

Research article

Observing digital mobilizations in pandemic times

Live streams as research sources

Camila Emboava Lopes

The year 2020 was strange for Indigenous movements in Brazil. On-site gatherings were cancelled due to the outbreak of Covid-19. Indigenous movements, in connection with Indigenous media initiatives, aimed at occupying the screens instead. An abundance of live streams popped up on diverse social media platforms. During April 2020, online observations were carried out using an approach inspired by digital ethnography. This article offers a discussion about collecting research data within this changing context. The main aim is to reflect upon online observations as research practice and live streams as sources for scholarly investigation. Additionally, this paper discusses how to think about presence, place and temporality in the research context.

Keywords: online observations; indigenous peoples; digital ethnography; live streams; pandemic

2020 var ett underligt år för urfolksrörelser i Brasilien. På grund av utbrottet av Covid-19 ställdes många av deras planerade sammankomster och träffar in. Istället höll urfolksgrupper massor av "liveströmmar" på sociala medieplattformar. Den här artikeln bygger på digital etnografi där sådana liveströmmar studeras. Online-observationerna genomfördes i april 2020. Artikeln bidrar med en diskussion om att samla in forskningsdata i sådana föränderliga sammanhang. Huvudsyftet är att reflektera över online-observationer som forskningspraxis och liveströmmar som källor för vetenskapliga undersökningar. Dessutom diskuteras hur forskare kan tänka om närvaro, plats och temporalitet i sådana kontexter.

Nyckelord: onlineobservationer; urfolk; digital etnografi; liveströmmar; pandemi

It is the first day of activities of the Free Land Camp in April 2020, held via Zoom and streamed on Facebook by the Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil (APIB). Kretã Kaingang, an Indigenous leader from the Kaingang People in southern Brazil is the last to talk. He sits in front of the camera, behind him only a white wall. His long hair is made into two long braids and he wears a mantle (cloak) of feathers. His speech is engaging and his words are full of energy. At the end of his speech, Kretã invites the other participants and viewers of the live stream to speak out together, from wherever they are – the Indigenous territories, the cities and so on. He speaks powerfully: "Indigenous blood!" (I hear a bit of echo). Sonia Guajajara is quick to respond from her screen: "Not a single drop more!" Other voices join in repeating the same response. With a digital echo, the sound is a bit robotic. There is a delay in some of the microphones while the participants respond, "Not a single drop more!" Kretã goes on: "Demarcation!"

Sonia Guajajara is the first to appear responding on the screen again. Closed fist pointing upwards, smartphone in the other hand. She responds "Now!" Others also respond: "Now! Now!" Zoom microphones seem to be confused; I can hear one second of silence, as if Zoom has muted everyone. Delays, echoes and a high-pitch sound intersect. But everything is somewhat audible. Most of the participants do not have the video turned on at this point, but respond with their mixed, delayed voices while their names appear on the screen. Kerexu shows up on the screen for a few brief seconds and her image does not seem to be in sync with her audio "Now!" Kretã firmly tells the last slogan: "Bolsonaro out". And I hear again the echoes, responses and delayed voices: "Out! Out! Out!"

I think about the invitation to shout the slogans from our houses and I feel like doing it. I look out of my window, stare at the balcony of the apartment and for a second imagine myself shouting from home. It all looks

calm, the trees almost have new leaves and the snow is nearly gone. I think about the neighbours, the cats of the neighbours, the birds outside. I do not shout the slogans in the end. After all, besides being physically distant, I am watching the live stream retrospectively. Thus, rather than being there, I am “being then” (Postill 2017; Gray 2016).

Introduction

The paragraphs which open this article are re-worked excerpts from my notes observing the online mobilization Acampamento Terra Livre (Free Land Camp) in April 2020. The material was produced as part of the data collection for my ongoing doctoral thesis research. The thesis, in the field of media and communication studies, investigates discourses produced and circulated by Indigenous digital media initiatives in Brazil. My PhD research material includes other kinds of media content, interviews and on-site observations. However, in this article I look specifically at live streams of online-based events as scholarly sources.

This article’s reflections rely primarily on my notes from observations of two series of online events developed by Indigenous movements and media initiatives in Brazil during April 2020. The aim of this article is to reflect upon online observations as research practice and live streams as sources for research. I understand the studied series of live streams as a mixture between online mobilizations and digital media events. In this context, this article addresses how researchers could think about presence, place and temporality when using online-based live streams as research sources.

The discussion about *presence* is inspired by the concept of “being then” developed by digital ethnography researchers (Postill 2017; Gray 2016). Using this concept and dialoguing with the work of Gray (2016), Postill examined the practice of remote ethnography using digital tools and argues for the legitimacy of *being then* (Postill 2017: 67). Gray (2016) and Postill (2017) studied events that happened at a local level and were streamed online. The pandemic situation of physical restrictions offered a possibility of rethinking the notion of digitally mediated co-presence (Pink et al. 2016). I take the concept of *being then* and relate it to my notes of event series that were held exclusively online. In previous editions, the Free Land Camp had already been connecting the local and the global via the digital in many ways (Emboava Lopes & Egan Sjölander 2020). However, the internet and online activities were never so visibly embedded, embodied and everyday (Hine 2015) as in 2020. The proliferation of digital events during the pandemic did not engender a global world, but it continued to provide space for multiple social worlds and experiences of place (Kraemer 2017: 179).

The Abril Indígena Live (Live Indigenous April) was a series of daily live streams during April 2020 produced by the pioneer Indigenous online radio station Rádio Yandê on their Facebook page with the application

Stream Yard. The live streams were round-table style talks ranging from one to two hours about specific pre-arranged themes. There were invited guests for each day, but the link for the live stream was made available in the comments section, inviting the audience to “enter” the live stream room if they felt like it. All guests during the thirty days of live streaming were Indigenous people in Brazil. Regarding the invitation for viewers to join in the video room, it was implied that it was specifically intended for Indigenous audience members, as the host Daiara Tukano called for the participation of “*parentes*” (“relatives”, as Indigenous Peoples in Brazil often refer to each other). In some occasions viewers did join the live streaming.

Rádio Yandê (www.radioyande.com) is a pioneer web-based Indigenous radio station, created by a collective of young Indigenous individuals from different ethnic groups in Brazil in 2013. The station operates via their own website and on social media platforms, such as Facebook (51,950 followers), Instagram (27,503 followers), Twitter (6,269 followers), YouTube (1,640 followers) (data from September 25th, 2022).

The Acampamento Terra Livre (Free Land Camp) was organized by APIB (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil) and its regional organizations. APIB was founded during the second edition of the Free Land Camp in April 2005. The camp-protest calling attention for Indigenous rights – with a special focus on land – has been carried out yearly since 2004 (Guerra & Valiente 2014). In 2020, the Free Land Camp had to be moved online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The speeches – also in a round-table style – happened in a Zoom room streamed live via APIB’s Facebook page. The streaming is also shared by various Indigenous media initiatives and other organizations pages, including the Facebook pages of Rádio Yandê and Mídia Índia.

APIB has a website (www.apib.info), a Facebook page (117,780 followers), an Instagram account (227,542 followers) and a Twitter account (60,939 followers) (data from September 25th, 2022). During the Free Land Camp in 2017, participants created the initiative Mídia Índia, which has their own webpage (www.midiaindia.org), an Instagram account (184,562 followers) and a YouTube account (2,120 followers) (data from September 25th, 2022).

Indigenous participants from diverse areas and Peoples in Brazil talked during the Live Indigenous April and the Free Land Camp live streams. Those online events attempted to dialogue with – and to provide a media space for – self-representations of a multiplicity of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil. There are 305 Indigenous Peoples according to the latest data of APIB, of whom 114 Peoples live in isolation, and 274 Indigenous languages are spoken (Amado & Motta 2020). The latest national survey, conducted in 2010, presents an Indigenous population of 817,900 people, differentiated into 283 Peoples (sometimes referred to as ethnic groups) and speaking 180 languages (IBGE

2010). Although not exact, those numbers illustrate the diversity of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil.

Following this introduction, three subheadings organize the empirical findings of this article. In the next subheading, I motivate the selection of the live streams and provide an overview of the methods used for collection and analysis. Then, I reflect about the choice of methods in relation to ethics. Finally, I provide a discussion about how the live streams can relate to the concepts of presence, place and temporality.

Observing live streams: Selection, collection and analysis

From my improvised home office in Vyöddale/Vindeln in Sápmi, Northern Sweden, I carried out daily digital field trips to Indigenous media initiatives' pages, including Rádio Yandê and APIB during April 2020. The journey included stops at the initiatives' own web portals and pages on social media platforms. At that time, I had been carrying out online observations for more than a year and had had personal contact with Indigenous producers from Rádio Yandê in Brazil at the end of 2019 within the scope of my doctoral research. I knew that April would be an important period for Indigenous media initiatives. For decades, April has been a month of intense mobilizations for Indigenous movements in Brazil.¹ While it became impossible to have physical gatherings due to pandemic restrictions, many digital events in a live stream format (known simply as “lives” in Brazil) were organized by Indigenous media producers. The observations discussed in this paper were carried out on Facebook.²

The two live stream series were selected for two main reasons: the first one was related to their importance from a media and communication perspective. The outbreak of Covid-19 aggravated the tense relationship between the Indigenous movements and the then current Brazilian federal government. Indigenous territories were considered especially susceptible to the spread of the virus because of infrastructural problems, for instance lack of water supply and long distance to hospitals (Azevedo et al. 2020). Indigenous movements have carried out independent monitoring of Covid-19 cases in Indigenous communities, compiling their own reports and planning emergency actions (Amado & Motta 2020). When physical isolation became necessary to stop the spread of Covid-19, many Indigenous communities implemented a system of autonomous “sanitary barriers” to control the entrance at Indigenous

territories (APIB 2021). Indigenous persons living in urban contexts were also encouraged to remain at their houses and to avoid visiting Indigenous territories. In this sense, digital media was essential, especially regarding communication between different areas and to the visibility of Indigenous communities regarding the pandemic challenges.

The second reason was that the live streams, and the pandemic context wherein the live stream emerged, motivated reflection about the practice of digital observations, as well as the notions of digitally mediated co-presence and place. Such reflection was compelling due to physical restrictions for meetings and the increase of digital events in the context of Indigenous movements in Brazil.

I observed the “lives” in real time or in retrospect according to what my time zone allowed. This mixed temporal approach of the observations was a necessary functional fix. However, this mixture became useful to reflect about the asynchronous or synchronous implications to the observation practice. I took notes while observing the live streams and I also downloaded the videos using the application FbDown. Furthermore, I collected the links for the videos in a table. This has allowed me to return to the links and re-watch the videos on Facebook. I also took print screens to better remember the visual settings. While writing the present article, I re-examined my observation notes once and then again when I went back to the saved live streams. I selected the empirical pieces that were related to the notions of place and presence. Inspired by the work of digital ethnography researchers (e.g. Postill 2017; Pink et al. 2016; Hine 2015), I reflect about these concepts in relation to my online observations.

Reflections on positionality and ethics

In this kind of study, my own position is relevant since reflexivity plays a crucial role. I am a non-Indigenous Brazilian. I have been researching Indigenous contexts for some years, and I am currently employed as a PhD researcher at a Swedish university. Therefore, I make this study from an outsider perspective who recognizes the call for decolonization of research (Smith 2021). In this article reflecting about live streams as sources, decoloniality is part of the ethical orientation (Chilisa 2013). In practical terms this means reflecting upon whether the study can at all benefit Indigenous media producers and initiatives. In his last live participation at the Live Indigenous April, co-founder of Rádio Yandê Anápuaka Tupinambá asserted that the live streams would be saved and the videos could be used as research archives, for example. Although it is hard to locate concrete benefits at this point, Anápuaka made a clear invitation for research.

Ethics relating specifically to digital research were also considered, informed by *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0* published by the Association of Internet

¹ The symbolic importance of April has to do with two “celebratory” dates. On April 19, Brazil officially celebrates Dia do índio (Indian Day), created by a decree of the former dictator-president Getúlio Vargas. Some Indigenous movements propose to change it into the Indigenous Peoples' Resistance Day. Furthermore, April 22 is marked as the official arrival date of the first Portuguese ships in 1500, at the coast of what is now northeast Brazil.

² The live streams happened primarily on Facebook, although they have been shared in other platforms as well.

Researchers (AoIR) in 2020 (Franzke et al. 2020). The usage of multiple social media platforms for both series and the further inclusion of the Live Indigenous April series into Rádio Yandê's programming demonstrate that a high outreach was intended. In this study, the empirical material was not scraped; i.e., downloads and screenshots of media material were carried out manually, which decreased the risk of collecting material without a highly intended outreach. However, at a few moments in some of the live streams technical complications were perhaps not intended to be public. For example a few times the control chat of the Zoom room became visible with instructions to open or close microphones, or participants did not seem to have realised that their voices were still audible. Furthermore, comments and reactions from viewers are not as easily classified as intended to be public. Such moments can present ethical concern. They are not described in detail in this article.

The sections below present reflections about how the live streams relate to the notions of presence and place.

Feeling co-present: Connections between the local and the digital

The live streams functioned similarly concerning the affordances of the used social media platforms. In the case of Live Indigenous April, the application Stream Yard was used to create a room wherein the speakers had discussions. We could see their video and hear their sound. The link for the room was provided in the comment sections and the viewers were encouraged to join the room if they felt like it. The access to the room was controlled by the host. The video was streaming live on Facebook, and it was from that platform that viewers would watch, react (with the buttons like, love, funny, angry), share and comment. Viewers' comments and activities were visible to the host.

The Free Land Camp live streams were in a Zoom room, except for the first video which was made using Instagram. The Zoom room streamed live on Facebook. Organizers controlled the Zoom room, and the link was not provided for viewers. The scale in terms of number of viewers and speakers was bigger in relation to Live Indigenous April, which is related to the scale of APIB as a national coalition of many regional organizations and relationships with partner organizations. In addition to the round-table style talks, movies, dances and music presentations were streamed during the event. The viewers' comments and reactions via Facebook were managed by the organizers.

Although in both cases the live streams were managed by media professionals (APIB's and Rádio Yandê's communication teams), the speakers' experiences and use of digital rooms varied visibly, and many participations had connection difficulty. In this sense, a degree of spontaneity and emotion seems to have been more important than, for instance, technical demands

for internet, image and sound quality. In a similar way, while examining music live streams, Risk (2021) found that the aesthetic of pandemic-era live streaming is an aesthetic of imperfection – in the sense of “not perfect” and also “still in process” – and of intimacy (Risk 2021: 8). Such aesthetics, which was a consequence of the context, may have contributed to the feeling of community.

During the live streams, everyone – organizers, speakers and viewers (myself included) – was experiencing a time of restriction of physical gatherings. The speakers emphasized the digital presence, comments and questions from viewers who were faraway. Similarly, speakers were talking from different physical places themselves. That evinced the connective dimension of digital place making (Özkul 2017) during the events. The concept of *local* had a prominent role within the digital process of place making in the live streams. For example, in both series of events speakers were representatives of specific Indigenous territories. In this sense, the live streams can be understood as a network of place-based communities (Kraemer 2017: 181).

In that context, physical distance was not a barrier to presence (Özkul 2017). Rather, the emergent notion of presence seemed, to a degree, to have relied on the feeling of (physical) distance. People from physically distant places, at that time confined to their homes, seemed to be trying to perform presence in a new way. The embodied internet (Hine 2015) consisted of a possible *way* (not merely a means) to being present. This form of digital co-presence was not disembodied. In my case, it was possible to feel it *in the body* (Gray 2016). For example, I experienced feelings of surprise and slight discomfort during the eventual digital complications. When observing a live stream, the unexpected interruptions from the calls, “frozen speakers”, unwitting microphone muting and unmuting, echoes and so forth would make me feel uneasy. At times I did check my own internet connection when the transmission was frozen, actively wishing the speakers' internet would hold. Therefore, similarly to Gray (2016) I found that digital media can be experienced and remembered in the body with adrenaline kicks (Gray 2016) but also with other positive or negative feelings: a smile when I heard and saw beautiful chants performed, concern when the streaming was not smooth. In line with Postill (2017) I argue that this is not only true for online events that are observed in real time. In the case of my research, archived material that I watched later also made me feel *as if* I had been watching in real time.

The affordances of digital archiving provided experiences with different temporalities. The live stream videos of the Live Indigenous April and the Free Land Camp were saved on Facebook. When accessing the saved links, one can re-watch the recordings and interact with the saved live streams (i.e. to share, to press

like or dislike buttons) to a certain extent. Even when a live stream ends, the digitally mediated possibilities of interaction do not end completely. The videos still exist on the social media platform – maybe in an intersection between now and then, merging the past (moment of streaming and recording) and present (whenever people watch). When watching the live streams later, I “reacted” to some of them pressing the Facebook buttons “like” or “love”. Selecting the function to watch the comments in real time, I could feel *as if* observing it in real time. On the other hand, the possibilities of asynchronous participation is obviously very limited. To observe it in real time gives the possibility of sending questions, comments and simply being potentially *visible* for speakers and other viewers.

Either way, observing the live streams live or in retrospect, my co-presence in the live streams seemed to be a negotiation between the local and the digital. This also seemed to be the case with the speakers, as we (viewers) could see and hear their background images and noises. The live stream series functioned as digital places of connection between distant physical localities and also between different temporalities. Such connection is, however, negotiated in terms of co-presence wherein the local played a key role.

Conclusion

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, on-site gatherings had to be cancelled. During April 2020, Indigenous movements – together with media initiatives – organized digital events. I carried out online observations in two live stream series (Live Indigenous April and Free Land Camp). This article offered a reflection about the practice of carrying out online observations in pandemic times – with restrictions on physical gatherings and increase of digital connection. I proposed that live streams become stimulating research sources, with potential for exploring a different way of building presence and feeling co-present. Furthermore, the experience of being exclusively digitally connected – in different times and spaces – provided an experience of place that enhanced the connective level. The physical barriers did not decrease the importance of locality, quite the opposite. The local, articulated with the digital, seemed central at the digital events. Although this article’s reflections are centred on Facebook, it is also interesting to notice that the live streams travelled across platforms. Future work on the same topic could further explore the implications of such online-based events in terms of convergence.

The approach of this paper was exploratory. A description and a reflection about my own research were the central aspects. There is, thus, no generalizable claim to the findings. Still, I hope that this experience can enter into dialogue with other studies employing digital observations, as well as media studies and Indigenous studies research.

Author biography

Camila Emboava Lopes is a PhD candidate in Media and Communication Studies at Umeå University, Sweden. Her ongoing PhD research investigates discourses of contemporary indigeneity produced by Indigenous-owned media initiatives in Brazil. She has a master’s degree in Indigenous journalism from the Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino, Norway and a bachelor in journalism from the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil.

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