

Private Messages from the Field: Confessions on Digital Ethnography and Its Discomforts

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anthro{dendum} welcomes guest bloggers Crystal Abidin and Gabriele de Seta who will be editing a [series](#) of blogposts titled *Private Messages from the Field*. To kick off the series, today's post features an introduction and backstory to this collection of essays.

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by Crystal Abidin & Gabriele de Seta



Here's a first confession about ethnographic work: All professional things have personal beginnings.

We are today writing this introduction as editors of a series of confessional posts about the discomforts of digital ethnography, but we met three years ago at a pub table, two doctoral candidates sharing a brief moment of co-presence right in the middle of a graduate summer school. Sitting in front of each other for the first time in a week, we broke the ice by latching on sparse disciplinary markers we had been peppering

our public utterances with, hoping for someone to notice. The summer school we were attending was a decidedly interdisciplinary event, and retreating into a common discursive domain was a cozy convenience: "So... are you an anthropologist? Who is your go-to author?"

Namedropping snowballed. What digital media did we study, where, and how did we go about it? The loud conversations piling up across the long pub table receded into the background as we masked intimate feeling out with ethnographic geeking out. For the following week of seminars, our backstage dialogues originating at a pub table continued as an exchange of direct messages on Twitter – we did truly slide in each other's DMs before it was even a meme. After we left the summer school, the social media private message backchannel remained our go-to pocket of intimacy for any communication that didn't belong to e-mail, Facebook comments or postcards.



For a long while, this newfound space seemed to us truly special and unique. And it still does today, to be honest, every time we scroll upwards into thousands of daily textual exchanges peppered with images, reaction GIFs, emoji, and URLs: a running stream of co-constructed presence bridging over time zones and life stages, that has over the years become an intimate archive of the theoretical, methodological,

practical, professional, affective and emotional struggles of two early-career academics who still find important to brand themselves as 'digital ethnographers'.

And yet, in time, we have also come to realize that this secret pouch of Twitter DMs was just one example of a communication genre we have broadly termed 'private messages from the field': intimate backchannels precariously established and dedicatedly sustained by ethnographers away from their professional fronts, a variety of relational spaces ranging from cozy post-conference pub retreats to digital versions of Ray Oldenburg's "[third places](#)" (1989). Many of our colleagues turned out to be also sharing their troubles through mailing lists and Facebook groups, WhatsApp conversations and Skype calls; social media privacy settings were adjusted to select the appropriate audiences for emotional rants and disciplinary venting, while multimodality helped bringing reciprocal care and careful intimacy into the backstage of an often geographically dispersed profession.

We like to think that one of the first 'private messages from the field' was sent by Jen Clodius, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who was doing research on community formation in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). In a "[Report from the field](#)" that she shared with other *AAA Anthropology Newsletter* readers in 1994, she warned: "Conducting ethnography on the InterNet presents a whole new series of challenges and problems for the anthropologist." These challenges and problems included issues of identity and performativity, authenticity and trust, community rules and moral norms, as well as complex and shifting ethical dilemmas.

More than two decades after Clodius's field report from the world of MUDs, doing research on, through and about digital media remains challenging and problematic, a state of epistemological uncertainty that is compounded and perhaps even amplified by the relative novelty of

sociotechnical arrangements and the quick turnover of platforms and services. And yet, despite the refinement of 'digital ethnography' into countless disciplinary variants, most methodological manuals pay little attention to how digital ethnographers themselves cope with these challenges and problems by exchanging private messages from the field through the very same digital media they do research through, on and about.

For this reason, years after our summer school pub encounter, and thousands of Twitter DMs later, we have decided to open up our private message folders, so to say, and put together a collection of essays illustrating the messiness of digital media research in the making. In order to give our essays an intimate, personal perspective, we have encouraged authors to draw their inspiration from a couple of sources: the genre of [confessional ethnographic writing](#) outlined by John Van Maanen (2011), and the unabashed disclosure of what Gary Alan Fine (1993) calls the "[lies of ethnography](#)". Our hope is that, by confessing troubling epistemological choices and sharing our ways of coping with methodological discomforts, we contribute to demystifying disciplinary canons and reminding readers of how digital media (and the ways of researching them) are always in the making.

There is no denying it: The practice of digital ethnography entails anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles; and it is not a surprise that many researchers that decide to adopt an ethnographic approach to study digital media end up dedicating some thought and writing to these methodological discomforts. Rather than delving into sectarian discussions of the sub-branding and out-branching of the (broadly intended) disciplinary domain of digital ethnography, the posts featured in this series respond to a call beautifully formulated by John Law in his book [After Method](#):

Parts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and

our statistics. But other parts are not, or if they are then this is because they have been distorted into clarity. [...] Perhaps we will need to know them through 'private' emotions that open us to worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals. (2004, pp. 2-3)

This is the goal of this series of posts: to get to know and talk about parts of our worlds that are not usually caught in our digital ethnographies, and to do so through private emotions, discomfoting confessions and shared intimacies. We would do this work through our private messages anyway, so we might as well open it up for once, and try to welcome readers to the field of a "digital ethnography" intended less as a prescriptive collection of research strategies and more as an inclusive methodological common ground for scholars doing ethnographic research on, through and about digital media.

Private Messages from the Field is a collection of posts that summarize the contents of a yet unpublished journal issue which the editors have been working on during the past year. These sneak peeks into our arguments, kindly hosted by *anthro{dendum}*, are a precious occasion for our authors to float a few ideas about the discomforts of doing digital ethnography for a broader audience before they become inevitably "distorted into clarity" by peer-review, revisions and paywalls. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in various global contexts (Australia, China, Singapore, Sweden) on topics ranging from the dark web to collaborative translation, and from internet celebrity to organizational media use, the posts collected in this series are offered as comforting missives to anthropology students, early-career researchers and seasoned scholars dabbling in the troubling but rewarding practice of digital ethnography.

If you have any comments, you are welcome to send us a private message.

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Dr Gabriele de Seta is a media anthropologist. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and has recently completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan. His research work, grounded on ethnographic engagement across multiple sites, focuses on digital media practices and vernacular creativity in contemporary China. He is also interested in experimental music scenes, Internet art, and collaborative intersections between anthropology and art practice. More information is available on his [website](#).

The editors contributed equally to this project and are named alphabetically.

We are seeking academic journals to publish the edited collection of full-length articles on which this collection of blogposts are based, and would love to hear from interested parties.

[Crystal Abidin](#)

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Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online (Emerald Publishing, 2018) critically analyzes the contemporary histories and impacts of internet-native celebrity today. Reach her at wishcrys.com or [@wishcrys](https://twitter.com/wishcrys).