

Recommended Readings

We asked our panelists to share two of their favorite readings about or using digital ethnography, including any piece authored by themselves, which we might find useful for diving into online methods.

Below is the list of their favorites, and their key take-aways from it.

Melissa Aronczyk

Blok, A., Nakazora, M., & Winthereik, B. R. (2016). Infrastructuring Environments. *Science as Culture* 25(1): 1-22.

How can we use ethnography to apprehend human and non-human relations in (so-called) natural environments? It involves, as the authors write, “attending to how ‘the environment’ is managed and known, through what material and conceptual means, and to what effects” (3). This article, an introduction to a special issue, describes how conceptual resources from a number of overlapping research traditions (STS, sociology, anthropology, human geography, organizational studies, and human ecology, among others) can be mobilized toward ethnographic sensibilities around global environments. I especially like the article’s reminder to think of infrastructures and networks as dynamic and fluid (though not frictionless) and how ethnographic methods are therefore well suited to highlighting the “contextual dynamics of situated practices and agencies” (11).

Jaffrennou, M., Coduys, T. (2005). Mission Impossible: Giving Flesh to the Phantom Public. Pp. 218-223 in Latour, B. & Weibel, P., eds. *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. ZKM.

This essay describes an art project designed by the authors for the exhibit Making Things Public, curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel in 2005 in Berlin. The art project is in fact an immersive installation that builds on the concerns expressed by Walter Lippmann for the future of communication in a democracy in his book, *The Phantom Public* (1925). The essay describes how visitors move through the installation as bodies and as data selves, captured by digital technologies such as RFID codes and sensors. While the essay is not about digital ethnography per se, I love how it invites us to consider what and how to capture a “public” or “public opinion” in a digitally mediated context.

Sophie Bishop

Skeggs, B. (1994). Situating the production of feminist ethnography. *Researching women's lives from a feminist perspective*, 72-92.

I’m trained in the field of Cultural Studies, which is actually very methodologically rich, although it’s not always viewed that way. In this piece, Bev Skeggs reflects on some of her experiences researching working class women in the UK with refreshing honesty. She discusses how messy research can actually be, and how many of the boundaries that we draw within the research process can be quite arbitrary. Although this is not a piece on

'digital ethnography', yet it deals with many of the issues that I experienced when researching young women online.

Bishop, S. (2019). Managing visibility on YouTube through algorithmic gossip. *New media & society*, 21(11-12), 2589-2606.

As part of my research, I wanted to find out how theories about what the YouTube algorithm 'wanted' shaped beauty influencers' cultural production.. I found it useful to conceptualize influencers as 'professional users', who were running tests on social media platforms every day, and documenting the results of these tests in Facebook groups, Twitter and Instagram pages. I am a huge fan of gossip and I wanted to discuss the casual musings, theories and forms of strategic talk that I found in these online spaces as an important record of the link between perceptions around algorithmic visibility. These theories may not be right, but they end up influencing culture that is visible and available to us on platforms (which are probably less likely to be YouTube now!).

André Brock

Bonilla, Y and Rosa, J. "#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States". *American Ethnologist* 42, 1. P. 4-17
<https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12112>

An important clarification on the complexities of studying hashtags as "discursive communities"

Brock, A. (2018). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 1012–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816677532>

Although I'd been writing about CTDA for nearly a decade before this article, this is the first full-fat treatment of the method. For the first time i was able to articulate why my positionality as a Black male academic helped to inform this approach to meaning making, race, and community in online spaces, apps, and commenting sections.

Jeff Lane

Christin, A. "The Ethnographer and the Algorithm: Beyond the Black Box." *Theory & Society*, 1-22. [here](#)

I love this piece because it shows how an algorithmic system can be a way into the field and an opportunity to initiate or build on ethnographic relationships.

Lane, J. (2020). A smartphone case method: Reimagining social relationships with smartphone data in the U.S. context of Harlem. *Journal of Children and Media*, 14(4).

This piece is about experimenting with how to integrate a smartphone and its traces into the traditional method of shadowing someone. It's also a reflection on the boundaries of a relationship.

Nick Seaver:

Beaulieu, A. 2010. "Research Note: From Co-Location to Co-Presence: Shifts in the Use of Ethnography for the Study of Knowledge." *Social Studies of Science* 40 (3): 453–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312709359219>.

Anne Beaulieu is an outstanding methodologist, and the basic argument of this article is one I've really internalized: When doing fieldwork with digitally mediated groups, it just isn't that useful to worry about physical co-location as the sine qua non of ethnographic research! There are many ways people are present with each other, and the ethnographer's task is to trace these out and experience them.

Seaver, Nick. 2017. "Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems." *Big Data & Society* 4 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717738104>.

I recommend my own piece not because I think it's particularly novel (it's not!), but because this article was my effort to pull together a variety of sources that proved useful to me in composing an ethnographic study of algorithmic systems. In general, these sources are not distinctly digital: many tips and tricks from ethnographers who study elites, distributed phenomena, and organizations prove useful for "digital" ethnography. I often hear from graduate students who find the collection of resources I gathered together here useful for convincing themselves (or their committees) that they are indeed doing "real" ethnography, despite what it might feel like at times.