

An Ethnography of Social Media: The Digital Researcher, Navigating a Complex Web of Information

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Abstract

In ethnographic research, participants frequently utilize social media practices and technology as an essential component of their engagement with their broader social, material, and technological surroundings. Hence, it is imperative to examine theoretical and methodological frameworks that, when integrated, can facilitate comprehension of the evolving ethnographic practice influenced by social media. The objective of this article is to provide a thorough assessment of previous academic research on the possibilities of the Internet as a platform for conducting ethnographic research. This study aims to elucidate the manner in which regular activities, movement, and social interactions influence the development of knowledge and the formation of physical locations by examining the dynamic interrelationship between these factors.

Keywords: J. Postil and S. Pink are working on a book that will be published in 2012. It's hard to be a digital analyst in the world of social media ethnography. The Australian Media International.

Introduction

In 2010, our research team moved to Barcelona for a year to examine the relationship between social media and activism. We devised a set of questions to learn more about the ways in which activists and social movements use Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in their activist undertakings and the potential consequences for societal and political change. Due to its rich history of resistance and activism and the concomitant occurrence of multiple activist events and social media campaigns during our visit, Barcelona proved to be an outstanding research location. We present a novel conceptual framework in this academic essay to make sense of social media ethnography in light of the results of this investigation. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of social media ethnography practices and locations. We argue for a radical shift away from the prevalent network and community frameworks in online research, offering instead the more persuasive ideas of routine, movement, and social interaction.

Social media is defined by Lang and Benbunan-Fich (2010) in a way that is consistent with other modern viewpoints. They define social media as content-handling web apps that collect data from users and make it available for later use. Although these abstracts do a good job of outlining the technical capabilities of social media, the primary focus of this article is on investigating the possible uses of social media for ethnographers and other qualitative researchers, taking into account these affordances. It is not always required for the ethnographer to physically visit a defined research area (Hine, 2000: 43) when doing online ethnography centered on a specific media event, frequently referred to as a "Internet Event" by Hine (2000: 50). However,

when viewed in the context of particular locations, the topics investigated via internet ethnography may take on added significance. The unique characteristics, political systems, and historical context of a given country or region can also influence how people there use social media. In light of Kozinets's proposal, it makes sense to focus on the countries and people within those countries that demonstrate the most advanced or sophisticated utilization of technology while doing research into mobile online community use or video blogging.

In keeping with this viewpoint, project 2 benefited from a trip to Barcelona for research to better understand how social media is used in the real world. Exploring the anthropological (dis)continuities between the lived experiences of social media and in-person encounters and the accompanying social dynamics allowed us to go beyond the description of our work as "the pursuit of ethnographic holism" (Hine, 2000:48). To paraphrase Pink (2009), this is a rung on the ladder toward creating a "ethnographic place." Drawing on the research of Massey (2005) and Ingold (2008), this paper seeks to explain how particular places come into being as a result of interactions between things and processes. They aren't confined to any one region, social group, or demographic classification. Instead, these things could be seen as collections or taxonomies that take into account both human interaction and physical location.

The number of academic works exploring the potential of online ethnography is growing rapidly. Beaulieu (2004), Beaulieu and Simakova (2006), Boellstorff (2008), Burrell (2009), Hine (2000, 2008), Kozinets (2010), Ardevol (2012), Pink (2012), and Postill (2010a) are among the researchers cited here. Research from an anthropological perspective is just starting to emerge on social media sites, platforms, and activities. There are three major repercussions for online ethnographers caused by web 2.0 and the rapid spread of social media platforms, applications, habits, and activities. The possibilities given call for a reappraisal of the methodological framework used in online research, since new channels for doing ethnographic fieldwork are opened up. These events also hope to foster creative methods of ethnographic practice and promote an evaluation of the current theoretical frameworks in internet studies. By critically diverging from traditional approaches taken in online ethnography, this paper aids in the development of the field as a whole. This is achieved by taking into account recent theoretical developments and insights into social media ethnography in Barcelona.

In this research, we consider the repercussions of shifting the focus of research away from network and community models and toward routines, mobilities, and socialities, as proposed by Pink (2008) and Postill (2008, 2011). The authors of this study argue that these concepts help us understand how social media ethnography fosters the emergence of "ethnographic places" (Pink, 2009) that combine elements of the virtual and physical worlds. Our primary focus in Barcelona social media research was on the free culture movement, which included many different communities. Since free culture prioritizes individual autonomy over monetary gain, it opens up previously unexplored channels for commons-based service supply. In the beginning, Barcelona is ground zero for the free culture movement, and its activists are highly savvy when it comes to using various means of online communication.

During the course of the inquiry, the investigators participated in a well-known statewide drive to counter the Sinde bill (Ley Sinde), which intended to reduce instances of digital piracy. Advocates for free culture shifted their attention to broader political and economic issues once the measure was finally passed in February 2011. The indignados (or 15M) movement, which they helped organize and spread, was a major impetus for the broader Occupy movement. Since social media is becoming increasingly important in today's culture and academic research, the ramifications of our discussion go beyond the confines of the Barcelona ethnography. Instead of trying to provide a final answer, we conclude by providing some theoretical, methodological, and practical principles that should encourage further discussion on the implications of social media ethnography.

Social media as a research site

The methodologies and procedures that are applied will determine how social media might be constituted as a research site. Web content analysis (Agichtein et al., 2008; Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; Kwak et al., 2010; Oulasvirta et al., 2010) and social network analysis (Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009; Java et al., 2007; Prieur et al., 2009) have been the most common research methods used in this area up until this point. The methodologies that were utilized in this investigation establish social media as a separate kind of research platform that may include textual information and/or hyperlinks to a variety of different organizations. In the course of anthropological research, the usage of large data sets has the ability to produce statistical summaries that provide extremely helpful information regarding the context of the investigation.

However, these platforms are not best positioned to answer the research questions given by our study, which seek to illuminate the mechanisms, rationales, and repercussions of activists' utilization of social media. Our study aims to investigate how activists utilize social media. When standard ethnographic methods are utilized by researchers, such as participant observation or interviews, social media can be rethought of as a mobile, social, and immersive context in which to conduct fieldwork (Cox, Clough, and Marlow, 2008; Humphreys, 2007; Komito, 2011; Miller, 2011). [Citations] Cox, Clough, and Marlow (2008); Humphreys (2007); Komito (2011); Miller (2011). During the course of our inquiry into activism in Barcelona, we investigated the "intensities" of social media engagement as well as the interplay between offline and online social connections. These types of interactions have an effect on a variety of virtual and real contexts.

The gathering of relevant online materials is required for the research of social media and activism. In addition to conducting interviews with activists to explore the work that they do, the study also requires the collecting of relevant online resources. Monitoring blogs, online news outlets (both amateur and professional), physical gatherings, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as actively engaging with them, is an essential part of this process. Our major concentration was not only on internet-based ethnography; rather, we were more interested in internet-related ethnography. This distinction originates from the awareness that actions associated to social media cannot be precisely classed as online

occurrences by themselves. This was brought to light by Hobart's idea of "media-related practices" in the year 2010.

In this specific setting, the term "social media ethnography" refers to the process of conducting ethnographic research that is closely connected with activities and information that can be found online; nevertheless, the term does not restrict itself to only this particular field. However, it is essential to keep in mind that conducting research online and making use of the internet in general can provide a more all-encompassing context for the discussion we are having. Our argument is that the deployment of social media ethnography and the advent of Web 2.0 call for additional scholarly debate on the conceptualization of the Internet as a "site" for academic investigation. This is because both of these developments have ramifications for academic research. The above sentence illustrates the numerous web-based and offline contexts, which serve as examples to explain the distinguishing characteristics of social media as a dispersed learning environment that incorporates online platforms, demonstrates dynamism, and incorporates both physical and digital locations.

This highlights how important it is to take into consideration the physical surroundings as well as the face-to-face interactions that are tied to social media. In addition to this, it sheds insightful light on the convergence of the research instrument and the subject's use of the same media, which is extremely helpful. As Law (2004) and O'Reilly (2005: 170) point out, the word "messy" has been used to characterize both the social reality and the ethnographic methodology. This is something that has been done on multiple occasions. This description might be used to substantiate the claim that social media constitutes a component of the "chaotic web," hence giving rise to a similarly complex method of conducting online ethnography. Due to the digital character of the activity, the compilation and sharing of data, as well as the inherently open nature of the medium, the application of social media ethnography necessitates changes from traditional ethnographic methodologies.

How to define ethnography, both online and off

Ethnographic knowledge and knowing can be divided into two categories (Pink, 2009). As ethnographic research disperses, Atkinson et al. (2007) contend that various sorts of evidence are supported by different ethnographic methodologies. Adapting evolving technology and methods to various circumstances is one way to explore new ethnographic knowledge and comprehension while maintaining a reflexive awareness of knowledge generation and its strengths and weaknesses. In contrast to "traditional" ethnographic knowledge, this approach promotes profound, contextual, and situational understanding through immersive and collaborative sensory experiences that often use digital technologies, according to Pink (2009). There are similarities between the notion and "adaptive ethnography." In particular, Hine (2000, 2009) is known for his work on social media ethnography projects that need collaboration across digital platforms and in-person situations.

This remark acknowledges ethnographic flexibility and moves away from a cohesive totality. Baym and Markham (2009: viii) claim that the Internet shapes qualitative research understanding and practice. Social media ethnography shows how online-offline interactions offer new information opportunities. This article discusses novel

ethnographic research methods and their ramifications. Before starting our ethnographic investigation, we provide the theoretical foundation and a brief description of how previous methodological frameworks have handled internet ethnography's challenges. Email, the WWW, Usenet newsgroups, bulletin boards, IRC, and Multi-User Domains (MUDS) are all considered "the Internet" by Hine (2000: 2). Although Hine's articles were set in the Web 1.0 framework, which differs from the current focus on social media networks, many of his insights remain relevant. Her sociology of media and technology approach held that internet users shape the technology.

They demonstrate this involvement by understanding and producing knowledge (2000: 38). The user also noted that the Internet has two dimensions from an analytical rather than personal perspective. Some regard it as a discourse-enacted culture. Or, it's a cultural artifact, a technological text (2000: 39). Hine believes that offline Internet use and online social venues shape meaning. The 2000 claim (citation: 39) casts doubt on the ethnographic premise of holism. The author studied ethnography's late-20th-century crisis. This problem was resolved by viewing ethnography as a textual and lived skill. The author criticizes ethnography's traditional reliance on lengthy physical presence at a selected field location (Hine, 2000: 43). Hine's work shows that Facebook, Myspace, and Bebo have made ethnographic inquiry methods easier to use. It's clear that Hine has supported adaptive ethnography for eight years (2008: 260). The author reiterates that internet research should focus on technology as a social activity and technological appropriation (2009: 3). Law (2004) informs Hine (2009)'s recognition of the world's complexity and disorder (p. 5). Online research becomes organized with this method. According to Hine (2009: 5), internet researchers reject investigating bounded units. Hine (2009: 11) acknowledges the usage of "online traces," such as hyperlinks, to navigate field sites.

The Internet could be seen as a chaotic fieldwork environment that promotes the interaction and influence of the virtual and physical spheres through the ethnographer's tale. Building on Pink's 2009 focus on mobility in "ethnographic places," this discourse expands on Hine's ideas to advance this conceptual framework. Kozinets (2010)'s "netnography" methodology is the second focus. Kozinets supports netnography by emphasizing community and culture. He claims both goods are online. Besides virtual interactions, online groups often have face-to-face encounters (2010: 15). Kozinets defines "community" as a group of people who interact, have social relationships, and share a physical environment, or "space." This space alludes to "cyberspace." According to the individual, "community membership" can alter and involve different levels of engagement. Active involvement, personal identity as a member, mutual acquaintance, regular interaction, collective understanding of specific customs and behaviors, and a feeling of responsibility can help define a group's borders (Kozinets, 2010: 10). Postill's work in Internet studies also recognizes the concept of community. However, "community" has long challenged anthropological and sociological theory. Due to its various interpretations and connotations with happy feelings, some scholars have even abandoned it as an analytical category. As noted in

prior literature (Pink, 2008; Postill, 2011), "community" should be defined by the participants rather than used as an empirical social unit to study activist behavior.

While acknowledging and agreeing with Kozinets' attention on virtual communities' ambiguous boundaries and frequent interaction between online and offline environments, we proposed an alternate focus on social dynamics. This method focuses on social connections' traits rather than their 'community' membership (Postill, 2008). This allows us to evaluate both the sense of belonging associated with 'community' and the dynamic and temporary interactions and pathways online and offline. We propose that social media ethnography shifts the focus from online communities to digital socialities. We use anthropological theory to analyze the complex relationship between social media and activist activity using the concepts of place, movement, and sociality. Ethnographers' methods affect internet research sites, according to Hine (2009). The rationale largely matches Pink's (2009) "ethnographic places." Pink's theoretical framework on ethnographic placemaking requires the ethnographer to collect a variety of objects for the study.

Pink (2009) defines ethnographic places as assemblages of related objects rather than geographical localities, while physical locations may influence their creation or affiliation. The author's claim is confirmed by Ingold and Massey (2005) and Ingold (2008) spatial theories. The ethnographic methods presented in this study can be applied to online and offline situations. Pink (2012) suggests internet-connected visual ethnography. This paper proposes a theoretical framework for social media ethnographers to develop web-tracable ethnographic sites to observe offline-online linkages. Geography and daily habits are linked in modern literature. Cresswell (2002: 26) defines place as a process of development through practice and practical knowledge. Postill (2010b) notes that media and digital ethnography is increasingly using theories of practice. Social media ethnography examines social media behaviours as a result of and part of an environment. The digital ethnographic arena is intertwined with online and offline encounters in its stories. The ethnographer and ethnographic process have many online remains. These remains include the ethnographer's social media and online archiving. This section examines John Postill's traditional and portable social media ethnography method. It will show how these factors helped him join a social media research setting and make it an ethnographic site.

Conclusion

Different theoretical frameworks have been used in the extant academic literature to bring some kind of order to the chaos that is the World Wide Web. Concepts like "community," "culture," and "network" are all included in these models. There is a certain methodology that must be used when conducting social media ethnography. To better understand how social media practices affect the formation and collective engagement of social groups, particularly in the context of our research on activist practices, we adopt a pluralistic perspective on sociality that allows us to examine the interconnectedness of online and offline relationships. Recognizing the movable nature of ethnographic work is crucial for developing a complete comprehension of the ever-changing nature of social media. Insight into the nuanced nature of the social media world, in all its online and offline manifestations, is facilitated by this realization.

It is critical that the researcher's online activities be monitored in a naturalistic manner, including their participation in social media platforms like Facebook threads and Twitter hashtags. This allows students to become fully integrated members of both online and offline groups, broadening their exposure to real-world situations. The implications of these findings for online ethnography are far-reaching. When viewed through the perspective of ethnographic study, even widely held and relied-upon conceptions of the internet, such as those about social media, might be challenged. The Internet has had a revolutionary effect on our ability to understand and use qualitative research. Social media ethnography, on the other hand, requires a close inspection of the presumptions that shape our understanding of the web. We propose a new method for conducting ethnographic research on the internet and social media, one that emphasizes sociality and mobility rather than the traditional concentration on communities.

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