

SOCIAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY: THE DIGITAL RESEARCHER IN A MESSY WEB

Abstract

Social media practices and technologies are often part of how ethnographic research participants navigate their wider social, material and technological worlds, and are equally part of ethnographic practice. This creates the need to consider how emergent forms of social media-driven ethnographic practice might be understood theoretically and methodologically. In this article, we respond critically to existing literatures concerning the nature of the internet as an ethnographic site by suggesting how concepts of routine, movement and sociality enable us to understand the making of social media ethnography knowledge and places.

In 2010 we moved to Barcelona for twelve months to do research about social media and activism. Our research posed a set of questions concerning how activists and social movements were engaging social media (mainly Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) in their activist practices, and the implications – if any – for socio-political change. Barcelona was an ideal research location, as it has a history of resistance and activism; during our stay, a number of activist events and campaigns involving social media were mounted. Drawing from this research, we advance a new approach to understanding the practice of social media ethnography. Arguing for a critical departure from the dominant paradigms of network and community in internet research, we instead propose engaging concepts of routine, movement and sociality to enable us to understand the practices and places of social media ethnography.

Lang and Benbunan-Fich (2010) provide a technological definition of social media as ‘web applications that process, store, and retrieve user-generated content’ that resonates with other contemporary characterisations. Although these are useful minimal descriptions of the technical potential of social media, our emphasis here is on the ways in which ethnographers and other qualitative researchers may use social media in relation to these affordances. Hine has suggested that undertaking internet ethnography need not involve the ethnographer travelling physically to a field site (Hine, 2000: 43) when internet ethnography is focused around a certain media event – which Hine (2000: 50) calls an ‘Internet Event’.

However, the issues with which internet ethnography engages can also become particularly relevant in relation to specific localities. Uses of social media can also be interwoven with the qualities, political structures and histories of localities or regions. Therefore, parallel to Kozinets’ suggestion that ‘to study ... mobile online community use, or video blogging, it might make sense to go to the countries and the people within the countries who are in some senses demonstrating the most advanced or sophisticated uses of technology’ (2010: 17), going to Barcelona to study social media meant the project benefited from making connections between online and locality-based realities. Rather than being ‘the pursuit

of ethnographic holism' (Hine, 2000: 48), it enabled us to follow ethnographically the (dis)continuities between the experienced realities of face-to-face and social media movement and socialities. This is part of the process of making an 'ethnographic place' (Pink, 2009). Such places, as we explain below, drawing on the work of Massey (2005) and Ingold (2008), are constituted through the emergent relations between things and processes. They are not bounded territories or groups/communities. Rather, they are clusters or intensities of things of which both localities and socialities are elements.

A growing literature concerned with the practice of internet (related) ethnography (e.g. Beaulieu, 2004; Beaulieu and Simakova, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2000, 2008; Kozinets, 2010; Ardevol, 2012; Pink, 2012; Postill, 2010a) is emerging alongside a corpus of anthropological studies of social media sites, platforms and practices (e.g. Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Miller, 2011; Postill, forthcoming; Wesch, 2009; Juris, 2012). For the internet ethnographer, the implications of the shift to Web 2.0 and the rapid growth of social media platforms, applications, practices and activity are threefold. They create new sites for ethnographic fieldwork, foster new types of ethnographic practice and invite critical perspectives on the theoretical frames that dominate internet studies, thus providing opportunities for rethinking internet research methodologically.

In this article, we advance this field through a critical departure from earlier approaches to internet ethnography, rooted in reflections on the experience of carrying out social media ethnography in Barcelona, and in recent theoretical 'turns'. We examine the implications of shifting the methodological emphasis from models of network and community to a focus on routines, mobilities and socialities (Pink, 2008; Postill, 2008, 2011). These concepts, we propose, enable us to understand how social media ethnography produces 'ethnographic places' (Pink, 2009) that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public.

In Barcelona, our social media research spanned several groups but was centred on free culture activism, which is the example discussed in this article. Free culture ('free' as in 'freedom', not as 'for free') opens up the possibility of new models for citizen engagement in the provision of public goods and services, based on a 'commons' approach.¹ Barcelona is a focal locality for the free culture movement, whose activists tend to be skilled social media users. During the research period, they were involved in a high-profile national campaign aiming to prevent the passing of the co-called *Sinde Bill* (*Ley Sinde*), aimed at curtailing digital piracy. When the Bill eventually was approved in February 2011, free culture activists turned their attention to wider political and economic issues and played an important role in the planning and spread of the *indignados* (or 15M) movement that, in turn, inspired the global Occupy movement.

Given that social media are increasingly central to contemporary everyday life and scholarship, the implications of our discussion extend beyond the Barcelona ethnography. We conclude by identifying theoretical, methodological and practical principles through which we aim to open up the question of the implications of social media ethnography for further discussion, rather than attempting to provide a definitive solution.

Social media as a research site

The ways in which social media are constituted as a research site are contingent on the methodologies and practical methods engaged. The two main methods used to date are web content analysis of large data sets drawn from microblogging and other social media sites (Agichtein et al., 2008; Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; Kwak et al., 2010; Oulasvirta et al., 2010) and social network analysis (Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009; Java et al., 2007; Prieur et al., 2009). Such approaches constitute social media as a particular type of research site filled with texts and/or with connections between entities. Using large data

sets can provide statistical overviews that offer useful backgrounds for ethnographic work. However, they are less suited to responding to research questions such as ours, which seek to understand how, why and with what consequences activists use social media. In contrast, when methods associated with conventional ethnographic practice, such as interviews or participant observation, are engaged (Cox et al., 2008; Humphreys, 2007; Komito, 2011; Miller, 2011), they allow us to refigure social media as a fieldwork environment that is social, experiential and mobile.

For our research about activism in Barcelona, we were researching ‘intensities’ of social media activity and sociality that span online and offline, and also have repercussions in other web and face-to-face contexts. Doing research about social media and activism entails going beyond interviewing activists about what they do to include bringing together relevant online materials and either following or actively participating in blogs, social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), online news sites (both professional and amateur) and face-to-face events. As social media practices cannot be defined as phenomena that take place exclusively online, we were concerned with internet-related ethnography (cf. Hobart’s 2010 ‘media-related practices’), rather than internet ethnography. This we define as ethnography that engages with internet practices and content directly, but not exclusively, and in our case includes social media ethnography. Yet, simultaneously, the internet and internet research practices form a wider context for our discussion. We argue that the practice of social media ethnography and the emergence of Web 2.0 invite further critical comment about how we might characterise the internet as a research ‘site’.

The range of web-based and associated offline contexts referred to in the last paragraph gives a sense of the nature of social media as a research environment that is dispersed across web platforms, is constantly in progress and changing, and implicates physical as well as digital localities. It highlights the significance of accounting for face-to-face socialities and material contexts with which social media are co-implicated. It also illuminates the overlap in the use of the same media as both the subject and the tool of the research. Social reality has been characterised as ‘messy’ (Law, 2004), as has the ethnographic process itself (O’Reilly, 2005: 170). This description might be transferred to argue that social media are part of what can be characterised as the ‘messy web’, resulting in an equally complex online ethnography process. Yet social media ethnography entails types of digital practice, compilation, sharing and openness that involve specific departures from conventional ethnographic practice.

Defining ethnography, online and offline

There are competing understandings of ethnographic knowledge and ways of knowing (Pink, 2009), which can broadly be divided into two approaches. One argument has been that ethnographic research has become increasingly fragmented, leading to particular types of data being championed through specific ethnographic approaches (Atkinson et al., 2007). Another seeks to find new routes to ethnographic knowledge and understandings, flexibly adapting and developing new methods and new technologies to new situations, yet retaining a reflexive awareness of the nature of the knowledge produced and of its limits and strengths (Pink, 2009). This approach neither replaces long-term immersion in a society or culture, nor aims to produce ‘classic’ ethnographic knowledge; rather, it creates deep, contextual and contingent understandings produced through intensive and collaborative sensory, embodied engagements, often involving digital technologies in co-producing knowledge (Pink, 2009). It has elements in common with the ‘adaptive ethnography’ Hine (2000, 2009) associated with internet methods, and its emphasis on flexibility suits the need that exists when undertaking social media ethnography to work across web platforms and face-to-face situations. This takes the focus away from the ‘whole’

to acknowledge the openness of ethnographic places. As Baym and Markham propose: 'The Internet changes the way we understand and conduct qualitative inquiry.' (2009: viii)

Social media ethnography is a good example, because it brings new routes to knowledge that are specifically opened up through online/offline engagements. It is on these new pathways to knowing about ethnographic themes and their wider implications that we focus here. Before discussing our own ethnography, however, we establish the points of departure from which we build our contribution with a brief discussion of how the challenges of internet ethnography have been treated in existing methodological frameworks.

When Hine wrote her landmark *Virtual Ethnography*, she said: 'Talking about "the Internet" encompasses electronic mail (email), the World Wide Web (WWW, Usenet newsgroups, bulletin boards, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multi-User Domains (MUDS) and many other applications.' (2000: 2) Hine was writing about a Web 1.0 context, different from the social media platforms on which we focus here, yet some points remain applicable. Following a sociology of media and technology approach, she suggested internet users were dually 'involved in the construction of the technology: through the practices by which they understand it and through the content they produce' (2000: 38).

Hine also proposed that we might understand the internet analytically (although not as an experienced reality) as having two dimensions: on the one hand, as 'a discursively performed culture' and on the other as 'a cultural artefact, the technology text' (2000: 39). Hine argued that meaning is produced contextually through 'the circumstances in which the internet is used (offline) and the social spaces that emerge through its use (online)' (2000: 39), thus challenging the myth of holism in ethnography. Her work responded to the crisis in ethnography of the late twentieth century, as 'an opportunity for making a form of ethnographic enquiry suited to the Internet', which 'involves embracing ethnography as a textual practice and as a lived craft, and destabilizes the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a found field site' (Hine, 2000: 43).

Hine's emphasis on adaptive ethnography was still present eight years later, when she wrote that: 'The emergence of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo has also provided the occasion for adaptations of ethnographic enquiry', and saw developments such as blogging as 'offer[ing] up new forms of social interaction to explore' (2008: 260). Again, she argued for a dual focus for internet research on 'technology development' as a 'social process', and on 'technology appropriation' (2009: 3). While this imposes some order on internet research by determining a frame through which one might research, Hine also drew on Law's (2004) work to recognise that 'the world is an inherently messy and complex place' (2009: 5). Seeing the researcher as a 'constructor of reality' (2009: 5), Hine rejected the idea that an internet researcher might be able to study bounded units: 'Ethnography of the Internet can, then, usually be about mobility between contexts of production and use, and between online and offline, and it can creatively deploy forms of engagement to look at how these sites are socially constructed and, at the same time, are social conduits', identifying 'online traces' such as hyperlinks as a way to move around a field site (Hine, 2009: 11). Following this line of thought, we can understand the internet as a messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and offline worlds, and is connected and constituted through the ethnographer's narrative. Below, we advance this proposal by building on Hine's ideas in correspondence with Pink's (2009) emphasis on movement in the constitution of 'ethnographic places'.

Our second point of departure is Kozinets' 'netnography' approach (2010). Kozinets underpins the method of netnography with two concepts: community and culture. Both, he argues, can be found online. He stresses that online communities are not simply 'virtual', but in many cases those who participate in them meet face to face too (2010: 15). Kozinets argues that 'the term community appears appropriate if it is used in its most fundamental sense to refer to a group of people who share social interaction, social ties,

and a common interactional format, location or “space” – albeit, in this case, a computer-mediated or virtual “cyberspace” (2010: 15). He suggests that:

a continuum of participation exists in determining what can and cannot be considered ‘community membership’. Its boundaries are somewhat indistinct, but must be understood in terms of self-identification as a member, repeat contact, reciprocal familiarity, shared knowledge of some rituals and customs, some sense of obligation, and participation. (Kozinets, 2010: 10)

Kozinets’ work is in line with the continued popularity of a concept of community in internet studies (see Postill, 2008, 2011).

Yet, with its diverse applications and ‘feel good’ connotations, ‘community’ has been a problematic concept in anthropological and sociological theory for many decades, often leading scholars to abandon it as an analytical category. We have argued elsewhere that for the purpose of understanding activist practices, the term ‘community’ is better interrogated in terms of its local meanings for research participants² than as representing an empirical social unit that is open to analysis (Pink, 2008; Postill, 2011). Therefore, while acknowledging Kozinets’ stress on the indistinct nature of the boundaries of online communities and their frequent online-offline nature, which we also follow, we suggest an alternative focus on socialities. This approach attends to the *qualities* of social relationships rather than their being part of a ‘community’ (see Postill, 2008), and therefore permits us to attend to both ‘community’ type feel-good-ness *and* the shifting and more transient encounters and co-routes through the internet and offline. Thus, we propose, social media ethnography practice further suggests a critical shift from the analysis of online communities to that of digital socialities.

To focus on the socialities of social media and activist practice, we use a guiding framework rooted in anthropological theory, of place, movement and sociality. As Hine (2009) suggests, the places of online research are constructed through the practices of ethnographers. Her argument to some extent resonates with Pink’s (2009) notion of ‘ethnographic places’. In Pink’s version of ethnographic placemaking, the ethnographer brings together diverse things through the research process. Drawing on the spatial theory of Ingold (2007, 2008) and Massey (2005), Pink argues that ethnographic places are not bounded localities (although physical localities might be part of or associated with them), but collections of things that become intertwined (Pink, 2009).

This approach can incorporate ethnographic processes that engage with online/offline contexts, as for internet-related visual ethnography (Pink, 2012). It also provides a way to conceptualise how the social media ethnographer makes ethnographic places that are traceable on the web, and that follow relationships between online and offline processes. The relationship between place and everyday routines and practices connects with recent literatures. Cresswell refers to the idea of thinking ‘of place in a constant sense of becoming through practice and practical knowledge’ (2002: 26). Theories of practice are increasingly popular in media and digital ethnography (see Postill, 2010b) and an understanding of social media practices as part of, and as producing, place offers us a way to conceptualise social media ethnography. Many digital traces of the ethnographer (and ethnographic process) remain part of the internet (e.g. her/his social media engagements and online archiving practices), thus weaving a digital ethnographic place that is inextricable from both the materiality of being online and the offline encounters that are intertwined in its narratives. In the following sections, we focus on the routine and mobile elements of Postill’s social media ethnography practice, showing how they became about both how he participated in a social media research environment, and how it was constituted as an ethnographic place.

The everyday routines of digital ethnography practice

The everyday life of the social media ethnographer involves living part of one's life on the internet, keeping up to date with and participating and collaborating in social media discussions. This is not simply a virtual experience but is connected to the material world in important ways. It involves charting out and living through the ethnographic place of the fieldsite, which is a sensorily embodied, rather than 'virtual' experience, as demonstrated when John began to fear he was getting a repetitive strain injury from the frequent mouse-clicking that characterised his many hours online. John's practice as a social media researcher consisted of five overlapping sub-practices or routines: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. Below we show that these became part of how the digital ethnographer produces knowledge and creates elements of her or his research environment, or ethnographic place.

Catching up is a taken-for-granted yet crucial routine for most internet users, including social media researchers. John kept up with research-related developments through Twitter, Facebook and face-to-face encounters and, to a lesser extent, via email, mailing lists, Google alerts, news feeds and mobile phone exchanges. In Spain, as in many other countries, the microblogging site Twitter is now a major meeting point for politicians, activists, journalists, technologists, scholars and others who are actively involved in public life. Without a regular presence on Twitter, John's ability to conduct research on current affairs would have been severely impaired. He did not use RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to aggregate all his updates on to a single site, but instead used Twitter as a manner of 'human-mediated RSS feed' (Naughton, 2011). In other words, he 'followed' a manageable set of Twitter users (fewer than 120), who acted as filters by resending (or 'retweeting') only selected updates from other Twitterers. In this way, he sought to reduce the information overload that invariably accompanies this kind of research.

There is nothing new, of course, in the human imperative to remain updated on changes to one's social and physical environment. The novelty of social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, when compared with their technological predecessors (e.g. mailing lists or bulletin boards) is that they prompt users to constantly update one another on news, and to 'share' digital content (images, videos, news items, etc.), often via hyperlinks. Another significant contrast with earlier technologies is the ease with which social media users can actually share such content. Catching up and sharing digital content are therefore two thoroughly entangled routines.

The technical ease with which users habitually share news and other information conceals the fact that digital sharing is a skilled, embodied activity that the researcher must learn to perfect over time. Like other social media users, the researcher learns that 'adding value' to a shared link will increase the chances of recipients in turn sharing it with their own personal networks, thereby enhancing the researcher's 'name and fame' (Miller, 2000). This is particularly important on Twitter, where a widely retweeted item can help to boost a user's number of followers. Unlike Facebook and other social networking sites, Twitter fosters asymmetrical relationships, since one does not need to reciprocate a tie in order to establish a public relationship. The relationship is one of following versus being followed, not of 'friending'. Although it is possible to 'follow back', each user is at liberty to decide who to follow. However, reciprocity can sometimes be advisable – for example, so as not to cause offence. For instance, once a potential research participant John had just met via Twitter playfully scolded him for not following him back. John quickly began to follow him, and apologised for his oversight. In principle, he could have replied that Twitter, unlike Facebook, is a milieu where asymmetrical relations are the norm, but this would have hardly endeared him to his prospective participant. Therefore, 'sharing' and catching up are not only about retweeting, but also about following, because following opens you

directly to the sharing of others. It is, in this sense, a sub-practice through which both the malleability and the intensity of the socialities of digital ethnographic places are formed.

Catching up and sharing frequently lead to a third routine activity: exploring – often by following links provided in tweets. These explorations can end in a quick glance at a web page or in longer, more meandering explorations of a potential research site – participant or initiative. Often they are brief excursions from online haunts that are followed by a return to base. These research homebases (especially Twitter, Facebook and email) can be seen as ports from which the digital ethnographer embarks on short exploratory trips – rarely venturing too far, however.

Another key routine involves interacting with research participants. This can take on a range of different forms and intensities, from an occasional ‘Like’ on Facebook to a long series of face-to-face, mobile and online encounters. While strong ties and regular exchanges with key research participants are crucial, it is equally important to develop an extended set of ‘weak ties’ with other participants. These are sustained via social media platforms that facilitate ‘phatic communion’ (V. Miller, 2008) with a large set of contacts with very low investments in time per contact. Although social media gurus speak of the need to engage in ‘conversations’ with one’s contacts (Platt, 2010), John’s ethnographic experience contradicts this. Often a quick retweet to ‘nod’ in their direction will suffice to signal or reaffirm a sustained interest in, and appreciation of, a research participant’s activities. There is a tacit understanding that fellow communicators lead busy urban lives, and offence is not taken if mediated interactions are interrupted or left unfinished. Partial exchanges and ephemeral ‘contextual fellowship’ (Rapport and Amit, 2002: 5) are the norm, and lengthy storytelling a rarity (see Wittel, 2001). The concomitant assumption is that unfinished exchanges may be taken up again if and when interlocutors deem it necessary. In an era of ‘polymedia’ (Madianou and Miller, 2011), in which numerous media options are available to urban dwellers, digital ethnographers must practise media-switching and media-mixing to create and maintain social relationships with research participants across space and time.

Finally, there is archiving. If a few years ago internet users relied on hard disks and CDs/DVDs to back up their work (these days memory sticks), now, in addition, cloud platforms and social media themselves have become a means of archiving. The social media ethnographer’s ‘archival hubris’ can be compared to that of free software programmers (Kelty, 2008). For John, this took place mostly through the bookmarking site Delicious.com, as well as Dropbox and Google Docs. Tagging web content was integral to his day-to-day research activity. The routine consisted of attaching keywords such as ‘activism’, ‘socialmedia’ or ‘protest’ to content he bookmarked on Delicious and, less frequently, on his research blog. Delicious was central to John’s research. By 20 December 2011, he had stored over 3700 bookmarks coded with more than 4000 tags (keywords). The rise of tagging (de Kerckhove, 2010) raises questions about the changing nature of fieldnotes in the digital era. One intriguing question is how extensive tagging may shape the fieldwork process. By analogy to Granovetter’s (1973) notion of strong vs weak ties, it could be argued that weak (uniplex) tags are potentially as important as strong (multiplex) tags. Over time, as the ethnographer spends months in social media environments, she or he grows a long tail of weak tags across a vast knowledge space.³ The methodological implications are far-reaching. The media anthropologist Mark Peterson writes that, when using qualitative data management software:

You page through large bodies of fieldwork notes and transcripts (and photos, videos, etc.) attaching codes and building a codebook from which you can build an interpretation of what is going on. Is tagging an incipient form of theory building? How does it affect our methodology if we attach tags on the fly, as it were, because

we are posting much of our data, in the moment, to sites like Delicious and blogs, and so forth, rather than deliberately, thoughtfully, after the fact? (Potatoskins, 2011)

There are significant differences between tagging and earlier forms of fieldwork coding. These include the potentially public nature of the tagged materials (should the researcher choose this option, as John did), and the fact that Delicious often suggests possible tags to the user based on other users' digital trails – a form of indirect, algorithmic participation in the coding process by anonymous others. However, the ease and speed with which researchers can nowadays store information for future use can create its own unintended problems, not least a tendency towards data accumulation at the expense of diary writing and reflection. Social media fieldworkers must find a balance between tagging and diary keeping.

Thus the routine practices of the social media ethnographer work towards the making of an ethnographic place – characterised by an intensity of links to digital materials and routine routes online. This place is both defined, as it 'clusters' and interweaves digital elements, and 'open' in that it is constituted not only through practices of gathering and accumulating, but also by sharing, linking, following, tagging and more.

It is important, though, not to present too sedate an account of the internet-mediated research process. Fieldwork often shifts between periods of relative calm and periods of intense activity – even turbulence. Thus, following the 15 May 2011 demonstrations across Spain, in which John marched through the streets of Barcelona with tens of thousands of protesters, Spain's social media landscape underwent a prodigious transformation as countless citizens rushed to share digital content across blogs, microblogs, social networking sites and myriad other platforms (Postill, forthcoming). Under such conditions, social media research is anything but routine! We turn next to these more mobile and fluid phases of digital ethnography practice.

Digital socialities in motion

A heavy use of networked technologies does not mean that the digital ethnographer operates in an undifferentiated 'network society' with a homogeneous form of 'network sociality' replacing the 'community sociality' of previous eras (Wittel, 2001). Elsewhere, Postill (2008, 2011) has argued that we should avoid reducing sociality to a 'network vs community' dichotomy. Instead, he suggests that sociality can take on multiple forms even within the same social field or locality. Drawing from ethnographic research in the Malaysian suburb of Subang Jaya, he exemplifies this approach through three distinct forms of residential sociality: committee sociality, patrol sociality and (web forum) thread sociality. Thus residents' committees in Subang Jaya are characterised by the:

co-present, synchronous sociality of monthly meetings devoted to discussing local issues (cf. Jean-Klein, 2003). Meetings are held at night in air-conditioned rooms and attendance is restricted to committee members and their guests. The bodily orientation is primarily face-to-face – although this will depend on interlocutors' seating positions relative to one another (Pink, 2008)

The discourse is oral, polylogical and gesturally rich but it is also mediated by texts, most of them shared over the internet (e.g. the agenda, emails, letters, websites). (Postill, 2011: 107)

In contrast to these real-time meetings, which are rich in non-verbal communication, web forum exchanges are asynchronous, arranged into topical 'threads' and peppered with avatars and emoticons 'to compensate for the reduced bodily cues of online communication' (2011: 106). Like committee sociality, web forum 'thread sociality' is polylogical – that is,

it typically involves a group of conversational partners – yet its quasi-orality is mediated by the written word and computer interface. Similarly, amidst the seeming chaos of Twitter’s ceaseless torrent of exchanges, a new form of thread sociality has evolved that both resembles and differs from that of web forums. We could call this new form ‘hashtag sociality’. As Solis (2011) puts it:

Hashtags are not only part of online culture, they are defining a new era of communication on the Web and IRL (in real life). With over 140 million Tweets flying across Twitter every day, hashtags surfaced as a method to the madness – the ability to group conversations into an organized timeline. But what started out as a way to index conversations in Twitter has now substantially altered how people convey, relay and discover information in and out of the popular nichework. The hashtag has also a form of #self-expression.

Or, as 15-M activists commented following the mass occupation of Spain’s main squares, in May 2011:

The assemblies in each of the encampments are essential not only for logistical reasons but also because everyday and mid-term tasks are outlined in their committees. Above all, they are massive, transparent exercises in direct democracy ... However, the [movement’s] direction is mostly set on Twitter. The hashtags serve not only to organise the debate. They also shape the collective mood: #wearenotgoing #wearenotafraid #fearlessbcn ... (@galapita and @hibai (2011), our translation).

The hashtag can therefore be thought of as integral to the nature of Twitter as a *social* medium. As such, it produces the experience of being ‘in the digital crowd’. Being a mobile social media ethnographer does not only involve following the (digital) action, but also getting caught up in it, being carried along the trail and becoming entangled with others as the ethnographers’ tweets become interlinked with those of others and they move forward together.

An example of fast-moving sociality is John’s following of the #nolesvotes campaign, which called on citizens not to vote for any of the major political parties. This was partly an archival function, but also generated real-time information about issues, opinion leaders, flows of communication among them and technologies used. Therefore, moving through a social media fieldwork site does not merely entail extracting data or staying in a single ‘virtual community’. The latter would not have been possible for John, even if he had understood his role in these terms, because the field site itself was characterised by movement. For example, until February 2011, much of Spain’s digital action was to be found via the Twitter hashtag #leysinde. However, after the Sinde bill was finally passed by the Spanish parliament (see above), the action moved to #nolesvotes and its related wiki, Google group, Facebook group and listservs, only to move again in subsequent weeks to a new multi-platform initiative named Democracia Real Ya. Thus John’s digital routes and routines shifted, moving through these field sites, often checking for updates but at other times exploring further, looking around the sites, following new leads across platforms and offline sites.

Social media ethnography therefore does not mean doing fieldwork in or about one particular social media platform – such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. While the latter is possible, it is complicated by the fact that most internet users constantly criss-cross a range of platforms through aggregators, search engines, hyperlinks and other devices. Moreover, the movement of the digital ethnographer involves traversing interrelated digital and co-present contexts – for example, sharing a bus ride with activists, a Facebook collaboration or a smartphone image over coffee. These field situations are neither communities nor networks – they are hybrid forms of sociality through which the ethnographer and their

research participants gain variously mediated senses of contextual fellowship (Rapport and Amit, 2002).

Conclusion

In existing literatures, a messy web has been ordered through concepts such as community, culture and network. However, in the context of doing social media ethnography, a different approach is needed. A plural concept of sociality that allows us to focus on the qualities of relatedness in online and offline relationships offers a better way of understanding how social media practices are implicated in the constitution of social groups, and the practices in which they engage together (in the case of our research activist practices). Understanding the work of the social media ethnographer as mobile is important for gaining a sense of the shifting intensities of the social media landscape as it emerges online, but also as it is interwoven with offline activities. It is important to be able to see how the researcher's online movement is both routine and subject to her or him being 'carried' through social media environments (e.g. through Twitter hashtags or Facebook threads), and becoming part of both digital and offline crowds in real, experiential ways.

These insights have wider implications for doing internet ethnography: the example of social media suggests that existing concepts that are commonly used for understanding the internet are – as is often the case – open to revision when we probe them through ethnographic research. It is worth returning to Baym and Markham's point that: 'The Internet changes the way we understand and conduct qualitative inquiry.' (2009: 26) Social media ethnography, in turn, invites us to reflexively interrogate the concepts we use to understand the internet. It is through such an exercise that we suggest a new research design for social media/internet ethnography, away from community and towards sociality and movement.

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Notes

- ¹ See <http://fcforum.net/en/charter>.
- ² This analytical distinction between emic (vernacular) and etic (academic) understandings of community does not mean that ethnographers can ignore local sensibilities – for example, the earnestly felt sense among many in Barcelona that Catalonia is a bounded national community with its own distinctive history, language and culture.
- ³ See www.delicious.com/tags/jpostill.

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