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## Legitimising digital anthropology through immersive cohabitation: becoming an observing participant in a blended digital landscape

### Abstract

Debate regarding how to conduct digital anthropology is currently contested, with two primary methodologies emerging; researchers who conduct projects wholly in cyberspace, and those who look at the use of digital technologies by their informants, contextulised in the offline world. This paper suggests a third way, arguing that immersive cohabitation is possible where online and offline fieldsites are viewed as part of a larger blended field. This paper builds on two years ethnographic fieldwork with Instagram to call for immersive cohabitation as a new method to be considered by digital anthropologists and ethnographers. Further to this blended approach, this paper argues for a move beyond participant observation to working as observing participants in the virtual. This dual approach restructures current anthropological methods for digital working to enhance the quality and depth of data collection whilst ensuring the continued currency of the anthropologist in a rapidly modernising and increasingly digitised world.

### Keywords

Immersive Cohabitation, Digital, Virtual, Cyberspace, Instagram, Social Media, Clothing, Dress, Methods, Smartphones

Do you Instagram? I do. For two years I took photographs of myself practically every day showing what I was wearing and posted them online via the social media platform. At the time I was conducting a period of ethnographic fieldwork with bespoke tailors and their clients in London, and had found that many of them had highly active Instagram accounts. These tailors use Instagram to communicate with clients and fans; display pictures of new items available for purchase; share images of celebrities wearing their clothes; show bespoke garments being produced in various unfinished stages; allow followers to glimpse their private lives; and give ‘sneak peaks’ of upcoming projects and designs. Furthermore some of the tailors I worked with used Instagram multiple times a day, posting a practically continual stream of images featuring themselves, their products and other’s wearing their designs. Many researchers conducting ethnographic fieldwork have sought to investigate the use of various technologies being employed by their interlocutors, but Instagram seemed more involved. Less an investigation of a technology and more an enmeshed part of my informants day to day lives that I was ignoring. To address this failing I began to use Instagram in the same manner as my informants, developing a digital presence and learning through completing the same tasks as they did, taking and posting pictures of myself. The further I progressed with what would become 24 months of digital fieldwork I began to realise that this form of fieldwork was subtly different to other forms of digital ethnography that had previously been conducted, and as such I developed a new methodological approach, with this in-depth habitual practice forming a central tenet to the modified form of digital methodology which I will champion in this paper.

In a rapidly modernising and increasingly digitised world, the manner in which we investigate digital technologies ethnographically has spawned many new approaches and generated much debate. The result of this is that categories such as digital anthropology or virtual ethnography mean different things to different researchers. This article takes the current debates in digital anthropology and offers an alternative approach which I term immersive cohabitation. This article does not seek to discount prior ethnographic endeavour in the field of digital anthropology, but rather to highlight this new method which will be relevant to the investigation of certain technologies and certain fieldsites, and may become increasingly relevant as more offline fields feel the encroachment of digitisation into everyday life and practices. This hinges on the nature of this digitised modernity in which I situate this research. In looking for clarification this could be alternatively conceptualized as a postdigital age, in that it is no longer appropriate to think about digital technologies as separate entities. Rather they are enmeshed into everyday practices:

As I sit here writing I can reach into my pocket, pull out my smartphone, use my fingerprint to unlock it and then within moments access my bank, order groceries, chat to friends, book a hotel room, watch practically any commercial film ever made, find someone to go on a date with or post a picture of the jacket I’m currently wearing to Instagram to see what my followers think about today’s look. This is not a unique experience. It is the same for the person in the next room, outside on the street, or sat next to me on the train. There is of course a privilege to statements such as these, not everyone in a fieldsite such as London will have access to the financial and digital resources

necessary to belong to this network, but I am studying up, working with men who purchase tailored garments retailing for thousands of pounds, and this technology is becoming more affordable on a daily basis. I wanted to move beyond merely observing my participants use of their smartphones, and to understand the processes involved in posting pictures of yourself to Instagram on a daily basis. This was the first step in developing a new method.

#### A New (Blended) Digital Method: Immersive Cohabitation

In order to develop a digital method in which I moved beyond participant observation into working as an observing participant (see Holy, 1988), I first had to develop a digital presence. I named this character @anthrodandy, a portmanteau of the words 'anthropologist' and 'dandy'. This was done for two reasons: firstly as means of identification as both a researcher, and one specifically interested in sartorial matters (mirroring those I would be working with); secondly, my preliminary research had identified a trend amongst my informants that their digital 'handles' were often portmanteaus or a series of words run together. My choice of name was intended to adhere to this trend and facilitate my acceptance into the field. Once I had settled on a name, I created accounts on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook specifically for this new digital presence, and wrote the following bio which would appear on these pages:

Digital Anthropologist at the University of St Andrews. My PhD research is with Bespoke Tailors, Primarily in London. All pictures are my own.

I followed this bio with a link to my university website allowing potential followers to easily check my credentials, and highlight my role as a researcher. Once I had created this profile I began by following tailors whom I had already had terrestrial encounters with and conducted interviews and participant observation with. This allowed me to observe their online activity as well as functioning as a means for communication through the private message function of the platform.

Once I had conducted two weeks of digital participant observation, which involved using the platform to observe other's posts and interact with other users through the occasional 'like', but without publishing any of my own content in the form of images, I had become comfortable with the platform's interface. Only after this period did I began my work as an observing participant. To this end, I began to follow more people and engage with other's accounts through liking their posts and commenting on them. The people I followed were initially other tailors and then accounts which were associated with these tailors, such as clients, suppliers, fashion media and accounts which posted images of men in suits. Eventually this process expanded to the point where I discovered a coherent digital network of individual accounts, all with an interest in high-end menswear, sartorial matters and design. This network contained a broad selection of individual accounts, however it was clear that they all interacted with each other and this web of interactions held the amorphous network together. While I was actively engaging with the content of other's I also began to produce my own content. This was a critical step change in the process of moving from participant observation to becoming an observing participant, with the specific difference being a move from using Instagram as a tool, to considering it a fieldsite inhabited by a digital researcher.

The process of producing my own content was not one which came naturally to me, and had to be learned, practiced and continually reassessed. I began by attempting to replicate the images which I had seen being uploaded by my digital informants. These consisted either of self-portraits displaying the outfit they were wearing that day, or featured close-up images of new purchases or beautiful sartorial objects and clothing. This started a process whereby I attempted to publish at least one image every day, over a period of digital fieldwork which eventually lasted twenty four months during which I published 850 images. Across the duration of this digital fieldwork I engaged with the digital network I became a part of for hours every day, liking, following and commenting on other's content as well as spending hours offline, purchasing garments, dressing up, taking photographs and editing images ready for publication. The time investment involved in this process was substantial but afforded me access to this digital network, a feat that would not have been possible simply as a participant observer. This is due to the network only becoming clearly visible once one has become a feature on the multiplicity of loci of interactions that make up the network. Furthermore, the process of engaging with the platform in such an active sense gave me a substantial insight into not only the content being produced by others, but the invisible production of this content, which I was replicating. In addition without engaging in this manner I would not have had such a clear understanding of the language use, including emojis, or the negative psychological impact of intensive use of a digital platform which was eluded to by my informants but never explicitly stated.

Whilst completing this digital strand of fieldwork I continued with my offline fieldwork with tailors in London. The fostering of this blended approach, encompassing online and offline fieldsites into a single piece of fieldwork actually improved the relationships I had with the tailors I worked with offline, whilst allowing me to access their clients and admirers online. While it is true that in anthropology we often consider contexts to be blended as we think about individuals, families, sports affiliations and so forth, the enmeshed nature of the online and offline in the fieldwork I conducted has led me to conceptualise the space in which I conducted my fieldwork as a single blended postdigital field. Working in this way fostered relationships and tailors began to contact me through various social media channels. Some would complement me on what I was wearing in a particular image I had posted, sometimes reposting the image to their own social media account, whilst others would send me reminders of sales or images of items they thought I might like to buy. In addition there were occasions where I was identified and spoken to in a warm manner using my Christian name by people at fashion shows even though we had never met, but we were Instagram friends. Furthermore, the digital access I had to clients and admirers of the various tailors I worked with through Instagram allowed me to interact with these individuals as well as following trends and conversations. Data which would have been invisible or inaccessible without having created @anthrodandy as a digital self who had become respected and acknowledged as a legitimate feature in the digital network.

Throughout this process my Instagram account functioned as both a research tool, a digital self, and an image based blog charting my fieldwork. Despite this, and in response

to the warning offered by Hine (2015: 74-75), I also kept traditional ethnographic fieldnotes which recorded my day to day experiences cohabiting in both online and offline spaces. This allowed me to return to these fieldnotes in combination with the digital record of my research when writing up, giving a multidimensional record in both text and technicolour images to refer back to whilst visually allowing a record of outfits, locations and events to inform and invigorate my field diary.

Elements of my method are not new, indeed digital technology has been examined, social media used as a research tool, and whole research projects have been conducted in cyberspace before I conducted my fieldwork. Despite this my work differs sufficiently in the totality of its immersion in the digital fieldsite as an observing participant whilst retaining elements of offline fieldwork as to warrant my assertion of this as a new blended digital method. This is the crux of my method, an acknowledgement of the blended nature of the online and offline in a postdigital field, coupled with a set of working practices which enable the researcher to exist within this landscape as their informants do. The closest ethnographic research to mine in terms of methodology is the research conducted by Schneidermann (2014) on hip hop in Uganda, who used Facebook to become co-present with her informants. This notion of co-presence, existing and conducting research which spans the online and offline spaces inhabited by one's informants was equally the starting place for my digital research. However, it is this point where our methodologies diverge, since Schneidermann (2014) only uses Facebook as a means of communication and conducts research with Facebook because her informants inhabit that virtual space. Conversely, during my fieldwork, whilst this co-presence was the starting point, my digital research grew into co-habitation. This process involved moving from working through participant observation to taking and publishing my own content, thus becoming an observing participant. The key difference being a move from merely being present in the online landscape (accessed and contextualised from offline), to inhabiting the online space, through the creation of a digital self who can remain there even after the offline researcher has logged off. At this point, the digital landscape is no longer merely a research tool, but a field in its own right, and one which fundamentally repositions the person of the researcher, giving them a more nuanced subjective understanding of the processes conducted by one's informants and the space in which these actions are carried out. There are similarities here to the work of MacKee (2016: 2) who conducted fieldwork with gay men using the dating platform Tinder and clearly draws from a similar methodological corpus as my research, although he terms this "deep hanging-out". Whilst he doesn't explicitly frame his methodology as becoming an observing participant he states that some of the interviews he conducted were also "dates", "opportunities to start romantic relationships" or "situations which could lead to casual sex" (MacKee, 2016: 2). This research is reminiscent of Humphreys' (1970) work, which Coffey (1999: 85) highlights as ethically problematic. However Coffey (1999: 85) does acknowledge that such research may be the only way to gain access to hard to reach spaces, and when conducted with a solid understanding of the ethical implications can be highly fruitful. Despite these ethical considerations, my work was primarily open access and with individuals who were actively self-publicising. A fact which lessened potential ethical dilemmas faced by the likes of MacKee (2016).

This notion of learning by doing, not merely by observing, is fundamental to conducting research as an observing participant, and while this can complicate the ethical implications of the research, particularly when there is a sexual element as in Humphreys' (1970) and MacKee's (2016) work, the results can be very fruitful when undertaken carefully. Hine hypothesises about the validity of using social media to set up an ethnographic presence to extend "a field site in time and space beyond a notion of a specific bounded or offline site" (Hine, 2015: 73). This is precisely what I did, developing a digital self as a tool through which to access and research the digital fieldsite. The beauty of this method is that it not only allows access and provides a research tool, but by engaging in the same activities as one's informants, a degree of reflexivity can be brought to bear. Furthermore it is possible to gain an understanding of the habitus of ones informants and even to cultivate a shared understanding of said habitus if the process of crafting the digital self is sufficiently immersive over a long enough period of time. It is worth mentioning the work of Luvaas (2016) more specifically at this point, from which I drew considerable inspiration during the formulation of this methodology. Luvaas (2016) conducts ethnographic research amongst streetstyle photographers and fashion bloggers, conducting a traditional methodology including participant observation whilst also, in tandem, himself becoming a streetstyle photographer and fashion blogger. It is this combination of observation and learning through participant which I have employed in my methodology to gain insight, as he does, into the world in which my informants live as well as the manner in which they manage and produce the content required to exist digitally.

Applying the new method: Immersive Cohabitation takes time

The greatest strength of this method is also one which illuminates its most significant challenge. The time taken to establish oneself as a researcher within a closed digital network is substantial. Indeed I extended my digital fieldwork from an initial 12 months to 24 since it felt as though I had only just begun to establish myself online after the first year. This is a period of digital ethnographic research which appears to be one of the most significant, in terms of time undertaken. The time involved became an important aspect of the methodology I developed, not only for the richness of interaction which can only occur between users who are familiar with each other, but also due to the level of understanding one is able to garner over time and the observation of gradual shifts in trends over time and at different times of the year. Furthermore, it is important to note that the process of familiarisation between users takes longer digitally. Users may be using the platform sporadically, and the researcher has to learn ways in which they can be noticed and accepted before they can engage successfully. In addition the researcher lacks the normal tools one is able to employ in offline communication.

In the case of my digital fieldwork, relationships developed gradually for two reasons. Firstly, the nature of the images posted to craft ones digital self, which were deemed to be acceptable and desirable to the network I wished to work with, had to be learned. It took considerable observation, as well as the continual acquisition of new objects, artefacts and outfits, to allow for the constant production of images necessary to gain access. Secondly, once I had gained access, the language use, beyond the discourse of the images which were necessary to the construction of an accepted digital self, had to be learned. This included the kind of phrases and vocabulary needed as well as the network specific

use of emojis. Learning both of these strands of discourse was a slow process and as at that point I hadn't gained full access to the network it was not possible to ask for help. Instead these modes of communication had to be learned by observation, teamed with trial and error. Fortunately the function of Instagram means that it is clear when a mode of discourse has been greeted favourably because you get more feedback in the form of likes, comments and follows. However, the element of feedback becomes more complicated once one is established in a network and temporal elements such as the time of posting become more important.

Initially I was not aware of the existence of networks within Instagram. I suspected that there might be groups of like-minded users who grouped themselves together, but I had no idea how these functioned, and my starting point of following tailors gave me little insight. However, over time it became abundantly clear that these amorphous, yet clearly bounded networks existed, and the longer I conducted research the more complex and multi-stranded the loci of interactions between users in the network I existed within became. Instagram itself tries to link users it thinks are similar, and this functions to assist the formation of networks. Yet these networks are not obvious and one has to follow a large number of the members of the network before the links, references and trends shared by the disparate users become apparent. Furthermore, only once the network has been identified, can closer links be made with individual members of this network. These occur through repetition and habit, with those closest liking practically every one of the other's posts and frequently commenting on them, or making reference to the other in their posts. This process is slow and time consuming, yet without it there is no way of understanding the complexity of the network, the individuals within it, and the manner in which it shifts and morphs over time. It is a coherent understanding of the production of images by individual users, at the same time as monitoring the wider movements of the network as a whole which gives analytical strength to the method I developed. A method which can only be used effectively through considerable investment of time.

Why Instagram?

Instagram was chosen as the primary platform within which I would conduct digital fieldwork for a number of reasons. Firstly, preliminary fieldwork suggested that this was the platform most used by my informants, the tailors and their clients whom I had begun to work with. It became apparent that the highly visual nature of this platform and the vibrant network of sartorially inclined gentlemen who regularly use Instagram make it the most desirable digital platform for tailors to use. In addition, the network of users who interact with tailors, and others with an interest in menswear, act as advertisements for the tailors themselves, often showcasing their wares or simply highlighting style trends. Secondly, it is within Instagram that some of the most crucial theoretical questions within the field of digital anthropology are most acutely visible and ready for analysis. Notions of habitual self-portraiture and the creation of alternative digital selves are all drawn into sharp focus once this specific digital optic of Instagram has been applied. In addition it appeared that very limited research had been conducted by anthropologists with Instagram. Consequently it became my primary digital fieldsite, and the network of individuals interested in menswear and sartorial matters including tailors and their clients became my informants.



Whilst Instagram is the favoured space for tailors the majority of their posts are mirrored with simultaneous or similar posts to complementary Facebook and Twitter accounts. However it is Instagram where these posts originate and where the majority of traffic and conversations occur. It was this fact which persuaded me to follow suit when first setting up my Instagram account under the name @anthrodandy, by linking my Instagram account to a Twitter account (@AnthroDandy) where all my Instagram posts would also appear. This approach initially led me to attempt digital fieldwork across these two social media platforms, however the quantity of data available and the time necessary for meaningful interaction within Instagram proved too great to pursue an analysis across two platforms and so I confined myself to Instagram. Despite this, I still recognised the importance in the use of multiple platforms for communication, termed “polymedia” by Madianou and Miller (2012a, 2012b), particularly how moving across multiple platforms can indicate evolving levels of intimacy between users, a fact which is also noted by Mackee (2016: 2).

Instagram was a particularly beneficial platform to conduct this research with, and its specific set of functions provided me with the ideal platform to develop a new method. Instagram allows users a full spectrum of engagement levels from simply existing invisibly and looking at the content of others, all the way through to becoming a fully involved daily part of a network or networks, producing content in the offline world, to publish on the platform. A process which not only enriches one’s digital self, but also allows relationships between users to be made. This wide range of levels of interaction, as well as the use of images and text based language through the medium of comments provides ample range for analysis. However, the specificity of the networks which exist within Instagram provide a focussed set of informants to work with, without becoming swamped by the potentially boundless and interconnected networks found in other social media platforms. Furthermore, the unique mix of digital methods, visual anthropology and material culture which has transpired from this research, breaks new ground in the study of these fields. Finally, the manner in which these three areas have crystallised into a coherent synthesis throughout my fieldwork demonstrates that the intersection of material culture, visual anthropology and the digital landscape is one which is ripe for further study, and that using Instagram as a fieldsite is a prime way of doing this.

#### The Digital Landscape

Conducting fieldwork in an online space has been imagined in a number of ways. However, I frame this type of work as working in a digital landscape. This way of conceptualising the digital field refutes Burrell’s (2009: 193) idea that “virtual worlds...may not be physically habitable” by instead suggesting that the digital selves which users create are, in line with the work of Kondo (2009: 230-231), one of multiple selves. These digital selves have no problem existing in a digital habitat.

My work in this digital landscape was conducted within a network which contained members whose offline locations ranged from the UK, to the USA, Scandinavia and South Korea. The majority of members were UK and USA based, with fewer from the rest of Europe, and fewer still from the rest of the world. However, such wide geographical coverage confirms the existence of a continent spanning network. This fact may not be contested, but my use of the term landscape has been chosen specifically to

address the nature of this network within Instagram. This is not a multi-sighted form of fieldwork as I initially questioned when the geographical variety of my informants began to materialise, but rather, in line with the work of Wulff (2015), this could be seen as constituting a “flexible form” of fieldwork. This idea led me to hypothesise that an international digital network, such as the one I was investigating, was not sited in many places, but rather consisted of members who all converged in one place, an identifiable location within a digital landscape.

Furthermore, I contend that in our digitised modernity a digital landscape now exists everywhere, an instantly accessible other space, where users can be themselves or create another identity. Indeed, in many locations this digital landscape is so enmeshed with the offline world that it must be considered as a single blended entity, or conceptualised as postdigital. This landscape is infinite and multifaceted, divided into a variety of platforms through the various methods of gaining access to the digital realm. However, despite this, many of these platforms are not separately bounded entities but connect seamlessly to each other. Within and across these platforms sit networks, like the one I have described, each interested in a specific joint enterprise. My use of the term network builds on the actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009) as well as the work of Kapferer (1969) and Boissevain (1978), but it is more visual. The networks within Instagram communicate through a discourse made primarily of digital images, though this varies across different platforms. The level within which this digital landscape is embedded into the day-to-day lives of a growing number of individuals is profound. It is therefore necessary to question whether it is pointless to conduct an ethnographic study in the setting of western modernity which avoids an analysis of this concurrent landscape. I contend that it is. The omission of such considerable part of daily life and interpersonal interaction is as short-sighted as historical ethnographic failings, such as a lack of sufficient language learning or the conducting of fieldwork which ignores one gender.

#### Advantages of Immersive Cohabitation

There are many advantages to this new method, as well as many challenges. These will be individual to the specific project being conducted and as such I will not detail the full breadth of potential positives and negatives here, apart from suggesting the benefit of this method in simply gaining the best possible understanding and insight into the digital landscape and its intersection with the offline world – conceptualised as a larger blended singular field. However I would like to detail one substantial advantage of this methodology which is vital in gaining access to the networks one wishes to study. As well as crucial for conducting a reflexive analysis of the processes involved in becoming, and staying part of a digital network.

Personal presentation is more vital in the digital world than in the offline world. This is a fact which has been noted by Horst (2009) who describes the importance of representing oneself in the digital landscape. However, the importance of the image presented by the researcher, of themselves, has received less acknowledgment. Coffey (1999: 65) describes trying to dress “like an accountant” while completing the research for her PhD (Coffey, 1993), and others such as Miller (2004) allude to returning from fieldwork with a modified dress style. Despite this, the dress and appearance of the ethnographer in the field is not widely discussed. This is where fieldwork conducted in a digital landscape

differs, because the image crafted and displayed by the researcher is incredibly important, both as methodological tool and reflexive process, but also as a means of gaining access to a specific network. In the case of my digital fieldwork, it would not have been possible for me to gain access to a network concerned with sartorial objects, and the production of self-portraits displaying a current outfit, unless I had partaken in the same processes and carefully crafted my digital self to gain approval and access. This idea of dressing to fit it, and presenting one's digital self as both researcher, and another digital presence which can blend into a particular network is a vital step in developing contacts and nurturing relationships with informants. The digital landscape is different to the offline world, where a panoply of methods for communication can be used to ingratiate oneself into a community. Online, similar language, images and discourse must be used, as a specific network uses them, in order to gain access and elicit acceptance. This may be a more involved process than offline ethnography, but the methods of interaction are different and one's approach must be moderated accordingly. These nuanced understandings of discourse, ranging from the manner in which one presents a particular image, to emoji use, are comparable to Goffman's "overlays" (Goffman, 1971: 166). These "judicious minor modifications in timing and tone" offering "tacit meanings...contained in other meanings" are very difficult to communicate in online discourse (Goffman, 1971: 166-167). Consequently a new set of digital overlays are adopted, specific to each network. These range from emojis used to imply a specific tone or inflection be applied to a text based comment, through to a specific presentation of the self being seen as necessary or mutual respect being demanded in a digital network. The greatest advantage of this difference between online and offline research is that the researcher gains an insight into the processes of this transformation through the necessity of adapting their language use and presentation of self to fit in. This allows a more reflexive approach to be taken, allowing the ethnographer to question what it is like for others in the network to present themselves online in this way, and how such a presentation creates conflict with their offline selves.

#### Discussion: Framing the Debate

Ethnographic research in a world which is becoming increasingly digitised is in a constant state of evolution. As researchers seek to refine their methodological approaches to investigate new technologies, behaviours and ways of thinking, new methods are employed, discarded and refined. This process has left us with two primary methodological schools for engaging with digital anthropology. The first being championed by Miller (2011, 2016) who contextualises his fieldwork in the offline world, and the second following Boellstorff's (2015) approach of conducting whole ethnographic projects purely in cyberspace. I have highlighted a third way in this paper which takes the benefits of each of these approaches and methodologically restructures them to approach fieldsites set within a blended postdigital landscape.

Of the two current methodological approaches the first, is more widely used. This concentrates on the manner in which one's informants interact with digital technology, contextualised in the offline world (Rapport, 2003; Miller and Sinanan, 2014), often consisting of observing 'over-the-shoulder' of informants while they use a particular technology; social media in the case of Nisbett (2006). This form of research ranges from conducting observation in bars where men were using the gay dating app Grindr (Stempfhuber and Liegl, 2012, 2016) to observing how one's informants use Facebook in day to day life (Miller, 2011). This is not to say that these researchers do not use social media, or conduct research online as part of their fieldwork, to both complement and broaden their understanding. However, typically these aspects of the fieldwork are not reported in publication, and this highlights the difference to the method of immersive cohabitation which is being championed here. The creation of a digital self is part of the core methodology and a vital research tool central to conducting this new form of fieldwork.

The second approach to conducting digital ethnography is to conduct fieldwork wholly digitally in an online fieldsite (see Nardi, 2010; Boellstorff, 2015). In this case interactions between researcher and informants take place digitally, and are contextualized digitally. There are numerous examples of this such as Boellstorff's (2012) work with Second Life, Slater's (2000) work on the sharing of sexually explicit images online, and those who have conducted work with dating applications such as MacKee (2016). However much of this research, with the exception of longer projects by those such as Boellstorff (2015), have been conducted over shorter periods of time than traditional ethnographic fieldwork. As such they mostly appear to be exploratory exercises in the new field of digital research, rather than coherent long term research. This is eminently understandable as many of these projects are the first of their kind and offer many valuable insights into these uncharted digital landscapes. However, it is my assertion that in an increasingly digitised modernity, where the online and offline worlds are increasingly enmeshed, we must designate a new methodological approach such as Immersive Cohabitation to contextualise interactions between researcher and informant neither as online or offline, but as part of a blended postdigital modernity.

The corpus of work concerning digital anthropology is small but growing, with numerous methodological texts (Horst and Miller, 2012; Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016), monographs (Costa, 2016; Haynes, 2016; Wang, 2016; McDonald, 2016; Miller, 2016), and articles (Reed, 2005, 2008; Schiffauer, 2013) detailing experimental forms of digital anthropology. However, the majority of these consider the digital as simply another aspect of the terrestrial offline fieldsite, a technology to investigate, and as such are approached as an offshoot of a traditional methodology based around participant observation. It is this notion I wish to challenge, through framing the digital fieldsite as a viable and necessary space for ethnographic exploration in its own right, yet one which is inescapably linked to, and enmeshed with, the offline field. Hence my discussion of a larger single blended field.

Immersive cohabitation draws on the work of Holy (1988), Wacquant (2004) and Luvaas (2016), who extol taking a step beyond traditional participant observation to become, in

the words of Holy, an observing participant. This forefronts undertaking the same tasks and practices of ones informants as a form of knowledge making during fieldwork, over simply observing, living with and participating in day to day life. This difference is highlighted by Wacquant (2004) who didn't simply work with boxers, but became a boxer, and likewise with Luvaas (2016) who became a streetstyle photographer and blogger, rather than working with others who were already completing these practices. I did not simply observe the tailors and clients whom I worked with, but participated in their world through doing as they did; becoming a client, wearing their clothes and attending their fashion shows. I brought this form of methodology with me when I began to conduct digital research in tandem to the terrestrial fieldwork I was already conducting and as such developed my own unique set of digital methods for working as an observing participant in the digital. I could have simply observed how the tailors I worked with used their smartphones day to day on their shop floors and observed their online posts, but I realised there was more to see. As such I began to conduct parallel research, both online and offline, which far from being separate strands of fieldwork formed interconnected branches of a blended approach, and involved becoming a habitual Instagrammer.

#### A new method in a changing world

Digital ethnography is still in its infancy, with numerous approaches being accepted, and ideas still being explored. As I have briefly described above, there are currently two primary ways of approaching a research project which would qualify it as digital anthropology, with topics as varied as webcams (Miller and Sinanan, 2014), cell phones (Horst and Miller, 2006), technology in the working environment (Garsten and Wulff, 2003) and social media (Baker, 2013) being explored. When I began to conduct digital fieldwork alongside my offline fieldwork with tailors I began to realise that the online and offline fieldsites which I inhabited were not as disconnected as I had initially imagined. Instead the two fieldsites were so close that images, conversations and friendships bled between the two worlds. This convinced me that this new method of immersive cohabitation was required. A blended method, which considered these two fieldsite as part of the same field; a postdigital field. The name immersive cohabitation builds on the work of Schneidermann (2014) who suggests the need to be co-present with informants who use a digital platform such as Facebook to communicate, but my method goes further. The creation of a digital self as both research tool and digital entity which continues to exist even when the offline researcher is not interacting online solidifies this notion of cohabitation, with the digital self the researcher creates eventually living unsupported among ones digital informants in a digital landscape and habitually performing the same tasks. This in itself is an immersive form of research, but the term immersive in immersive cohabitation goes further than this, implying an immersion which spans the online and offline worlds where the work as an observing participant which the researcher conducts is so complete that one is immersed in a blended landscape of the digital and the offline, in the same manner that one's informants are.

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a postdigital landscape must begin with the researcher constructing a digital self, a version of their offline self which can be allowed to exist and evolve within the online landscape they are conducting research in. This

digital self is the medium through which the researcher can access the digital fieldsite and it is in this way that fieldwork can begin. Such fieldwork should involve daily interaction, over a substantial period of time, forging social relationships with informants, and establishing oneself in the field. Furthermore, the nature of digital communication is such that learning through replicating the tasks performed by one's informants, through working as an observing participant, will enable the researcher to gain greater insight into the processes of the platform. As well as charting the interactions between users, and conducting a reflexive analysis of how it is to use the digital landscape as ones informants do. Furthermore, given sufficient time the researcher can move on from merely replicating the content of their informants to a fully immersed state where they are creating and publishing original content which is accepted by the network.

I contend that this new approach takes the best features of previous digital ethnographic methodologies but allows researchers to go further in asking key anthropological questions - what is the impact of digital technology on social networks, who uses these digital technologies, and why do they use them? As well as allowing for the analysis of a wide ranging set of anthropological tropes from the nature of the body to the politics of the gaze and how digital selves are constructed. Furthermore this method will be crucial for understanding a modernity in which everything from the politics of the body to political elections are constructed, manipulated and subverted in the digital landscape.

#### Implications for research

There are profound philosophical implications for this work. The world is changing and in an increasingly digitised modernity, the postdigital fieldsite I describe will become increasingly common. Developing methodologies therefore which recognise the legitimacy of this kind of field, consisting of a blended online and offline space is vital, not only to ensure the continued validity of anthropology as a discipline, but also because ethnography in a postdigital landscape provides the researcher with insight and understanding that other methods cannot achieve. Furthermore as this gap between the online and offline worlds becomes so close that the two bleed into one another until they are enmeshed, immersive cohabitation allows for ethnographic research to maintain its currency. This requires further analysis both anthropologically and philosophically regarding old questions in anthropology concerning the nature of the field and the person of the researcher. However I suggest that the form of research which I have detailed above proposes a new way for contextualising online and offline fieldsites as a single blended entity which must be contextualised correspondingly. This is the key starting point to this new method, and allows for ethnographic research within closed networks or those employing a polymedia approach to be research eye-to-eye rather than over the shoulder. Participant observation is not active enough to deal with the faceless nature of these digital interactions, and as such a more involved methodology is necessary as I have detailed. Working as an observing participant, identifying oneself as researcher and completing the same digital tasks as one's informants must be the model for engaging in long-term postdigital ethnography. This is not to say that conducting research which investigates digital technology use contextualised in either the online or offline world alone is an obsolete practice. It is vital. Indeed some fieldsites will not yet be postdigital, but such research is only half of a multi-dimensional image, and in order to understand

the continued use of digital media we must look forward and consider the increasing propensity for a postdigital landscape to be the new horizon in ethnographic practice.

The nature of this postdigital field, and this article's suggested response to it, has been laid out above. However, how we conceptualise the person of the researcher within this new type of field is as important a discussion. This research is specifically concerned with men who produce regular self-portraits of themselves and their outfits to post on Instagram, primarily for the support and camaraderie engendered by existing digitally in a network of others doing the same. There is an echo of Bourdieu here: "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu, 1996: 6). Slater would tell us that "displaying knowledge of the other's taste" online constitutes an "intimate rather than competitive" relationship (Slater, 2000: 136). This is precisely what is happening amongst the men whom I worked with. The production of images, and the publishing of these images crafts an additional self, a digital self, which allows these users to form relationships with other like-minded digital users. Naturally for the research to be a success the researcher must craft an additional digital self too, in line with their informants. This idea builds on Kondo's (2009) suggestion that we can have multiple selves, and Goffman's (1980, 245) notion that selves are performed. This is crucial to understanding how digital selves are constructed by an offline self, ostensibly little different from traditional fieldwork where a different 'face' of the researcher may be presented in various aspects of the fieldsite, but here in the postdigital world it is more formalised and visible. There is often a close similarity or a clear element of representation in the digital self, however it is distinct from the offline self, and this is accepted by my informants. Indeed this disparity is often mentioned and is the source of humour, with an acknowledgement that the online digital self displays a curated and highly polished version of the offline self. The nature of Instagram, as an image based platform with a set of easily accessible editing tools and the predominant use of handheld smartphone cameras to take the images which are eventually posted, means that notions of image manipulation are accepted. Despite this, idealised forms of dress and the manner in which this frames and fashions the body are hierarchically rendered, with this set of ideals shifting and morphing over time as the tastes of the network gradually shift. This finding is the basis for understanding how digital selves function, but additionally provides a foundation for an analysis of the body in a digital landscape and the politics of the gaze. As well as asserting the need for a blended approach which can chart online and offline selves in tandem to gain a more in-depth understanding of such phenomenon.

It is only through long-term ethnography, as one might conduct in a traditional offline fieldsite that digital relationships online can be formed and reported through thick description (Geertz, 1974). However, it is only through a blended approach that crucial notions such as the intersection between the online and offline selves of frequent digital users can be explored. As well as questions regarding the nature of the body, the politics of the gaze and how digital selves are constructed.

#### Conclusion

Prior digital anthropological study has employed various working practices centred around two methodological schools. This first (following Miller, 2011, 2016) where digital research is conducted in the context of offline and the second (following

Boellstorff, 2015) where research is conducted wholly online and contextualised as such. This article has presented a third way, drawing on the best features of these two established methodologies but reacting to the ever more embedded and enmeshed nature of the online and offline landscapes, and the findings from 24 months fieldwork with Instagram.

The existence of a concurrent digital landscape to the offline in the western world has been irrefutable for some time, and progressively the rest of the world is following suit. However, increasingly these two adjoining landscapes have touched, overlapped, bled into one another and are now well and truly enmeshed. This provides ethnographers with a new landscape within which to conduct fieldwork, a postdigital landscape, and the potential to ask a host of relevant questions regarding the nature of the self, the representation of the body, the person of the researcher, and modes of communication. This is the digitised modernity I spoke about at the beginning of this article, a brave new world for anthropological endeavour. Furthermore the highly visual nature of this landscape and the ease with which digital photos and images can be created, manipulated and shared offers untold opportunities for research in the field of visual anthropology. The methodology which I have presented here provides the basis for long term ethnographic fieldwork, not only encompassing other networks within Instagram, but also other digital social media platforms including, Facebook and Twitter. As well as a whole variety of other mediums for accessing the digital landscape such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Pinterest, Tinder, Grindr and many others. These platforms are equally embedded into day to day life and must therefore, I suggest be contextualised postdigitally.

In this paper I have made the case for a new methodological approach to conducting digital research through becoming an observing participant and blending online and offline fieldwork; a method I have termed immersive cohabitation. This is a reaction to what I have termed a postdigital field, and is informed by two years of fieldwork with Instagram. Whilst I have highlighted the numerous alternative methodological approaches employed by those already conducting digital ethnography, I have found the methodology which I have developed allows for a greater understanding in an increasingly digitised field through a combination of embodied practice, long-term engagement as an observing participant and a reflexive analysis by the researcher. There will be those who suggest that meeting informants digitally is not comparable to the face-to-face interaction so prized by ethnographers, however I refute this and suggest that in a world where the boundaries between the digital and non-digital landscapes are beginning to blur, a screen-to-screen meeting is not only a valid approach, but also a crucial methodological tool. Furthermore, in a world where many people meet their significant other, one night stand or sartorial inspiration online, the digital is an embedded phenomenon which is not going away. Therefore I must advocate for this new method, with long term immersion in the digital landscape working as an observing participant to compliment offline ethnographic fieldwork. A crucial methodological step in a world with an ever growing enmeshed digital realm.



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