

One Ethnography in a Digital World

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Introduction

Digital Ethnography outlines an approach to doing ethnography in a contemporary world. It invites researchers to consider how we live and research in a digital, material and sensory environment. This is not a static world or environment. Rather, it is one in which we need to know how to research in it as it develops and changes. *Digital Ethnography* also explores the consequences of the presence of digital media in shaping the techniques and processes through which we practice ethnography, and accounts for how the digital, methodological, practical and theoretical dimensions of ethnographic research are increasingly intertwined.

This book is not just for the specialist in digital media. Rather, it is a proposal for how we might do ethnography as the digital unfolds as part of the world that we co-inhabit with the people who participate in our research. Doing research with, through and in an environment partially constituted by digital media has led to the development of new and innovative methods and challenged existing conceptual and analytical categories. It has invited us not only to theorise the digital world in new ways, but also to re-think how we have understood pre-digital practices, media and environments. *Digital Ethnography* addresses this context by explaining the possibilities of digital ethnography for both researching and redefining central concepts in social and cultural research.

In doing so, *Digital Ethnography* takes us to the core issues in this debate. It asks how digital environments, methods and methodologies are redefining ethnographic practice. It takes the novel step of acknowledging the role of digital ethnography in challenging the concepts that have traditionally defined the units of analysis that ethnography has been used to study. It goes beyond simply translating traditional concepts and methods into digital research environments, by exploring the ethnographic–theoretical dialogues through which ‘old’ concepts are impacted by digital ethnography practice.

This book therefore addresses anyone who is interested in the implications of the digital world and an ethnographic approach for their research practice or for understanding the contemporary contexts in which we do research. It can be used at different levels and in different ways. Some readers might wish to use the concepts that we introduce as templates for developing projects or theses. Others will be able to use the book as an introduction to understanding how we live and act in a context that is, today, almost always co-constituted and entangled with digital technologies, content, presence and communication. While others will wish to engage with our broader argument and definition of the digital as situated in everyday worlds. As such it might be treated as a framing understanding through which further developments in theoretical scholarship and methodological improvisation may potentially emerge.

What is *Digital Ethnography*?

Ethnography is a way of practicing research. Readers interested in ethnography will likely have encountered the mounting literature in this field. While sometimes proponents of different disciplines might claim to ‘own’ ethnography as ‘their’ approach, in reality such ownership only comes about contextually. That is to say, ethnography is not a very meaningful practice by itself; instead, it is only useful when engaged through a particular disciplinary or interdisciplinary paradigm and used in relation to other practices and ideas within a research process.

There are multiple definitions of ethnography with slight variations proposed by a range of different authors. In this book we are not necessarily interested in contributing to the creation of new definitions. We acknowledge that digital ethnography might be practiced and defined in different ways that relate more or less closely to the range of existing definitions. The ways in which readers will wish to define ethnography will also depend on their own critical backgrounds and interests. For example, as Pink has pointed out (2015), some definitions are more open (O’Reilly, 2005), and others are more prescriptive (Delamont, 2007). Following Karen O’Reilly, we posit that ethnography is: ‘iterative–inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods ... that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher’s own role and that views humans as part object/part subject’ (2005: 3).

Yet, once ethnography becomes digital, parts of O’Reilly’s definition become conditional on our acknowledgement of how digital media become part of an ethnography that involves ‘direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures)’; what it might actually mean to be digitally engaged in the equivalent of ‘watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions’; and where we might want to do more than ‘producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience’ (all quotes are from O’Reilly, 2005: 3). Most of these ethnographic activities are to some extent transferable to a digital ethnography approach, but the conventional ethnographic practices that they stand for begin to shift. In digital ethnography, we are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence. As the following chapters suggest, we might be in conversation with people throughout their everyday lives. We might be watching what people do by digitally tracking them, or asking them to invite us into their social media practices. Listening may involve reading, or it might involve sensing and communicating in other ways. Ethnographic writing might be replaced by video, photography or blogging. Indeed, taking O’Reilly’s open definition as a starting point offers us a useful way to consider what differences the digital actually makes to our practice as ethnographers, and thus to contemplate digital ethnography as it evolves. As new technologies offer new ways of engaging with emergent research environments, our actual practices as ethnographers also shift.

O’Reilly’s definition is useful because it remains open to the relationship between ethnography and theory without insisting that a particular disciplinary theory needs to be used in dialogue with ethnographic materials. To engage in a particular approach to ethnography, we need to have a theory of the world that we live in. The ways in which we theorise the world as scholars, working in or across academic disciplines, impacts on our practice as individual (or team-working) ethnographers in particular ways. Methods and theory are two aspects of ethnographic research and analysis that change when carried out by different researchers. The authors of this book, for example, do not all ascribe to the same theoretical visions of the world. In fact, it would be surprising if we did, because our work is oriented towards and originates from different disciplinary approaches, ranging between social anthropology, media and communication studies and cultural studies. This means that the perspectives and the emphases that we

take in doing research vary. However, there is a set of principles that underpins the approach to ethnography that we advocate and which inform the very ways in which we theorise ethnographic practice. We elaborate on these in more detail below.

Digital Ethnography across Disciplines

There are a good many prisms through which ethnography might be viewed. The literature about research practice and methods reveals two key trajectories. First, over the years, in parallel and in dialogue with changing theoretical and substantive foci in research, methodologies for researching have shifted in relation to the key debates that they generated. To be specific, in the history of ideas in the social sciences, when there has been a ‘turn’ in focus towards gender, the visual or the senses, for example, there has likewise been a ‘turn’ in the methodology literature. Where ethnographic methods are concerned, a focus on gender in ethnography also corresponded with greater reflexivity with respect to the contexts of knowledge production. There has been a parallel turn in reflexive practice, such as that in the work of Ruth Behar (1996) or Kamala Visweswaran (1994), who examine women’s lives and the practice of feminist ethnography (see also Behar and Gordon, 1995; Bell et al., 1991). The increasing focus on the visual (e.g., Pink, 2001; Banks, 2001) and the senses (e.g., Classen, 1993; Classen et al., 1994; Howes, 2003; Pink, 2009; Vannini et al., 2012) at the turn of the century similarly came with new methods as well as a challenge to the dominant ways of ‘knowing’ and ‘researching’ that privilege particular senses.

The second trajectory is that these ‘turns’, however, do not necessarily stop once they have happened, but instead become consolidated and integrated as part of ethnographic practice. Sometimes they expand. Therefore, as readers will note in the following chapters, the ethnographic examples we outline might discuss the gendered relations of the people we have researched with as well as our own encounters as gendered researchers. We likewise discuss the different methods that reflect the practice of ethnography. Similarly, there has been a strand of ethnographic methodology literature regarding the digital. Many argue that this strand launched around 2000 with Christine Hine’s *Virtual Ethnography*, although of course there were early predecessors (e.g., Baym, 1999; Correll, 1995; Gray and Driscoll, 1992; Hakken, 1999; Ito, 1997; Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998; Lyman and Wakeford, 1999). Hine’s book effectively began a strand of consolidation of this theme through books and journal publications that collectively constituted a field of ethnographic inquiry. *Digital Ethnography* sits across these sets of literature. It incorporates a number of theoretical turns that have played a key role in defining ethnographic practice in the last twenty or so years. Yet, at the same time, it expands the debate about the consequences of the digital for ethnography.

Despite an interest in digital culture and practices across a range of disciplines, it is interesting to note that most of the attempts to define ethnography as ‘digital’ have been focused in anthropology and sociology. This is not to dismiss contributions to ethnographic practice in disciplines and fields such as Human Computer Interaction (HCI), human geography and media and cultural studies. These fields and disciplines have often engaged with ‘ethnography’ as part of an ‘ethnographic turn’ to understand media or digital practices. For example, in HCI and related fields such as Informatics, Information Studies and ubiquitous computing, ethnography has been usefully incorporated to nuance and expand the notion of the ‘user’ (see Dourish and Bell, 2011). Like human geography’s grappling with the consequences of the ‘online’, ‘offline’ and the ‘virtual’, what is interesting about this particular focus on the ‘digital’ is what it means for the other end of the equation, be it digital anthropology or digital sociology.

Building on the formative work of Sherry Turkle (2005) and others, sociologists have broadened their focus on looking at the implications of ‘the digital’ through a focus on digital media or transformations that accompany ‘the digital age’ (Robinson and Halle, 2002; Robinson, 2007; Turkle, 2005, 2011). Many of these studies have taken up sociology’s concern with structural forms and inequities to understand how inequality is extended, reproduced or complicated by digital media technologies (see Orton-Johnson and

Prior, 2013). These debates are also influenced by the particular approach to ethnography undertaken in digital sociology. For instance, Bella Dicks et al.'s *Qualitative Research and Hypermedia: Ethnography for the Digital Age* (2005) introduced the use of digital media as an approach to sociology that was rooted in the multimodality paradigm. In contrast, the sociologist Dhiraj Murthy describes digital ethnography as being centred on 'data-gathering methods [that] are mediated by computer-mediated communication' (2011: 159). This, he writes, includes 'digitally mediated fieldnotes, online participant observation, blogs/wikis with contributions by respondents, and online focus groups' and can also include accounts of offline groups (ibid.: 159).

By comparison, Hine and other sociologists who have become interested in the consequences of the Internet and digital media and technology generally have been influenced by the interdisciplinary perspectives of Science and Technology Studies (STS). In her introduction to *Digital Sociology*, Deborah Lupton (2014) has recently argued that those who describe themselves as digital sociologists engage in four types of practices. These include: first, new forms of professional practice where sociologists use digital tools to network and build conversations; second, researching how people are using digital media, technologies and tools; third, using digital tools for analysis; and fourth, engaging in critical analysis of the use and consequences of digital media. As Lupton suggests, one of the key concerns in digital sociology has been the extent to which algorithmic data has the capacity to enhance, change or replace traditional qualitative (as sociologists frame ethnography) and quantitative practice. In other words, digital sociology is framed as a debate about the discipline's focus and practice. In contrast, Marres (2013) defines the concerns of digital sociology as being not 'just about theorizing the digital society, and ... not just about applying social methods to analyse digital social life', instead stressing that: 'The relations between social life and its analysis are changing in the context of digitization, and digital sociology offers a way of engaging with this.' Marres is particularly inspired by the possibility of new, interdisciplinary 'inventive methods' such as those exemplified in the work of Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford. In fact, Marres expresses discomfiture with the disciplinary label of digital 'sociology' itself.

The growth of digital anthropology as a subfield has been well established through the works of: Horst and Miller (2012b), who, in their edited book *Digital Anthropology*, build on their earlier ethnographic research around digital technologies (Horst and Miller, 2006; Madianou and Miller, 2011; Miller, 2012; Miller and Slater, 2000); as well as the growing literature on virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010); on mobile and social media use (Gershon, 2010); networked forms of community and activism (Coleman et al., 2008; Postill, 2011); and broader reflections on the digital age (Ginsburg, 2008). These and other topics are demonstrated in the book's various chapters on: digital archives (Geismar, 2012); disability (Ginsburg, 2012); politics (Postill, 2012a); location technologies (DeNicola, 2012); open source software (Karanovic, 2012); development (Tacchi, 2012); gaming (Malaby, 2012); and design (Drazin, 2012); personal communication (Broadbent, 2012); social networking (Miller, 2012); religious contexts (Barendregt, 2012); and everyday life (Horst, 2012). Horst and Miller's edited volume reveals that 'the digital' is spread across 'traditional' as well as new domains. As such, they argue that digital anthropology is now a field of study in its own right, akin to classic areas of anthropological inquiry, such as religion, legal or economic anthropology (Boellstorff, 2012). Like these more traditional areas of investigation, digital anthropology also takes up the discipline's broader concern with what makes us 'human' (Miller and Horst, 2012). This last point has been a particular focus of anthropological debate centring on technology since the emergence of 'cyberia' and 'cyberspace' studies (Escobar, 1994; Hakken, 1999; Haraway, 1991; Whitehead and Wesch, 2012).

While one must be careful not to conflate anthropology with ethnography (Ingold, 2008), most

anthropologists are likely to study the digital using an ethnographic approach. For example, Gabriella Coleman's (2010) review article, entitled 'Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media', that focuses on a broad set of practices and practitioners outside the discipline of anthropology. For anthropological ethnography, there is increasing discussion of the digital as a field in which we practice as much as we analyse. This shows that there are a range of ways in which digital anthropology itself might be interpreted, and as such we would expect digital ethnography to be equally varied when carried out by anthropologists. In effect, what we see through both the discussion of digital sociology and anthropology is that the broadening out to other disciplines is a welcome and productive catalyst for disciplinary debates. In fact, the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration are well demonstrated in a recent co-authored book on ethnographic approaches to studying virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In their book, the authors – who have studied virtual worlds via ethnography from both sociological and anthropological perspectives – come into conversation to design an approach to the ethnography of virtual worlds, which counters some of what they view as the limitations of many approaches that claim ethnographic perspectives and methods.

Within this context, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* takes a specific stance in relation to the debates and discussions in the work discussed above. *Digital Ethnography* sets out a particular type of digital ethnography practice that takes as its starting point the idea that digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit. It follows what media scholars have called a non-media-centric (Couldry, 2012; Moores, 2012; Morley, 2009) approach to media studies by taking a non-digital-centric approach to the digital. It also acknowledges the intangible as a part of digital ethnography research, precisely because it invites us to consider the question of the 'digital intangible' and the relationship between digital, sensory, atmospheric and material elements of our worlds. In effect, we are interested in how the digital has become part of the material, sensory and social worlds we inhabit, and what the implications are for ethnographic research practice.

In this book, we suggest ways of acknowledging and accounting for the digital as part of our worlds that are both theoretical and practical and that offer coherent frameworks through which to *do* ethnography across specific sites and questions. As ethnographic researchers, we always share aspects of being in everyday worlds and making them along with the participants in our projects. Such an understanding opens up ways to conceptualise our research relationships and the basis on which we develop our collaborations as ethnographers. Just as we divide up the chapters of this book according to the idea of using concepts of experience, practice, things, relationships, social worlds, localities and events as units of analysis, so we could also very well conceptualise the ethnographic process through these very categories.

In the [next section](#), we take a step back to explore how we might define ethnography and how this extends to a definition of digital ethnography. We argue that, in order to understand the practice of digital ethnography, we also need a theory of the digital.

Principles for a Digital Ethnography

In this section, we outline five key principles for doing digital ethnography: multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity and unorthodox. Most of these have been alluded to in the discussion above. Indeed, it would be difficult to write of digital ethnography at all without mentioning them. We now define them more closely and we discuss why and how they come into play specifically in the context of digital ethnography theory and practice. These principles are also demonstrated in the examples and discussions that we develop throughout this book. When relevant, we point to where instances of them appear in the following chapters. However, readers might also keep in mind that the process of identifying these principles has also been part of the process through which the writing of this book has enabled us to reflect on how, building up from our research experiences, a set of principles might be developed. While these principles are grounded in experience, they might not always be represented in all projects and in some cases offer an ideal model of digital ethnography practice that is not always realisable. Such a model is not necessarily to be aspired to, but to be bounced off, played with and adapted according to the contexts and aspirations of each new research project and process.

1. Multiplicity: There is more than one way to engage with the digital

Digital ethnography research is always unique to the research question and challenges to which it is responding. It is often guided by specific theoretical frameworks connected to academic disciplines, as well as by the needs and interests of different research partners, stakeholders and participants. These influences and their impact make each project and the way it is formulated evolve in particular ways. In the examples in the following chapters, we often note how the projects we discuss were funded and conceptualised because this influences the types of knowledge that is produced.

At the same time, we need to keep in mind how digital technologies and media (and the things that people can do with them) are interdependent with the infrastructures of everyday life. For example, digital media need to be powered by a reliable energy source. They need to be able to be used by the research participants whose lives and media use we are interested in studying. They also need to be functional enough for researchers to be able to use them for fieldwork. Perhaps more significantly, the infrastructures that exist to support digital media use have a clear impact on both the participants in research and the researchers. For example, during his recent fieldwork on digital media and civic participation in Indonesia, John Postill found that because there is comparatively little digital broadband and Wi-Fi access in Indonesian cities, the participants in his research tended to depend on smartphones for Internet access. This framed both the topic he was studying and the ways in which he was able to be active as a researcher working in a digital field with a different infrastructure to that he had experienced in Barcelona where public Wi-Fi connections are easily located.

In other contexts, Wi-Fi and social media connections might be part of the research process. Indeed, in much new work on dynamic spaces there is a need to capture and archive transient processes. For example, in Heather Horst's recent collaboration with Robert Foster on the moral and cultural economy of mobile phones in the Pacific, they have started archiving the various companies' mobile advertisements through sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo. Their aim is to understand how transnational companies develop local versions of their products and services. Without their efforts to archive, these advertisements are transient and often disappear. Moreover, when working in interdisciplinary projects and/or in distributed teams, in any context where digital data collection is part of the research process, research participants might be required to have a Wi-Fi connection to engage in Skype, Google Chat or other conference call services, which, in turn, help to create close-to-synchronous collaboration and data sharing. Variations in bandwidth speeds also shape the practices of digital ethnography.

2. Non-digital-centric-ness: The digital is de-centred in digital ethnography

The idea that media studies scholars might take what has been called a ‘non-media-centric’ approach is experiencing something of a revival in media studies and media anthropology (for examples, see Couldry, 2012; Moores, 2012; Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013). Such approaches de-centre media as the focus of media research in order to acknowledge the ways in which media are inseparable from the other activities, technologies, materialities and feelings through which they are used, experienced and operate. Indeed, for anthropologists – even those who call themselves media anthropologists – the idea of studying media in a way that always puts media at the centre of analysis would be problematic because it would pay too little attention to the ways in which media are part of wider sets of environments and relations. Moreover, as we often find when doing ethnographic research, by approaching research questions indirectly, that is through something that is related in some fundamental way to the very thing we wish to learn about, we can often produce novel insights that tell us more about what underlies the findings of research. These kinds of insights are difficult to find through standard interview and survey methods. In the example of Pink’s research about energy demand discussed in [Chapter 2](#), the researchers did not directly ask participants about their energy or media use, but instead studied, together with participants, the everyday routines and activities that participants engaged in that required or implicated the use of energy and digital media. The same principles can be applied to the study of digital media more generally (Horst, 2012).

In order to understand how digital media are part of people’s everyday worlds, we also need to understand other aspects of their worlds and lives. In doing so, we might focus specifically on those domains of activity in which digital media are used rather than on the characteristics or use of media. As we show in [Chapter 5](#), digital media form part of human relationships. Moreover, the qualities and affordances of mobile phones and locative applications enable new aspects of those relationships (in our examples, new forms of co-presence, or being together). Yet, even when they are conducted primarily online, relationships cannot be purely digital. We therefore need to look beyond the digital to understand how they are played out. For instance, in Horst’s example in [Chapter 5](#), transnational communication within families can only be understood in relation to the norms of kinship in Jamaica, particularly the gendered expectations of grandmothers, men and children. Jo Tacchi’s study of the significance of mobile phone use among women living in Delhi slums requires a broader understanding of what mobility means for the women in her study. Similarly, in [Chapter 8](#), we see how the concept of the event, which involves bringing together processes of different types to constitute an event, also offers us an example of how digital activities, technologies, content and uses become part of wider configurations. While our interest in this book is in the digital as part of ethnography, our approach to understanding the event through digital ethnography practices and principles means that we can understand more than just the role of digital media in people’s lives. We can also demonstrate the implications of digital media through examining the entanglements of other things.

Following the same principle, then, we also argue that digital ethnography research methods should be non-digital-centric. This means that the digital ethnography project should not be prefaced with the idea of needing to use digital methods. Rather, the use of digital methods should always be developed and designed specifically in relation to the particular research questions being asked. It might be that some research about digital media use would be best undertaken when not using digital technologies as research tools, or that research that uses digital techniques and tools might be about everyday life

activities or localities that are not usually contexts or sites of digital media immersion, or are sites of limited digital media immersion or availability. One example of this is Tania Lewis's discussion of the practice of 'permablitzing', wherein the primary activity involves getting out in the urban gardens of Melbourne to work. In this case, the Permablitz website is secondary to the core practice, effectively becoming a conduit for the primary practice of gardening and greening the city.

Therefore, by keeping the place of digital media in research relational to other elements and domains of the research topic, site and methods, we are able to understand the digital as *part of* something wider, rather than situating it at the centre of our work. This, we propose, inevitably enriches both the ways in which we study digital media, their uses, qualities and affordances, and the ways in which these studies create insights into the digital impacts on other strands and elements that constitute everyday environments, experiences, activities and relationships.

3. Openness: Digital ethnography is an open event

The concept of ‘openness’ has increasing currency in contemporary academic and other discourse and practice. For instance, the geographer Doreen Massey refers to what she calls ‘place’ as open, seeing it as a kind of ‘event’ where things are drawn together (2005). The term ‘open’ is also being used to characterise design processes as open-ended. For instance, the anthropologist Tim Ingold writes that ‘designing is about imagining the future. But far from seeking finality and closure, it is an imagining that is open-ended’ (2012: 29). Indeed, this processual way of characterising the kinds of things that we do as academics and researchers offers us a way to conceptualise digital ethnography research processes as open. That is, digital ethnography is not a research ‘method’ that is bounded. Nor is it a unit of activity or a technique with a beginning or end. Rather, it is processual.

Openness is also a fundamental concept in what is sometimes called ‘digital culture’, whereby open source, creative commons and other forms of digital sharing and collaboration become ways of being and relating to others in relation to digital media. Transferring this concept of openness to the digital ethnography research process helps us to understand the process of doing digital ethnography in a way that is open to other influences (like those of speculative design or arts practice) as well as to the needs of other disciplines and external stakeholders with whom ethnographers might collaborate. For example, in the work of Horst, discussed in [Chapter 3](#), this has meant that the basic research findings were integrated into a broader and comparative project to be able to generalise to a educational context. In Pink’s study discussed in [Chapter 2](#), the research has involved collaborations with engineers and designers. Hjorth’s Spatial Dialogues project discussed in [Chapter 8](#) illustrates how ethnographic and arts practice come closer together. Finally, in Tacchi and Lewis’s work with KPMG, the industry stakeholder’s needs became embedded in the ethnographic project. Digital ethnography, if it is to be undertaken at these intersections between academic disciplines and external partners, becomes an open and flexible research design, which can be shaped in relation to the particular research questions which it asks as well as to the institutional contexts which it is related to and the ways in which the participants in the research engage with it.

The openness of digital ethnography therefore signifies that digital ethnography is a collaborative process. Indeed, it could be argued that all ethnography is equally collaborative in that the research encounter with others – as opposed to the distanced observational stance – is inevitably a collaborative activity: that is, we make knowledge and ways of knowing with others, and not as lone researchers. However, returning to the parallel between digital ethnography and popular representations of digital culture, which is also regarded as a collaborative and participatory context, we can see that the association of digital ethnography with collaboration invites further scrutiny. This does not mean that digital ethnography would be essentially ‘more collaborative’ than other renderings of ethnographic practice. Rather, it suggests that digital forms of collaboration, as integrated into digital ethnography research processes, invite different collaborative ways of co-producing knowledge with research partners and participants.

4. Reflexivity: Digital ethnography involves reflexive practice

In ethnographic practice, the notion of reflexivity has stemmed largely from what was called the ‘writing culture debate’ – a discussion and literature that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and attended to a series of questions around the ways in which knowledge was produced through anthropological ethnography (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; James et al., 1997). The outcome of these discussions was for ethnography to become associated with the notion of a reflexive form of research practice. This was particularly the case for anthropological ethnography but has also become important to how ethnography is carried out in some fields of sociology and human geography. For the purposes of this book, to be reflexive can be defined as the ways in which we, as ethnographers, produce knowledge through our encounters with other people and things. It is an approach that goes beyond the simple idea of ‘bias’ and that engages with the subjectivity of the research encounter and the explicatory nature of ethnographic writing as a positive and creative route through which to produce knowledge or ways of knowing about other people, their lives, experiences and environments. Reflexive practice is also considered to be an ethical practice in that it enables researchers to acknowledge the collaborative ways in which knowledge is made in the ethnographic process.

In the context of digital ethnography, reflexivity does not necessarily take a different form to that which it would take in any other ethnographic process. However, we might think of the distinguishing feature in relation to the ways in which digital ethnographers theorise and encounter the world as a digital–material–sensory environment. Part of the ways that digital ethnographers might reflexively engage with their worlds is concerned with asking ourselves precisely those questions about how we produce knowledge. Our relationships with the digital are pivotal to the specific ways of knowing and being that we will encounter in the course of our research practice.

5. *Unorthodox*: Digital ethnography requires attention to alternative forms of communicating

Each of the chapters in this book features three examples of ethnographic writing drawn from the authors' own research at different physical and digital sites around the world. These examples are based on projects that account for the digital as part of the environment or everyday life, or as research technologies, or as both. The examples throughout the book show how taking a digital approach enables us to acknowledge and seek out ways of knowing (about) other people's worlds that might otherwise be invisible and that might be unanticipated by more formally constituted, and thus less exploratory and collaborative, research approaches. They also account for the research process as being inextricable from the ways in which ethnographic knowledge is produced, thus in some cases incorporating a degree of reflexivity into the ethnographic writing process. As instances of writing digital ethnography, these offer readers a set of examples of both what we might learn through doing digital ethnography and how and where it might be practiced.

In presenting these examples in written form, we focus on timely and, in some cases, 'rawer' forms of communication than the ways in which many digital ethnographers (the authors of this book included) tend to publish in quite conventional paper formats. Few digital ethnographies have photographs and those that have experimented with companion websites (e.g., Miller and Slater, 2000) have found little interest in these associated sites. Scholars who work with photography and video in digital ethnography and the visual as a topic of study or a mode of investigation (e.g. Ardévol 2012; Gomez Cruz, 2012) note the limitations of the ethnographic monograph. There is an emerging digital visual ethnography practice that includes using the visual as a research method and that holds enormous potential for the visual in digital dissemination (Pink, 2012). This is because digital dissemination methods go beyond the more conventional visual anthropology approach in the making of digital film and photography. In tune with this call for a visual digital ethnography, most of the examples given in this book have included one or more images that not only simply serve as illustrations but also as modes of evoking the feelings, relationships, materialities, activities and configurations of these things that formed part of the research context.

Several of the projects discussed in this book have also taken unorthodox forms of dissemination. This includes a range of websites, such as Pink's recent Energy & Digital Living website (<http://energyanddigitalliving.com>) that features 'raw' footage of participants doing their laundry and using energy, as well as Postill's blog (<http://johnpostill.com/blog-series/>), which archives conference and paper presentations as well as preliminary analyses of current events. Horst's work on the 'Digital Youth Project', which involved disseminating material through a project blog (<http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/stories.html>), an academic book, executive summary, as well as a public forum broadcast on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=CC2EF6A461393C86), and in her work with Erin Taylor (2014) on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, likewise explored various forms of presenting material such as a two-page 'cost of sending money' flyer (http://www.imtfi.uci.edu/files/docs/2010/mmm_time_and_cost_flyer_feb20111.pdf). Finally, Tacchi's work in the area of communication for development has included the dissemination of digital content created by research participants in the *Finding a Voice* project (<http://findingavoice.org>), and the development of the ethnographic action research training website (<http://ear.findingavoice.org>), which shares examples of the process of research and field notes from local community based researchers. These timely, translational and, in some ways, more transparent forms of ethnographic practices represent unorthodox forms of making and doing ethnography that leverage digital media and go beyond a

'broadcast' model of dissemination. These, in turn, highlight the potential, opportunities and challenges of digital ethnography.

These unorthodox approaches to methods dissemination enable new forms of continuity between digital ethnography fieldwork, ongoing collaborations and dialogues with research participants, and a certain bringing together of the temporalities and sites of the research, analysis and dissemination processes. They thus show how a digital ethnography approach enables us to go beyond academia, beyond disciplines and beyond the standard written production of academic scholarship.

The Framework for this Book

In this book, we examine how seven key concepts in social and cultural theory can be used for the design and analysis of ethnographic research. These concepts were selected to represent a range of different routes to approaching the social world, that is: through experiences (what people feel); practices (what people do); things (the objects that are part of our lives); relationships (our intimate social environments); social worlds (the groups and wider social configurations through which people relate to each other); localities (the actual physically shared contexts that we inhabit); and events (the coming together of diverse things in public contexts). All of these concepts have already been part of social sciences and humanities research for a long time and, in fact, they remain at the core of our business as academics. Yet, existing theoretical concepts have often been configured in ways that have responded to the specificity of the social, cultural and material forms that they have been used to understand. This means that sometimes they present limiting paradigms that do not reach the needs of contemporary researchers.

We argue that the seven concepts that we have chosen to explore in this book can all be used effectively to understand and research in digital environments, but that they need sometimes to be more finely honed for such work. We propose that the concepts can also be reshaped in response to the ways in which we encounter digital worlds ethnographically. We would also stress that the concepts which we have chosen are not the only ones that might be (re)engaged or invented to be used in dialogue with digital ethnography practice. Our main limitation has been that it would be impossible to cover everything within a single book, and so our choice has been based on an assessment of which theoretical concepts are emerging as increasingly important through recent theoretical ‘turns’ and debates with which our work, collectively, has been engaged. However, we would encourage readers to continue this work by exploring the use of other concepts in similar ways.

Indeed, our wider argument is that, for a number of reasons, contemporary ethnography needs to be as Hine has put it, ‘adaptive’ (2015: 192). The reasons for using adaptive methods vary: they can be a response to time limitations, the distributed nature of field sites, the nature of the analytical units or the (inter)disciplinary foci they take. Yet, we contend that we also need to use ‘adaptive concepts’ precisely because digital ethnography is not just a ‘method’ or part of a ‘toolkit’. Rather, digital ethnography is also always engaged in building and developing theory.

Structuring Digital Ethnography: A Guide to the Book

Digital Ethnography is set out around a series of concepts, all of which researchers and scholars who work across a range of fields and disciplines have found to be important and useful as units or categories through which to design, analyse and represent ethnographic research: experience, practice, relationships, things, localities, social worlds and events. These concepts share the common feature of having all been developed in various more or less indirect ways in existing literatures and therefore have both biographies as concepts in the social sciences and humanities, and have more recently been engaged for the analysis of a contemporary world of which the digital is a part.

The concepts are introduced in the order that is set out above, that is, from experience in [Chapter 2](#), through to event in [Chapter 8](#). This is not to say that there is a linear progression through this series of concepts; however, their ordering does represent a way of thinking about them that acknowledges their differences and similarities. Experience is a difficult category of human life to research and analyse. This is because experience is ultimately unique to individuals. We cannot actually access other people's experiences in any direct way. Neither can we have the same experiences as them. Yet, we can, as we show in [Chapter 2](#), create an analytical category around the concept of experience that can be used as a way to think about, research through, analyse and represent the findings of research. There are many types of experience that might be researched in relation to digital media: embodied, affective, hallucinatory, sensory or other forms of experience. In [Chapter 2](#), we focus on sensory experience as an example of how such aspects of human life can be researched. In [Chapter 3](#), however, we take a different type of analytical unit, which focuses on the concept of practices. Practices are not actual 'things' that we can directly research, but rather they are analytical constructs through which we can access and research aspects of human life and activity. The concept of a practice in [Chapter 3](#) works rather differently to that of experiences, because it focuses on what people 'do' rather than what they feel. It would of course be possible to research feeling and doing – that is, experiences and practices – as part of the same research project. Indeed, these could be examined in combination with any of the other concepts we explore in this book. However, we tend to keep these concepts separate in our chapters to outline the ways in which specific concepts might, as a first stage, be used as part of a digital ethnography approach.

[Chapter 4](#) turns the attention away from human activity to focus on 'things', which are made and made meaningful through human activity. Bringing together approaches to things from anthropology, cultural studies, material culture studies and STS, this chapter situates the digital, and the practice of digital ethnography, in relation to a longer term relation to the production, consumption and circulation of things. [Chapter 5](#) looks at how personal relationships might be researched through digital ethnography and how contemporary relationships across the world are being constituted and played out through practices such as co-presence in and through digital media and technologies. [Chapter 6](#) takes a wider view of the social by asking how we might engage with types of social worlds through digital ethnography. The concept of social worlds works slightly differently from others in the book, since unlike theories of practice, experience or materiality, there is no established body of theory on the concept of social worlds. Instead, there are a number of different theories around how social worlds are constituted, each of which advances a different vision of how social relationships, collective activities and the like are bound together. These include theories of community, network or sociality. The various concepts that are used to understand social worlds have implications for both the methods used in research and the ways that these concepts have been formulated and critiqued.

In [Chapter 7](#), we focus on the concept of localities. This might seem an unusual concept when considering

digital environments, where indeed physical localities tend to be newly connected with each other as well as connecting digital places and encounters. We explore how the concept of locality has renewed meanings and relevance when used in conjunction with a digital ethnography approach, making it a viable, if reshaped, concept. Finally, in [Chapter 8](#), we look at the event. This is a concept that has been at the centre of discussions in media studies since the last decades of the twentieth century. The idea of the event was also used extensively at the interface between anthropology and media studies during this period, and it has remained a popular way of framing how media and activities around them fit into national and other contexts. We argue that the digital has both implications for how actual events are constituted and for the ways in which we might theorise the event in a contemporary environment where the elements that would have made up old media events have also shifted. The event, however, is also an interesting concept to end our discussion with, given that the concept of the event as bringing together diverse other things of different qualities and affordances might also help us to understand the ethnographic process. Indeed, the concept of the event could further bring together the other concepts that we have introduced in this book. To understand an event that is lived out in a digital–material–sensory environment, one might well wish to comprehend the relationships between the experiences, practices, things, relationships, social worlds and localities through which it is constituted.

The Future of Digital Ethnography: After the Book

As will become evident throughout the book, the concepts, principles and methodologies discussed should not be viewed as a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to studying a particular concept. Indeed, in each chapter, multiple examples are provided which highlight not only the methods employed but also the motivations for designing the research methods and questions together. In many cases, new methods and approaches were developed or 'adapted' to address new questions and situations in the field. As new digital media technologies and new theoretical turns emerge there will be increasing opportunities to rethink digital ethnography. This book remains open to such advances. Our aim in the following chapters is to show how and where digital ethnography principles and practices have emerged in ways that enable researchers to use and adapt concepts to research problems or questions. Indeed, Digital Ethnography is an emergent field of theory and practice; we do not view it as a static or defined area. We invite readers not to *do* what we have done, but to *use* what we have done as examples or sources of inspiration to develop their own approaches.