

# We Have Never Been Digital Anthropologists

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anthro{dendum} welcomes guest blogger Rebekah Cupitt, contributing the third post in the [Private Messages from the Field](#) series edited by Crystal Abidin and Gabriele de Seta.

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by Rebekah Cupitt



"A Chimera" (1590-1610), attributed to Jacopo Ligozzi, from the Royal Collection of the Museo del Prado

## Ethnography: A Chimera

Ethnography is the methodological chimera of Anthropology, composed of a snake (the researcher, who insinuates into other people's lives), a lion (the fieldwork, the daunting practice through which we fall bodily into an 'other's' world), and a goat (the task of writing, that has us consuming our fieldwork experiences, masticating and digesting them into the more palatable documents that we then publish and share). Ethnography is a multi-headed beast with mythical qualities – and I am of course paraphrasing John Law here, who writes that method in the social sciences is a multi-headed beast ([Law 2004, p. 4](#)). In this post, I want to foreground the chimeric nature of ethnography because it was only once I situated myself in an interdisciplinary research setting and a technologically saturated field site, that I realized how little the epistemological frameworks and methodological toolkits of digital anthropology had prepared me to make sense of the digital itself.

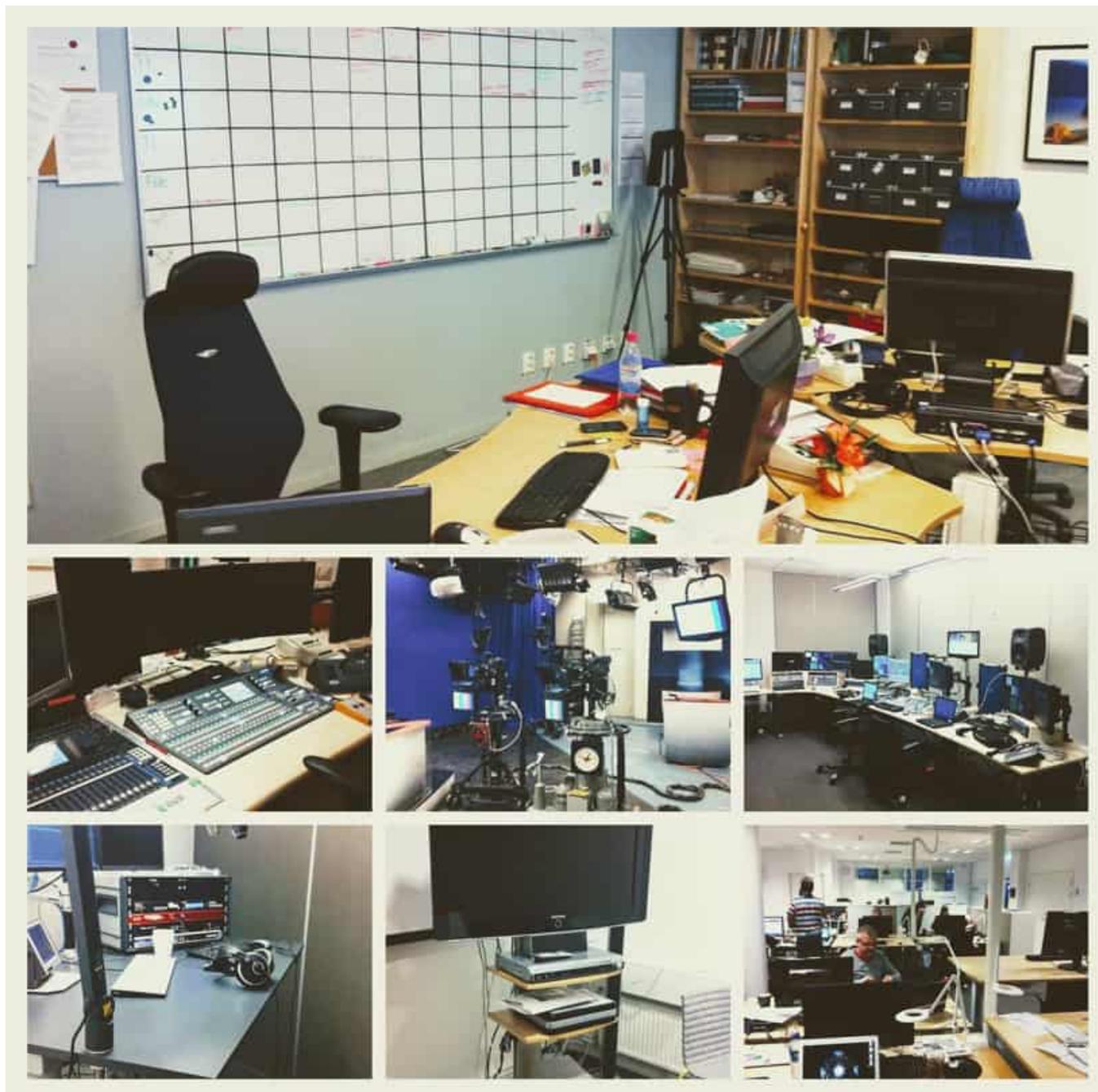
While all heads of the ethnographic chimera warrant examination, the primary focus of this short blog post is on the lion's head: The fieldwork experience that roars loud enough to be heard even in other disciplines. How does ethnography shift, change and morph when it is carried out in digitally saturated settings? Here follow some reflections upon my own experiences of doing research at Swedish Television alongside the production team that creates and curates its programming in Swedish Sign Language ([SVT Teckenspråk](#)). Doing participant observation and becoming entangled with the people and other entities at [SVT Teckenspråk](#) left me considering how the very foundations of ethnography relate to the digital. As a result, I began to wonder whether the notion of 'digital anthropology' has not perhaps become inordinate.

## **The Lion: Fieldwork**

Arguably, the fiercest head of the ethnographic chimera is the lion: The practice of fieldwork an ethnography is based upon. In my case, fieldwork included participant observation, interviews, photographs, films

– you know, the regular devices of field research. Fieldwork is perhaps the one aspect of Anthropology that, through its sheer dogmatism, stands as the proud figurehead of the discipline. Since the [Malinowskian](#) cries about extended periods of “[isolated study](#)” in the Trobriand Islands, to the Geertzian occupation of the [native’s point of view](#), and into contemporary debates on the form fieldwork should take ([Marcus & Okely 2008](#)), fieldwork has been Anthropology’s primary method of understanding ‘the other’, digital or otherwise. Each field site is distinct, and a first step on our roads to becoming professional anthropologists requires us to navigate our First Encounters and adapt our methodologies as a compulsory *rite de passage*.

Finding myself in a field site that stretched from technologically saturated editing suites, sound mixing rooms and film studios to equally technological filming locations, video meeting rooms, and the production team’s own computer-centered office spaces, my primary difficulty was fitting my own fieldwork practices and conceptualization of the digital with those of the employees at SVT Teckenspråk. In the daily lives of the Swedish Television’s production team that worked hard on programming in Swedish Sign Language, the digital was unremarkable and mundane.



Technologies of television production: Tools for collaboration, administration, and creative processes (photo by R. Cupitt, 2018)

At SVT Teckenspråk, technology is important in some settings but unimportant in others; it is new and old in a disconcerting mix. Brand new mixing equipment interfaces with archaic microphones; a top-of-the-line monitor is connected to a 7-year old video-meeting system; someone is running a brand new version of Microsoft Office on an outdated PC, and so on. The definition of new technology is not as fixed as we might assume, and what seems entirely new soon becomes thoroughly old.

What we perhaps mean, as anthropologists, when we talk about 'new technologies', is that we are ourselves discovering new communication forms that are carried out via technologies that are as new to us as they are to our discipline. At SVT Teckenspråk, the entire workplace was rife with technologies of work – new, old, redundant, essential – all tangled up in one big mess of cables.

However, a conflict arises when a reference to the digital comes to signify a new disciplinary frontier on the researcher's end: Emphasizing the digital as a way to contribute to the understanding of society at large, and to prove that Anthropology still matters. A scale of possible responses to this contradiction stretches across a spectrum including: The extreme decision to abandon the native's point of view and depict a field site rife with objects of digital anthropological fascination; a choice to render the objects as conduits for novel human behavior while emphasizing their embeddedness in pre-existing patterns of everyday life; or an equally radical stance that gives up posturing the digital as a new frontier and instead recognizes that the field under study is a place filled with practices much like the one the researcher herself may come from – where technology is inextricably and unassumingly entangled in the everyday. Confronted with this dilemma, I chose the last option, but only after pondering on a critical question: How can fieldwork of the mundane be carried out when the researcher themselves is conceptualizing their fieldwork as discovering 'new' sociocultural territory? The implicit futurist and technocentric innovation and pioneering spirit I was surrounded by in my interdisciplinary setting colored the analysis and the tone of my ethnographic text.



Researcher technologies: Engulfed by cables, devices, and tools (photo by R.Cupitt, 2018)

## We Are Beast

While it is certainly more common in digital anthropology today to sideline rhetorics of novelty, exotic digital practices, and fantastical democratic possibilities that open up new avenues for revolution, carrying out anthropological research in interdisciplinary and technocentric fields of research demands a more considered approach to an ethnography of the digital. At SVT Teckenspråk, everyday work was

the production of digital television using digital tools, and communicating was often mediated by digital technologies such as video meeting technologies. I, the researcher, documented, analyzed and wrote about the everyday communication that took place as a part of television production in Swedish Sign Language using digital tools, and was as engulfed by digital technologies as the fellow researchers who studied, designed and developed in the offices and labs right next to my own. There was no end to the digital, and no moment in which it was absent. It was simply there, entangled with people and their everyday lives.

Rather than a new frontier or object of study, the so-called digital has become a companion to the non-digital in the sense that Haraway means when she talks about [companion species](#) (2010). The digitally driven cultural revolution seems to have been exaggerated, and we have instead undergone a kind of "symbiogenesis" of the digital and the human ([Haraway 2010, p. 15ff](#)). The digital and the human are bonded in "significant otherness", and to focus on one as a driver of change and use it to explain the other is to miss their critical entanglements and to not take these posthuman relationships seriously enough. This intertwining of technology and the human is well-acknowledged by researchers in STS, techno-anthropology and certain strands of the digital humanities, and yet the continued use of the term 'digital' begs the apparently unanswerable questions: If technology is now mundane and its centrality to our ethnographies becomes an analytical artifice or, at worst, a strategy to secure funding, are we still digital anthropologists? Is there still meaning in this moniker? Or is it so that, not only have we never been modern ([Latour 1993](#)), but we have never been digital either?

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