Special issue introduction

PRIVATE MESSAGES FROM THE FIELD: CONFESSIONS ON DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS DISCOMFORTS

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ABSTRACT

This special issue collects the confessions of five digital ethnographers laying bare their methodological failures, disciplinary posturing, and ethical dilemmas. The articles are meant to serve as a counselling stations for fellow researchers who are approaching digital media ethnographically. On the one hand, this issue's contributors acknowledge the rich variety of methodological articulations reflected in the lexicon of "buzzword ethnography". On the other, they evidence how doing ethnographic research about, on, and through digital media is most often a messy, personal, highly contextual enterprise fraught with anxieties and discomforts. Through the four "private messages from the field" collected in this issue, we acknowledge the messiness, open-endedness and coarseness of ethnographic research in-the-making. In order to do this, and as a precise editorial choice made in order to sidestep the lexical turf wars and branding exercises of 'how to' methodological literature, we propose to recuperate two forms of ethnographic writing: Confessional ethnography (Van Maanen 2011) and self-reflection about the dilemmas of ethnographic work (Fine 1993). Laying bare our fieldwork failures, confessing our troubling epistemological choices and sharing our ways of coping with these issues becomes a precious occasion to remind ourselves of how much digital media, and the ways of researching them, are constantly in the making.

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1   DIGITAL BACKCHANNELS

This special issue began to take a life of its own – even before we editors realized it – as a series of Direct Messages (DMs) we started exchanging via Twitter in July 2014. That year, we were two of the thirty PhD candidates selected for the Summer Doctoral Programme offered by the Oxford Internet Institute (OIISDP), a two-week program in which aspiring academics could enjoy guest lectures by renowned internet studies scholars, interactive methodological and pedagogical workshops, and focused feedback on our research presentations. As exciting and prestigious all of this might sound, no matter if happening at scholarly events or in the field, first interactions between strangers are always wrought with uncertainty and anxiety. After the officious rituals of Day 1 (roundtable biographical introductions that served as verbal status markers; group photo-taking for corporate collateral during which strangers had to navigate personal space boundaries through bodily touch; inaugural lectures in which haphazard sitting arrangements birthed early friendships out of convenience; the first meal break over which we relied on small talk about catering to glide through awkward silences) the lot of us eventually stumbled into an empty pub for a nightcap. It was there that this issue's editors sat across each other by deliberate happenstance and talked to each other for the first time, learning that we were the only two members of that year's cohort who described themselves as "anthropologists". Like migrants chancing upon kinsmen in faraway places, we soon slipped into the familiar language of ethnography and found refuge in deploying our shared anthropological lens to help process and make sense of the stimulating but displacing revelries of a strange academic place among strange academic others.

Pubs have long served as segue spots, post-event comfort holes, and transient places of affect-making in the tired wake of academic events. Pubs are the place where after a long day of professionalism, posturing, and banter, some academics retreat into smaller groups to shed their conference room bravado and their scholarly "personal front" (Goffman 1956, 13) in a neutral "third place" (Oldenburg 1998) away from spaces of work (i.e. conference venues) and residence (i.e. hotel rooms). This does not imply that these post-event spaces are devoid of personae curation – in fact, these transitory comfort spaces demand a different form of "face work" (Goffman 2003, 7-8). Sitting at pub tables, academics unravel bits of themselves in the safety of a "back region" (Goffman 1956, 69-70) where they can selectively disclose usually "unseen" practices (1956, 21) and "suppressed" facts (1956, 69) of their profession as they work through "correct[ing]" and "conceal[ing]" their "errors", "mistakes", and failures before returning to the front region with an air of "infallibility" (1956, 66). In order for this performance to work, its participants must engage in reciprocity, care and mutual trust, bringing their own faults, failures, and frailty to the table. Finding comfort and camaraderie in the late-evening bookend to a day of academic sociality, academics forge solidarity and intimacy and establish networks of support and care.

As it quickly dawned upon us, the pub was only one of the possible venues for off-stage academic solidarity to happen. Having started as an extension of our post-workshop pubbing, the backchannel of Twitter DMs shared between the two of us evolved into a meeting place for commiseration, consolation, and collegiality that extended our co-presence throughout the following four years of fieldwork, thesis writing, job-hunting, and early careering in geographically distant locations. Populated with pictures, reaction gifs, emoticons, kaomoji, emoji, URL links, and text, this running stream of co-constructed presence has over time become an intimate archive of the theoretical, methodological, practical, and emotional struggles of two early-career academics who brand themselves as "digital ethnographers". Yet, no matter how precious and unique this specific digital space might have seemed to us, we quickly realized that ours was not a particularly innovative practice: Each of the authors contributing to this special issue does also find solace in scholarly social media backchannels, and readers will recognize how they similarly work through their own professional dilemmas, one private confession at a time. Just like the "great good place[s]" at the "heart" of every community (Oldenburg 1998), these private bubbles carved out of digital third spaces function as crucial professional resources, "remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that [they] exten[d]" (1998, 42). Keeping contemporary, dialogic versions of Malinowski's secret fieldwork diaries tucked in the private folds of our smartphone apps, we exchange and accumulate private messages from the field through the affordances offered by the very same digital media we do research on and about.

With the pervasive popularization of networked communication technologies, an increasing number of graduate students and early-career researchers in anthropology and the social sciences at large have directed their inquiries towards internet usage, online communities, mobile devices, social media platforms, and so on – a familiar collection of topics that we broadly indicate through the shorthand term "digital media". New generations of ethnographers are often as familiar with digital media as their research participants, and yet this familiarity does not necessarily grant smooth entrées, flawless interactions, effortless participation and clean-cut conclusions. Rather, despite their interactional proficiency and insider positioning, digital ethnographers can encounter deadlocks, rejections and failures. Moreover, as post-graduate students and early career researchers using ethnographic methods to approach digital media, many of us find ourselves grappling with an overwhelming proliferation of manuals, handbooks and lexicons that increasingly feel as a cyclical exercise in academic branding. Confronted with a puzzling variety of methodological nuances, we are at the same time asked to address the fault lines in our epistemological choices, negotiate the visibility of our failures, and come up with an original perspective. How to take into account the problematic breakdowns in our own research work? What is the relationship between methodological branding and ethnographic failures? How do

"private messages from the field" help digital ethnographers work through moral and ethical quandaries?

This special issue collects the confessions of five ethnographers laying bare their methodological failures, disciplinary posturing, and ethical dilemmas. Three of the authors included in this special issue came in contact through similar forms of professional backchanneling (e-mail, social media private messages, closed discussion groups, etc.) in the wake of academic events (graduate seminars, summer schools, conferences, workshops, symposia), exchanging private messages from the field through which they shared and worked through the moral confessions and ethical dilemmas that would otherwise be too taboo, too amateurish, too career-threatening and too persona-breaking to make public. The other two were introduced to us rather serendipitously by an academic who had read our works and found striking similarities in the personal and methodological challenges we were navigating. The articles selected for this special issue are meant to serve as a counseling stations for troubled digital ethnographers. On the one hand, they acknowledge the rich variety of methodological articulations originating in the lexicon of "buzzword ethnography", including media anthropology (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005; Postill 2009), media ethnography (Horst et al. 2012; Murphy 2011; Murphy & Kraidy 2003), cyber-ethnography (Hallett & Barber 2014; Keeley-Browne 2010), virtual anthropology (Reid 2012; Weber et al. 2011; Weber 2015; Wong 1998), virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), digital anthropology (Horst & Miller 2012), digital ethnography (Murthy 2008; Underberg & Zorn 2013), netnography (Kozinets 1997; 1998; 2002; 2006), social media ethnography (Postill & Pink 2012; Postill 2015), and networked anthropology (Collins & Durington 2014). On the other hand, this issue's contributors seek to evidence how doing ethnographic research about, on, and through contemporary digital media is most often a messy, personal, highly contextual enterprise fraught with anxieties and discomforts.

While edited collections of methodological literature tend to push for clarity, closure and refinement, leaving readers asking themselves the "what next?" question (Jankowski & van Selm 2005, 199), this issue acknowledges the messiness, open-endedness and coarseness of research in-the-making, and prefers to offer answers to questions such as: "what now?", "where did you fail?", "why didn't it work?". In order to do this, and as a precise editorial choice made in order to sidestep the lexical turf wars and branding exercises of 'how to' methodological literature, we propose to recuperate two forms of ethnographic writing: Confessional ethnography (Van Maanen 2011) and self-reflection about the dilemmas of ethnographic work (Fine 1993). By juxtaposing four confessions by digital ethnographers who work on insider accounts of geographically and socio-culturally distant aspects of networked communication, this special issue invites readers into the private bubbles of academic backchannels and offers an intimate portrait of the dilemmas and difficulties of applying qualitative research methodologies to digital media. Laying bare our fieldwork failures, confessing our troubling epistemological choices and

sharing our ways of coping with these issues becomes a precious occasion to remind ourselves of how much digital media, and the ways of researching them, are constantly in the making.

2 BUZZWORD ETHNOGRAPHY

Before delving into the intimate backchannels of digital ethnographers, we want to clear up the methodological ground and offer a short critique of what claiming to do an ethnography of something 'digital' has come to mean over more than two decades of anthropological approaches to media. As early-career academics who have come across media anthropology during the early 2010s, both of this issue's editors have painstakingly crafted their own research approach in dialogue with bookshelves bending under the increasingly heavy weight of research handbooks and methodological manuals. From widely recommended staple readings like Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and Markham & Baym's edited collection *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method* (2009) to more recent discussions of the subject such as Boellstorff et al.'s *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method* (2012) and Pink et al.'s *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice* (2016), we have read, skimmed, quoted, criticized, built upon and recommended a growing repertoire of methodological literature. Confronted with the necessity to position ourselves in clear epistemological terms while keeping ourselves up to speed with the proliferation of increasingly specialized approaches to digital media research, we have devoted sincere efforts to explain, in the meaty methodological sections of our doctoral dissertations, why "digital" might be a better descriptor than "virtual", why "platforms" might be a better metaphor than "cyberspace", or why "praxiography" might be a more precise term than "ethnography".

The complex disciplinary tree of ethnographic approaches to digital media has its roots in the qualitative intersection of communication research (which also includes quantitative methodologies, network analysis and others) and social science studies of technology (which include HCI, digital sociology, STS, and others). Directly borrowed from the anthropological canon, ethnography (sometimes confused with participant observation or other components of ethnographic research) has been successfully repurposed as a toolkit of participatory strategies for qualitative inquiry by researchers in the widest array of disciplines (Ingold 2014) – including media, communication and internet studies among them. As Markham notes, emerging communication technologies like the internet are very popular areas of study across the humanities and social sciences, offering the opportunity to shed light on undescribed phenomena, outline new theories, and experiment with innovative methodologies (2009, 135). The popularity of internet research is characterized, according to a prophetic observation by Christine Hine, by "the introduction of new epithets to familiar methods", a practice that "marks the air of innovation around the field and also provides for a sense of anxiety" (2005, 5). Despite its popularity and the wealth of related methodological literature,

designing and conducting online research remains a tricky endeavor navigated by newcomers through the help of expert advice by colleagues or supervisors (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009, 1). One of the first quandaries regularly encountered by researchers trying to figure out how to apply ethnography to digital media is strictly terminological: what is the difference between cyber anthropology, virtual ethnography and netnography? Is digital ethnography better than Internet anthropology? Does collecting Facebook posts count as online ethnography or web archaeology?

Over the years, methodological literature has closely followed the development of communication technologies, incorporating its buzzword lingo and sometimes preserving it way past its heyday of popularity in tech-related linguistic domains – this is nowhere more evident than in the persistence of locutions like "cyberspace" or "real life" in ethnographic writing about the Internet in a time when hardly anyone talks about digital media in these terms anymore. Throughout this special issue, we refer to ethnographic research on, through and about digital media as "digital ethnography", a choice we have both substantiated and embraced, over the years, in our own writing. While other researchers might object to this terminological choice, or prefer other ways of referring to their application of ethnographic methodologies to networked communications-related inquiry, we feel it necessary to highlight how these approaches have been articulated in a dizzying variety of variations, branding their peculiar emphasis and perspectives by attaching different tech buzzwords to the word "ethnography".

The earliest proposals of applying ethnographic methodologies to emerging communication technologies (see, for example, Baym 1994 or Ito 1996) put forwards intuitions that keep reverberating in the most up-to-date digital ethnography manuals. In the early 2000s, the exploratory efforts in applying anthropological methods to new media could be placed in a spectrum going from two opposite poles. On one side of this spectrum is the "ethnographic approach to the Internet" proposed by Miller & Slater (2000, 21), who argue for a relatively conservative application of canonical ethnographic inquiry to Internet use in situated social contexts. On the other pole is the "virtual ethnography" outlined by Hine (2000, 30-33), a more adaptive and less traditional approach that understands the Internet as a "site of interaction" in its own right, allowing forms of sociality defined by new concepts like mobility, flow, and partial participation. Hine's use of the adjective "virtual" to characterize her methodological proposal is closely connected to a historical moment in which terms like "virtuality" and "cyberspace" were current in discussions of the Internet and computing at large.

The persistence of these concepts is evident in Marshall's description of "online ethnography" (2010) and in Keeley-Browne's definition of "cyber-ethnography", research approaches that all involve "becoming immersed in virtual culture and observing on interactive websites and in virtual communities as issues are discussed" (2010, 33). Closer to Hine's virtual ethnography, both online ethnography and cyber-ethnography emphasize the need to move beyond

traditional ethnographic concerns when studying cyberspace, paying attention to the imaginary divides of its rhetorics and giving centrality to online interactions and Internet cultures in their own right (Hallett & Barber, 2014, 308). In parallel to these methodological refinements inside anthropology, ethnographic methodologies were also being retooled to conduct quick and dirty market research on the Internet. Kozinet's "netnography" (1997; 1998; 2002; 2010) is a paramount example: a "written account of on-line cyberculture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology" (Kozinets, 1998, 366) tailored towards the study of consumer behavior, with the advantage of being "faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews" (Kozinets, 2002, 61).

Once the ethnographic cat was out of the disciplinary bag, meddling around with cyberspaces and virtual realities, anthropologists have actively worked towards luring research on communication technologies back into their scholarly domain. Shored up by a renewed interest in practice theory, the "media anthropology" outlined by several authors throughout the mid-late 2000s moves beyond the mere application of an anthropological lens to media, and strives to come up with its own conceptual vocabularies to understand the role of media in modern societies (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005; Murphy & Kraidy 2003; Postill 2009). "Media ethnography" is its methodological correlate, an approach grounded on the "observation of and engagement with the everyday situations in which media are consumed, the practices by which media are interpreted, and the uses to which media are put" (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005, 2). Given the breadth of its descriptor, media ethnography can refer to pretty much any ethnographically-grounded study of media-related activities and phenomena, from audience reception and fandom to production practices and creative industries (Murphy 2011, 385), and researchers have increasingly felt the need to narrow down their field of inquiry by proposing more specific methodological descriptors (Horst & Miller 2012, 86). One of the most fortunate among these formulations is "digital ethnography", which narrows down the scope of media under analysis according to their underlying technology – the binary code (Horst & Miller 2012, 3) – and emphasizes the messiness, ambiguity and materiality of digital mediation. As with any other term, different authors have defined "digital ethnography" by emphasizing different methodological choices: Murthy (2008, 839) argues for "a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography", Underberg & Zorn (2013, 10) stress the need of immersive participation and storytelling, while Hsu (2014) pushes for experimentation with the very same digital technologies under study.

With the propagation of digital technologies in virtually any domain of social life across large areas of the globe, digital ethnography has also started to feel too all-encompassing a term for some authors, leading them to seek further refinement of their domains of inquiry, and resulting in a truly vertiginous collection of methodological brands. Here is a compressed overview with no pretense of

comprehensiveness: Howard's "network ethnography" (2002) foregrounds social connections among actors; the "hypermedia ethnography for the digital age" proposed by Dicks, Mason, Coffey and Atkinson (2005), along with the "multimodal ethnography" outlined by Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey (2006), both propose ways to make sense of complex media environments; Boellstorff's "virtual world ethnography" provides principles to investigate peculiar social contexts like Second Life and massively-multiplayer online games (Boellstorff, 2008; 2012); Dirksen, Huizing & Smit (2010) envision a "connective ethnography" sensitive to the imbrications of information resources across systems and texts; Geiger & Ribes (2011) explore the possibilities offered by "trace ethnography" to the study of user interactions and activities on collaborative digital media platforms; Pink & Postill's "social media ethnography" (2012) zooms into the affective intensities of interactions online and offline; Hochman & Manovich's idea of "data ethnography" extends the dream of big data analytics to the possibility of following individual users throughout large-scale aggregations of content (2013); Collins & Durington's "networked anthropology" (2014) emphasizes a processual engagement with ecologies of actors. The overlaps and similarities between these ethnographic brands and other (not explicitly ethnographic) methodological proposals such as "global technography" (Kien, 2009) or "web archaeology" (Leung et al. 2001; Rauber et al. 2002; Foot & Schneider 2006; Foot & Schneider 2007; Harper & Chen 2012, p. 67) further compound the confusion.

Often made under pressuring disciplinary demands, a choice of methodological wording drawn from such an over-defined literature carries implications and epistemological assumptions that might be opaque to graduate students or ECRs new to the canon of ethnographic approaches to media and technology. The condensed overview of two decades of ethnographic research on communication technologies provided in this section highlights the unacknowledged similarities and drastic differences that are often obfuscated by terminological proliferation in methodological literature. In light of this short review, our use of "digital ethnography" in the title of this journal issue should seem less prescriptive and more inclusive – a methodological common ground for scholars doing ethnographic research on, through and about digital media. Standing on a slightly more solid ground, the following section moves beyond terminological quibbles and introduces the major sources of anxiety, doubt and concern of putting digital ethnography in practice.

3 ANXIETIES, CHALLENGES, CONCERNS, DILEMMAS, DOUBTS, PROBLEMS, TENSIONS AND TROUBLES

Perhaps the first "private message from the field" sent by a digital ethnographer can be found in Vol. 35(9) of the 1994 AAA *Anthropology Newsletter*. Here Jen Clodius, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison researching community

formation on the internet, shares a "report from the field" with other list members. In the short roundup of her pioneering research experience, Clodius (1994) warns:

> Conducting ethnography on the InterNet presents a whole new series of challenges and problems for the anthropologist. In addition to questions of how DragonMudders use the InterNet as a Goffmanesque "backstage" to practice attributes which they want to incorporate into their lives away from the InterNet, and how they use textual descriptions to create the illusion of "space" in a non-geographic community, one of the areas that most fascinates me is how gendered roles are complicated in a variety of ways. In spite of the diverse cultures from which people log on, the InterNet seems to operate, for the most part, on Western perceptions of "proper" behavior.

More than two decades after Clodius's field report from DragonMUD, doing research on, through and about the internet remains challenging and problematic – an observation shared almost unconditionally across methodological literature of all sorts. At the most general level, Hine (2005) notes, the urgency of researching new media contexts comes along with a "considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions" (1). The relative novelty of digital ethnography trades off the stability of a tried-and-tested toolbox for the thrill of largely uncharted domains of inquiry: the sharing of research precedents among peers becomes then a fundamental help against epistemological anxiety (2). Despite the wealth of professional reassurances and coping strategies, the "irresolvable tensions" of digital ethnography can still paralyze researchers and grind down entire projects to a halt (Markham 2009, 191). As Hine summarizes,

> the Internet has […] become almost unavoidable, but is also often troubling in the extent to which it seems to challenge our starting premises about who we study, where they are, and what they do there. (Hine 2013, 2)

There's no denying it: The practice of digital ethnography entails anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles. The source of discomfort most consistently described since the earliest attempts at approaching the Internet ethnographically is the disconnect between traditional notions of participation and the new forms of interaction made possible by digital media. In her review of the field, Anne Beaulieu highlights how the lack of face-to-face interaction and the absence of a traditional notion of place are regularly invoked to challenge the reliability of digital ethnography. Through a survey of methodological literature, Beaulieu identifies the main articulations of this pressing concern: "questions of presence", "field relations", and "new possibilities of observation" (2004, 139). When much of participant observation, surveys and interviews happen through media channels like emails, chatrooms, message windows, virtual world interfaces and social media profiles, interactions and relationships with informants might seem to be confined behind a starkly delineated online/offline divide (Orgad 2005). What happens to reliability, ethnographic

rapport, immediacy and intimacy when presence is mediated across space and time by digital technologies? Supported by a wealth of successful and inspiring ethnographic studies of digital media, the most recent consensus around this troubling disconnect is that mediated interactions are a perfectly adequate subject for qualitative research:

> It is time to realize that there is now a generation for whom using the Internet may be an obvious, sensible, unproblematic thing to do, and the old debates about whether the Internet is, in itself, good enough for qualitative research may have been overtaken by events. (Hine 2013, 118)

Another long-standing source of anxiety and concern for digital ethnographers is the application of human subject research ethics to qualitative studies of mediated interaction. Recognized as a pivotal question since the earliest participatory approaches to mailing lists, MUDs and online communities (Paccagnella 1997), the tweaking of ethical decisions in light of the new kinds of interactional routines, identity construction and privacy management afforded by digital media has been extensively debates across the methodological sections of many academic articles and book chapters. An important result of digital ethnographers' growing displeasure with the existing guidelines for human subject research (Bassett & O'Riordan 2002) is the compilation of ethical frameworks tailored to the specificities of Internet research, designed to help decision-making with flexible and situational parameters (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee 2002). The central intuition behind these efforts is the acknowledgement of unavoidable dilemmas between the definition of ethical concerns provided by IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) or national regulations and the contextual, situated understandings of concepts like privacy or fair use in online communities and among different user groups (Sveningsson Elm 2009). The productive outcome of these ongoing debates, as Sarah N. Gatson concludes, is the realization that the ethical frameworks of digital ethnography are constantly in the making:

> in a sense, we have to remake our guidelines for each online ethnography we decide to do, without at the same time abandoning our connections to professional and socio-legal ethics that we must simultaneously work under. (2011, 253)

The most widely recommended remedy to assuage epistemological anxieties, participatory doubts and ethical dilemmas is self-reflexivity. Being reflexive about one's own choices in the design and practice of research is necessary for "finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions" (Baym 2009, 173) and stabilizing a research project through self-disclosure and transparency. Seen from outside the ethnographic experience, this inward turn in methodological design might be criticized as self-absorbed navel-gazing, but it is in fact an almost innate reaction used by researchers to find their balance when all their certainties are shaken by emerging realities and unruly data. Baym & Markham summarize

this feeling by describing the practice of digital ethnography as a matter of making "smart choices" on "shifting grounds" (2009, viii); self-reflexivity provides an indispensable tool to unpack the complexities hidden behind research accounts presented as logical flows and smooth progressions (ix), while also helping the researcher gaining flexibility and feeling less "trapped by method" (Markham, 2013, 436). Ultimately, as Beaulieu notes, a reflexive stance is in itself a marker of professionalism, and the production of self-reflexive methodological publications (including the articles contained in this special issue) serves to establish helpful precedents and claim legitimacy for digital ethnography (2004, 145).

The bundle of methodological choices called "digital ethnography" is an unstable construct, a nested toolbox of practices filled to the brim with potentialities and failures. Nearly any researcher who chooses to adopt an ethnographic approach to digital media ends up dedicating some thought to the anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles that result from practicing it. Since the earliest ethnographic approaches to networked communication in the 1990s, some of these sources of discomfort have been recurrently discussed in methodological literature: challenges to the reliability of digital ethnography as a whole; doubts about the role of mediated presence and participation-at-a-distance; concerns regarding the ethical treatment of people and data. With a good track record in helping researchers out of epistemological impasses, self-reflexivity has consistently pushed digital ethnography towards more flexible and fine-grained sensibilities – or, in the broad terms described by John Law, "better equipped to deal with mess, confusion and relative disorder" (2004, 2). As Law continues:

> Parts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and our statistics. But other parts are not, or if they are then this is because they have been distorted into clarity. […] Perhaps we will need to know them through 'private' emotions that open us to worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals. (2004, 2-3)

This is our vision for this special issue: knowing things that might not be caught in our ethnographies through private emotions, discomforting confessions and shared intimacies – showcasing the variety in the contemporary practice of digital ethnography beyond the "hegemonic and dominatory pretensions of certain versions or *accounts* of method" (Law 2004, 4) enshrined in the normative vocabulary of disciplinary branding exercises. This is what the four 'private messages from the field' gathered in this issue hope to do.

4   FOUR PMS FROM THE FIELD

As hinted above, the articles collected in this special issue share similar origins in the professional backstages of academic events and in the intimate backchannels of collegial communication. Some of these contributions have begun as complaints

voiced in-between conference panels, others as disciplinary rants ricocheting across Twitter threads; some have developed through email exchanges between distant fieldsites and workplaces, others through instant messaging conversations in the close quarters of classrooms and seminar rooms. What these 'private messages from the field' share is a methodological dedication to digital ethnography and the wish to push its self-reflexive drive beyond the sanitized disclaimers of good conduct, and towards intimate (and at times provocative) confessions about research and its discomforts. As editors, we have decided to sequence the four contributions to this issue in a linear fashion that roughly follows the arguments developed throughout this introduction. Just like many intimate confessions, these four articles sometimes privilege a righteous and self-centered urgency over smooth scholarly agreement. By encouraging each other to tip our writing towards the personal rather than the professional, we hope to highlight how the methodological practice of digital ethnography is still a deeply human and individual experience.

Regardless of all the theory we grapple with while preparing to embark on fieldwork, there are moments of revelation often masked by crises and anxiety that reveal how practice often entails the ability and willingness to adapt to ambiguities.

The experience of fieldwork has traditionally been a rite of passage for anthropologists-in-training, a baptism of fire during which our sense of being and relationality to our informants, our fieldsite, our fellow colleagues, academia as an institution, and our own internal belief systems are reassessed and recalibrated. Often, in these messy and confounding moments, the lived experience of our fieldwork changes us. Alexia Maddox's "Hacking the ethnographic imaginarium: Challenges of immersion in a cryptomarket community" is an account of the practical challenges and ethical dilemmas experienced while researching a volatile and contentious digital fieldsite. Maddox reflects on equipping herself with "crypto-literacy" prior to entering the virtual community of Silk Road, noting the "tension between visibility and vulnerability" for herself and her informants during fieldwork, and describing a shift in her value system after a period of sincere engagement with informants respected as "sovereign subjects". In her riveting account, Maddox takes readers through the intimate dialogue she co-constructed with her participants in a "Digital Bermuda Triangle", to illustrate how mutual sense-making, believe-canvasing, and opinion-shaping occurs through her terrains of "visibility, vulnerability and contention".

The peculiar features of digital fieldsites force ethnographers to confront new epistemological challenges and adapt interdisciplinary methodologies to their needs. As exemplified by the proliferation and diffraction of news events on digital media, grievous incidents quickly become transitory fieldsites emerging across clusters of hashtags, trends, and comment threads, requiring our immediate attention and archival capabilities. Johanna Sumiala and Minttu Tikka's piece follows one such news media event, reflecting on their ethnographic study of the Strasbourg Christmas shooting in December 2018 as it unfolded. The authors discuss the unsettling dilemmas of tracking a tragedy in its earliest hours, explaining

how they had to make a series of quick ethical and methodological decisions as they transited from processing personal grief to conducting a research project. Specifically, the authors considered how the scale and extensive range of digital data trickling in during a viral event, the need for researchers and methods to be mobile and flexible to adapt to the evolution of the digital fieldsite, and the agency of humans and non-humans around the media event they were tracking, were continuous evaluations they made to determine the eventual scope and outcome of their study.

Evidently, even the most precise and invested armchair reading and mental preparation can never truly and wholly prepare us for fieldwork. Given the spectra of diverse fieldsites, lines of inquiry, intellectual underpinnings, and personal motivations that comprise every budding anthropologist, perhaps the best advice would be to embrace fieldwork with open eyes, minds, hearts, and ears. In so doing, we learn to "tune in" to the field, adjust and modify our approaches on the go, and empathetically invest in the translation of cultural literacies between persons and places. Crystal Abidin's "Somewhere between here and there: Visibility labour and literacies between academia and the Influencer industry" is an intimate negotiation of transitions between the attention economies of academia and the Influencer industry. Abidin enacts different vocabularies of visibility practices and self-branding that vary across place and audiencing, in order for her informants in Singapore to place her within their cultural loci. The author suggests the possibility of selectively mobilizing aspects of an anthropologist's intersectional identity to position themselves favorably with informants in the field, through the practice of 'spectrums of conspicuousness'. The paper offers six tropic positionalities that anthropologists may adopt when conducting fieldwork between digital and physical spaces, including the esteemed guest, the exotic inbetweener, the willing apprentice, the trophy acquaintance, the concealed consultant, and the passing confidante.

Allying with the culture of our fieldwork and fieldsites can be one of the most personally rewarding and uniquely memorable experiences for any anthropologist. Any one from the founding scholars of our discipline to a grad student three-months deep into fieldwork will undoubtedly be able to recall moments of magic from their journey. That said, for many of us, publishing our research and engaging with our intellectual community necessitates a strategic positioning, posturing, and packaging of our work as part of building pools of knowledge. Gabriele de Seta's "Three lies of digital ethnography" is a (perhaps impossibly) honest unpacking of some of the "professional illusions through which digital ethnographers justify their work" within the domains of anthropology. Drawing on fieldwork on digital media use in China, de Seta reflects on the usually concealed backstage work of self-editing and expertise-building in producing ethnographic writing. The article is a distillation and confession of some of the unwritten black holes in claims of truth-making, and proposes to update Gary Alan Fine's foundational article "Ten lies of ethnography" (1993) for today's digital ethnographers. The article outlines the intellectual and emotional acrobatic work undertaken in a digital media field site

through the roles of the networked field-weaver, the eager participant-lurker, and the expert fabricator.

Bringing together different global contexts and disparate research topics, the articles collected in this Special Issue share a common thread: digital ethnographers negotiating their positionality in social spaces. Where Sumiala and Tikka struggled to pragmatically grapple with their voluminous corpus of data while navigating the highly charged terrain of grief and loss in their fieldsite, de Seta overrelied on the safety net provided by the idea of "being there" and other ethnographic tenets; similarly, while Maddox grappled with the implications of her fieldsite disappearing overnight, finding herself "in the middle of nowhere" online, Abidin's navigating her informants' online dealings in offline spaces necessitated occupying a position "somewhere between here and there". In closing, as early-career ethnographers of internet cultures who spend a significant portion of our personal and professional lives in various domains of "the digital", we noticed that in our everyday life, in and outside of work, we end up finding professional comfort and affective fixes in subtweeting and getting social media likes and comments, and in exchanging distressed private messages or receiving consolatory email about digital ethnography and its discomforts. This collection of academic articles should be read like a compilation of private messages from different fieldsites, or as a thread of confidential emails exchanged among your closest colleagues. If you are just starting to carefully delve into the ethnographic ways of researching digital media, if you are doubting everything you have done during your fieldwork, or if you are an early-career scholar disillusioned by methodological cynicism and bureaucratic nonsense, let us divulge in one last intimate vulnerability and learned confidence: It is going to be okay.

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