DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE BY SARAH PINK, HEATHER HORST, JOHN POSTILL, LARISSA HJORTH, TANIA LEWIS, JO TACCHI (1ST EDITION. LONDON, SAGE, 2016)

ANNA FRUZSINA GYŐR[1]

   In his seminal work, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*[2], Kozinets ascertains that we have reached a point of no return: social scientists can no longer regard the internet and computer-mediated communications and all their affordances as esoteric phenomena. The distinction between online and offline (or 'real world') has become a false dichotomy as they are seamlessly blended together to form the social worlds we inhabit. The sheer size of the tome, *SAGE Internet Research Methods* (1682 pages)[3], proves that the last decade has seen a substantial surge in internet-related social research and that the field has matured.

   Christine Hine – perhaps one of the best-known scholars to write about the methodologies for sociological and ethnographic understanding of the internet – has emphasized that tackling the 'virtual' entails much more than simply transferring methods 'online'; it forces the researcher to become reflexive in terms of what constitute the core principles of social research.[4] As Hughes writes, researching the internet and through the internet raises a wide range of ethical, epistemological, ontological and methodological issues, along with debates and controversies that may force us to consider anew how such research differs from conventional social research methods.[5]

1 Anna Fruzsina Győr is PhD student at the Sociology Doctoral School of the Corvinus University of Budapest, e-mail: gyorannafruzsina@gmail.com

2 Kozinets, Robert V. (2011). Netnography: doing ethnographic research online. London: SAGE. (First edition, published in 2010).

3 Hughes, Jason (ed.) (2012) SAGE internet research methods. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

4 Hine, Christine (2005). 'Research relationships and online relationships: Introduction', in C. Hine (ed.), Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet, pp. 35-50. Oxford: Berg.

5 Hughes, Jason (ed.) (2012) SAGE internet research methods. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Following this line of thought, the central tenet of *Digital Ethnography Principles and Practices* is that digital ethnography is fundamental to our understanding of the social world. While technological progress is often framed in laudatory or critical terms, this book does neither: the broader argument of the authors is that the digital must be understood as situated in the everyday world.

The authoritative team of authors – Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi – each bring different disciplinary influences, from sociology and ethnography to anthropology, media and communication studies, and design. Drawing on their diverse research topics and trajectories, they have collaborated to explore and define what digital ethnography means to them as a collective.

Building on works such as Hine's *Virtual Ethnography*[6], which begun the consolidation of the digital theme in ethnographic research, the main aim of the book is to re-examine fundamental conceptual and analytical categories inherited from a pre-digital era of social and cultural research, and to reconceptualize them in accordance with our changing social worlds. The authors stress that this is a work in progress, and as "new technologies offer new ways of engagement with emergent research environments, our actual practices as ethnographers also shift." (p 3) The book focuses on – as the title makes apparent – ethnography, but the questions raised and arguments made are of undisputable relevance to all fields of social inquiry.

The most salient feature of *Digital Ethnography* is the authors' clearly non-digital-centric approach to investigating the digital. Instead of situating the digital at the center of the research, they invite us to explore the relationship between the digital, sensory, atmospheric and material elements of our everyday lives and the social worlds we inhabit, and to consider the implications such interconnectedness have for ethnographic research practice. They offer a framework that accounts for the digital as part of our world(s) from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, and emphasize that such an approach has the potential to produce novel insights into how the digital is a part of wider configurations.

The authors clearly outline the five principles that guide their digital ethnography practice. While acknowledging that creating and following the ideal model of research is not always achievable, or even desirable, they hope to offer a framework that can be adapted to diverse research contexts and goals. The principles they advocate for are: 1, multiplicity, or the acknowledgement that digital ethnography research is always unique to the research question or

---

6 Hine, Christine (2000) Virtual Ethnography. London: Sage.

circumstances at hand – with an added emphasis on accounting for the state of the infrastructure that exists to support a given digital media use; 2, non-digital-centric-ness, or considering digital media as inseparable from the activities, technologies, materialities, relations, and feelings through which they are experienced; 3, openness, or regarding the digital ethnography research processes as open, and accounting for the heightened opportunity to co-produce knowledge through collaboration and digital sharing among both researchers and participants; 4, reflexivity, or examining how our relationship with the digital as researchers shapes our production of knowledge; 5, unorthodox communication and dissemination methods, or the importance of making use of visual and digital tools to evoke the complex mix of feelings, relationships, materialities, and activities that constitute the research context, and to challenge the typically disseminated model of knowledge distribution.

The book has a very consistent structure. Each chapter takes as its focus one of seven key concepts in social and cultural theory and examines how it can be incorporated into digital ethnography research. The seven concepts – namely experiences (what people feel), practices (what people do), things (the objects that surround us), relationships (our intimate social environments), social worlds (groups and wider social configurations through which people relate to each other), localities (the shared physical contexts we live in), and events (the coming together of diverse processes in a public context) – represent a variety of ways through which it is possible to relate to the social world. After a brief historical overview of how a given concept has been used in social science research, and which key debates have influenced its conceptualization, each chapter is dedicated to an exploration of how the presence of the digital makes necessary an adjustment or rethinking of the concept in ethnographic inquiry, and what such a shift means for the research process in a given environment. The work consistently examines both sides of the equation, focusing on researching how we live in our contemporary digitally entangled world, and reflecting upon the presence of digital media in shaping the methodological, practical, and theoretical dimensions of social research. Each chapter offers three examples – mostly from the authors' own earlier research – to illustrate the diverse challenges that an environment partially constituted by digital media raises, and the variety of innovative methods a researcher can employ to understand the role the digital plays. The book does not offer in-depth methodological guidance: the aim of the authors is to highlight the importance of reflexivity when researching varied digitally entangled environments, and to emphasize that much of how we experience the digital and how meaning is attributed to the digital happens at a subliminal level. In other words, they acknowledge the intangible features of the digital whose uncovering calls for carefully constructed research methods. The

authors stress the importance of designing methods and questions together, and the need for developing new methods and adopting existing ones in response to new questions.

After a more general introduction to how the authors conceptualize the field of digital ethnography, the second chapter examines how digital ethnographers might explore experience, particularly sensory experience. The authors emphasize the role of the senses in permitting the experience of things that might be difficult or impossible to articulate through words, and underscore the vital importance to ethnographic practice of immersion in other people's experiences. Living in an environment where digital technology and media is abundant, ethnographers – in expanding the focus from only the content and audience of digital media – must attend to how these devices affect our sensory embodied experience of the world. On the other hand, new technological platforms – e.g. virtual realities – also make possible new modes of lived experience that also become sites for ethnographic fieldwork.

Applying the sensory ethnographic and non-digital-centered approach to the analysis of access to mobile phone in an Indian slum, for example, a social, cultural, and moral landscape emerged in which structures of power, gendered oppression and violence were intertwined with digital technology use.

The third chapter examines how digital ethnography can use the concept of practice to research everyday habits and routines as they are played out in everyday contemporary environments. Applying the tenet of practice theory – which sees social order as being produced and enacted through everyday practices – to digital media, here too the focus shifts from media production and consumption to a broader notion of an ensemble of practices that are shaped by non-human actors such as technologies and material objects. The image of a couch-bound passive consumer of ready-made media content becomes obsolete in a digital media world. People are producers and shapers of media content and media technologies. Also, many elements of digital technology have become ubiquitous (for example, mobile phones and social media have widely become taken for granted). Interaction with such technology has also become a highly personalized experience that is embedded in our daily lives, routines and interpersonal relationships. This enmeshment and omnipresence, as the authors point out, presents researchers with the challenge of separating out the ways that people use digital media from the wider rhythms and routines of everyday living and embodied senses of self, especially when many of these practices are habitual and unconscious. Also, although analytically a practice may be conceptualized as a unit, in real life practices are not 'naturally' bounded.

As the authors point out, the ability to uncover the habitual and unconscious is the key advantage of practice-led ethnography; both researchers and

participants have the possibility to become reflexively aware of hidden habitual and embodied digital practices and meanings. When used as a research tool, mobile technologies such as video cameras and mobile phones also make it possible for researchers to engage with and articulate the visceral nature of the everyday – the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, feel, rhythms, and temporalities of a range of actors, spaces, and practices.

Chapter Four gives a brief overview of how media and media technologies have been approached as things that are produced, consumed, and circulated. A particularly important concept the authors highlight is how media technologies are objects that link the private and public sphere and, in turn, facilitate the negotiation of meaning both within and through their use in domestic settings. Another relevant point is that through customization, for example, media technologies can also become extensions of the self. With the convergence of devices and software, shifting the focus to media ecologies instead of individual digital tools or platforms has the benefit of emphasizing the diversity of contexts and practices. Furthermore, as the writers point out, digital media technologies have also become spaces that we move in, through, and between. With the use of avatars, we can explore what the digital form means for our understanding of the human body, other forms of materiality, and also our connection to other people.

The central focus of Chapter Five is understanding the use of digital technology in the context of relationships. The main question examined by the authors relates to the shifting definition of co-presence and intimacy in light of the digital era. Traditionally, proximity has been the key component of co-presence but the affordances of digital media have created new opportunities for being present. The chapter describes two primary approaches to understanding the influence of digital technologies on creating and maintaining personal relationships. The first concept stresses that, instead of focusing on the constraints imposed by an individual medium, the emphasis should center upon the social, emotional, and moral consequences of different media. The second highlights the importance of the "ambient virtual co-presence" that digital technologies enable through channels in the form of a continuous flow of small communicative acts that help maintain an ongoing background awareness of others (e.g. by keeping a webcam turned on). This type of co-presence breaks down the binaries between here and there, virtual and real, online and offline, absent and present.

The sixth chapter explores how digital ethnographers research social worlds. The writers criticize the concepts of 'community' and 'network' because of their limited applicability due to their vagueness, normativity, and overexposure. They argue for the more neutral term 'social worlds' that can be conceptualized as relatively bounded – but never airtight – domains of social life that exist in great diversity and can also freely intersect. 'Social worlds' is a heuristic concept that

invites empirical investigation and comparative analysis. The writers also find the concept of 'networked individuals' and Kozinets' 'netnography' approach useful in the analysis of online communities. The first describes how in the age of the internet communities have been reconfigured around an individual's personal networks, often in geographically dispersed 'personal communities', while the second characterizes online communities as sharing a computer-mediated space and proposes using a 'continuum of participation' to define community membership. The examples provided in the chapter investigate the role of technological mediation in the construction and maintenance of social worlds, and examine questions of identity, sociality, boundaries, change, and continuity.

Chapter Seven is an inquiry into the digital ethnographic dimensions of the production of locality. Localities as inhabited places, as Sarah Pink argues, generate particular qualities because they are forged through the closeness or intensity of their elements. Localities are knowable to people and are experienced as entities. The authors suggest that there is little merit to separating the digital from the non-digital when we theorize about locality; for the digital ethnographer, the digital and material are brought together as part of the same world to create new ways of knowing and being. Today, digital technologies play a key role in shaping the immediate environments in which we live, and local contexts and local knowledge are shifting towards referring not only to the material physical but also the digital environment. The examples demonstrate how local issues and activism, or ways of representing the experience of locality, combine digital and material worlds. The studies cited highlight the epistemological implications of the study of the digital in reshaping the concept of 'being there'. The authors advocate for the rejection of the inherent notion of superiority of unmediated physical co-presence, and instead call for triangulation in research which uses as rich a variety of resources as possible.

The last chapter focuses on events. The authors emphasize that in a contemporary context media and events are interwoven in multiple ways: "digital media are part of how events are conceptualized, made, and experienced by participants, viewers, and users." (p 165) While media events in the past were often tied to public interests – like watching the Olympics – and could be interpreted as processes of ritual reaffirmation, the production, consumption, and dissemination of media have now been decentered, so – along with the digital convergence and the growth of mobile and locative media – how media events occur has changed considerably. The writers stress that with the transformation of how media events play out spatially and temporally, and the expanded ways in which participants can intervene through them, media events should be examined in terms of their role in the processes of change.

Digital Ethnography thoroughly examines many methodological, practical and theoretical questions that social researchers face in a digitally enmeshed environment. Perhaps one area of inquiry somewhat neglected is the ethical dimension of research that incorporates the virtual. For example, when researchers immerse themselves in virtual environments without disclosing their identity and goals, the implications of 'cyberstealth' must be examined. Also, the internet should never be understood as a neutral observation space for it represents power relations: as with all fieldwork the researcher's selection of data and analyses are always biased by agendas, personal convictions, and social norms (Hughes, 2012:56).

Considering that the pace of technological advancement is predicted to increase and more and more people are acquiring a connection to the internet (in 2016, 47% of the global population were connected[7]) digital ethnography will likely become even more central to our understanding of the social world and our place in it. The argument that Hine makes in her new book *Ethnography for the Internet*[8] that the internet has become 'embedded' in non-virtual activities, 'embodied' in our daily actions, and the 'everyday' – mundane to the point of near-invisibility – will hold even more true. Digital ethnography will remain an exciting field of inquiry that is continually shifting and adopting to its evolving environment for many decades to come. Precisely because of its emphasis on reflexivity and openness – instead of a narrow focus on some specific technologies –, this volume has the potential to maintain its relevance for a long time to come and provide an adaptable framework for any researcher who wishes to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and nuanced ways the digital can be conceptualized. The many examples of research the book presents also make it an inspiring read, demonstrating that the exploration of the digital offers practically endless and thrillingly diverse opportunities.

---

7 "ICT Facts and Figures 2016". Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Retrieved 2017-03-02.

8 Hine, Christine (2015). Ethnography for the Internet: embedded, embodied and everyday. London: Bloomsbury.