

# Doing remote ethnography

John Postill  
RMIT University  
[john.postill@rmit.edu.au](mailto:john.postill@rmit.edu.au)

Draft chapter to the *Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*  
Eds. Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway & Genevieve Bell

January 2016

## Abstract

It is commonly thought that ‘being there’ has been the sine qua non of anthropological research ever since Malinowski’s ‘fieldwork revolution’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Geertz 1988). Yet during World War Two, leading US-based anthropologists such as Mead, Bateson and Benedict had no choice but to study the cultures of Japan, Germany and other nations ‘at a distance’, including through media formats such as films, novels, and poetry (Mead and Metraux 2000). With the explosive growth of networked technologies in recent years, the remote study of social practices is once again on the agenda - only now with far greater media resources at our disposal than those available in the 1940s. In this chapter I reflect on my experience of researching digital politics while physically absent from ‘the field’. I argue that there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate about researching local issues remotely (e.g. via Twitter, live streaming, web cam, email, online archives), or indeed retroactively, especially for ethnographers with previous local experience. The main challenge is precisely how to overcome this misconception and make adequate provision for remote ethnography in our research designs and practices.

## Keywords

long-distance fieldwork, research, methodology, digital media, social media, anthropology, digital ethnography, remote ethnography

It was a tense event. I was sitting in a classroom at Goldsmiths College, University of London, near the front. The speaker was the ex-Muslim and feminist author Maryam Namazie. She was here as a guest of the university’s Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society (AHS) to speak about blasphemy and apostasy. The audience consisted at this point of some twenty-five souls, including a contingent of young Muslim women sat towards the back of the room. Normally at a university lecture one assumes the audience will be reasonably quiet and respectful – you would certainly not expect to have to contend with hecklers bent on disrupting the session. But on this occasion that was exactly what was in store for Namazie.

After a brief introduction by a young, bespectacled AHS member, Namazie wondered out loud whether she should sit or stand, eventually choosing the latter. About ten minutes into her talk, half a dozen young bearded men – presumably from the

university's Islamic Society – entered the room and sat along the front row, a mere few feet away from the speaker. One of them began to laugh as Namazie related the recent murder of Bangladeshi bloggers critical of political Islamists. The speaker asked him whether he found it amusing that people were being ‘hacked to death’. Shortly afterwards, another bearded student started to interrupt Namazie, to which she responded by shouting numerous times ‘Be quiet or get out!’, alas to no avail. Tongue in cheek, the student replied that he felt intimidated by Namazie who immediately retorted: ‘Oh, you’re intimidated? Go to your safe space.’ Refusing to be silenced by the constant interruptions and irritations (e.g. loud ringing tones), Namazie pressed on with her presentation and even managed to hold a lively Q&A session at the end, by which time the troublemakers had already left the room<sup>1</sup>.

\*\*\*

I folded my laptop, got up from the sofa, went downstairs to the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea. I had been glued to the screen for almost two hours without a break. I was not in London. I was at home in Melbourne, 17,000 kilometres away. What’s more, I was not even following the lecture in real time, for it had been recorded and uploaded onto YouTube the day before<sup>2</sup> (I learned about this video via Twitter). And yet it *felt* as if I was present there and then, in the thick of it, as much a member of the audience as anyone else. I felt the palpable tension, the anger, the fear, the dogged determination, the final triumph of argument over intimidation. Perhaps it did not feel exactly as if I had been there at the time, but no great leap of the imagination was needed to feel a great sense of immediacy – even intimacy – with a recorded event that took place a world away.

### **A problem of legitimacy**

This tale of entry was inspired by a draft article by Patty A. Gray titled ‘Memory, body, and the online researcher: following Russian street demonstrations via social media’, soon to be published in *American Ethnologist*. I had the good fortune of being one of the paper’s six blind reviewers. I say good fortune because this reviewing assignment coincided with the early preparations for the present chapter. This gave me an ideal entry point into the question of how we may go about doing ethnographic research remotely in the current age of nearly ubiquitous digital media. Gray opens her article with the following passage:

It is a crisp winter day in Moscow: brilliant blue sky, bright sunlight, dazzling white snow shoveled into piles along the streets. We are driving along the Garden Ring, the circular road that belts the city of Moscow. Normally on a Sunday this road would be relatively empty and quiet – certainly not the traffic gridlock that paralyzes the city on any given weekday. But on this sunny Sunday in January, the road is full of muscovite cars of all imaginable makes circling the city, making one full turn of the Garden Ring, then another, round and round as they are joined by more and more cars. It is easy to spot who you are looking for, because their white emblems are displayed as visibly as possible on their vehicles: flowing white ribbons; white balloons; a white umbrella sticking through a sun roof; someone’s white blouse fluttering out a window; a white stuffed rabbit strapped to a side view mirror. One car is tiled with pieces of white paper, and another has simply piled high its roof with

snow. This last example is the most literal emblem, because this has been dubbed the “Snow Revolution,” Russia’s contribution to the so-called “colored revolutions.” (Gray in press, n/p).

Just like me, Gray is referring to an event that she only took part in remotely – in her case in real time. Whilst I was ‘transported’ from Melbourne to London, she was ‘driven’ around snowy Moscow from her Dublin home: ‘I am not in Moscow, I am in Dublin; but it *felt* like I was in Moscow, and I want to go back’.

Although a long-time specialist in Russia, Gray did not set out to conduct research into the Russian protests remotely – or indeed at all. Yet once she had followed the first protest, she became ‘hooked’ for months on end, joining the action as it played out ‘from start to finish, spending hours at each sitting’. She describes the experience as being ‘exhilarating and often great fun’, albeit as exhausting as traditional anthropological fieldwork. At the same time, this protracted activity raised the thorny issue of whether it could be considered ‘real’ fieldwork given the absence of a ‘being there’ (Geertz 1988) dimension.

The aim of Gray’s article is to explore the meaning of ‘being there’ and ‘being then’, and especially the use of social media ‘to remotely study offline social phenomena’. She suggests that ethnographers experience and remember online social media encounters just as they do offline encounters, that is, ‘in the body’. If this is the case, says Gray, the epistemological implications are significant for all ethnographers, including those like herself with no particular interest in studying digital media. In this exploratory essay I wish to continue the conversation, so to speak, with Patty Gray on this problem of how to go about studying local phenomena from afar. To this end I will take up a number of the points advanced by Gray and discuss them one by one, starting with the idea of remote fieldwork as a safer way of conducting research in conflict-ridden or otherwise hazardous locations.

### **From a safe distance**

One unexpected bonus of doing remote research for Gray was that, as a US citizen, doing fieldwork on the ground in Russia entails a degree of potential risk and harassment:

[E]ven if I had been free to jump on a plane at the first sign of activity and spend the next several weeks in Moscow researching this phenomenon first hand, it would have been risky for me to do so [...]. As an American citizen, I am a lightning rod for negative attention from Russian authorities.

There is a venerable precedent here. It is commonly thought that ‘being there’ has been the sine qua non of anthropological research ever since Malinowski’s ‘fieldwork revolution’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Geertz 1988). Yet during World War Two, leading US-based anthropologists such as Mead, Bateson and Benedict had no alternative but to study the cultures of Japan, Germany and other nations ‘at a distance’, through media formats such as films, novels, and poetry (Mead and Metraux 2000). After the war, most anthropologists once again lost interest in studying media as relatively peaceful conditions returned to their chosen field sites. It was only from the late 1980s that a growing number of them would take up the study

of media, often after their research participants had literally turned their backs on them to watch TV or listen to the radio (Peterson 2003).

Of course, there is no guarantee that a presently peaceful locale will remain so forever. Thus in the mid-1990s, as I was preparing for doctoral fieldwork in West Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo, the country entered a phase of turmoil that culminated in a mass protest movement against the military regime of Suharto, who was forced to step down in 1998. In view of these circumstances, I decided to conduct fieldwork into media and nation building north of the border in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo (Postill 2000, 2006). Meanwhile, a fellow PhD candidate at University College London, Andrew Skuse, faced a similar challenge as large parts of Afghanistan came under the control of the Taliban. But rather than turn his attention entirely to neighbouring Pakistan, where he found himself stranded, Skuse persevered with his plan of studying radio reception in Afghanistan remotely, through local research assistants whose presence was inconspicuous (Skuse 1999). Unlike Gray, who in the early 2010s had access to a wealth of telematic media with which to study unfolding events in Russia from afar, in 1990s Afghanistan – a media-poor time and place – Skuse had to resort to hiring research proxies.

There are also ontologically more ambiguous situations in which anthropologists who were hoping to conduct fieldwork in a given physical locale (or set of locales) become stranded not offline but online, with less real-time access to physical spaces than that enjoyed by Gray. This was particularly the case in the late 1990s and early 2000s, before the current global boom in web-enabled mobile devices. For example, Birgit Bräuchler (2005, 2013) was hoping to conduct field research in Maluku, Indonesia, but instead had to make virtue (or virtual) out of necessity by focussing on the ‘cyberspace’ created around the bloody religious conflict that pitted Maluku Christians against Muslims from 1999 to 2002. Although most of her research took place online, Bräuchler also managed to conduct some fieldwork on the ground.

In yet other cases, anthropologists have found that their target field sites are beyond direct reach owing not to war but to a natural disaster. This was the challenge faced by Jonathan Skinner during fieldwork on the Caribbean island of Montserrat following a volcanic eruption in 1995, when most residents, including Skinner, had to be evacuated at short notice. The instant diaspora was scattered across Canada, the United States, Britain and other countries. Some of them decided to keep in contact online via an internet newsgroup they named the Electronic Evergreen. This pre-Facebook social medium allowed displaced Montserradians to recreate the style and rhythm of the erstwhile co-present sociality of their distant homeland. Skinner (2007) was compelled to follow suit, interacting with his research participants at once remotely and online.

Here we can begin to see the varied ways in which anthropologists and other ethnographers have conducted fieldwork safely from afar. For Mead and Bateson, this meant studying media contents originating in Japan, Germany, and other nations at a distance as well as after the fact, owing to the wartime impossibility of travelling to those countries. Over half a century later, Gray, Bräuchler, and Skinner were able to follow events ‘on the ground’ in real time – or close to real time in some cases, through asynchronous forms of mediated interaction such as newsgroups. The case of Montserrat is curious, albeit increasingly common among diasporic groups, in that the

anthropologist, like his informants, socialised through a remedial technology that recreated the experience of being there prior to the volcanic eruption. By contrast, Skuse conducted his research vicariously, not via telematic media but rather through local research assistants able to work in his target field sites.

### **Planned and unplanned**

Remote ethnography can be both planned and unplanned. With the recent proliferation of digital media and the growing political turbulence around the world (Postill 2015a), more and more ethnographers are increasingly unable – or unwilling – to declare an end to their primary research on leaving ‘the field’. Thus in her discussion of how she came to study Russian protests from afar, Patty Gray explains that she was

not consciously doing *research* – it was not planned, and in the beginning it could not have *been* planned, because even the protesters themselves did not know they would come out onto the street for that first mass demonstration on the fifth and sixth of December 2011... (Gray in press, n/p, emphasis in original).

This Russian specialist unexpectedly resumed her previous on-the-ground work through internet-mediated research from Ireland thanks to the ready availability of digital technologies at both ends. Similarly, after concluding my Spanish fieldwork into internet activism in the summer of 2011, I could not help but monitor events from abroad as the *indignados*/15M movement continued to evolve month after month. I did this first from the UK and later from Australia, where I currently live, as well as from Indonesia during fieldwork there.

Gray describes Twitter as a manner of ‘wormhole’ leading to a multitude of social media platforms through which she could keep abreast of the Russian protests. Likewise, elsewhere I have described Twitter as my very own ‘human-mediated RSS feed’, that is, as an efficient way of channelling the deluge of information related to my research by following a manageable set of informants (Postill and Pink 2012).

There are also, however, times when ethnographers can prepare in advance for periods of long-distance research. For instance, during my 2003-2004 fieldwork into local activism in the township of Subang Jaya, Malaysia, I built into the research design a number of breaks from the field to attend to parental responsibilities in the UK. Interestingly, during these ‘absences’ from Malaysia I was able to devote more time to the wider network of local residents who were active on the local web forum than when I was physically there, occupied with ‘following’ key informants from one offline setting to another (Postill 2015b, Pink, Horst, Postill et al 2016).

### **Being then**

Gray argues that there is nothing new about remote anthropology itself. The novelty lies in the fact that anthropologists can now access remote sites *in real time* through social media. She supports this point with the example of an Instagram image tweeted from inside a police van in December 2011 by the Russian activist and blogger Aleksei Navalny, just after Gray and others had witnessed live his arrest along with that of other demonstrators. Navalny’s tweet read: “I’m sitting with the guys in the riot police bus. They say hi to everyone”. The Instagram photo showed the smiling faces of a group of protesters, some of them flashing the victory sign.

The tweet and the image are now in my digital archive of that event, so I can refer to them at any time. However, there is no replicating the real-time adrenaline kick of the (being-then) moment when that tweet appeared in my Twitter feed and I read the words, not at all expecting that when I pulled up the image on Instagram I would see what resembled a moment of giddy *communitas* rather than an experience of repressive police detainment (Gray in press, n/p).

Gray goes on to argue that ‘being then’ in real time framed her subsequent interpretations of the evolving riot police practice of detaining protesters in Moscow. Had she merely retrieved the image and tweet from an online archive, the ‘adrenaline kick’ of having lived that intense moment would be missing. Gray concludes that social media are ‘experienced – and remembered – *in the body* in ways that challenge the distinctions we might otherwise make between virtual and physical encounters.’

There is no denying that real-time experiences can indeed be powerful and shape the researcher’s understanding of subsequent field events. I for one went through a transformative experience of sharing a common strip of space-time with Plaça de Catalunya occupiers in Barcelona in mid-May 2011, which I described as an awakening for me and countless others across Spain after decades of political slumber (Postill 2014) – an experience that Gray includes in her article. At the same time, we must be careful not to replace one dubious panacea of anthropological research (‘being there’) with a seemingly more current, yet equally problematic, alternative (‘being then’).

There are two main reasons to be cautious. First, not all ‘being then’ experiences have to be ‘adrenaline kicks’. One can share experiences with others in real time at very different tempos, and with widely varying emotional qualities. In my own remote research over the years, I have experienced all manner of emotions ranging from excitement, joy and even bliss at one end of the spectrum to boredom, frustration and apathy at the other, with fast-moving phases of intense engagement invariably followed by quiet periods (Postill and Pink 2012). Moreover, different (sub)cultural universes of practice will privilege certain forms of time-bound emotions over others. Compare, for instance, the high risk-taking ‘edgework’ of base parachute jumpers (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng 2001) with the more sedate activities of lawn bowls players or weekend anglers.

Second, whatever the temporal and affective quality of the remote event in question, it is still possible to extract valuable insights from archived moments, even from moments that we never experienced live. For example, in a series of posts titled ‘Freedom technologists’ that I am currently publishing on my research blog<sup>3</sup>, I draw from digitally archived interviews by and with Spanish *indignados* to, among other things, recreate some of the defining moments of their protest movement. Thus many interviewees refer to a collective act of civil disobedience carried out by tens of thousands of occupiers of Madrid’s Puerta del Sol square in May 2011. I may not have been there or then, but through their vivid recollections of this collective rite of passage, and my own comparable experiences in Barcelona, I was still able to imaginatively relive this turning point *almost as if I had been there and then*. Arguably this is not quite ‘the real thing’, as defined by Gray, but it more than suffices for my writing purposes, namely to sketch the early stages of the *indignados* movement through (para-)ethnographic means.

### **Twin anxieties**

All this suggests that there may be two related anxieties at play in the increasingly common practice of long-distance fieldwork. We could call them (a) the ethnographic fear of missing out, and (b) the anthropological aversion to thin descriptions. As regards missing out, take the angst I felt in March 2011 as I attended an event in Barcelona from afar, via a networked computer from my home in England. The meeting was the third in an itinerant series known by the Twitter hashtag *#redada*. These were sessions organised by free culture activists battling the Spanish government and culture lobbies over the future of the internet. Participants coordinated these sessions via social media. Those unable to attend in person could do so free of charge by means of a live streaming platform. They could also put questions to the panelists over Twitter.

When I realised that my short trip to the UK clashed with the first ever *#redada* to be held in Barcelona, I was bitterly disappointed. For a moment, I had forgotten that much of what goes on within the world of free culture activism in Spain actually takes place remotely, especially via Twitter. Like me, not everyone can attend all events in person. At times, they may have to, or even choose to, attend telematically. How much did I miss by not ‘being there’ in the flesh? I probably missed a few chances to network with participants, perhaps over a cold beer and *tapas* or dinner after the event. On the other hand, from the comfort of my English study, undisturbed by the rich contextual cues of a physically co-present interaction, I could pay close attention to other features of the event – not least to the social media uses of internet activists that formed an integral part of my research. Besides, if necessary I could always revisit the archived tweets and video footage at a later point in time.

As for the fear of not being able to live up to the hallowed anthropological ideal of writing ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973, Ponterotto 2006) based on first hand research, in this respect remote fieldwork is no different from on-the-ground fieldwork: not all texts – or sections in a text – will warrant ethnographic thickness. In some pieces of writing, and for a host of reasons (space constraints, uneven materials, editorial requirements, etc.) anthropologists will alternate between thick and thin descriptions. In other writings, they will spread the ethnographic butter more evenly – and thinly. Thus in a chapter of my monograph *Localizing the Internet* (Postill 2011) titled ‘Internet Dramas’ I weave into the narrative two protests involving residents of the Malaysian suburb of Subang Jaya. Whilst I witnessed the first protest there and then, the second was based on materials I gathered remotely from the UK, mostly online and after the fact, but nonetheless sufficiently detailed to serve my textual ends (Postill 2009).

## **Conclusion**

With the continued diffusion of networked technologies, the remote study of social practices is once again on the agenda - only now with far greater media resources at our disposal than those available to Mead, Bateson et al in the 1940s. This state of affairs creates both opportunities and challenges for social scientists who wish to adopt ethnographic methods. I argued that there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate about researching local issues remotely, or indeed retroactively, especially for ethnographers with previous local experience. The main challenge is precisely how to overcome this misconception and make adequate provision for remote ethnography in our research designs and practices.

As we saw earlier, Patty Gray (in press) asks herself whether her long-distance monitoring of Russian protests is a legitimate mode of anthropological inquiry, or whether it is ‘cheating’ because there is no ‘being there’ component. She is not alone in her epistemological angst, for it is now gradually becoming rare for ethnographers *not* to use telematic media as part of their research repertoire.

In this chapter I have answered to Gray’s concerns with an unequivocal ‘yes’: it is indeed legitimate to conduct anthropological fieldwork from afar. For one thing, anthropological research is a technologically plural, open endeavour – we use whatever technical means will help us gain insights into the lives and deeds of our research participants (provided they are ethical). Remote fieldwork is more than a remedial measure, a ‘second best’ choice for anthropologists unable to reach their field sites for reasons of safety, illness, or disability. It often helps us to observe familiar people and things from a different perspective, thereby creating a richer engagement with the worlds of our research participants. Moreover, as growing numbers of people around the globe take up telematic media such as webcams, live streaming, or live tweeting, ‘being there’ from afar is becoming an ever more integral part of daily life.

It follows that we must make room in our research proposals for both scheduled and unscheduled phases of remote ethnography, something ever more doctoral students and their supervisors are now coming to realise. As more researchers with familial and work-related obligations engage in ethnographic research, and as conditions on the ground in many parts of the world become more uncertain, the overlooked practice of remote ethnography is likely to gain more visibility and methodological sophistication in the coming years.

## References

- Bräuchler, B. (2005) *Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Bräuchler, B. (2013). *Cyberidentities at War: The Moluccan Conflict on the Internet*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Geertz, C. (1973). ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture.’ In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1988) *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford University Press.
- Gray, P.A. (in press) ‘Memory, body, and the online researcher: following Russian street demonstrations via social media’, *American Ethnologist*.
- Ferrell, J., D. Milovanovic and S. Lyng (2001). ‘Edgework, Media Practices, and the Elongation of Meaning: A Theoretical Ethnography of the Bridge Day Event’, *Theoretical Criminology* 5(2): 177–202.
- Mead, M., & Metraux, R. (2000). *The study of culture at a distance*. Berghahn Books.

- Peterson, M. A. (2003). *Anthropology and mass communication: Media and myth in the new millennium*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Pink, S., H. Horst, J. Postill, L. Hjorth, T. Lewis and J. Tacchi (2016). *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept Thick Description. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(3), 538-549.
- Postill, J. (2000). Borneo Again: Media, Social Life and Nation-Building among the Iban of East Malaysia. Unpublished PhD thesis, University College London (UCL).
- Postill, J. (2006). *Media and nation building: How the Iban became Malaysian*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Postill, J. (2009). What is the point of media anthropology?. *Social anthropology*, 17(3), 334-337.
- Postill, J. (2011). *Localizing the Internet: an anthropological account*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Postill, J. (2014) Democracy in an age of viral reality: a media epidemiography of Spain's indignados movement, *Ethnography* 15 (1): 50-68.
- Postill, J. (2015a) Public anthropology in times of media hybridity and global upheaval. In S. Abram and S. Pink (eds.) *Media, Anthropology and Public Engagement*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Postill, J. (2015b). Digital ethnography: 'being there' physically, remotely, virtually and imaginatively, *media/anthropology*, 25 February 2015, <http://johnpostill.com/2015/02/25/digital-ethnography-being-there-physically-remotely-virtually-and-imaginatively/>
- Postill, J., and S. Pink (2012). 'Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web', *Media International Australia* 145:123-34.
- Skinner, J. (2007). From the Pre-Colonial to the Virtual: The Scope and Scape of Land, Landuse and Landloss on Montserrat. *Caribbean Land and Development Revisited*, 219-232.
- Skuse, A. (1999). Negotiated Outcomes: an Ethnography of the Production and Consumption of a BBC World Service Soap Opera for Afghanistan. Unpublished PhD thesis, University College London (UCL).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> I have written this para-ethnographic tale of entry by drawing from a YouTube video of the event (see below) as well as from a 4 December 2015 report in *The Independent* (UK): <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/muslim-students-from-goldsmiths-university-s-islamic-society-heckle-and-aggressively-interrupt-a6760306.html>

<sup>2</sup> The YouTube video in question can be accessed here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1ZiZdz5nao&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>3</sup> See 'Freedom technologists series', *media/anthropology* blog:  
<http://johnpostill.com/category/freedom-technologists-series/>