
Post-analog ethnography: pursuing the possibilities

Editorial

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Analog ethnography's glorious past

I began my academic career as an analog ethnographer. As a Ph.D. student, regaled at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, by John Dowling of [Dowling and Pfeffer \(1975\)](#) fame, one of the great, and in my opinion still largely unsung, heroes of institutional theory's founding, I was one of a cadre of students who came out of our course intensives hopped up on the aesthetic, moral and scientific necessity for ethnography [1].

As a result, I am not ashamed to say that I love ethnography as a method. I have immense respect for the history of anthropology and anthropologists. And I delight in ethnographic research as a sub-field within itself that cuts across such a large swath of academic fields, from human geography and cultural studies to nursing, education, sociology and almost everything in between. As a subfield of subfields, ethnography alters as it fragments. We do not talk about it much, almost as if it is shameful that ethnographic purity does not exist – or has been lost. But postmodern ethnography, feminist ethnography, video ethnography and deconstructive ethnography are alternate forms in themselves.

Ethnography exists in concepts like “organizational ethnography,” “feminist ethnography” or “online ethnography”. It is ethnography modified by something. Ethnography is modified by the lenses and focal topics of organizational science, by the axiologies and interests of feminist thought or by the lens of technological instrumentation. What is that original thing then, this thing called ethnography? What is ethnography at its core, the Ur-ethnography? Perhaps Ur-ethnography as a notion is historical, a method fixed in a time when there were many more “organic” cultures to study, cultures that were pre-industrial and lived close to the Earth, like the rain forest Yanomami tribes of Brazil. Studying those freshly discovered tribes with the tools of the globalized capitalist scientific marketplace before the same globalized capitalist scientific marketplace and mass society choked them out, that may have been the original ethnographic imperative – and an incredibly worthy one at that. In that case, the core ethnography was a face-to-face practice involving long travel by boat, a completely different culture, new language, large degrees of unfamiliarity to make familiar. This was ethnography as it was practiced, say, in the 1910s and 20s by Bronislaw Malinowski or over 2,500 years ago by Herodotus as he hung out with the Greek army as they conquered their way through Europe and Asia.

Those cellphone-innocent halcyon days of ethnography are gone. I am sorry if I am the one to pull back the shroud and make the pronouncement, but it is over. Today, even the Yanomami Indians use digital technology. They may not have reliable Wi-Fi at all times, but they are skilled at social media content production, video editing and network promotions. They manage their public relations through individual and tribal social media accounts. They have to! Technology is how they tell their story, how they manage their relationships with the world (if not, increasingly, with each other). This factual example is meant to convince you that there are no pre-technological societies anymore. They are currently, as far as we know, and with rare occasional exceptions for small groups found in a few rapidly vanishing and untouched forests, extinct.

There is no place to hide from being inculcated and enculturated into a culture rich with information and communication technologies. This is not a bad thing for ethnography, not by any means. Online communications and their affordances present the largest and most varied



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buffet of socialities that have ever been served up on this planet or by any species we know of. And ethnography is a perfect – some might say the only – way to study some of their most elemental aspects. But what we must realize, once and for all, is that we are past this pure analog version of Ur-ethnography, face-to-face, emplaced and embodied ethnography. I call this new reality post-analog ethnography. After some purists’ postulated version of ethnography where, as [Hine \(2000\)](#) repeatedly states, and Sarah Pink and her co-authors (e.g. [Pink et al., 2015](#)) frequently indicate, ethnography online is some pale and incomplete “virtual” shadow of the real, authentic, person-to-person practice of netnography.

In fact, it is useful to distinguish [Pink et al.’s \(2015\)](#) notion of digital ethnography to show just how different it is from my idea of post-analog ethnography. Pink *et al.*’s long and winding definition of digital ethnography (2015) seems to conclude that it is ethnography applied to the questions of “what it might actually mean to be digitally engaged” which, the authors assert, involves a lot of exploration of old “ethnographic-theoretical dialogs”. Through their examples, we can see that digital ethnography might mean engaging with people’s online experiences and social experiences, and it also might not. It could mean, for example, watching someone’s body as they use a computer, or sitting in front of them and listening to them talk about their favorite apps. These are not online ethnographies, but something much broader and more diffuse. In fact, the ethnographic theoretical dialogs are more akin to the backwards-looking cogitations of this editorial than they are to any form of practical advice to guide future practice.

Despite this academic meandering in the past, however, the actual cultural world that people live in has moved on from the purely analog state. Practically any topic of any ethnography today is going to need to deal with the fact that a lot of meaningful communication and information involves digital technology. Culture is technoculture today. Analog ethnography is still essential, but we are past the time when a purely analog ethnography is revealing enough to satisfy anyone’s curiosity about culture.

Ethnography and ethnographers, there is no going back.

Analog ethnography as endangered species

I say this not as some technophilic armchair ethnologist or eager content analyst of spreadsheets full of decontextualized YouTube comments. I state it as an ethnographer whose academic career began in fan studies with my sleeves rolled up and my body in the game. As a juiced-up ethnography-practicing Ph.D. student, I was on board as a full-time local fan club member, secretary of the board of directors, convention organizer, and pilgrim to fan sites and conventions that took me to hotel and convention centers across the continent. The online component of my work developed as an organic part of the process of realizing that fan culture was being massively altered by the use of social media technology, and that, to fully understand fan culture circa 1996–1997, I had to incorporate some of that usage into my ethnography.

When I started studying Burning Man a couple of years later, my focus, again, was on the physical event. I would not dream of studying the intense physical immediacy of Burning Man through its evanescent online vestige and would heartily condemn someone who tried. But, at the same time, it was completely clear to me throughout my ethnographic travel to and from Burning Man that the weeklong countercultural event could not be separated from the way you first learned about Burning Man, and from the online “Survival Guide” that taught first-timers exactly what to expect, what to buy and which supplies to bring to Burning Man, how you bought your ticket and made arrangements to meet and found a theme camp and so on. Burning Man was a digital native, online from the moment it was born through the Silicon Valley culture, and there was almost no way to have a Burning Man experience that did not intimately involve networked technology.

And it is not just the culture of Burning Man. It is not just fan culture or Yanomami culture. There is not any work culture, any fan culture, hardly any kind of national, regional, religious or family culture on the planet that I can think of that is not using some kind of technology to communicate in a meaningful and substantial way with others who are members of their clan, heartmates, those with whom they are bonded. That feeling of being one with others, of identifying as being connected to them – those we consider to be like family – is at the heart of our human reality and human experience. Organizations sometimes provide this feeling too, as well as religions and partisan politics. Now more than ever people identify deeply with their collectives, and they organize, publicize, and find those connections through technology. And, just like the Yanomami, these communications extend outwards to telling our own stories to others.

We are currently living through a time in which we are all becoming increasingly aware of the importance of technologically mediated forms of communication in our lives, our work, and all of the various relationships we carry out with people, from those closest to us to those most distant. Technology use changes these relationships, transforming them at the levels of scale, scope and depth. These qualities are measurable both objectively (as with network length, centrality and densities) and sociologically (as an audience, a wellspring of fountaining creativity resulting from massive innovation, and the emotionality of deeply meaningful cultural symbolism that cuts to the cores of our hopes and fears, the dreams and nightmares that constitute our most authentic inner identity).

Ethnographers who are paying attention know this already. Ethnography lurches good-naturedly from one crisis to another and seems to have always done so. In this, one of the latest, we can ask about how ethnography and ethnographers alter their science and their craft in the face of technology's effects on culture, particularly those of social media and mobile communications.

The use of mobile communications and social media involves levels upon levels of infrastructure as well as technological networks of socialities, and its research must also involve the socialities of technologies in use, the aspects (such as affordances) of the technologies used, the perspectives of users, viewed in cultural ways. To understand this interplay, oftentimes we need to understand the industrial, regulatory and business systems in which they are embedded, including, nontrivially, organizations. Throughout all of this complexity, everyone from computer scientists to social psychologists needs ways to study how these communication and information systems modify meaning, restyle language and download motivation in ways that involve communal feelings, senses of belonging, of bodily comfort, arousal and desire.

Being ethnographic in the age of zoom?

As our modalities of being social metamorphose in response to the coronavirus pandemic, as we migrate onto Teams and Hangout or Zoom, we are finding that this is an age not only of massive threats but also of highly significant opportunities. Our work is online. Our friend and family visits are online. Our shopping is online. Our conferences and tradeshow are virtual. I would like to explore some of the arc and trajectory of my explorations with post-analog ethnography, the ethnography that comes after Malinowski, an ethnography that is moderated by terms like technology, poststructural, multi-sited and experimental.

There is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater either. The works of Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Margaret Mead, Clifford Geertz and many others continue to have profound relevance for work in our times and understanding of our world. But that world has also changed radically since those times.

Anthropologists' emphasis on attempting to grasp the "native's" point of view, for example, and their concept of "going native" have to be altered when we add the "auto" of

reflexive study to the notion of ethnography. Most critically of all perhaps is the contestability and problematizing of the notion of participating in a field, as is allegedly done in the ethnographic field trip, ethnographic fieldwork and fieldnotes. What happened when ethnography moved next door? When William Foote Whyte, for example, left Harvard to move to another part of town and started studying the so-called “Italian slums,” it destabilized the notion of ethnographic fieldwork. The ethnographic fieldsite could be another place in your own city. The strangers you sought to understand there could be immigrants or people who were different from you. When, in a gem of a presidential address, [Goldschmidt \(1977, p. 294\)](#) proclaimed that “all ethnography is self-ethnography,” he opened the floodgates that threatened both to wash away what was unique to the anthropology of old, and to usher in the frighteningly new: reflexivity, multiple field sites, an unstable field.

Academics have been adapting ethnography and trying to figure out how to explain those adaptations ever since. Is an ethnographic bus ride across town like a boat voyage to the Trobriand Islands? As ethnographers asked themselves questions like these, the voyages became closer and closer to home. By the time [Hayano \(1979\)](#) was developing auto-ethnography, the horse had already fled the barn. Fieldwork at that point could consist of someone’s day job, or their evening leisure pursuits. There was little voyage involved, and the notion of participation also became increasingly obscure.

What does it mean to understand another person’s relationship to their own lives, to be able to see their own unique and culturally embedded vision of the world when that person is you? What does it mean when it is other people who are very much like you? How do we make sense of these sorts of incursions even when the fieldsite is moving closer and closer to home? In this, the age of coronavirus, we find that the ethnographic voyage might entail moving over to our tablet computer and picking up our phone, pressing a few keys to log in. Increasingly, we have been moving toward a technologically mediated form of auto-ethnography that layers on top of all of our other experiences, scholarly and otherwise.

Our physical worlds are getting much smaller as our digital ones expand to multiple horizons.

To learn a new culture, translate a new language and curate new customs, we do not even need to leave our rooms. To communicate and gain the sense that we are joining a new culture, this does not require an ethnographic informant. It only requires the mediation of a device. Culture has been sliced into finer and finer slivers. Ethnography, once a bow and arrow used to hunt large game, is now affiliated with a centrifuge meant to separate and identify these various cultural fragments. Ethnography becomes reformulated as the study of a series of local micro-practices suited to various contexts and conditions, both in the cultural environment and in academic and institutional ones.

Perhaps we have moved from the alleged rigor of conducting ethnographies to the open-endedness of pursuing the ethnographic. What it means to be ethnographic rather than to conduct ethnography is that we undertake research that tries to reveal reality from the perspective of the culture members who are within it and experiencing it. From that vantage point, we try to explain it from the perspective also of the social system in a way that can be compared and can be linked to existing knowledge structures and the literature intelligently and comparatively. This happens by emphasizing six different things. First, is the researchers’ involvement in the cultural experience – which I prefer to call engagement rather than participation. The term engagement has a range of sociotechnical positionalities, while participation, chained to traditions of face-to-face ethnography, seems constrained. We know what it means to participate in a conversation, to raise our hand in a classroom or meeting. But the analogies seem different when we leave behind the analog.

The second element of the ethnographic that we might try to maintain throughout all of the various moderations of post-analog ethnography is the emphasis on context. The researcher is to be embedded – psychically, emotionally and intellectually, if not physically –

in the same environment as the people he/she is studying. They share the same experiences, and they experience them in similarly human ways. This is important because, in the name of efficiency, artificial intelligence and big data methods are usurping much of the privilege of data analysis from the inefficient human minds who take time to process nuance and interpret significance.

Another of the key elements is humanism. Perhaps, in the past, this humanism was overwrought in the works of anthropologists. Goldschmidt (1977) emphasized that the “anthropological ethos” consisted of “an abiding commitment to egalitarianism” as well as “a strong identification with . . . the underprivileged and powerless peoples of the world”, as well as a belief in the “noble savage” and “the belief that man is essentially good” (295). Embracing every element of this anthropological ethos is probably not essential to conducting post-analog ethnography today. However, it still helps to be able to identify with those you are studying. Seeing social worlds through the perspective of those you are investigating, increasing our empathy, engaging our humanity in this way still seems to be essential – and welcomingly positive – elements of the ethnographic experience. I am excited to see works that recognize “that life is a seamless fabric and that all things are interrelated” as part of ethnographic work (Goldschmidt, 1977). I wonder how we can incorporate the many technological things and networks as parts of this ever-expanding (and, for many species on our world, ever-contracting) and interrelated web of life.

Post-analog ethnography maintains its status as a highly adaptable approach that allows the researcher to engage in a considerable amount of bricolage in the design and implementation of the study. Ethnography functions more through the contextual shaping of general guidelines than through strictly enforced prescriptions that might attempt to aim for replicability and universality. Another ethnographic element is the idea of multiple methods and triangulation between them, whether using documentary analysis, visual analysis, photography, videography, interviews, participant diary-keeping, or even descriptive statistics, where multiple different types and sources of data and approaches are used to understand complex cultural realms.

The final quality of the ethnographic relates to a hunger for holism. Ethnographers seek to reveal macro-principles through the deep study of micro-events. This pursuit causes them to be comprehensive and inclusive. Ethnography often tends to be big picture and to deal with some of the larger questions about humanity and being human. These are questions that we really cannot discuss and uncover using any other method. The ethnographic is where empirical and humanities research meet philosophy, where science and scientists ask questions of morality and direction. The holistic emphasis of ethnography guides us to try and find a thorough understanding that connects different parts of the human experience and sometimes reaches heights both unexpected and unexpectedly fulfilling. These six elements – engagement, context, humanism, adaptation, multiple methods and holism – define, for me, the core of the ethnographic. They substitute in my practice and my philosophy for the rote pursuit of procedures and terms like participation and fieldwork that, for the kind of investigations that often interest me, are usually better left in the past.

Under pressure, the post-analog ethnography evolves

As we consider the contemporary evolution of ethnographic techniques, it is impossible not to consider the role of digital technology. All technologies alter ethnography. Having written languages changed the way we understood Herodotus’s *The Histories*. Robert Flaherty changed the way anthropologists thought about anthropology in 1922 with the videography *Nanook of the North*. As cameras became smaller and less intrusive, we saw more of them in anthropological work. As tape recorders became smaller and more portable, it became possible for ethnographers to use them not only to take fieldnotes but to record interviews *in situ*. This allowed a different focus and new type of ethnography to emerge that was also,

itself, technologically mediated. As telephones allowed us to stay in contact with informants long after we had left the field, this, too, altered the way that ethnography was conducted. The site of the ethnography kept slipping. As long as phone contact was possible, even after the fieldwork was wrapped up, the ethnographer could go back and ask additional inquiries, do member checks, ask for further elaboration or updates.

All of these technologies had major impacts on the ways that ethnography was conducted. With each technology came new affordances and new opportunities for ethnographers to do different things. And in fact, the ethnographies they were creating were changing. Having a camera or a tape recorder meant less time spent describing in words or sketching by hand, and more time using the camera or conducting additional interviews. Each new technology created new challenges and new opportunities.

When computers came into the social scene in the late 1970s and 1980s as the age of electronic communication became a reality, it was not long before researchers began to bring their ideas of the ethnographic to its study. Different scholars took this ethnographic sensibility to the brave new world of technologically mediated communication and information exchange and asked themselves what methodology might they be following as they began conducting the work [2]. During this new practice period, it seems to me that one of the things these early online ethnographic researchers focused on was maintaining a naturalistic feel to the conduct of the research. The context was privileged. The social reality of online sites of communication was considered to be an appropriate context for observation and researcher engagement. Immersion, the notion that the researcher is the most important ethnographic instrument, was key.

There was significant ethnographic work in the mid to late 1990s where the focus was on joining “online communities” or “virtual communities”, with the implicit assumption being that community was something that could and did manifest through these novel digital platforms. Perhaps it did, and perhaps it still does, sometimes. Regardless, the focus on the experience of community became almost an overwhelming fascination and foundation of early ethnographies of online interaction. This may have worked to the detriment of this developing sub-practice because it emphasized the study being confined to particular online sites, an analog to the old days of the bounded fieldsite of analog ethnography.

There have been numerous forms of ethnography of online interaction offered up over the years. Many have simply been ethnographies that involve some sort of online data collection and analysis and that group that online work in with other types of ethnography, such as the face-to-face. My early work among fan communities followed this formula (Kozinets, 2001). At the time, I did not feel it necessary to separate the ethnographic work that involves online communications from the ethnographic work that does not. It was rightfully so because the experience blended utterance and the utterer. But over the years, it has been increasingly puzzling whether the rules of research practice could be the same between them.

Varieties of online ethnographies and the new rules of the game

Online contexts provide new contexts that limit how faithfully we can apply traditional research methods and design, a point astutely made by [Rice and Rogers \(1984, p. 82\)](#). On social media, the nature of social interaction is altered by different technologies. Even different social media platforms provide different types of experiences of interaction. Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat are all highly visual, but different in the way you connect, the types of visual information shared and the way it is presented. On social media, interactants can be anonymous or pseudonymous. They can be human or nonhuman, chatbots, virtual influencers or artificial intelligence (AI) personalities. Online interaction is accessible to a degree that face-to-face social interaction is not. The archiving and automatic data saving functions of the online environment have no analog in the world of analog. Online, we are technology users, consumers. This is a different position and subjectivity than

being culture members and participants. These are just a few ways that the online sociocultural experience faced by an online ethnographer is radically different from that faced by the analog ethnographers of old.

Prior methodologists such as Christine Hine and Dhiraj Murthy offer versions of ethnography such as virtual ethnography and digital ethnography. These methods retain a lot of ethnography's fluidities, the open-ended emergent contextually adapted nature of ethnographic work. They are terms for variants of ethnography that tend to not only focus on the larger philosophical issues of what it means to moderate ethnography with "the virtual" or "the digital", but also to leave many of the important workbench decisions to the individual researcher.

In my native field of consumer research, we are very similar to organizational research in that we tend to have many methods coexisting. It has become quite important for us to explain our methodology to others that may not be familiar with it, but who have an interest in it, and also to those who are interested in following it. Once I began to write about this form of ethnography, I was concerned with being methodical so that other people could benefit from my experience. Although I did not intend at first to teach the method, and only later found myself in that role, my goals from early on were to develop a systematic approach that was concerned with comprehensibility, comparability and comprehensiveness. I wanted to make the method easy to explain, so people could understand what to do. I was not going to dwell on the philosophy of the method any more than I needed to. I wanted people to have a basic system so that they could compare results with one another and build up a body of knowledge about this increasingly important social arena. And I wanted to be able to answer questions about how the approach could be applied in this particular online context (Facebook, Reddit or WhatsApp, for example) or for the study of this particular phenomenon.

As a result, I attempted to systematize the various research choices that one faced in doing ethnography online. To do that, I needed to consider how and where to appropriately maintain the ethnographic in adapting ethnography to these new digital circumstances. And so in my latest iterations of netnography, I emphasize that netnography offers a fundamental understanding of some core steps for conducting this type of research. There are over twenty subcomponents that can be used for various research contexts. But there remains a large degree of flexibility and adaptability so that particular studies can be redesigned and tailored for the needs of particular fields, theoretical frameworks, researchers and their strengths and weaknesses, topics and sites of data, and type of online connection. There are numerous ground rules and guidelines, but the adaptability and flexibility for contextualizing particular studies remain.

Two core concerns that bear mention are platforms and ethics. In terms of the various platforms, researchers investigating topics on social media are faced with an enormous amount of choice, complexity and change. Twitter and Tiktok today. Clubhouse and Discord tomorrow. What is offered on each of them also changes constantly, not only the content but the functionalities as well. Each platform is governed by different terms of use, and the use of each platform has different strengths and weaknesses for particular kinds of study. Data collection may need to be approached differently. So, for example, someone researching Snapchat cannot simply scrape data with a crawler in the way that someone who is researching on Reddit can. And the visual experience from using a platform like Instagram is very different from the textual experience of posting on a Facebook page or the audio experience of Clubhouse. Along with these functions come affordances, and these media offer accordingly different forms of culture and connection. Whereas the analog ethnography was trying to capture a physically present social act with tape recording or videography, in the case of these technologies and platforms they are creating the very experience that is being studied. These platforms are new sources of sociality, new sites of culture, and new places of

connection, meaning, and sense-making. And so the technologies are complex and various, and the rules of analog ethnography struggle to keep up [3].

In terms of research ethics too, the rules have changed. On social media platforms, ethnographers have access to public sites that are far more massive than the intimate cultural gatherings of analog ethnographies. People, voices and faces are reduced to pseudonyms and content, data waiting to be scraped into the columns of spreadsheets. Social media researchers gain access to private spaces where the rules of engagement are unclear and amorphous. Platforms are owned by profit-making companies, governed by their terms, and many kinds of research are expressly forbidden. Governments regulate data usage in these spaces, setting legal boundaries and limitations on what can and cannot be done.

Ethical research practice in circumstances such as these requires knowledge not only of the past of research ethics procedures but also of salient technological elements, as well as normative legal and institutional protocols. Online access also gives qualitative researchers the ability to become a type of fly on the wall. This creates an enormous responsibility, one that raises very important questions about when informed consent is required. Online, the ethnographer has to be certain about matters such as whether every person needs to permit their publicly posted words to be captured and communicated in a research document (they do not). The ethnographer needs to think about when it is appropriate to give an informed consent form to someone (in an interview, even a brief online one, it is). We have new issues like data security. We need to think about anonymizing names and verbatim data so that it cannot be backwards traced through a search engine. So many of these things involve a deep knowledge of technology and what it offers. Navigating these spaces has as much in common with the human-computer interactionist's knowledge of platforms and their affordances as it does with the rich history of analog ethnography.

Netnography for today and tomorrow

In my writing, I have tried to both link netnography to the ethnographic as well as to emphasize a pragmatic, hands-on, workbench level approach that removes a lot of the guesswork for new scholars and students. Netnography is a type of online qualitative social media research that offers particular steps (called movements). Depending upon your research question, certain movements are required and others are optional. Within each movement, there are combinations of specific qualitative research practices. For example, the "investigation" stage has a procedure called "simplification" which involves turning your research questions into search terms that can then be used for selecting sites to search for research-relevant data.

Netnography contains various sub-routines or operations that capture entire procedures for conducting online research. For example, there are guidelines for conducting online interviews. There are others for constructing research web pages to collect data from cultural participants. Others guide the conduct of mobile ethnographies that utilize cell phones to gain ethnographic access to private cultural spaces. Each of these subroutines is connected to the ethnographic in a way that is adapted to the realities of these new technological media and the legal and sociocultural conditions (including regulations) of their use. These conditions vary by country. For example, there are different rules for the USA, UK and the EU, and researchers must follow the rules relating to the nationality of the citizens they are studying online (often very hard to determine), and not where they (the research or researchers) are located.

Social media presents an incredibly exciting, fast-paced, yet extremely complex and multifaceted research environment. Anything that we can do to reduce its uncertainties and challenges should be welcome. That is why I believe that relying on the old practices of analog ethnography or the newer but open-ended variants simply will not do. We need clear

operating instructions, navigational handbooks. That is why netnography emphasizes procedures and platforms. Beyond guidelines and single authoritative voices, however, are living active fields. I believe that, if it is not already there, netnography is quickly becoming such a field. Researchers are working with the core texts and making adaptations, experimenting with different procedures for different problems, questions, and platforms, and then publishing the results of these experimentations. As I have said elsewhere, netnography is crowdsourced, and this is one of its biggest strengths. Now, if it is to be a healthy and meaningful method, netnography is something that must continue to build collectively across and within fields of inquiry.

Flexible and practical, netnography is at least as good a candidate to pick up the mantle of the ethnographic online as any other approach. As a contextualized study of online traces, netnography provides the researcher with the clearest and most comprehensive set of rules and guidelines for performing rigorous cultural research. Its rapid pickup in the time of coronavirus demonstrates the usefulness of this approach in situations where a student or researcher cannot leave their own home. As we adjust to a new normal post-lockdown, I suspect that, regardless of viral variants, we will find that human sociality has moved further and deeper online.

Globally, culture has changed, and ethnography and ethnographers are struggling to keep up with those transformations. Ethnography has moved from a Malinowskian undertaking to local street corners, into the mirrors of auto-ethnographic self-reflection, and now onto the mobile phones of digital researchers. In this essay, I have tried to provide a sense of the grounding of online forms of ethnography, including netnography, in an abiding notion of the ethnographic. I have also tried to instill an appreciation for the need for common ground rules, common language and scientific comparability to continue to teach and learn. I have emphasized not only crowdsourcing but the technical comprehension of technology platforms as crucial to the conduct of ethnography online. As our technologies extend, our conceptions of the social worlds that humanity encounters seem to be expanding to include nonhuman actors and agents such as algorithms, affordances and AI.

Ethnography changes and fragments. On social media, ethnographic research also changes and fragments. There are already multiple variants of netnography, from more-than-human netnography to digital netnography to auto-netnography. This makes sense, as social media expands in influence and numbers at a breathtaking pace. Today, five billion people have cell phones and access to social media. As our organizations become ever more complex and ever more embedded in and wedded to these transnational webs of information and communication, it makes sense to expand and develop our research toolkits so that ethnography's future as a form of scientific inquiry is as bright as its past.

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Notes

1. Although John Dowling did not achieve the statue of, say Richard Scott, who is widely recognized as one of the pillars of institutional theory or of his brilliant mentor, Jeffrey Pfeffer, whose lasting relevance is reflected by 154,000 Google Scholar citations. But he certainly left his mark on me and my colleagues at Queens as an inspiring, iconoclastic teacher and all-around intellectual catalyst.
2. This is a necessarily brief overview of a fascinating social history. I begin to explore it in chapter 2 of [Kozinets \(2020\)](#), but it certainly deserves a fuller treatment in our literature.
3. As Manuela Nocker and I have written about [Kozinets and Nocker \(2018\)](#). See that chapter for further and deeper development of the implications of netnography for management and organization research and science.

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