media/anthropology

Digital ethnography: 'being there' physically, remotely, virtually and imaginatively

FEBRUARY 25, 2015

tags: activism, being there, community, digital activism, digital anthropology, digital ethnography, field theory, internet activism, media anthropology, media ethnography, methodology, network, social fields

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IN 2003 AND 2004 I conducted anthropological fieldwork in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Subang Jaya, Malaysia (Postill 2011). I was part of an international team of social anthropologists from the universities of Bremen, Manchester and Amsterdam studying e-governance initiatives in multi-ethnic areas of six different countries. The aim of this comparative project was to determine whether the internet was making any significant difference to local governance policies and practices in those localities. In my particular case, events on the ground led me to an unplanned focus on internet activism around local issues, and its implications for relationships between the municipal authorities and local residents (Postill 2012a).

The municipality of Subang Jaya was created in 1997, coinciding with the Southeast Asian financial crash that led to a deep political crisis in Malaysia and to the onset of the *reformasi* movement in 1998. Although internet penetration was still low in Malaysia at the time, the internet played an important role in the reform movement as an alternative means of information, opinion and mobilisation, especially among the (sub)urban middle classes (Abbott 2001, Postill 2014).

A year later, in 1999, Subang Jaya residents reacted to a 240 per cent overnight rise in local tax rates by using the internet to successfully reverse the municipal council's decision. That same year a Yahoo mailing list and a Web forum were created by and for residents as venues for both 'serious' and light-hearted exchanges about local issues, leisure pursuits, national and international affairs, and so on. The forum was a huge success, and it soon became Malaysia's most lively local forum.

I discovered a panoply of digital initiatives in Subang Jaya on both sides of the government-civil society divide, including a trisectoral 'smart township' project aimed at bringing together the public sector, the private sector and the local residents. Although this project failed, it did contribute to the flourishing of internet activism and some modest democratic reforms in a country with an acute 'democratic deficit' after local elections were banned in the 1960s following race riots that pitted the Malay Muslim majority against the ethnic Chinese minority (Postill 2011: 53).

To my surprise, ethnic identity was not really a major concern among Subang Jaya's activists fighting for better local governance in their largely middle-class, yet overcrowded and underserviced, suburb. The most salient identity marker was in fact **residentiality**, not ethnicity — a common refrain heard among activists being 'We are local residents and rate-payers'. The key issue was not so much democracy either (e.g. a campaign to reinstate local elections gained few adherents). It was ensuring that the local authorities used residents' taxes wisely and efficiently to resolve seemingly mundane problems related to traffic, waste disposal, green areas, and the like – a type of collective action I termed 'banal activism' (Postill 2011: 18).

On returning from the field, I first tried to place my empirical materials on Subang Jaya's various local internet initiatives along a community-network continuum, with communal projects at one end of the spectrum and network-like projects at the other. However, this soon proved to be a dead end that did not do justice to the fluidity and heterogeneity of conditions on the ground. Inspired by the Manchester School of Anthropology's pioneering studies of urbanisation and social change in Central-Southern Africa – where they fashioned new concepts such as 'field', 'network', 'social situation', 'trouble case' and 'social drama' – I developed the notion of **field of residential affairs.** A field of residential affairs is a conflict-prone domain of action in which residents, politicians, municipal staff, journalists, entrepreneurs and other social agents compete and cooperate over local issues, often via the internet (Postill 2011: xii). This new concept allowed me to escape from the analytical constraints of the community/network duo – a dubious conceptual pairing that has bedevilled internet studies for decades (Postill 2008). Trying to understand the infinite variety of internet social forms through 'communities' and 'networks' is like seeking to map the biodiversity of a Borneo rainforest armed with the words 'bits' and 'bobs'.

I then followed up this 2003-2004 fieldwork in Subang Jaya with part-time online research from the UK until 2009, as well as online archival research reaching back to 1999. The result was a 'diachronic ethnography' spanning 10 years (Postill 2012b). Interestingly, during several breaks from 'the field' back in England, I was often actually able to be a more active participant with a broader range of residents via the lively Web forum than when I was physically in Subang Jaya, where I was busy interviewing people and attending events with narrower segments of the population and the local elites. In addition, the broadband connection was faster and more reliable in England than in Malaysia. Oddly enough, I felt closer to the local residents when I was 6,500 miles away than whilst physically 'being there' (cf. Geertz 1988).

'Being there' in the digital era

What are the implications for ethnographers and other qualitative researchers of this technological ability – increasingly common – to conduct participant observation remotely? Is 'remote ethnography' as valid a mode of inquiry as traditional co-present research? After all, 'being there' has been the sine qua non of ethnographic research since Malinowski's fieldwork revolution (Geertz 1988). What does 'being there' mean today, particularly among the (sub)urban middle classes, when ethnographers and their research participants alike have a range of telematic media at their disposal? Does this state of 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller 2013) destabilise earlier notions of what counts as ethnographic fieldwork? Where are we when we Skype research participants across two or more locations? Are we in a virtual 'third place' akin to Second Life or in several physical places simultaneously?

I cannot answer all these questions here in any detail, but clearly the notion of 'being there' requires some unpacking. With the widespread adoption of digital media in recent years we are now in a position to discern at least four fundamental ways of being in the field. First, one can be there **physically**, or co-presently, interacting with research participants face-to-face (or indeed side-by-side, back-to-back, etc., see Postill 2008). Second, the ethnographer can also be there **remotely**, that is, via Skype, streaming, chat, pads, and other telematic media. Third, we can be in the field **virtually**, in a 'third place' that is neither our present location nor that of our interlocutors (Boellstorff 2008), e.g. via a mailing list, a web forum, a 3D real-time game, etc. Fourth, ethnographers (and their participants) can be elsewhere **imaginatively**, before and/or after the fact, through digital stories or images found on blogs, social media, video-sharing sites, and so on.

To add another layer of complexity to this heuristic scheme, these modes of being can be combined in potentially infinite ways. For instance, it is common nowadays for ethnographers – and their interlocutors – to use their mobile devices while in the presence of others, sometimes interrupting the flow of conversation several times in the course of an interaction, or adding a physically absent interlocutor to the conversation through a real-time connection, stored images or video of them, or a combination of these formats.

All modes of digitally mediated presence/absence entail a trade-off. Digital ethnographers will typically switch and mix among these modalities in the course of their ethnographic research – often without having the time to pause on the process as it unfolds, let alone catalogue and analyse all such instances in the post-fieldwork phase. In other words, this mixing and switching in our ways of being there has become almost fully naturalised.

It follows that we should abandon once and for all the received anthropological ~~notion~~ assumption that unmediated physical co-presence is inherently superior to, or more legitimate than, other forms of being there. In fact, there are certain situations in which we can learn more by following a Facebook exchange about a local issue or the live streaming and tweeting of a local event from our homes thousands of miles away than if we had been there at the time, as I have found when researching the digital practices of activists in Malaysia, Indonesia and Spain.

The crucial point here is **triangulation**, that is, the ethnographic imperative to gather primary and secondary materials on a given question through as rich a variety of sources as possible (Ortner 1998), including the ever-expanding ways of being there. Relying solely on physically co-present,

non-digital fieldwork, or solely on telematics is still theoretically possible, but in most research settings it no longer makes sense to do so.

About the author

Dr John Postill is Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow at RMIT University, Melbourne (2013-2016), and Digital Anthropology Fellow at University College London (UCL). His publications include *Localizing the Internet* (2011), *Media and Nation Building* (2006) and the co-edited volume *Theorising Media and Practice* (2010, with Birgit Bräuchler). Currently he is conducting anthropological research on new forms of digital activism and civic engagement in Indonesia, Spain and globally. He is also writing a book on the Spanish indignados (15M) movement and its recent political offshoots, as well as the co-edited volume *Theorising Media and Change* (with Elisenda Ardèvol and Sirpa Tenhunen). Follow John on Twitter: **@JohnPostill (https://twitter.com/johnpostill)**

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from → activism, digital anthropology, digital media, ethnography, fieldwork, ICT studies, internet studies, Malaysia, media anthropology, media ethnography, research, Southeast Asia

2 Comments   leave one →

1. **MPeterson PERMALINK**
   February 25, 2015 6:35 pm
   Another (quite different) take on the same idea:

   My analysis is methodologically rooted in a kind of "anthropology at a distance" (Mead and Metraux 2000) derived from my technologically mediated experience of the revolution. This included round-the-clock viewing of Al Jazeera's live coverage (in shifts with my wife), supplemented by a continuous flow of e-mails, Facebook posts, and tweets from our networks of friends and colleagues in Egypt. "Anthropology at a distance" refers to the study of cultural systems not through direct participation and observation but through literature, news media, films, music, and other types of expressive culture understood as "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Geertz 1973). Analysis of these stories is usually contextualized by interviews with travelers, migrants, or refugees from the place in question, or (as in my case) by the experience of extensive prior fieldwork. While always subject to criticism within anthropology (even by its practitioners), this approach has served anthropologists' work during periods like World War II, when most international field sites were closed off; in the contemporary global world system, where ethnography is difficult or impossible in places like Iraq (Robben 2009) and Afghanistan (Kucera 2012); or at times when events are temporally

displaced from direct ethnographic participation (Lindholm 2002). Contemporary work of this type has been transformed by the temporal immediacy of electronic communication, which "has made the pursuit of fieldwork in new contexts of time-space (or here, simply a return of an intimate version of 'anthropology at a distance') possible" (Marcus and Mascarenhas 2005: xv). Moreover, even though my absence from the Tahrir Square protests clearly makes me a nonparticipant in the central events of the revolution, my wider, mediated participation in the Egyptian revolution differs little, in some aspects, from that of the many Egyptians who also experienced it partly, or even largely, through electronic and social mediation.
(from Peterson, Mark Allen. Forthcoming [2015]. "In Search of Antistructure: The Meaning of Tahrir Square in Egypt's Ongoing Social Drama." In Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality. Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, eds. Berghahn Books)

REPLY

2. **John Postill PERMALINK***
   February 26, 2015 6:09 am
   Very interesting indeed, many thanks for posting it here, Mark.

   I'm reminded of Jonathan Skinner's ethnography of Montserrat from afar following a volcanic eruption, [Skinner, J. (2000). The eruption of chances peak, Montserrat, and the narrative containment of risk. Risk revisited, 156-183] or Birgit Brauechler's (2013) Cyberidentities at War, or Andrew Skuse's work from afar on Afghanistan [Skuse, A. (1999). 'Negotiated outcomes': an ethnography of the production and consumption of a BBC World Service radio soap opera for Afghanistan (Doctoral dissertation, University College London (University of London)].

   Has anyone put together a collection of these 'remote ethnographies'?

   REPLY

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