

# Three Lies of Digital Ethnography

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anthro{dendum} welcomes guest blogger Gabriele de Seta, contributing the final post in the *Private Messages from the Field* (<https://anthrodendum.org/tag/private-messages-from-the-field/>) series edited by Crystal Abidin and Gabriele de Seta.

## Three Lies of Digital Ethnography

by Gabriele de Seta

We ethnographers cannot help but lie, but in lying, we reveal truths that escape those who are not so bold. (Fine, 1993, p. 290 (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/089124193022003001>))

Let's start with a conclusion: Ethnographers lie.

This might not be a widely shared proposition, but I experience it often in my own work, especially when talking in practical terms about my fieldwork. The more the weeks of traveling between Chinese cities, staying at friends' houses and transcribing their social media interactions recede back into the past, the more I doubt about the scholarly value of the ethnographic study of digital folklore I say I have conducted. I realize that an assemblage of disciplinary imperatives, epistemological nudges and promises of legitimation I have internalized during my scholarly formation keeps determining how I carefully massage the description of my research project according to the needs of the moment.

As I distort my fieldwork experience into elevator pitches and small talk during conference breaks, I realize that I am enacting the gentle calisthenics of professionalism and persuasion. Like a well-trained marketer, I avoid discussing the challenging aspects of my research or my actual methodological practices, and instead piece together strings of buzzwords and abstracted data points intended to prove my disciplinary belonging – I simplify some things, hide others, and casually lie when convenient.

Despite the unpleasant aftertaste of these performances, the tensions motivating my resort to half-truths, strategic simplifications and circumstantial lies are nothing new: Like many other academic domains, anthropology has its own disciplinary culture, and methodology is perhaps the level at which disciplinary discursivity is at its most evident. Foregrounding the spatial and temporal dimensions of one's fieldwork remains a reliable marker of authority, and narrowing down one's interests to a bounded community and a well-defined topic still helps expert validation.

At the same time, the relative novelty of certain research domains (in my case, vernacular creativity on digital media) makes them more prone to generalizations, and requires simplifying the presentation of one's work when pushing back against insinuations of "having it too easy" with fieldwork done by "simply spending all day on social media" to follow "fashionable topics" such as Internet memes, selfies or online celebrity.

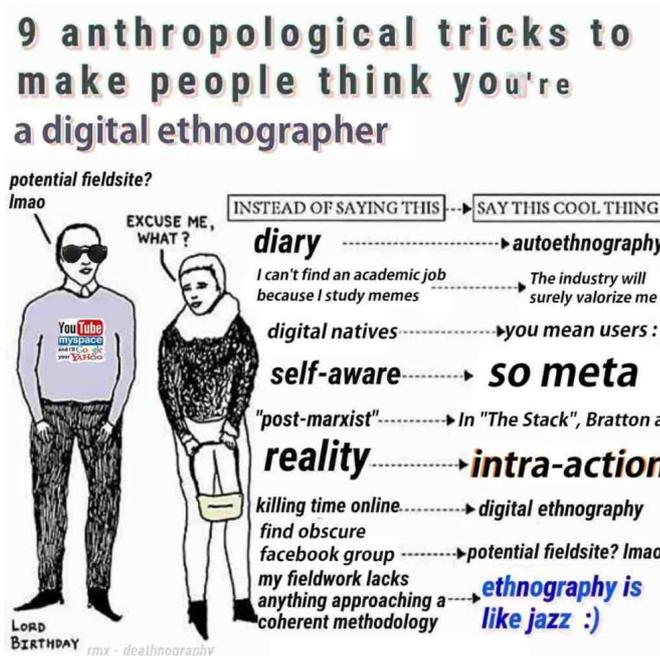


Figure 1. Disciplinary markers of digital ethnography (by @deathnography (<https://www.facebook.com/deathnography/>))

One of the pieces of writing that most helped me come to terms with this feeling of unease is a Gary Alan Fine article titled “Ten lies of ethnography” (1993 (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/089124193022003001>)). In this liberating piece, Fine skirts the fascination for laying bare the uncomfortable truths of the trade, and instead focuses on the unavoidable practices of lying that accompany much ethnographic research. According to Fine, illusions about the underside of ethnography, regularly hidden in its methodological backstage, are necessary for both the production of good work and occupational survival, but become problematic when they take root in the discipline and become taken for real by its practitioners.

Inspired by how Fine identifies ten lies of ethnography behind the classical virtues and technical skills of figures such as the “friendly ethnographer,” the “unobtrusive ethnographer” and the “chaste ethnographer”, I want to put forward three more lies peculiar to digital ethnography, which I briefly describe below, accompanied by their respective authorial archetypes.

**The networked field-weaver**

The first lie of digital ethnography is related to one of the most widely debated ethnographic constructions – the ‘field’. Questioned, fragmented and deconstructed in the wake of the writing culture debates, the field remains an important anchor for ethnographic practice. When I embarked into my (by then overly-theorized) fieldwork, the most convincing metaphor I had come across was the one offered by Jenna Burrell in her proposition of the “field site as network” (2009 (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1525822X08329699>)). Building upon previous theorizations of multi-sited ethnography, Burrell emphasizes how it is the ethnographer herself, through the everyday tracing of different actors, that pulls together the field as a network.

I found myself adopting Burrell’s insight as an effective soundbite: My own “field as network” included a bunch of friend and acquaintances, longer and shorter stays in eight Chinese cities, a number of online platforms, an inventory of mobile devices, a sample of linguistic repertoires, certain genres of online content, mass media discourses about the internet, and a variety of media practices.

As many solutions that seem to work all too well, I started realizing that my idealized reliance on weaving my field as a network was built on hiding and lying about something. Rather than experiencing the expansive movement of branching out promised by this metaphor, I often found myself building my “field as network” by grasping at straws, and immediately cutting away most of what came along with them. Weaving networks into an ethnographic field can bring the most disparate things together, and particularly when one’s research topic isn’t extremely narrow, each node of the network can result in dizzying vertigos over a wealth of potential interlocutors, unexplored communities, or entirely new categories of data.

In order to decide what does or doesn't belong in one's research project (and, ultimately, to produce a viable written report) the ethnographer continuously prunes down networks as they proliferate, carving out a skeletal "field as network" that eventually feels more like a crooked bonsai tree than an expanse of thick experiential wilderness. The lie of the ethnographer as networked field-weaver should be kept in mind as it hides the cutting as much it glorifies the pulling together.



Figure 2. The digital ethnographer justifying their field (by @deathnography (<https://www.facebook.com/deathnography/>))

### The eager participant-lurker

The second lie of digital ethnography relates to the central practice of this research approach: Participant observation. Participation in digital media bleeds over a linear spectrum going from non-use to intensive and active presence, and extends in different dimensions according to the platforms used, the devices at hand, software availability, access to connectivity in time and space, as well as the social circles and practices one participates in.

In the earliest pioneering ethnographies of online settings, researchers found in the figure of the 'lurker' a productive archetype embodying the contradictory status of participation on the internet. Reflecting on this figure of participation, Leander & McKim (2003 (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14636310303140>)) conclude that, in choosing between being an active participant or a lurker, a digital ethnographer makes important epistemological decisions. Given the increasing variety of modes of participation offered by digital media platforms, more recent debates have tried to move beyond a clear-cut choice between active participation and lurking, and to instead explore the creation of intersubjectivity as a fluid outcome of a sustained ethnographic engagement (Beaulieu, 2004 (<http://virtualknowledgestudio.nl/staff/anne-beaulieu/documents/mediating-ethnography.pdf>)).

While cognizant of this fluid spectrum of modes of participation, I still feel the need to condense my engagement into simplified vignettes highlighting my presence in various digitally-mediated contexts, flattening my involvement into easily understandable nuggets of interaction that prove my active participation in the field. Confronted by the injunctions of participant observation, I often write myself into an eager participant-lurker: A professionally naive explorer of local online contexts, master of all modes of participation, surveying digital media use from a vantage point of carefully crafted presence.

The false choice between naturalist lurking and active involvement is something I still struggle with whenever I inscribe myself onto the field. As digital ethnographers, we participate (just like our 'research participants') through a wide range of modes of participation tightly linked to social dynamics and technological affordances that go from the choice of shutting off one's smartphone to the visceral need to sustain one's presence in a tense online discussion. Embracing the fluidity, uncertainty and ambivalence resulting from these situated choices should be preferred over flattening one's own persona into the stereotyped figure of the eager participant-lurker.

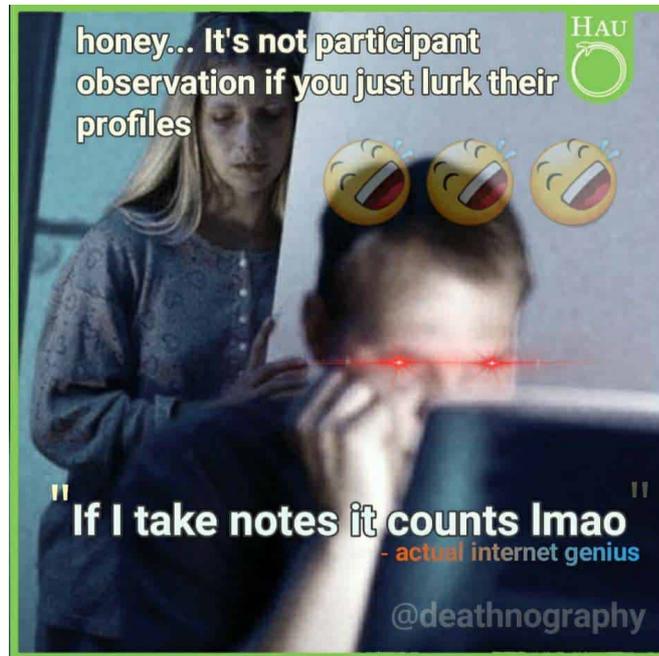


Figure 3. The temptations of lurking (by @deathnography  
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### The expert fabricator

The third lie of digital ethnography has to do with representation, an unavoidable component of producing any sort of research output. Digital ethnographers have the advantage of working with already thoroughly-mediated settings, and are able to include in their reports samples of online resources, snippets of mediated interactions, creative data visualizations, as well as images, videos and sounds. Yet, the increasing availability of multimedia traces does not mean that ethnographic texts become less representational. Even when grounded on extensive datasets, hundreds of fieldnotes and collections of user traces, the accounts produced by digital ethnographers end up including an extremely narrow selection of inscriptions, often thoroughly edited, translated, scrambled, rephrased, anonymized, cropped, selectively blurred and collated according to a bundle of ethical, rhetorical and aesthetic decisions.

Responding to the recurring dilemmas faced by researchers dealing with new and heterogeneous concretions of data, Annette Markham provocatively argues that digital ethnographers should embrace the suspicious practice of fabrication in order to overcome paralyzing tendencies in qualitative research, and to embed ethics inductively into research practice (2012, p. 341 (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2011.641993?journalCode=rics20>)). Fabrication, though, is inextricably linked to the idea of expertise. In claiming and embracing one's role as editor, translator and fabricator of multimedia composites of events, identities and inscriptions, the digital ethnographer implicitly establishes competence and knowledgeability over a certain sociotechnical context.

While I enjoy the flattering attributions of expertise over my research topic that these fabrications occasionally grant me, I often feel troubled by the way they blur my authorial role into the figure of the social media savvy or the computer geek, hiding how most of my ethnographic knowledge is actually grounded on a patchy process of discovery, a messy interaction between my puzzled inquiries and the kind help of patient friends who bear with my often clueless questions about the latest Internet meme or slang term.

Digital ethnographers are often closer to practical brokers, curious newcomers relying on the knowledgeability and interpretive guidance of what Holmes & Marcus call "paraethnographers" (2008 (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470696569.ch13/summary>)). It is important to remember how the figure of the expert fabricator can become an enticing professional illusion that easily overrides the messy, processual and thickly social construction of local expertise.

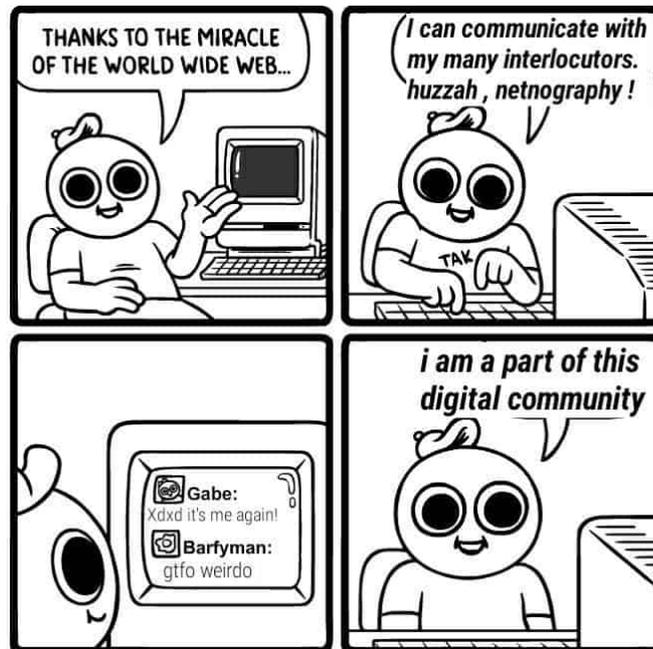


Figure 4. The digital ethnographer as expert community member (by @deathnography (<https://www.facebook.com/deathnography/>))

#### How to lie with digital ethnography

The goal of this post is decidedly not to “tell the truth” in the (ideally) public space of an academic blog, nor to reveal an ugly or cynical reality behind my practice of digital ethnography, nor to accuse colleagues of engaging in dishonesty and deception; rather, the three illusive figures described above embody discursive strategies, performative misdirections and illusory identities that I regularly confront in my thinking, speaking and writing about my own research work.

My hope is that both colleagues approaching the disciplinary domain of digital ethnography, as well as fellow researchers already familiar with this methodological assemblage, will recognize their own doubts and concerns in some of these sketched portraits. As Gary Alan Fine reminds us, it is important to constantly ask ourselves: Which professional illusions are current in our research field? Which issues do we pressure each other to devise half-truths about? Which circumstantial lies do we use to cover the tracks leading to our decisions?

Rather than telling readers how to ‘do’ digital ethnography, I’d rather suggest that we familiarize ourselves with the lies hidden by the contemporary archetypes of the networked field-weaver, the eager participant-lurker and the expert fabricator, before they become professional illusions hiding more than they reveal.

*Image credits: This essay is illustrated by @deathnography (<https://www.facebook.com/deathnography/>)*

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