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2017

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2886

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Frömming, Urte Undine; Köhn, Steffen; Fox, Samantha; Terry, Mike: Digital Environments and the Future of Ethnography. An Introduction. In: Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox u.a. (Hg.): *Digital Environments. Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces.* Bielefeld: transcript 2017, S. 13–22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2886.

Digital Environments and the Future of Ethnography

An Introduction

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With the notion of digital environments, we aim to propose a conceptual term that describes the mutual permeation of the virtual with the physical world. The digital environment encompasses phenomena such as wholly immersive and user-constructed virtual worlds—for example, *Second Life*—and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs)—such as *Minecraft*—as well as other three-dimensional online spaces. There are expansive digital social environments to be considered such as social networking sites and smartphone applications, together with the people and communities who engage with them. It is constituted and shaped by a wide range of internet technology—including devices like smartphones, tablets and "wearables"—and online venues such as virtual communities, blogs, forums and e-commerce. Digital environments hence are the conglomeration of technologies, events and realities that interpenetrate each other, sometimes co-constitute each other, and that have led to changed ways of being.

They have fostered new expressions of identity, new forms of collaborative working, new commercial and political strategies, new modes of producing and distributing art, and new configurations of sociality, exchange and intimacy. Digital environments are so closely entangled with the physical world that any opposition between the "virtual" and the "real" is fundamentally misleading in almost the same manner as a distinction between the "digital" and the "non-digital" (or "analog") is untenable. As Boellstorff (2016), Frömming (2013), Hine (2010) and Ginsburg et al. (2002) point out, such a dichotomy completely fails to acknowledge how the online is, indeed, real. If one falls in love in a virtual world or on an online dating site, these emotions have implications in the physical world (Gershon 2010; 2011). The same goes for what one learns in an online educational environment. Yet just as problematically, the constructed opposition between the digital and the real implies that everything physical necessarily

is also real. Boellstorff engages with timely literature on the ontological turn within anthropology to complicate such widely held misrepresentations of the reality of the digital. Our concept of digital environments avoids such a problematic dualism and allows us to ask precisely when and how online and offline worlds intersect, how users experience them and what consequences this has for social formations within the physical world. The ERC funded research project "Why We Post" at the University College London (UCL) and led by Daniel Miller (2016), provides one answer to the existing research gap that exists, considering the digitalization process as having a deeper and much faster influence on societies than we initially considered.

The 16 contributions to this volume likewise explore how people in Greenland, the Netherlands, Chile, China, Spain, Germany, South Africa, Columbia, Malaysia, Ukraine and the USA actually engage with various digital environments and how this changes their feelings and ideas about intimacy, social interactions, geographic distance, political situations, art production, or their very bodies. The individual articles are concerned with issues such as people's creative use of social media platforms like *Instagram*, *WeChat*, *Reddit*, *Facebook* or *Twitter* in trans-local or transnational settings. They examine the emergence of new online communities around Greenlandic news blogs or Malaysian LGBT *Facebook* groups, and describe the rise of transnational migrant networks facilitated by digital media. They investigate health issues in digital worlds and assistive digital technologies for blind people, the representation of conflicts, and the proliferation of ideologies within online spaces. Our aim with this book is to present fresh and timely research by young scholars from the Research Area of Visual and Media Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology to a wider academic. By eschewing the false dichotomy between the virtual and the real—as encouraged by other practitioners in this research field—these young scholars are able to forge new methodologies in the nascent field of digital anthropology, pursuing novel practices of entangled fieldwork in both online and offline contexts. As people enact their social lives through complex combinations of online and offline practice, the contributors to this publication accordingly construct their fieldsites out of intricate configurations of the (trans-)local, the digital and the global. Hence, they lead us to believe in both the physical and the digital as real and entangled entities. We strongly believe that such intertwined forms of research—online and offline—have the potential to innovate both ethnographic methodologies and anthropological theory.

As Pink et al. (2015) note, the digital unfolds as an indispensable part of the world that we, as well as our research participants, co-inhabit. A methodological perspective on the digital is thus becoming an essential aspect of all kinds of ethnographic fieldwork endeavors, even those centered on presumably non-mediated areas of investigation such as migration, politics, medicine, economy

or religion. Human lifeworlds, practices and cultures, be it in European, North American, or so called "indigenous communities" are increasingly subtly shaped by digital technology (Budka 2015), while such recent technology also offers ethnographers new ways of engaging with their field (Coleman 2010). One might think here of digitally mediated "*e*fieldnotes" (Sanjek 2016), interviews via *Skype* or *Messenger* software, the potential to record visual media with a smartphone, or simply the possibility to stay connected with interlocutors beyond the period of fieldwork via email or social networking sites. The younger generations of anthropologists, raised during the proliferation of the internet, are already using digital technologies as part of their research as accepted and valuable resources. Yet with the increasing amount of new digital gadgets, apps and software, they are tasked with constantly adapting and re-inventing their ethnographic approach and methodology.

Importantly, Pink et. al. argue that digital ethnography does not necessarily have to engage with digital technology in both its methodology and its research focus; they see "non-digital-centric-ness" as one of the key principles of digital ethnography. Our own notion of digital environments equally emphasizes the ways in which technologies have become inseparable from other materialities and human activities. Hence, instead of putting digital media at the center of analysis, our approach seeks to pay careful attention to the manifold and complex forms in which digital environments have become a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary life and cultures. Elderly Chinese, for example, who never learned how to use computers, have rapidly become avid users of the smartphone app *WeChat*, allowing them to improve their relationship with their adult children (Yun 2015). Likewise, amateur athletes increasingly use wearable technology for tracking their movements and physical fitness (Howse 2015), while Filipina migrant mothers working in Great Britain have grown accustomed to taking part in the lives of their children back home via *Viber*, *Skype*, or *Facebook* (Madianou and Miller 2012). The seamless integration of digital social media into our everyday practice has rendered them almost invisible (Fuchs 2013; David 2010). Our conceptual term stresses just that: digital environments have become so embedded in various social practices that we move through them like fish in water. Yet while digital technologies now form a part of most human relationships, these relationships are never purely digital. They do not produce novel forms of human interaction but may rather bring about different qualities in human lives, relationships and activities. We therefore need ethnography to look beyond the digital to understand how these technologies are played out precisely in their entanglement with other norms, relations and things.

As Collins and Durrington (2015) and Cohen (2012) note, such an ethnography of the present and future is, almost by definition, networked. Networked anthropology acknowledges the fact that digital technology,

particularly social media, permeates the social fields that contemporary anthropologists examine. Moreover, it explores how these media might foster collaboration with informant communities on the production of meaning. While classical anthropological modes of publishing, slowed down by peer review and a lengthy process of publication, tend to produce static representations of an ethnographic engagement, networked anthropology offers fresh new possibilities for feedback, immediacy and measurable interventions with our collaborative partners. The data produced within such networked research often simultaneously serves as material that may be appropriated, utilized and shared by the individuals and communities participating in the research. For example, Lola Abrera's *Virtual Balkbayan Box* (2015) is a collaborative ethnographic project to which female OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) contributed mobile phone video diaries, pictures, or artworks to share their stories on their own terms. Quite often, anthropologists today even find themselves assisting in the efforts of such communities to network with different publics.

In our relationships with the digital, we thus have to engage in new forms of collaboration and convey our ideas and findings to new sets of addressees. This demands a greater reflexivity from individual researchers who have to negotiate their individual projects in the face of re-conceptualized notions of the "anthropologist," the "fieldsite," the "research participant" and the "audience." In *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012), Boellstorff et al. explore how the often uneven and messy forms of "participation" in virtual worlds—as players, users, or producers—and various types of ethnographic immersion across online and offline spaces might be framed and analyzed. The contributions to our volume give accounts of this blurring of roles that ethnographers experience when they conduct research into and within digital environments. As digital environments emphasize user-generated content, contribution and self-presentation this almost inevitably brings an auto-ethnographic dimension into the research design (Dalsgaard 2008). Social media demands a certain kind of reciprocity of their users: if one wishes to connect with and receive information from other users, one is also required to reveal something about themselves. Digital ethnographies therefore often become journeys into the self. Through them we can better understand the new forms of identity and community as well as the social digital activism (Gerbaudo 2012, Postill 2010) emerging within and via digital technologies. Through these new forms of ethnographic expression, digital ethnographies can be our digital mirrors.

Jóhanna Björk Sveinbjörnsdóttir (Iceland), in her contribution with a case study about East Greenland, examines online media commenting systems as spaces for public debates. Sveinbjörnsdóttir conducted ethnographic fieldwork in East Greenland over several months, with a focus on the online version of the

most important newspaper in Greenland, *Sermitsiaq.AG*. Her seven interview partners from Greenland all agreed on one point: that the image of East Greenland was trapped in repeated portrayals of its inhabitants as murderers, alcoholics with social problems, or barbaric hunters. The author analyzes the comments, posted in response to news in the online version of *Sermitisiag.AG,* about a polar bear that was shot in front of the house by the father of a family and goes on to discuss the online making of an "imagined community."

Brigitte Borm (The Netherlands) analyzes the experiences of people, especially hosts, using the online platform *Airbnb*, which allows hosts to rent out their homes to other members, in exchange for a set fee. Borm raises the question: As the homes of hosts are temporarily or partly commodified, does the perception, experience or meaning of the homes of so-called hosts change? Following Tom Boellstorff (2012) in the notion that virtual and offline spaces are becoming profoundly interconnected, this contribution explores the relation between virtual participation on the hosting platform of *Airbnb* and the changing offline experience of the intimate environment of hosts' homes.

Juan Francisco Riumalló (Chile) examines the role that the internet has played for gay men in Chile across generations. Tracing the development of digital media—from anonymous chat rooms accessed via dial-up internet in the 1990s to smartphone-based dating apps that are popular today—Riumalló asks what social effects different media have had for gay men. While Chile remains a conservative, predominantly Catholic country, the internet can often be a safe, anonymous space for young men seeking support before coming out to their families. At the same time, pornography and sexualized dating sites present a limiting image of what it means to be a gay man. Riumalló addresses these concerns, as well as others, as he examines how the many facets of online interaction have shaped, and continue to shape, the identity of gay men in Chile.

In her contribution: "Red Packets in Real and Virtual Worlds. How Multi-Function *WeChat* Influences Chinese Virtual Relationships" **Xiaojing Ji (China)** presents the results of her research about the *Red Packet* app function as part of the mobile social application *WeChat*, which is extremely popular in China, similar to *WhatsApp* in Europe. With recourse to Marcel Mauss' theory of *The Gift* and the forms and functions of exchange, the author manages to reveal the enormous influence of the *WeChat Red Packets* on the lives of people in China and their social relationships.

Jie Liang Lin's (China) paper explores some of the nastier sides of the internet: the articulation of "antifeminist" views and identity formations in online communities. Particularly, she investigates the MGTOW ("Men Going Their

Own Way") movement—an online group that is active on dedicated websites, *YouTube* channels, *Facebook* groups and subreddits. It consists of mostly straight, white, middle-class males who attempt to analyze what they perceive as a feminist conspiracy against proper manhood and male destinies. The author traces this internet phenomenon back to male liberation movements, masculinist groups and sex-role theories of the 1970s in order to discuss how such views now slowly seep into the mainstream.

Jonas Blume's (Germany) chapter explores the internet as a participatory space for artists with new roles and new artistic online practices. The author explores the history of art and computer technology and the history of virtual exhibitions. The chapter culminates in the attempt of the author to understand the "integrative post-medium practices of post-internet Art." Blume also formulates a critique on contemporary museums that are, according to the author, "still rooted in their 19th century heritage, and are presently not equipped to appropriately present new media work."

Olivier Llouquet (France) explores, with his contribution: "Blind and Online," the everyday life of blind and visually impaired people and their networks in online communities. Over a period of two months, Llouquet gathered technical information on assistive technologies and joined several *Facebook* groups run by, and for, visually impaired people. He found out that their problem is not necessarily what is accessible to visually impaired people, but rather ignorance of the existing support structures.

Ellen Lapper's (Great Britain) chapter explores how social media has changed the way we grieve. In a time in which the deaths of celebrities become much shared "trending topics" on *Twitter* or *Facebook*, we all have to face the question of what happens to our own digital afterlives, as well as those of our loved ones. Starting from a very personal note, Lapper describes how following her father's death, she clung to the digital traces that remained of him on various digital platforms. Her research investigates how we negotiate a physical absence in light of a persistent digital presence, integrating theories of mourning and loss.

Dario Bosio (Italy) appraises the relationship between the ephemeral aspects of the social media platform *Periscope* and motivations for self-broadcasting. *Periscope* differs from other social media platforms that allow users to watch and offer views breaching the private sphere, due to its real-time broadcasting. According to Bosio, the added risk inherent in live broadcasting and the mostly anonymous audiences that 'tune in' to a specific scoper's video feed reveal a more accelerated and dynamic set of motivations. These include loneliness, anxiety surrounding online stimulation, boredom, New

Individualism, and even a possible desire for 'teleportation.' Bosio draws attention to the failure of the intended use of *Periscope*, as asserted by its developers, by offering examples that call attention to serious ethical and legal concerns. These include students using the app to publicly ridicule others, and abusive and suggestive behavior towards underage, specifically female users, revealing the need to examine the social effects of social media operating with anonymous and real-time connectivity.

Gretchen Faust (USA) is concerned with the representation of the female body in digital social environments. She analyses the new forms of censorship occurring on online platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter* with regards to body hair, (menstrual) blood and nipples. Faust explores how the ambiguous "community guidelines" of social media platforms effectively perpetuate double standards with regard to the representation of male and female bodies. She then discusses feminist artists' approaches to problematize these gendered forms of censorship and tackles their severe implications for women's status on the internet.

Teresa Tiburcio Jiménez (Spain), in her article "Berlin. Wie bitte?" makes an exploration of the construction of online platforms for the mutual support of young Spanish immigrants in Berlin. The author shows the ways in which these diasporic groups use the internet as an alternative space for communication, experimentation and the creation of new ideas for social innovation. During her fieldwork amongst the Spanish diaspora in Berlin, Tiburcio Jiménez asked the questions: how do young Spanish immigrants embody social innovation, what are their reasons for migration and in what ways do they use different digital environments during their migration process? The author examined several online platforms and social networking sites constructed and run by Spanish immigrants—such as *15M Berlin* (a nonpartisan, horizontal, self-managed and feminist political group for Spanish immigrants in Berlin), *Oficina Precaria* or *GAS* (Groupo de Acción Sindical)—and participated in offline meetings of the groups. Her research demonstrates the ways in which the online sphere is meaningful for political organization and identity creation in the diaspora.

Sue Beukes (South Africa) investigates the heightened discourse around race and inequality in South Africa. In this context, the entrance of an unmediated platform such as *Twitter* creates a new dynamic in this conversation through the entrance of a large and vocal young black South African online community, unafraid of challenging liberal views and the traditional Rainbow Nation narrative. Some have described this as a "psychic purge" or "shift in consciousness" which has been taking place over the last two years or so. In late 2015, the *#FeesMustFall* movement was born. This became one of the largest

civic engagements since democracy as well as one of the biggest events on *Twitter* that year. The public aim of this movement was to address the rising cost of university fees, which would ultimately exclude many students from families already struggling to pay tuition and living costs. In October 2015, mass protests took place in institutions across the country eventually forcing the government to freeze fee increases in 2016. As a spin-off of this action, movements and related campaigns emerged such as *#OutSourcingMustFall* and *#ColourBlind*. It became clear that *#FeesMustFall* was about much more than rising fees; it aimed to address issues of colonization, inequality, and racism. Beukes seeks to explore the role of *Twitter* in this evolving discourse around race. It uses *#FeesMustFall* as a pivot for discussion because the movement both represents and touches on so many of the pertinent issues facing young South Africans, including issues central to the broader society in a post-apartheid environment.

Sara Wiederkehr González (Switzerland/Colombia) produces an analysis of the online and offline lifeworlds of Colombian migrants in the German capital of Berlin. The Colombian expats that Wiederkehr González interviews are all virtually engaged—via social media, webcam or blogs—with the present social reality in their conflict-laden home country. Engaging with Deleuze's distinction between the actual and the virtual, the author explores how these migrants inhabit what Daniel Miller (2011) has called "a third place."

Veera Helena Pitkänen (Finland) explores the social media landscape advocating for the LGBT community in Malaysia. Homosexuality there is punishable by law, and social media users must balance their desires for connection and social justice with exposure to legal consequences. Focusing on the *Facebook* group "Seksualiti Merdeka" (which translates from the Malay as "Sexual Independence") Pitkänen examines the role the group plays in the lives of her informants, how *Facebook* can be utilized both socially and politically, and what role privacy and anonymity play in a country where identity politics carry great risk.

Karly Domb Sadof (USA), a visual anthropologist working as photo editor for the Associated Press, demonstrates the enormous importance and meaning of the role of the smartphone application *Instagram,* during the Ukrainian protests (*#Euromaidan*) that began in November 2013, after the Ukrainian government declared that it would not sign the association contract with the European Union. Domb Sadof shows the ways in which way "Selfies" played a central role in first-person or citizen journalism during the Ukrainian protests, affecting a strong and visible impact within Ukraine and abroad.

Joanna Sleigh (Australia) approaches modern religiosity through the virtual doors of *The Church of Google*, a website created in 2011 by enthusiasts of the search engine and technology company. Confirming that even online religiosity is still mediated by activity in real life, Sleigh outlines the marked differences between—yet gives equal credence to—the enthusiasts of *Googlism*, revealing two major factions: 'believers' and those that take a more satirical approach. Whether *Googlism* engages its followers through its impressive and infallible data organization and retrieval capabilities, or as a proxy for a critique of organized religion itself, modern technology and digital communication is thoroughly inscribed throughout the experience.

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