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39 Online ethnography

Abstract: This chapter provides the reader with a guide to undertaking a criminological ethnography online. Drawing upon reflections from two social scientific projects, the work discusses the practicalities, ethical challenges and central debates that we experienced in the field. We draw the chapter to a close with some meditations on the future application of online ethnographic study and its potential as part of a multi-sited approach.

Keywords: online ethnography, qualitative research, digital ethics, lurking

Introduction

Ethnography is a well-established methodology in Criminology, offering qualitative researchers a periscope into diverse lifeworlds as they exist in time and place. With its roots in anthropology, the method offers a contextually rich and exploratory sensibility that is well attuned to the need of criminologists. Ethnographic work is valuable for those who are interested not only in the complexity and intimacy of social and cultural relations and rituals, but also the impact of wider socio-political institutions such as the law and state.

The foundation of ethnographic research is in-depth observation and interaction with participants, where the researcher is immersed in the subject's social world to achieve a truer understanding and appreciation of their lived experience, or what is often termed 'verstehen' (Ferrell, 1997). Traditional ethnographic field-sites are therefore found in homes, workplaces, or leisure settings (gyms, pubs, etc). However, reacting to the profound digitization of societies, criminological ethnographers have recently turned their gaze to online environments. The result is the influx of myriad novel ethnographic approaches that can be broadly characterized as 'online ethnography.' We define this development as traditional ethnographic methods modified to interact with online communities and environments (see Gibbs and Hall, 2021). This describes a researcher's concerted immersion in digital field-sites that can include online forums, social media sites, or darknet pages (see Darknet by Tzanetakis). Discussing the expansion of quantitative digital social science, Lavorgna and Myles (2022: 1579) argue that: "[i]n a context of 'digital positivism' based on big data research methods and computational criminology in online research, it is important to retain a space also for qualitative analyses focusing on interpretative and critical approaches." Online ethnography therefore represents a valuable means of redressing this balance and retaining the unique and adaptable qualitative insight offered by ethnographic study. Of course, not all ethnographic work necessarily needs to be critical, and online ethnography can also provide descriptive insight on the uses, politics, and practices of technology. What matters is that the ethnographic gaze is able to follow the flows of social life

and offer data that cannot be captured by alternative methodologies. In this chapter we will reflect on our own experiences to offer a guide to researchers carrying out online ethnographic work on issues of crime, harm, and control. First, counsel will be offered to those wishing to undertake an online ethnography, before some challenges and ethical considerations are laid out. We will end the chapter with some meditations on some innovations and future directions of the methodology, with a particular focus on its application as part of a multi-sited approach.

Conducting an online ethnography

It is first important to address the various terms associated with online ethnography. Delli Paoli and D'Auria (2021) note that online ethnography has been carried out under various guises, including 'ethnography on the Internet,' 'cyber ethnography,' and 'virtual ethnography.' Though subtly different in their approaches, each can be traced back to Kozinets' (1998) idea of netnography, which was devised to research consumer behavior on the internet. From these origins, online ethnography has been deployed to examine sites throughout the various stages of the internet, from forums and bulletin boards, to blogs, and social media platforms (Holt, 2020). We have therefore settled on the term 'online' here to broadly encapsulate ethnographic study undertaken in online spaces. What follows is informed by our own deployments of the method, which respectively examined the online market in illicit medicines (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016) and the use and supply of image and performance enhancing drugs (Gibbs, 2023a).

Online ethnographic fieldwork can be split into two phases: passive and active. The 'passive' phase involves the researcher 'lurking' in the field, not actively shaping the research site and instead playing the role of a passive observer (Janetzko, 2008; Cera, 2023). Unsurprisingly, lurking is fraught with ethical challenges given that those being observed are unaware of the researcher's presence. Debate continues as to whether platforms like social media sites constitute public or private spaces (see Lingel, 2012) and therefore whether consent is required from those under study. If one assumes that digital spaces are no different to a public street, lurking can be understood as akin to a traditional ethnographer observing a culture at work. However, given that the researcher is hidden from the participant during the lurking process, they take on a decidedly more shadowy role. Though further ethical issues will be addressed later in this chapter, this contestation illustrates the numerous moral debates that circle online ethnography. Conversely, 'active' online ethnography describes the researcher becoming an active participant in the practices and culture of the online setting. This might be posting content, interacting with participants through direct messages, or liking and sharing online content.

In Hall and Antonopoulos' (2016) study, passive data collection took the form of lurking on platforms that facilitated the sale of illicit medicines, including online pharmacy surface web pages, forums and discussion boards, as well as social media sites.

This was initially facilitated by keyword searching that had been informed by a review of existing academic and grey literature, alongside insights garnered from experts. Similarly, Gibbs' (2023a) work, employed keyword searching on Facebook, Instagram, and surface web forums to locate and observe the mechanisms of the online market for image and performance enhancing drugs. This is consistent with other online ethnographies in criminology that have employed initial periods of lurking to observe online spaces without actively shaping the field (see Crowe and Hoskins, 2019; Addeo et al., 2021; Bakken et al., 2023).

We advocate for an initial lurking phase to familiarize oneself with the lexicon, norms, and conventions of an online community. Whether this be building familiarity with the terminology and use of emojis by a community of drug users or gaining insight into the nature of images posted by gang members on social media, peering into the spaces under study before leaping into the active phase holds a great deal of worth. Data for this passive aspect of online ethnography generally takes the form of screenshots and fieldnotes. We should note here that data obtained through passive online ethnography may be vulnerable to the researcher's assumptions or biases (see Bias by Oswald and Paul), given that while participants' voices are reported upon in some sense, not interacting with those actors leaves a considerable blind spot. For this reason, both studies that we lean on here employed active as well as passive phases.

The active phase of Hall and Antonopoulos' project saw the researchers create credible consumer profiles on social media and forums alongside email accounts. These served as the online 'face' presented to actors in the illicit medicine market and, given that the online ethnography was in part covert and supported by methods adopted across various field-sites, it allowed them to manufacture credible personas as prospective consumers to ascertain how illicit medicines were being marketed online. The ethics of this covert method will be discussed below. Gibbs, on the other hand, opted to use his genuine name and image when setting up profiles on Facebook and Instagram, which also showed his institutional affiliation and the purpose of his study (displayed in the profiles' 'bio' section). This candor reflected the researcher's need to keep consistency between his online and offline persona (given that the same participants were interacted with in both contexts) as well as his utilization of his own bodily and cultural capital as he posted 'training updates,' echoing the norms and practices under study. The decision to adopt this approach rather than simply operate a ghost account with no cultural coherency reflected Gibbs' position as a 'researcher participant' (Gans, 1967) immersed in a specific locale, which required a means of building authenticity. In such cases, the researcher's efforts are generally rewarded with enhanced access and participant trust (see Accessing Online Communities by Kaufmann). Relatedly, as noted by Bakken et al. (2023), digital capital is important in online drug markets and, while they discuss this specifically in relation to online sellers, we argue that a degree of digital literacy is just as important for research into consumer practices. Indeed, Gibbs noted that participants were reticent to engage with his profiles until they were suitably populated and trustworthy.

The digital environment, and specifically social media, also presents some opportunities for participant access and sampling that are lacking for traditional ethnographers. While the help of community gatekeepers remains important, Gibbs utilized the 'geotags'[1] from users' posts to identify participants in the local hardcore gym scene as well as searching for hashtags relating to certain gyms and brands of drugs. Again, it is worth addressing the ethical dimension of this method as, although users have made the decision to publicly link themselves to certain locations and brands, they did not do this with the understanding that these affiliations would qualify them as research participants. Gibbs therefore worked on the understanding that platforms like Instagram constituted public space and, given that these posts were accessible to anyone, understood the geotagging and hashtagging as public declarations worthy of study. Given how underdeveloped and emergent the field of digital ethics is (see Ethics by Markham), this is one of many examples in our work of situational ethics, wherein we advocate for a degree of flexibility under the mantra to 'do no harm' (see Gatson, 2011). Similarly, as both studies progressed, they utilized what Sidoti (2023) terms 'algorithmic sampling.' This is when the algorithms on social media sites are used to identify and follow accounts that are deemed similar, allowing us to connect with users and sellers alike. However, the in-built connectivity of social media sites also presented an ethical challenge with regard to participant confidentiality. This was played out in Gibbs' study when a childhood friend stumbled upon his researcher Instagram account:

> I logged onto my research Instagram account to be greeted by a notification telling me that my friend, Tommy, had somehow found and started to follow me. Clearly this is a concern as, due to my sample hopefully following me back soon, he could easily find out who my participants are if he wanted to. When setting up the account I was careful to untick the options to link the profile to my phone number or personal email address, so I am unsure as to how he found it. I sent him a message and he duly unfollowed me, apologising and saying that the account had come up as a recommended follow. (Fieldnote, 26/06/19)

As demonstrated above, online ethnographers must remain vigilant of such exposure if they choose to present as their authentic identities online. Though this infraction was ultimately resolved, Tommy might have compromised numerous participants' confidentiality.

Following the sampling process, both studies approached online participants via the specific platform's messaging service to either pose as an interested customer or overtly interview the user/supplier about their experiences (see Recruitment via Social Media by Andersen). Given that both studies employed elements of covert ethnographic practice, some ethical justification is required. Working under a framework of situational ethics, we deemed the use of some deceptive practice necessary to glean the

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1 Users on Instagram can choose to 'tag' their photos to certain geographic areas like cities, specific streets, or even individual premises. For Gibbs' study, he examined posts that geotagged in the gyms studied as part of the offline element of the research.

data on illicit market interactions that would be out of reach otherwise. Indeed, Gibbs' initial interactions with image and performance enhancing drug suppliers—within which he revealed his identity as a researcher—proved unfruitful as sellers did not engage. Instead, posing as an interested customer led to far more valuable data which ultimately informed the project's assessment of the market. Crucially, following Nissenbaum's (2010) situational ethics framework of 'contextual integrity,' which describes a 'case-by-case' ethical assessment, he found that making initial enquiries under the guise of a prospective customer posed little ethical risk. These interactions were limited to questions about the available products and pricing and did not move beyond initial enquiries (see Ferguson, 2017 for more on this). Similarly, all data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were attributed to the sellers to avoid any risk of exposure.

Ultimately, data collected in the reactive phase of both studies was made up of online interview transcripts, screenshots of various interactions, images and text posted by participants, documents that were hosted on the platforms under study, and fieldnotes. In line with the covert aspects of both projects, some of these data were collected without explicit consent of those under study (for example, transcripts of conversations between the researchers posing as customers as well as posts that were in the public realm). Further, in line with the messy nature of ethnographic study, active and passive phases inevitably bled into one another as the researcher seeks to capture the essence of the digital landscape.

Challenges and ethical considerations

Previous work has identified various ethical and practical issues with online ethnography (see Gibbs and Hall, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021) but, for the sake of brevity we will focus here on *building trust, informed consent*, and *data searchability*. Gibbs (2023b), in an article stemming from the project described above, emphasizes the need for sellers to build trust with their customers in online markets. The underlying reason for this is the scope for deception that exists online, particularly if one is studying illicit digital markets. Illicit actors are often drawn towards the cloak of anonymity that the online environment provides, particularly in disparate commodity-focused markets like those for fake medicines or image and performance enhancing drugs.

The task for the online ethnographer, therefore, is to approach such participants who will be distrusting and may even assume that the researcher is undercover law enforcement. This is compounded by the challenge of not being 'seen' in the same sense that traditional ethnographers were when embedded in the physical spaces of the community. Although Gibbs somewhat addressed this with his authentic profiles and content generation, many participants still chose not to respond, presumably because they feared the exposure of their involvement in illicit activities. Similarly, though the affordances of platforms like social media offer ease of access to researchers, ethical questions about non-culturally embedded ethnographers descending upon an online community ought to be posed. Unlike offline spaces, where the ethnographer

must often earn the trust of participants and engage in norms and customs, the lack of barriers to digital spaces opens them up to researchers who are outsiders. Do we lose some valuable ethnographic tradition if such researchers can simply parachute into an online community and take but ultimately do not give back? Equally, even if a researcher lacks 'insider' status, if they have engaged with literature and enter the field in an open-minded manner, is this really much of a departure from traditional ethnographic practice? A further consideration is the reliability of anonymous online participants' accounts (Hine, 2008). Although some participants might feel emboldened to speak more honestly due to their concealed identity (Paech, 2009), researchers must be critical given that they cannot be sure of the participant's authenticity.

Secondly, as hinted at earlier in this chapter, the challenge of ensuring that informed consent is obtained and navigating the boundaries between public and private data is key. Particularly when researching on social media platforms, it is often unclear whether data such as statuses and posts are public, given their searchability, or private, given that the user has presumably made the content just for their friends and contacts (Morey et al., 2012; Cera, 2023). Scholars writing on digital ethics have tended to either advocate for explicit informed consent to be given regardless of the nature of the data (boyd, 2008), or jettisoned the need for this in line with a view that, when anonymized, what is posted online constitutes public property (Kitchin, 2003). This debate speaks to wider issues around participants' awareness and ownership of their online footprint and personal data in an age of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015). This contestation fundamentally raises a few questions; given that users produce data for various purposes—for example, sharing information or views with friends and followers—why does the researcher have the right to use this material as 'data' in the first place? And, when producing this data, is the user aware that they may unwittingly become a 'participant'? With this said, it is well-documented that participants' behavior changes when they are aware that they are being observed, so are covert approaches in fact a necessity if we are to capture a true picture of the social world? With regard to privacy, both studies we reflect on here encountered numerous 'semi-private' groups on Facebook and drug forums. After much consideration, we opted to work with these data on the condition that it was fully anonymized.

Finally, the issue of data searchability is worthy of consideration. In the world of Web 2.0, what happens on the web really does *stay* on the web. Therefore, 'trace' data (Geiger and Ribes, 2011) is often searchable and, while this can be a helpful means of online ethnographic insight, it also represents an ethical dilemma. As data typically includes verbatim quotations, platforms like forums, non-private social media accounts, and surface web pages are accessible to the public, meaning that one need only search for the quotation to unmask the participant's identity. Given that participants received a guarantee of confidentiality in both studies, a mitigation strategy was needed. Such a strategy is Markham's (2012) notion of 'fabrication as an ethical practice,' whereby searchable direct quotations are superficially altered so as to prevent any ethical breaches. This was particularly important for Gibbs as he examined promotional hash-

tags employed by sellers which, if disseminated verbatim, would have jeopardized a multitude of actors involved in the illicit market.

Ultimately, as Gatson (2011) contends, online ethnographers cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all approach to ethics and instead should engage in something akin to situational ethics by trusting themselves to follow the mantra of 'do not harm' (Barbosa and Milan, 2019). In this sense, both projects applied a malleable ethical framework based more on participant protection and harm minimization than the 'little other' safeguards (Winlow and Hall, 2011) typical of contemporary academia. Above all else, we wish to emphasize the nascent nature of digital ethics and would encourage budding online ethnographers to remain pragmatic and risk-aware.

Innovations, applications and future directions

Even in its infancy, we have seen a slew of innovations in the practice of online ethnography. Foremost has been an understanding that online ethnographic study ought not to be divorced from offline practices and can instead sit comfortably alongside more 'traditional' methods (Walker, 2010). Aiming to quash the online/offline dualism often present in criminological research, we advocate for an eclipse of the barriers between digital and physical spaces and for online sites to be viewed as part of the wider tapestry of one's journey through the world of 'ubiquitous computing' (Duggan, 2017). In this sense, rather than reinforcing the dualistic conception of online versus offline spaces, we suggest that online ethnography holds great potential for carrying out what Marcus (1995) terms multi-sited ethnographic study. This is supported by Mackenzie (2022: 1538) who, discussing the 'metaverse' and the future of digital/physical space, argues:

> [E]ventually, the line between the real and the simulated will no longer be a particularly relevant or helpful distinction to make for analysts of the social. While we currently talk of online advancements like 'virtual reality' or 'augmented reality', the future is said to be more likely to be 'mixed reality': a mix between on and offline.

Looking forward, we might be better served discussing online ethnography on 'meta-fields' (Airoldi, 2018) as the nature of the digital field-site itself is set to become more contested. Encouragingly, in their systematic review of online ethnographic work, Delli Paoli and D'Auria (2021) found that one third of the research adopted such a bricolage approach, employing interviews, offline ethnography, and techniques like focus groups to complement the method. An awareness of the place of online ethnography in relation to offline spaces somewhat futureproofs the method as well as highlighting its utility in keeping pace with an ever-changing social context. Importantly, this multi-sited approach does not eclipse the need to study online space or devalue the contribution of research undertaken wholly in online environments. Instead, it highlights the value of understanding the productive tensions and kinship of online and offline space.

Online ethnography has been utilized to explore a range of disparate criminological phenomena in recent years, including financial crime (Mackenzie, 2022), incel culture (Thorburn et al., 2023), alcohol consumption (Romo-Avilés et al., 2023), and even the relationship between real estate and criminality (Maoz and Gutman, 2024). The terrain is now ripe for students and researchers of criminology to add to this expanding body of work by going beyond the Web 2.0 spaces of social media and digital commerce, and instead turning a critical eye to the criminogenic potential of artificial intelligence and other emergent themes (Hayward and Maas, 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter has served as a guide for anyone wishing to carry out a criminological online ethnography. The method acts as a counterbalance to the swell of 'big data' studies and ensures that criminology can retain an immersive qualitative focus amid a period of techno-social proliferation. We have offered some of the promises and pitfalls of this approach, from improved access to hard-to-reach communities through to the challenges of informed consent. Ultimately, as long as criminological researchers retain a commitment to situational ethics and an exploratory ethnographic sensibility, this method can offer unique insights into diverse criminogenic phenomena in a rapidly changing social world.

Suggested reading

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