

DIGITAL

Digital ethnography has become increasingly popular in recent years, reflecting the growing influence and presence of the internet in people's lives. Social researchers were quick to identify the advantages of digital ethnography, including the fact that there is no requirement to physically travel to any particular site to enter the field, and also that interacting via a screen allows the ethnographer to keep detailed records of what he or she is seeing and reading, in a way that is foreign to most examples of participant observation. Postill and Pink write:

For the internet ethnographer, the implications of the shift to web 2.0 and the rapid growth of social media platforms, applications, practices and activity are three-fold. They create new sites for ethnographic fieldwork, foster new types of ethnographic practice, and invite critical perspectives on the theoretical frames that dominate internet studies, thus providing opportunities for re-thinking internet research methodologically. (2012, p. 2)

The research practice and theoretical basis, as it stands, is still developing, and as such, digital ethnography is often referred to by different names. Varis (2014) includes virtual ethnography, cyber-ethnography, internet ethnography and netnography, as well as the more common digital ethnography. The common denominator, again according to Varis (2016) is that they all include the examination of online data through an ethnographic research process. The field is very diverse, in part because of the diversity of data, which might include, to name a few, blogs, social network sites, gaming environments, dating sites, transcripts and wikis.

Although digital ethnography draws on more classic forms of ethnography, it differs, especially in terms of context and contextualization. boyd (2008) identified specific technical properties of digital environments (persistence, searchability, replicability and scalability) that shaped interaction in these environments, and it is important that ethnographers are conscious of the way that these properties, as well as the platform-specific structures,

contribute to the context in which an ethnographer might work. Furthermore, boyd (2008) cautions researchers against assuming that these online platforms mean the same thing to all users. Instead, Varis recommends that 'online environments cannot be taken as self-explanatory contexts, but need to be investigated for locally specific meanings and appropriations' (2016, p. 58).

While most digital ethnographers (and indeed, social ethnographers as a whole) hesitate to assign any particular techniques to ethnography, Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis and Tacchi (2016) have suggested that there are five key features of digital ethnography of which a researcher must be mindful. Firstly, there is the idea of multiplicity: understanding that there is more than one way to engage with the digital, and an ethnographer needs to recognize and examine those ways. Secondly, a digital ethnography should not be digitally centered; in other words, it is important to recognize that the digital in digital ethnography cannot be separated from other experiences and feelings that are equally important to the ethnography. Openness is also important; drawing from ideas like the digital open source movements, digital ethnographers are open to other influences from different disciplines and schools. Digital ethnography also involves reflexive practice and, finally, it is unorthodox, because it requires ethnographers to pay attention to alternative forms of communication, as well as more common ones.

Further Reading:

boyd, D. M. (2008). Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics. University of California, Berkeley.

Pink, S. H. Horst, J. Postill, L. Hjorth, T. Lewis and J. Tacchi (2016), Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice, London: Sage.

Postill, J., & Pink, S. (2012). Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web. Media International Australia, 145(1), 123-134.

Varis, P. (2016). Digital ethnography. The Routledge handbook of language and digital communication, 55-68.