

‘Always in the Field’

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With the rapid rise in dynamic and ubiquitous digital technologies ethnographers are increasingly interested in digitally located or mediated social cultural practices. A developing body of ethnographic literature is further espousing the fluid nature of digital fields (Burrell, Jean 2009; Leander, Kevin and McKim, Kelly, 2003; Hine, Christine, 2007). In this, it is debated if digitally mediated fields can actually be fixed, or easily located to be discovered or are they constructed (Amit, Vered, 2000) and an outcome rather than a precursor of ethnographic research (Hine, Christine, 2007). Constructing the digital field is both a critical theoretical and methodological debate of ethnographic work in digital social systems.

Constructing the field is further complicated in ethnography spanning digital and face to face environments wherein the field and field work are both digitally mediated and unmediated. This has given rise to a rigid dualism in ethnographic literature and practice between the ‘offline’ and ‘online’ or ‘place’ and ‘space’ that misrepresents their coexistence, flows between and their fluidity. George Marcus (1995) argued that culture was not necessarily spatially fixed but constitutes global flows made up ‘in/of the world system’, and in this ethnography must account and ‘follow’ these flows. Bruno Latour (1992) further asserted that society and technology is a heterogeneous collective and it is the interaction between them that constitute society, that is a social system of human and non-human actors (Doolin, Bill and Lowe, Allan 2002). Kevin Leander and Kelly McKim (2003) account for this advocating that ethnographers follow the flow of ‘objects, texts, bodies’ between mediated and unmediated environments. However, the dualist assertion ‘between’, can propagate a mindset of multiple field sites offline and online or digital and face to face.

This paper discusses my methodological learning during an organizational ethnography in which people, practices and artifacts that comprise the complex adaptive social system and my experience of them where both unmediated and mediated. Drawing on the argument by George Marcus (1995) about ‘global flows’ and the assertion by Bruno Latour (1992) about society and technology as a collective, the work of these scholars gives emphasis to a complex adaptive system approach to ethnographic research design. In this the ethnographer is not studying located (fixed) field sites’ online and/or offline that are independent or partially connected. The ethnographer is (and always has been) participant-observer of a complex adaptive social system, following people (thing, metaphor etc) that coexist in a system and that continually flow, coevolving and coadapting (learning and changing together) from the social cultural practices (dialogue, interaction) used to traverse (flow) and the artifacts these people, practices cocreate. It is these people, their practices and artifacts that comprise the complex adaptive social

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system that is the field. Ethnography is an experience in humanity [people], and humanity 'coexists in' and 'flows within/through' multiple complex adaptive social systems, unmediated (face to face) and increasingly mediated (digital). In this it is the people, practices and artifacts unmediated and mediated that comprise the field (not a fixed site that is located in place or space); the field is fluid (not static or fixed); and the field coevolves so can only be constructed (not discovered) through experience.

In this paper I discuss the methodological learning during the fieldwork of a 28-month organizational ethnography (2009-2011) about the socialization of digital knowledge within a national arts organization. The paper contributes to our understanding of conducting ethnographic fieldwork that traverses a multiplexity of unmediated and digitally mediated field contexts, from which emerged the challenge of being *always in the field*.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Eszter Hargittai, Christian Sandvig and Costas Andriopoulos for their helpful comments on a previous version of the manuscript.

Parts of this manuscript have been accepted for publication and I gratefully acknowledge permission to publish this material here. The full manuscript can be sourced from: Page. K. L. (Forthcoming). Always in the Field. In Eszter Hargittai and Christian Sandvig, Eds. *Digital Confidential*. The MIT Press.

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