my fieldwork experience, 'being there' became not only a matter of immersing myself in a local context and going phenomenologically native (Hastrup 1990, p. 46), but an actual, pragmatic sociotechnical condition that my informants continuously inquired about each other – and even sometimes demanded of me – across the communication channels offered by multiple digital media platforms. From QQ group chatrooms to private messages on Sina Weibo, and from Facebook messaging windows to smartphone conversations on WeChat, the Mandarin Chinese salutation *zai ma*? [Are you here?] was used as a way to initiate interaction by checking for my digital presence and communicative availability (Fig. 1). In this sense, Hannerz's summation of multi-sited fieldwork as 'being there . . . and there . . . and there' (Hannerz 2003, p. 202) provided a useful

model for articulating my ideal fieldwork attitude as being online, being visible, being available, being interacting, and so on. In my own words,

> [...] 'being there', on different platforms and services, different conversations and groups, updated and in-the-loop regarding different topics and events: the spatial experience of the Internet was way more social than technological. (de Seta 2015, pp. 41–42)

The multiple possibilities of 'being there' in different locales, digital media platforms and social settings resonated with the pleas for a combination of online and real-life contexts repeatedly made ever since the earliest proposals for anthropological approaches to the internet (Ito 1996, p. 25). Moreover, embracing different ways of 'being there' dovetailed with depictions of an increasingly connective ethnography requiring the researcher to 'choose a perceived community and select the important nodes in the social network as field sites' (Howard 2002, p. 561).

*Figure 1: 'Being there' as a way of establishing co-presence on digital media: 'Are you here? Are you here?', 'Brother Beard are you here?', 'Are you here?', 'Do you have QQ?', 'Here or not?', 'Are you in Shanghai? Do you have WeChat? Tell me', 'Hey-hey are you here?', 'Areyouhereareyouhere?', 'Mr. Beard are you here or not?'. Collage of cropped screenshots by the author, 2015.*

When I embarked on my fieldwork, the most convincing metaphor I had come across was the one provided by Jenna Burrell in her famous proposition of 'the field site as a network' (2009). Building upon Marcus's and Hannerz's idea of multi-sited

ethnography, Burrell emphasises how it is the ethnographer herself, through the everyday tracing of different actors, that pulls together the field as a network (2009, p. 187). Over the years, I have found myself comfortably adopting Burrell's insight: my own 'field as network' included a group of friends and acquaintances, longer and shorter stays in eight Chinese cities, a number of online platforms, an inventory of mobile devices, a sample of linguistic repertoires, certain genres of online content, mass media discourses about the internet, and a variety of media practices. By weaving together an observation made in a student housing in Wuhan, a heartfelt WeChat discussion with a Beijing friend conducted while walking on the streets of Hong Kong, a QQ group conversation with people I had never met, and an interview with a Shanghainese office lady in a fancy cafe, I was able to offer a variegated portrait of how people used digital media in China. As a field, this assemblage pulled together the situated occurrences and happenstance moments I cherry-picked out of a hundred of fieldnotes about everyday life encounters; as a network, it remained productively open-ended, and could be interfaced with larger analytical constructions such as 'contemporary China' or 'the internet', while also functioning as an explanatory backdrop for smaller questions regarding individual case studies or specific data points.

As with many solutions that seem to work all too well, I started realising that my idealised reliance on weaving fields as networks was built on lying about something. The enticing lie of the networked field-weaver is that, rather than experiencing the expansive movement of branching out promised by this metaphor, I often found myself building my 'field as network' by grasping at straws, and immediately cutting away most of what came along with them. The problem of cutting networks that would otherwise proliferate uncontrollably already troubled anthropologists working in bounded fieldsites (Strathern 1996), and it is obviously aggravated by the move from field to networks (Wittel 2000). A few months into my fieldwork, an interviewee sends me a link to a news article about a burgeoning online phenomenon, telling me 'You should write about this.' Should I really? How deep should I look into it? Will it fit my account? During my last stretch of research, a friend of a friend introduces me to a group of local comic book artists publishing their work on microblogging platforms: Should I interview some of them and deepen my understanding of their creative labour? Could I include some of their work in my dissertation? How should I treat their authorship? Attending a concert in a county town puts me in contact with some young urbanites reinventing their lives in the countryside tourist industry: Should I include their use of digital media use as a challenge to my research focus on urban areas? Should I pull this locale into my field as well? If yes, at what scale?

Weaving networks into an ethnographic field can bring the most disparate things together, and particularly when one's research topic is not extremely narrow, each node of the network can result in dizzying vertigos over a wealth of potential interlocutors, unexplored communities, or entirely new categories of data. Under the constraints of institutional time and limited funding, the answers to these

recurring questions often imply cutting away outbranching connections, declining offers of furthering socialisation, and sealing off information outside the scope of a research project for the sake of its timely completion. So, besides the important acknowledgement of how these networked fields come together gradually and by chance (Hannerz 2003, p. 207), shaped by the ethnographer's reliance on the 'mechanical objectivity' of technological black boxes (Beaulieu 2004, p. 148), I find it necessary to problematise the idea of the 'field as network' by highlighting how it is unavoidably built on disconnection as much as connection. As Marilyn Strathern observed, the power of network models is also their weakness:

> […] one can always discover networks within networks; this is the fractal logic that renders any length a multiple of other lengths, or a link in a chain a chain of further links. Yet analysis, like interpretation, must have a point; it must be enacted as a stopping place. (1996 p. 523)

According to Strathern, one such mechanism for cutting networks is the Euro-American idea of ownership, which can simultaneously bound belonging and condense endless chains into an artefact, 'so where technology might enlarge networks, proprietorship can be guaranteed to cut them down to size' (p. 531). Academic writing is a similar mechanism: in order to decide what does or doesn't belongs in one's research project and to produce a viable written report, the ethnographer continuously prunes down networks as they proliferate, constructing a skeletal 'field as network' that eventually feels more like a crooked bonsai tree than an expanse of thick experiential wilderness. This network of fieldsites is rarely weaved in the same way twice: when writing journal articles, book chapters and shorter essays during and after my graduate studies, I realised that I would routinely pull back some of the same data into new configurations, expanding and reducing the 'field as network' according to both the discursive positioning of my research and on the rhetorical necessities of my imagined audience. In conclusion, while the idea of the field as network, like many other 'x-as-network' metaphors, is a useful and productive heuristic to think of ethnographic fields 'as constellations of power relations and institutional entanglements, mediated through technologies' (Levy 2015), the lie of the ethnographer as networked field-weaver who 'alone oversees the multi-sites he chooses and he alone sees the patterns' (Farnsworth & Austrin 2010, p. 1130) should be kept in mind, as it hides the cutting as much as it glorifies the pulling together.

## 4 THE EAGER PARTICIPANT-LURKER

The second lie of digital ethnography relates to the central practice of this research approach: participant observation. The issue of how participatory an anthropologist's observations should be is already hotly debated in more traditional research domains; yet, in the case of projects focusing on digital media platforms and media practices, defining standards of participation is even less straightforward.

In my personal experience, the recurring question: 'what exactly did you do during your fieldwork?' becomes particularly awkward to answer, and often results in a jumbled mix of claims about using certain digital media platforms, collecting certain forms of online content, and spending time with a certain number of users in everyday situations. As a matter of fact, my 'doing ethnography' is grounded on several layers of involvement, and done through multiple forms of participation and observation. Given my extended periods of residence in China, I had been using a selection of local digital media platforms (from early discussion forums and instant messaging applications to newer social networking websites and microblogging services) since way before the beginning of my graduate program and the decision of my doctoral research topic; this personal history of everyday use constituted a baseline for getting a sense of the many possibilities of research. Once I narrowed down my proposal to a study of vernacular creativity on digital media (Burgess 2006), I started to pay more attention to certain platforms, user practices and genres of content, and then moved to expand specific lines of inquiry by finding more relevant online communities, exploring new platforms, making contact with potential informants, and so on.

While my initial research proposal mostly relied on my experiences of using social networking websites and microblogging services such as Douban and Sina Weibo, my doctoral proposal focused on increasingly popular messaging app WeChat, which most of my informants were adopting at the time. Once I was formally and physically 'on fieldwork', not much changed: I was still browsing websites, scrolling through social media feeds, chatting with friends, liking their posts, commenting on news stories, watching and listening to content shared by my contacts, collecting samples of interactions and writing fieldnotes to wrap up daily observations and encounters. The only thing that changed was that I wasn't sitting at my Hong Kong office desk, but rather wandering in Shenzhen, Wuhan, Shanghai, or Beijing, meeting friends I had not seen for a while, spending time with my partner, playing at experimental music concerts, and sitting in cafes with interviewees. Sure, I didn't have a 4G data plan on my mobile phone, and Facebook, Twitter, Google and YouTube weren't available, but I gladly embraced these 'Chinese characteristics' as part of the immersion in the much touted sociotechnical 'there' I was looking forward to experience. But how participatory was this experience?

The problematic status of participation in digital ethnography is directly linked to the design of digital media platforms. In spite of the commercial and cultural hypes around Web 2.0, participatory media and user-generated content (Jenkins et al. 2013), and even considering how many internet companies are largely sustained by amateur content creators, it is still the case that a large percentage of everyday interactions with websites, apps and online services are dominated by practices of reading, watching and querying that are not explicitly participatory. While participating in the social life of a district, a rural community or a non-governmental organisation can seem easy to evaluate, recent debates on the role of

participation in both classic and multi-sited ethnographies have laid bare the uncertain status of this 'particular kind of presence in the field' (Hastrup 1990, p. 49), which is often deployed to claim authorial expertise while flattening a variety of difficulties and boundaries that one inevitably encounters. Along with activities and events that are worth participating in, ethnographers come across many others that may be 'monotonous, isolated, and difficult to access' (Hannerz 2003, p. 211). Participation in digital media is similarly diffracted into a spectrum going from non-use to intensive and active presence, and extends in different dimensions according to the platforms used, the devices at hand, software availability, access to connectivity in time and space, as well as the social circles one participates in.

When confronted with this wide spectrum of possible modes of participation, digital ethnographers resort to different strategies to rethink their own research practices. In the earliest ethnographies of online settings, pioneering researchers emphasised the need to 'get the seats of our pants dirty' by trying to understand online communities through participatory involvement (Paccagnella 1997) and found in the figure of the 'lurker' a productive archetype embodying the contradictory status of participation on the internet. In her study of the Lesbian Cafe Bulletin Board System, Correll (1995) attributes ethnographic qualities to lurkers themselves, who are described as careful observers spending time without participating in the community in order to learn the appropriate codes before tentatively joining its activities (p. 293). Reflecting on this figure of participation, Leander & McKim (2003) conclude that choosing between being an active participant or a lurker, a digital ethnographer makes important epistemological decisions. Given the increasing variety of modes of participation offered by digital media platforms, more recent debates have tried to move beyond a clear-cut choice between active participation and lurking, and instead to explore the creation of intersubjectivity as a fluid outcome of an ongoing ethnographic engagement (Beaulieu, 2004, p. 151), arguing for the need to triangulate different forms of participation in online and offline contexts (Orgad 2005, p. 51), extending the notion of participation to very personal activities like browsing, following links and moving between platforms (Hine 2007, p. 625), or complementing observations of online activities with spending time with users in their everyday life settings (Boyd 2008, p. 120).

What was once a folk figure of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) is increasingly diffracted into a wide variety of modes of participation that users likely move through across time and space – in my own experience, managing their availability on QQ, setting up automatic email replies, microblogging about their movements, checking in public or private places, joining group discussions on WeChat, shutting down their phones, and so on. Lurking becomes just a possibility alongside practices such as ignoring, reading, liking, commenting, sharing, editing, and linking, which are all modes of participation that can be adopted situationally across different platforms and identities, and that ethnographers are asked to understand and incorporate in their own work. In order

to try to capture this diffraction of participatory modalities, Anne Beaulieu proposes a shift 'from co-location to co-presence' as a way to attune the ethnographer to different modes of interaction:

> Not only does it enable the researcher to take mediated settings very seriously [...], but it also does not exclude face-to-face situations. Co-presence as a starting point enables a more symmetrical treatment of forms of interaction. (2010, p. 454)

Echoing this shift, Postill (2017) argues that digital media allow to successfully practice ethnography at a distance, since it becomes possible to participate immersively in a distant context and remain engaged with it without the necessity of co-location, anchoring short-term visits to interactions followed through online communications.

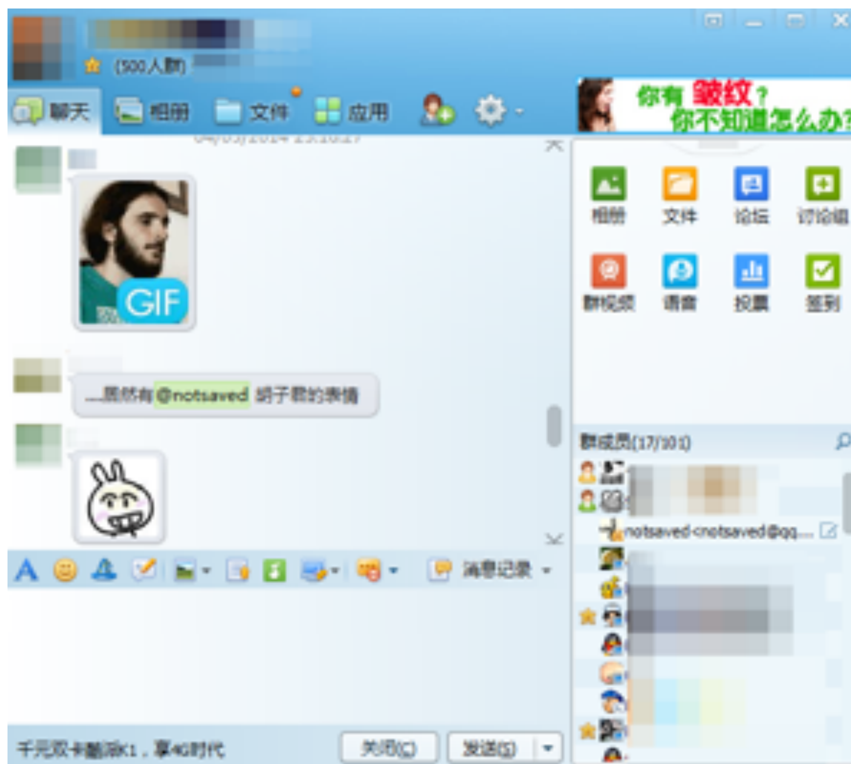


*Figure 2: '…unexpectedly there is an emoticon of @notsaved huzi jun ['Mr. Beard', the author's Chinese nickname]' – a friend shares an animated .GIF image of myself with other members of the LightWave QQ group. Cropped screenshot by the author, April 2014.*

Looking back at my own research experiences confirms this fluid nature of participation: for years, I have used Chinese digital media platforms as a way to keep in touch with local friends regardless of my physical location, to remain informed about local happenings around me, and to keep tabs on larger discussions around popular topics and newsworthy events; I've drifted in and out of social circles, discussion boards, microblogging platforms and private chatrooms,

sometimes with the hidden or declared intent of collecting research data, other times for pragmatic purposes or just following the dynamic changes of my personal relationships. In some cases, I moved from lurking, to liking, to commenting, to discussing, to being present and back, according to circumstances, interest and availability. When I met with friends, acquaintances or strangers, I sometimes participated in interactions, sometimes withdrew from them. While 'on fieldwork', I recurrently mused about how being stuck with nothing to do for a day or more in a hotel room without a Wi-Fi connection seemed in fact much less participatory than if I were in Hong Kong in front of my office computer. Yet, while recognising and reflecting on the nuances of these interlocking modes of participation, I still felt the need to condense them into simplified vignettes highlighting my presence and integration in a selection of social contexts: a photo of my face, transformed into animated GIF and used as sticker in a QQ chat group (Fig. 2), or my anonymous account, debating with other anonymous users on a discussion board, or my avatar and nicknames, the only non-blurred ones in a screenshot of a WeChat conversation.

Rather than reflecting on what different modes of participation meant for me and the people around me (whom I ironically still called 'participants'), I preferred focusing on answering the 'what did you exactly do during your fieldwork?' question in a professional manner, flattening my involvement into easily understandable nuggets of interaction proving my active presence in the field. Confronted by the injunctions of participant observation, I wrote myself into an eager participant-lurker: a master of all modes of participation, portrayed as impossibly co-located across multiple fieldsites, surveying digital media use from a vantage of carefully crafted presence. Besides the false choice between naturalist lurking and active involvement, the issue of participation should become a central concern of digital ethnography instead of a purely methodological decision. We participate, just like our 'research participants', through a wide range of modes of participation tightly connected to social dynamics and technological affordances, that go from the choice of shutting down one's smartphone to the visceral need to sustain one's presence in a tense online discussion. Choices about these participatory modes punctuate our everyday engagement with digital media, and embracing the uncertainty (Hine 2013, p. 80) resulting from the way these situated decisions are negotiated and made sense of is probably of more interest than flattening one's own persona into the apologetic figure of an eager participant-lurker.

## 5 THE EXPERT FABRICATOR

The third lie of digital ethnography has to do with representation, which is an unavoidable component of producing any kind of research output. Digital ethnographers have the advantage of working with already highly mediated settings and are able to include in their reports samples of online resources, snippets of interactions, creative data visualisations, as well as image files, videos, and audio

components. Whereas the ubiquity of communication technologies and the retrievability of mediated data has troubled the traditional anthropological model relying on face-to-face data collection and authorial transcription (Beaulieu 2004, p. 154), the recognition that 'the various "traces" that are left by users and uses of the technologies can be integrated into an ethnographic approach' (p. 145) has reoriented the research approaches of digital ethnographers towards new forms of data, methodological tools and multimedia representations (Dicks et al. 2006, p. 77). Anne Beaulieu identifies in these traces not only interpretable trails of user interaction but 'inscriptions', veritable 'modes of mediation' that digital ethnographers should not simply take notice of, but 'find a way to fully embrace them as part of the field' (2010, p. 457). Approaches such as trace ethnography (Geiger & Ribes 2011) and digital methods (Rogers 2013) suggest practical ways of embracing these inscriptions, following the patterns their distribution outlines, and repurposing them into integral parts of one's account and findings.

In my own research work, I often try to complement written accounts with inscriptions ranging from samples of textual interactions to visual resources such as collages of image repertoires, screenshots of user interfaces, collections of stills from popular video content, and photographic documentations of digital media use in everyday contexts. I argue that these inscriptions help bridging the divide between academic writing and the multiple forms of communicative activities practiced on digital media, while also functioning as data points anchoring theoretical discussions. For example, by weaving a chat history transcript from a ten-people discussion on QQ, a collage of the images and links shared during the conversation, and a screenshot of the software window into a descriptive analysis of group-based social media use, I not only provide readers with visual cues useful to imagine how the messaging software's user experience shapes and sustains the creation of linguistic and semiotic repertoires, but also incorporate different genres of writing and modes of mediation into my academic account. As any other form of representation in anthropological writing, reproducing textual interactions from digital media platforms and including user-generated content in one's ethnographic account present all the classical conundrums highlighted by the 'writing culture' debates (Clifford & Marcus 1986), as well as a host of ethical questions associated with the notions of privacy, informed consent, copyright and intellectual property. Common questions related to the representation of digital media data include: Can I reproduce a private chat conversation to support an argument in my writing? Should I change pseudonyms and identity markers to protect the participants? Whose permissions should I seek for the publication of an image publicly shared online? How to credit users for their creations while respecting their privacy?

These questions have been recurrently asked and answered in a rich repertoire of discussions regarding the ethics of internet research, which have consistently agreed on the baseline necessity to prioritise what research participants and digital media users give importance to: 'Changing not only real names, but also aliases or pseudonyms (where used) proves the respect of the researchers for the social reality

of cyberspace' (Paccagnella 1997). Widespread agreement regarding the digital media research ethics includes disclosing one's professional persona when collecting data in online communities, thoroughly anonymising or pseudonymising personal details and identity markers when recognisable or searchable content, seeking consent for the publication of private communications, giving credit for the reproduction of authorial creations (Bruckman 2002), and so on. These discussions move research ethics away from the risk evaluation and informed consent prescriptions of human subject research, towards more relational and situational ethics negotiated according to the digital media context at hand. Following the realisation that ethnographic accounts develop out of the researcher's authorial choices and compositional activities (O'Dell & Willim 2011, p. 29), Annette Markham provocatively argues that digital ethnographers should embrace the suspicious practice of fabrication in order to overcome conservative and paralysing tendencies in qualitative research:

> Traditional methods for protecting privacy by hiding of anonymizing data no longer suffice in situations where social researchers need to design studies, manage data, and build research reports in increasingly public, archivable, searchable, and traceable space. (2012, p. 336)

As prescriptive approaches to internet research ethics are beaten around the thickening bushes of changing digital media platforms, constantly revised terms of consent and complicated personal relationships with privacy and disclosure, fabrication becomes a lean strategy for 'embedding ethics inductively into research practice, by allowing the specific needs of the context to play a stronger role in determining "best practice" procedures' (p. 341).

Markham's argument in favour of fabrication is a sensible one. Even when grounded on extensive datasets, hundreds of fieldnotes and collections of traces, the accounts produced by digital ethnographers end up including an extremely narrow selection of inscriptions, often thoroughly edited, translated, scrambled, rephrased, anonymised, cropped, selectively blurred and collated according to a constellation of ethical, argumentative and aesthetic authorial decisions. In the specific example of a group chat discussion included in my doctoral dissertation, I have ended up choosing one specific hour of conversation from much longer and untranslated logs that I had earmarked in my fieldnotes according to their theme, participants and context. After translating the selected part of transcript, I edited out personal details, elided repetitions and typos, assigned pseudonyms to all discussants, evidenced key terms and included explanatory parentheses, and formatted the conversation so that it could be easily readable in the context of my dissertation while also preserving the flow of a prototypical group chat session on QQ.

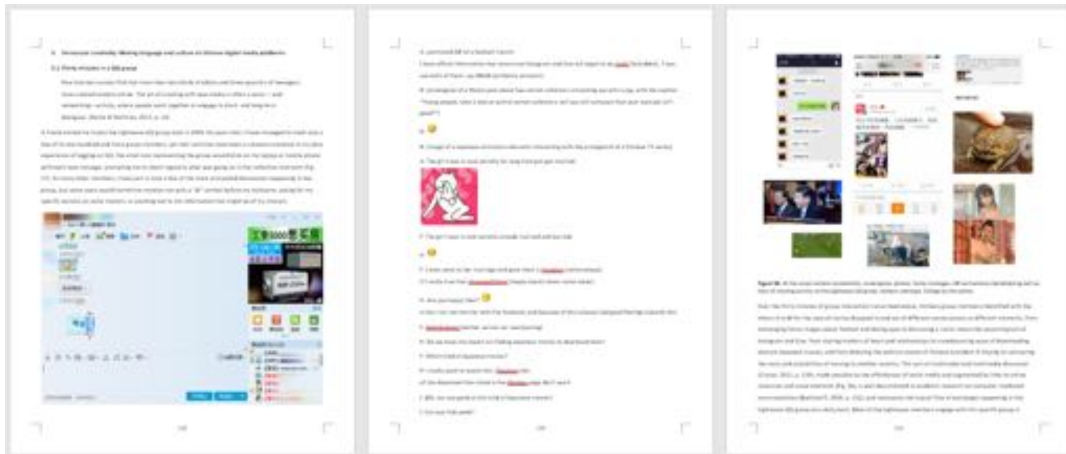

*Figure 3. Three pages from my doctoral dissertation, combining a screenshot of the QQ chat window, a transcript of a group discussion complete with emoticons and stickers, a collage of images shared during an hour of interactions, and my own description of the situation.*

In order to complement my account with a visual component, I retrieved the discussion through the software's chat backlogs, downloaded all the images, screenshots and emoticons used during the hour of interactions, back-traced them through a reverse image query on a local search engine, and composed them into a page-sized collage that I could then include in my dissertation as an illustration. Eventually, spanning six pages of my dissertation, this representation of an hour-long group chat is a fabricated account sourced from different kinds of data both captured during fieldwork and retrieved at the time of writing, a carefully crafted composition intended to offer readers an experience of a particular kind of digital media use. As in Markham's methodological proposal, fabrication becomes not just an ethical practice, but 'a way of embracing the agency of the researcher in this process, by first claiming and then actively enacting one's role as editor, translator, and indeed, the fabricator of the story' (2012, p. 345).

Fabrication is thus inextricably linked to the idea of expertise. In claiming and embracing one's role as editor, translator, and fabricator of multimedia and multimodal vignettes, of composites of events, identities and inscriptions, the digital ethnographer implicitly establishes competence and knowledgeability over a certain sociotechnical context. The compositional choices behind an account are justified by an expertise derived from the ethnographer's prolonged experiences and situated learning resulting in the ideal process of 'going native' (Hastrup 1990, p. 46), which supposedly provides us with the necessary sensibilities and competencies to select what is representative, to translate what is relevant, to emphasise what is peculiar, to cut out what is redundant, and to protect what is sensitive – in short, to fabricate an effective and ethical ethnographic account. This process of expertise acquisition is part and parcel of the ethnographic mythology: in my case, both

research participants and colleagues expressed admiration at my dedication to delve into the linguistic and semiotic repertoires of Chinese digital media – the former by praising my vernacular competence ('You know slang terms even I have never heard about!'), the latter by recognizing the time and effort needed to acquire the necessary sociotechnical literacy ('You must have spent a lot of time learning how to use all those Chinese apps.')

While enjoying the flattering attributions of expertise that come with public engagement about my research topic, I often feel troubled by the way they blur my authorial role into the figure of the social media savvy or the computer geek, hiding how most ethnographic research is actually grounded on a patchy process of discovery, a messy interaction between my puzzled inquiries and the patient explanations of research participants. It is safe to say that most of the 'expertise' included in my research accounts comes from the interpretive and translational efforts of committed online communities I rely upon, and from the kind help of friends who bear with my clueless questions about the latest internet celebrity or slang term. Digital ethnographers are often closer to practical brokers, curious newcomers relying on the knowledgeability and interpretive guidance of what Holmes and Marcus (2008) call 'para-ethnographers', local experts who are already doing our work. Without detracting from the usefulness of fabrication as an ethnically promising representational strategy, it should be remembered how the figure of the expert fabricator becomes an enticing professional illusion that easily overrides the messy, processual and thickly social construction of local expertise. Behind our complex data visualisations, creative multimedia representations and experimental writing lie precarious knowledges pieced together from naively eager participation in coarsely-pruned networks: if, as Markham suggests, 'one way to demonstrate the rigor of the analysis is to build transparency into the account' (2012, p. 348), perhaps the most urgent aspect to make transparent is the pointillist and serendipitous nature of learning hidden behind our expert and ethical fabrications.

## 6 TO BE HONEST,

Starting from the distasteful performance my elevator pitch, I have hinted at how much work spent on the athletics of professionalism and persuasion is dedicated to the performance of disciplinary belonging: deploying half-truths, strategic simplifications and circumstantial lies in order to position ourselves vis-à-vis the disciplinary culture of anthropology. After reviewing the methodological literature of the (broadly intended) disciplinary field of 'digital ethnography' – a research practice often pictured as a fashionable approach that is also problematic, excitingly innovative but also anxiety-inducing – I highlighted how the construction of its epistemic culture happens through claims to distinction, apologetic rhetorics, and strategies of objectification (Beaulieu 2004).

Riffing on the title of Fine's 1993 article, I have then proposed three lies of digital ethnography, roughly related to the very central issues of fieldwork, participation, and representation. These three lies clearly echo Fine's portrayals of the honest ethnographer (1993, p. 274), the precise ethnographer (p. 278), the observant ethnographer (p. 279), the unobtrusive ethnographer (p. 281) and the literary ethnographer (p. 288), and have evident overlaps with the four strategies of objectification (field, technology, intersubjectivity and capture) identified by Beaulieu (2004). Throughout this article, I put forward three archetypes typifying professional illusions that are part and parcel of doing ethnographic work about, on, with and through digital media. In the first archetype, that of the networked field-weaver, I have identified the lies I told myself and others about the near-omnipotent role I took in cutting sprawling sociotechnical networks down to size into manageable multi-sited fieldsites. The second figure, that of the eager participant-lurker, evidences how the anxieties and apologetics of negotiating and establishing ethnographic presence in networked fields end up obscuring the actual modes of participation embraced by both the researcher and the participants. Through the third character, the expert fabricator, I reflected on the ethical quandaries behind ethnographic accounts increasingly reliant on the incorporation of multiple media and inscriptions, and questioned the expertise assumed by embracing fabrication as a representational strategy.

These three lies of digital ethnography, along with the archetypal figures embodying them as professional illusions, are imagined from reflexive look back at my own research practice – and especially at how I constructed my own ideas of fieldwork, participation and representation during my graduate years. As I warned in the introduction, these three portraits are not meant to unveil the prurient underbelly of an academic discipline nor to accuse other researchers of being blind to their own deceptions, but are rather intended to reflect on which professional illusions are current in our research field, which issues we pressure each other to devise half-truths about, which lies we use to cover the tracks leading to our decisions, and so on. My writing is based on an exercise of self-reflexivity, a heuristic device widely recognised as foundational in qualitative research (Baym 2009, p. 185) to the point of becoming a cliché – at times even condemned as a conceit leaving anthropology as a discipline 'confined to the theatre of its own operations' (Ingold 2014, p. 393). Yet I hope that the arguments I developed will not spin in a self-conceited void, but could rather inspire, challenge and guide the epistemological decisions of fellow researchers.

Ultimately, rather than adding more normative prescriptions about 'how not to lie with ethnography' (Duneier 2011) and demanding the institutionalisation of reliability paradigms (p. 10), the conclusion might be a suggestion to give a shape to one's own lies, and learning to lie productively, lie provocatively, lie constructively, and lie contextually. As repeatedly argued, doing good ethnographic research consists of 'finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions' (Baym 2009, p. 173), and making accounts that are 'properly

responsible and accountable to their audiences and their informants' (Hine 2013, p. 6). To be honest about one's methodological lies would then become not just an apologetic confession or a formalised exercise in self-reflexivity, but also an important methodological heuristic to help capturing what would otherwise, as John Law puts it, be 'distorted into clarity' (2004, p. 2). As Fine concludes in his 1993 article, 'These lies are not lies that we can choose, for the most part, not to tell; they are not claims that we can avoid entirely. We must suffer the reality that they are part of the methodology' (1993, p. 290). Weaving networked fields, essentializing one's own participation, and engaging in expert fabrication are part and parcel of doing ethnographic research on, through and about digital media. Rather than hiding these strategic simplifications and pragmatic half-truths behind the professional front of anxiety-inducing elevator pitches, embracing the lies of digital ethnography might help being more honest about them.

## NOTES

[1] Gary Alan Fine kindly brought to my attention how Three Lies of Ethnography was written in the disciplinary context of sociology, where ethnography is commonly adopted as a qualitative method for research on the field. The present article has a more anthropological slant, reflecting the degree to which digital ethnography has been primarily developed by media anthropologists. Regardless of its disciplinary positioning, I hope that my contribution can be useful for anyone using ethnography to do research on, with and about digital media.

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