

JESSAMY PERRIAM

ETHNOGRAPHY, OBJECTS AND REFLEXIVITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE SELFIE STICK

ABSTRACT

While Science and Technology Studies regularly engage with objects that provide serious, useful or mundane value, how are we to observe objects that are considered to have a novelty, faddish or frivolous nature? Strong public opinion about such objects means that observing such objects often places the analyst in an odd position of defending or supporting the object, regardless of whether that is their intention. Drawing on the experience of writing an ethnography of the selfie stick, I describe the disconcertment felt in researching an object that was received with hate, enthusiasm and bemusement in equal measure. Yet, beneath the novelty of objects such as the selfie stick, there are valuable socio-technical insights to be gained. By studying the frivolous we gain insight into what is considered to be serious and accepted. This piece will examine how the public disconcertment around the selfie stick uncovered a disruption to the socio-technical assemblage of image creation and sharing. I also critique the nature of doing an ethnography of an object with an autoethnographic, ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1969) approach and how that impacts the object of study. Similarly, how did the methods and the methodology employed hamper the ability to study, describe and analyse the object and its agency?

INTRODUCTION

The selfie stick is a challenging object of which to conduct an ethnography. It is firmly material and yet it is fully implicated in digital practices. It manifests itself in multiple fieldsites - both material and digital - and gains many conflicting attributes from different actors. This presents a challenge for those tasked with researching it. How to account for the object, its differing fieldsites and, opposing actors? More importantly, how to account for where the researcher is situated in amongst this?

This exploratory article will describe my challenges as a researcher in conducting an ethnography of how the selfie stick was demonstrated as a disruptive object. Drawing on empirical work, it will examine the recursive impact of these demonstrations and the need for reflexivity on behalf of the researcher in order to describe the co-existence of these multiple fieldsites and positions on the object. Lastly, it will describe ways in which future research done on similar objects could benefit from a digital ethnographic approach (Pink et al., 2015)

A SIMPLE MATERIAL OBJECT OPERATING IN A DIGITAL CONTEXT

The selfie stick is a rudimentary material object that contributes to digital photographic practices. For all intents and purposes, it is a telescopic metal or plastic pole with a clamp at one end to allow people to attach their smartphone or tablet in order to take a picture from a greater distance than their own arms will allow. The product of this intervention is a form of photography that is digitally captured and/or distributed. The new process of taking and publishing photographs with this object caused varying reactions - bemusement, anger, enthusiasm - and ontologies within varying fieldsites such as Instagram, Twitter and online news articles and blog posts, along with in situ use of the selfie stick.

The research project I conducted along with colleagues¹ sought to understand these varying, conflicting ontologies of the selfie stick across field sites.

On Instagram there was primarily a positive ontology towards the selfie stick: images of people smiling, using the selfie stick to take selfies with friends, family, loved ones, pets and others. There was also occasionally, the odd meme image of makeshift selfie sticks cobbled together in a bricolage fashion from found household objects or, images of popular culture figures using the selfie stick. Additionally, the visual data captured from Instagram² showed some instances where the selfie stick was within the image. These instances bifurcated the selfie stick as an actor: it was both simultaneously an object creating an image and a subject of the image itself.

However, online news articles and blog posts presented an entirely different ontology of the selfie stick. These articles put forward an ontology whereby the selfie stick enabled narcissism, they were dangerous to precious objects and other people within the settings they were used. In short, the selfie stick was negative: not just to other objects but to the welfare of those using them. Most of these articles included calls for the selfie stick to be banned from public venues as a kind of object version of a *persona non grata*. And either by coincidence or as a recursive act, many venues (including art galleries, museums, theme parks and sporting arenas) chose to ban the selfie stick (cp. figure below, Foxx, C., 2015; James, R., 2015; Sumanac-Johnson, D., 2015).

¹ The selfie stick research started its life as a group project at the Centre for Invention and Social Process at Goldsmiths, University of London in early 2015. Many thanks to Noortje Marres, David Moats and Ana-Maria Herman for their input and insights of the selfie stick on Twitter and in-situ practices.

² The data for this study was captured before a change in Instagram's API made it difficult for social researchers to search for and analyse posts from the social media platform.



Figure 1: A sign depicting a ban on selfie sticks at Versailles, France. (Instagram, 2015 user: charcharr411)

But Latour (1999) would argue that the selfie stick in isolation does not cause disruption. It does not cause damage when it is tucked away in a bag or placed in a locker. Indeed, it only *becomes* disruptive and damaging when paired with a human operator. Additionally, a similar argument holds true for the assertion of narcissism: the selfie stick in and of itself isn't narcissistic, for it is not a sentient being. It can only be considered to aid someone's narcissism when configured in a very particular way. Could it be considered narcissistic when held back-to-front, upside down, or without a smartphone attached to it? Probably not, as it is mostly considered to be narcissistic when it completes the process of capturing an image with the intent of publishing it online for others' consumption.

But these differing, digital ontologies of the selfie stick in differing fieldsites have a recursive impact in material ontologies and interactions with the selfie stick. Aside from studying the selfie stick in digital settings, there were instances where the object would come up in conversations with friends and colleagues as they asked what I was researching. Their reactions were almost always agreeing with the ontology put forward by the online articles but with a ferocity and certainty that was lacking in the non-verbal, non body-language aided rendition of the narcissism argument. But bizarrely, few of these people raging against the selfie stick and making causal links between selfie stick use and narcissism hadn't picked one up and used it. They had merely seen those using it and been annoyed.

EXPLORING THE SELFIE STICK IN-SITU: A SEMI-FAILED BREACHING EXPERIMENT

I encountered my own recursive, reflexive problems when researching the selfie stick in an autoethnographic, ethnomethodological way. I was taking a selfie stick into The National Gallery as a form of breaching experiment (Garfinkel, 1969) with the intent of deliberately using it somewhere it had been banned. Historically, breaching experiments have been used as a provocation with a rather simple rationale: do something socially unexpected in order to bring to the surface expectations of behaviour within public places. This breaching experiment followed Garfinkel's rationale, however the execution differed. Unlike Garfinkel, I had crafted a breaching experiment that formed part of an autoethnography, while Garfinkel usually observed his students carrying out the experiment. I became a participant observer - only later did this approach seem difficult, even though others had successfully done similar breaching experiments (Woolgar & Neyland, 2014).³ It was a Saturday afternoon in early Spring 2015. I remember feeling nervous. I remember feeling like a child doing something they knew they shouldn't do. I remember feeling as though this object in this setting was going to say something about me, about my behaviour in a space with very strong ideas about how one should act. I didn't want to do what I was about to do. I was trying to convince myself it was 'serious research' and 'just a game' all at the same time.

I didn't come to the ethnography as a neutral analyst. I mentioned the selfie stick in passing in an early piece of field notes about mobile device use in public spaces, documenting a walk along London's Southbank. I bemoaned the fact that selfie sticks had changed the practice of tourists taking photos in and around London's tourist hotspots. No longer could grumpy Londoners walk through tourists' posed photographs, they were obstructed by the selfie stick jutting out from a group of tourists. In its own mundane way, a rudimentary selfie-taking object had disrupted the way Londoners moved about the city. As a Londoner being obstructed and delayed I hardly felt positive towards the selfie stick. And yet, stepping outside of that context, unbound by those attributes, I found I didn't mind the practice of using a selfie stick one way or the other.

But there was something else that I couldn't quite put my finger on that contributed towards my stance towards the selfie stick - I thought it was uncool. However, I had no discernible reason for feeling this way. I rarely take selfies but I wouldn't say that I strongly object to the practice. At the time I didn't know just how much this would influence my own research. Despite all of my discomfort with the object, the breaching experiment in the gallery was uneventful. Although the selfie stick was banned in the gallery,

³ Woolgar and Neyland (2014) describe conducting a series of breaching experiments involving taking bottles of liquid that broke restrictions through airport security as a way of inquiring why liquid restrictions are set at 100mL.

nobody told me or my friend off. This led to us becoming more brazen with our selfie taking as the experiment went on. It seemed to be that we couldn't achieve the purpose of the breaching experiment: to be reprimanded for using something in order to question the rationale behind the ban. We received a few funny stares and a strong feeling of being conspicuous. What does this say? Rules are meant to be broken? Or perhaps British institutions rely on self-regulation of behaviour rather than using staff to proactively police minor rule-breakers. From a human geography perspective, the selfie stick changed the way my friend and I encountered the space. Rather than methodically charting a course through the gallery, we darted from artwork to artwork, ignoring the pieces that weren't interesting or wouldn't photograph so well. In that sense, the breaching experiment forced us to consider the socially accepted ways of navigating public cultural spaces.

I never published any of the photographs online as my friend didn't want the images to appear online. In that sense, the selfie stick practice and publication process had been cut short. Hypothetically, even if I had published an image or two it would have posed a question of how I would have framed that image. How would the material practice of the selfie stick be enacted in a digital space such as Instagram? What attributes would I have given the selfie stick, knowing the situation, and the public I was publishing to? It likely would have been posted with a humorous comment about having to do the breaching experiment and how it hadn't gone to plan.

ETHNOGRAPHY, OBJECTS AND REFLEXIVITY

The problem with this fence-sitting approach to conducting an ethnography of an object is that as a researcher, a lot of time and energy is taken up in debating - both internally and outwardly - both ontologies, as though one must outweigh the other or have precedence over another. This, of course, is not true. Ontologies are largely dependent on situated action, and they will change, shift and morph in accordance with the actors involved in the situated action. The problem with the ontologies of the selfie stick is not the object itself - it is the humans and their varying understandings of it. And this leads me to a place of realisation: it is acceptable for the researcher to be reflexive in order to come to that understanding. For myself, that realisation came shockingly late in the research. Specifically referring to the selfie stick, it is interesting to note that many ontologies of the object exist, and yet they rarely intersect and enter into discourse with one another. Hence the angst of researching this object: the researcher can go around in circles *looking for discourse* of differing understandings where they may simply not exist.

But what of the object? After all of this ethnography in both material and digital settings, and after all of the reflexivity and recursivity, what can be said about the selfie stick? Is it inherently narcissistic? No.

Selfie practices would still exist without the selfie stick and those unsupportive would still discuss the selfie as a narcissistic activity. Is the selfie stick disruptive? Yes, in some settings, but never without help from other actors. A selfie stick will never damage a precious museum object on its own, it needs a human actor to accomplish that. Similarly, a selfie stick will never delay someone on its own, there must be a human actor using the selfie stick to cause the delay. And what of my discomfort in using the selfie stick for a breaching experiment? That could speak to my own lack of expertise with the object, or a dislike for being the active participant in a breaching experiment.

FIELDSITES: DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIES, MATERIAL ETHNOGRAPHIES AND, INTERSECTIONS.

The primary challenge of this autoethnographic, ethnomethodological cocktail of an approach across digital and material fieldsites was the difficulty in finding and describing the intersections and the settings where the digital and material merge. With the benefit of hindsight and with the aid of resources published after this research was conducted, it may have been beneficial to delineate exactly what was being studied when researching the selfie stick.

Pink et al. (2015) set out five principles for digital ethnography that would have been helpful to keep in mind at the time. While reflexivity features as one of the principles, the principle of 'non-digital-centricness' is also listed. It is an idea whereby the digital needn't necessarily be studied using digital methods. In this sense, does the inclusion of Twitter and Instagram data help the enquiry? Similarly, Pink et al. describe the multivalence of digital ethnography; we may research things, relationships, practices and spaces, all under the banner of 'digital ethnography'. With this hindsight it is clear that within that digital ethnography, I was trying to research too much. I was trying to research the selfie stick as a thing, as a practice and, within digital and material spaces. A benefit of this was that I was able to examine all of this and roughly determine that indeed selfie stick existed as an object to be practiced in digital and material spaces, but the downfall came in the analysis where it was near impossible to write something coherent without bouncing between referring to an object and a practice within spaces. This was especially apparent when it came to describing the differences between digital and material spaces.

WHAT ABOUT FUTURE OBJECT ETHNOGRAPHIES?

In some respects this case study of conducting an ethnography of selfie stick is something I would not repeat, it was disjointed across the material and the digital without enough to connect the two. There were noticeable absences which raised important questions: Why was there such strong critique online and yet there was no direct critique of the selfie stick when the situated practice was occurring? It was a curious separation of practice and critique. And yet these ontologies of the selfie stick co-exist; people still use the selfie stick to create images to be published online. And those critical of the selfie stick carry on in this way to a lesser extent now that selfie stick use has stabilized somewhat.

At some point in time I approached the selfie stick ethnography as a search for a controversy (Venturini, 2010) or an issue (Marres, 2007, 2015). What the ethnography showed was something more akin to a co-existence of ontologies that do not converge towards discourse. I am hopeful that in future ethnographies of objects there can be close attention paid to the potential for differing yet not intersecting discourses. These 'differing-yet-not-intersecting' discourses may in fact be akin to the broader concept of filter bubbles. Might we be able to take this co-existence of ontologies forward into future ethnographies of faddish objects that capture both the enthusiasm and critique of publics?

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