

Overcoming the Ethical, Methodological and Analytical Challenges of Digital Anthropology

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Digital media has become a culturally and politically meaningful aspect of everyday social life, which makes it a compelling and relevant subject of ethnographic inquiry. However, this new media is also ephemeral, often containing elusive and ambiguous constructions of collective and individual identities (Coleman 2010: 451). This raises challenges for conventional anthropological approaches. In this essay, I consider the ethical challenges implicit in the study of digital anthropology as a starting point for understanding how its methodological and analytical challenges should be overcome. I first place the discipline of anthropology in a historical context, which emphasizes the importance of considering the political implications of ethnographic studies. The significance of recognizing the dialectic aspects of online communities will be emphasized. Secondly, I will use the concept of “materiality of the digital” to show the ethical importance of challenging existing anthropological

methods. I consider how the concept of materiality of the digital challenges existing anthropological methodologies, but also how such a concept can be of ethical significance. Finally, I look at the fluidity of online identity and the analytical challenges this poses for the ethnographic study of such. I further consider how these analytical challenges have methodological implications. Ultimately, I thus argue that the ethical, methodological, and analytical challenges of digital anthropology are highly interconnected. While this adds complexity to the individual challenges it also suggests that changes in methodological and analytical procedures can help overcome the ethical challenges within the discipline.

Recognising the dialectic nature of the digital is of major ethical significance for the study of digital communities. This refers to the relationship between the growth in universality as well as particularity and the interconnectedness between its positive and negative effects (Miller and Horst 2012: 3). The colonial history of anthropology reveals its potential to be a tool for systematic subjugation of certain groups of people and highlights the ethical responsibility of anthropology to consider the political implications of its methodologies. The majority of

early work on digital communities has privileged economically advantaged areas, such as North America and Europe, focusing on those most immediately in contact with technological development (ibid: 20). Privileging such “cultural locations” over others limits the understanding of digital media in political processes and “postcolonial economies and aesthetics” (Coleman 2010: 490). Examples of such studies are Senft’s (2008) study on microcelebrity gained by webcasting, the blurring of the work-life balance among Silicon Valley tech workers studied by English-Leueck (2002), or the genre-specific attributes of blogs by Doostdar (2004). These studies echo the mentality of the time, where the opportunities of new technologies were met with utopian enthusiasm which insisted that social media facilitated “democratic participation” (Coleman 2010: 489) and that it would “empower individuals worldwide while subverting existing power structures” (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 451). This represents a clear ethical challenge for the discipline of digital anthropology, as ignoring the global demography can lead digital anthropology to become a form of cultural dominance, similar to early colonial anthropology (Miller and Horst 2012: 20). However, Madianou and Miller’s (2011) study on Filipino migrant women working

as domestic workers in London suggests “an alternative front line for the anthropology of the digital age” (Miller and Horst 2012: 10). With their children living in the Philippines, the study highlights the importance of digital communication for transnational migrants (ibid: 10). In this study, digital innovation is not idealized. Rather, Madianou and Miller study the women’s use of technology as highly embedded into their economic and political marginalization. Situated in a global context but recognizing the particularity and locality of the Filipino mothers working in London this study embraces the dialectic nature of digital technologies. It recognizes that the “new political economy of the digital world is really not that different from the older political economy” (ibid: 10). This highlights the importance of the concept of the dialectic because it acknowledges the impact of political contexts on the access to and use of technology. This serves as the central ethical challenge of digital anthropology, which the restructuring of methodological and analytical approaches can help overcome.

A methodological challenge in the ethnographic study of online communities lies in the acknowledgement of its materiality – “the bedrock for digital anthropology”

(ibid: 25). The dialectic approach to the digital is premised on the idea that “culture can only exist through objectification” (ibid: 34). Such can represent a methodological challenge, as digital equipment is “built and engineered to propagate an illusion of immateriality” (ibid: 25). This challenge can be exemplified in the context of “4chan”, described by Coleman (2010), an image forum in which participants are anonymous, posts are not archived, and happen at fast speed. A core value of this digital community is the upholding of anonymity and maintaining a clear division between offline and online worlds. The “Chronic Troll Syndrome”, a term invented by the community, describes the condition of a troll unable to “tell a difference between internet and IRL” and emphasizes the importance of this ability (ibid: 112). In such a community, the material and local aspects of the users’ identity are not performed. While Coleman’s study identified this divide, its methodological approach does not transcend the distinction created and does not engage with the material context of the community. In conventional anthropology, cultural artefacts have mainly consisted of physical objects from which anthropologists drew meaning. Digital anthropology, however, demands a broader and more inclusive understanding of

what constitutes a cultural artefact. Such an approach is used in Milner’s (2013) study of internet memes and their role in the mediated public discourse on forums such as 4chan and Reddit. He approaches the study of internet memes similarly to how anthropologists have traditionally approached the study of cultural artefacts: as objects that encompass cultural “order, agency and relationships” (Miller and Horst 2012: 24). The “logic of lulz” employed in the memes “disproportionally targets minorities and women” (Milner 2013: 67) and establishes “a participation structure premised on the repression of diverse voices” (ibid: 75). The collective morality identified in the study of memes is therefore highly embedded in a political and racial reality which transcends an offline-online divide. While Milner’s study shows the potential of studying the materiality of online communities effectively, Coleman’s work on 4chan demonstrates the methodological challenges that have to be overcome to do so.

Comparing the use of materiality in the ethnographic analysis of Milner (2013) and Coleman (2010) also reveals how the concept of digital materiality contributes to the recognition of the dialectic nature of communities that are studied. Milner uses the materiality of the

digital community, the memes, to establish a connection between the local and the global, placing the digital community in a gendered and racial political context. The “logic of lulz” employed in them also reveals aspects of the users own gendered and racial identities (Milner 2013: 67). The dialectic aspect of the digital community is thus revealed, as the political, racial, and gendered specificity of its dominant group of users interact with political questions that are global in nature. Coleman’s (2010) work on 4chan and “trolls” instead emphasizes the collective identity of the community. Instead of identifying the political and social context of its individual users, she puts emphasis on their movement against the “non-technologically minded people” on the internet (ibid: 113). While this demonstrates the dynamics between different online communities, it does not draw direct lines to the local identity of its users and does therefore not engage with the dialectic processes within the digital community. As Miller and Horst note, the “principle of materiality cycles back to the principle concerning the dialectic” (2012: 24) as it helps establish a connection between socio-cultural practices within and outside of mediated communication (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 453). This is clear in the comparison of the two examples, in which the concept of materiality is

employed differently and, as a result, the dialectic aspects of digital culture is too. This demonstrates the ways in which methodological shifts in the study of digital communities can help overcome the ethical challenges of the discipline.

Digital platforms allow for a negotiation of identity and community participation that challenges the conventional analytical approach of anthropologists. However, they also contain different “architectures for participation” (Coleman 2020: 101) and the role of the individual identity, therefore, comes to vary greatly in different digital communities. This can prove a challenge for a discipline which, as Wagner (1974) notes, uses groups and identity as beginning points for analysis. The diversity of the role of individual identity in digital communities can be exemplified by comparing Russian chat rooms studied by Humphrey (2009) to the digital community “Anonymous” studied by Wesch (2012). For Anonymous, which describes itself as the “group to end all groups, and an identity to end all identities”, individual identity is completely rejected (Wesch 2012: 99). On 4chan, where much of Anonymous sociability occurs, the technology itself encourages an anonymous identity by not requiring any verification or fixed username to submit a post. Without any stable

user identity, the boundaries of the community become fluid as membership is fleeting and ephemeral (ibid: 90). Anonymous thus comes to challenge the “taken-for-granted assumptions about identity and community” (ibid: 91). In the study on Russian chatrooms of users that participate in role-playing games, the users “virtual personas” are not just a reproduction of their offline identity but an extension of such (Humphrey 2009: 33). The restrictions they face in the offline world does not exist for them online. Their presence on the internet is therefore where they feel the most “real” (ibid: 34). Indeed, the users explicitly draw connections between their offline and online identities. Unlike in Anonymous, they are identifiable online due to their use of a specific virtual persona and their group membership thus becomes more constant. The different role of individual identities in online communities becomes clear in the contrasting ways in which it is used among Russian players and Anonymous. Due to the fluidity and ephemerality of identity online, the conventional approach of anthropology, which privileges fixed categorizations of groups and identity, is not sufficient. Rather, anthropologists should use the “continuum of communities, identities, and networks that exist” as a starting point for their analysis

(Wilson and Peterson 2002: 456). This is further necessitated by the fact that different individual identities can exist across different media platforms and participate in different digital communities in which identity is treated differently. This demands conventional analytical procedures to be shifted to “more dynamic approaches that recognize and theorize the processes of culture” (Wesch 2012: 99). This analytical challenge must be overcome if ethnographic studies are to acknowledge study individual identity, or the lack thereof, in digital communities.

The comparison of Anonymous and Russian chat rooms further demonstrates how analytical challenges of digital communities can have methodological implications. Due to the different role of individual identity in the digital communities studied, different methodological approaches have been used. Humphrey (2009) approaches the study of the identity of chat room participants by first describing their virtual persona and then analyzing how their “sociality interpenetrates with off-line life” by interviewing users (ibid: 33). Such an approach is possible because of the importance of a distinct, individual identity in the digital community. By comparison, Wesch (2012) studies the online activities of Anonymous by observing 4chan’s message board. The

anonymity is studied as a “cultural motif” (ibid: 91) and the lack of performed individual identity is understood in relation to anonymity as a core moral value. Instead of comparing participants to their offline identities as Humphrey (2009) does, the materiality produced within the digital community, the memes and texts, becomes a way of placing the individual identities of its users into a political and social context. Wesch’s (2012) methodological approach to data collection is therefore mostly observational, while Humphrey interviews and actively engages with the virtual personas online. Thus, the different ways in which individual identity is played out in the two communities require different methods of data collection. This shows how the analytical shift in how concepts of individual and collective identities are understood also has implications for the methodology used.

In conclusion, it can be said that the digital world contains many dichotomies which are embodied in the concept of dialectic. This essay looked at the materiality and immateriality, the universality and particularity, and the individual and collective identity of digital communities. These contrasting concepts came to demonstrate the interconnectedness of methodological,

analytical, and ethical challenges of digital anthropology. It became clear that, in order to overcome these challenges, the anthropological method and analysis must be able to transcend the digital dichotomies: the dialectic nature of the digital world must be recognized. If this is done, digital anthropology would “effectively collapse established differences”, which would have implications beyond the subdiscipline itself (Miller and Horst 2012: 18). As some scholars have noted, there is no such thing as non-digital anthropology anymore, as almost all aspects of what anthropology traditionally studies have been affected by the digital (ibid: 29). The breakdown of the online/offline divide, which is central to overcoming the challenges of digital anthropology, does therefore not solely apply to the ethnographic studies of online communities; it also applies to the discipline of anthropology as a whole. Digital anthropology and its core concerns can enhance the entirety of the discipline of anthropology (ibid: 15).

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