Abstract
This special issue gathers empirical papers that develop and employ digital ethnographic methods to answer core sociological questions related to community, culture, urban life, violence, activism, professional identity, health, and sociality. Each paper, in its own right, offers key sociological insights, and as a collection, this special issue demonstrates the need to bring ethnographic methods to digital communities, interactions, practices, and tools. Both as a topic and a methodological approach, “the digital” points us to the need to update, rethink, and grow qualitative sociology. The exemplary papers comprising this special issue exhibit this curiosity and expansiveness, with lessons and implications for an interdisciplinary set of fields and research problems.

Keywords Digital ethnography · Methodology · Methodological rigor

What does it mean to bring digital tools and practices to established methods of ethnography? How can digital technologies help us rethink core claims about ethnography and other established modes of doing qualitative sociology? How can sociol-
ogy’s debates and norms speak to related fields of communication, media studies, information science, and internet studies? Do we have the kinds of ethnography we need to answer the most interesting and most important research questions about social and digital life? These are the kinds of questions at the heart of this special issue.

The empirical papers in this collection develop and employ digital ethnographic methods to answer sociological questions about community, culture, urban life, violence, activism, professional identity, health, and sociality. They show how digital ethnography can be used to test and animate classic sociological concepts and theories in the digital age and to rework our theoretical and methodological landscape for the complexities of today’s communication environments. Both as a topic and a methodological approach, “the digital” provides incredible leverage to update and grow qualitative sociology. Digital technologies, practices, and communities point us toward new, exciting, and overlooked phenomena. The exemplary papers comprising this special issue exhibit this curiosity and expansiveness, with lessons and implications for an interdisciplinary set of fields and research problems.

As editors of this special issue, we came to this collection with aligned but distinct relationships to ethnography, digital culture, and sociology. With a PhD in sociology and interest in urban ethnography, Jeff came to digital ethnography through adapting neighborhood fieldwork to the digital networks that were shaping the social life he studied in Harlem (Lane 2019). With a PhD in library science and firm ties to internet studies, Jessa’s expertise in digital ethnography comes from an investment in unearthing the technological distributions of power (Lingel 2017a, b). We both share a commitment to seeing the digital as a core component of how the communities we study make sense of themselves and the world around them. While Jeff’s ethnographic praxis typically starts in the streets and ventures towards the digital to study neighborhood and digital life together, Jessa’s work often traverses the reverse course, beginning with online communities and asking how those practices reshape in-person networks and relationships. The papers in this collection demonstrate this spectrum of where to locate the digital within ethnographic work.

One way of characterizing the range of approaches to digital ethnography in this special issue (and more broadly) is to situate some papers as proactively focused on the digital, while others are more reactive. Within this collection, Ross Arguedas’ work on orthorexia is focused on a phenomenon that arguably requires online interaction to take shape. Similarly, Ferrari’s paper on the role of social media within mutual aid work of activist groups begins with the online communications of activists while pulling in the ways that local geography and politics still retain a crucial impact on digital practices. In contrast, Baldor’s work on queer men’s dating lives began in bars and clubs, but could only succeed as a full accounting of queer urban nightlife by recognizing the role of online dating platforms within the community. Evans’ work on the creative work of urban youth began in a production studio and expanded to include young people’s online networks. Whether researchers opt to focus on the digital from the outset or to incorporate online practices as part of what makes a particular community or practice function, we would argue that the idea that the digital could be a completely unexpected encounter in fieldwork will be increasingly uncommon. Moreover, a refusal to engage with the digital will increasingly risk key
conceptual oversights and potentially a disservice to one’s project and participants. To be sure, we do not mean to imply that every ethnography must be primarily virtual in focus – this special issue is meant as an invitation, not a mandate. More specifically, we see these papers as offering guidance on what digital ethnography looks like and how it produces new insights into questions that have long been central to sociology.

The methods at the core of this special issue have also been called cyber ethnography (Ward 1999), netnography (Kozinets 2002), and virtual ethnography (Hine 2008). We see digital ethnography as the most expansive term and position this collection as a complement to the growing literature on how to conduct ethnographic and qualitative work that attends to digital technologies (cf. Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2020; Lane 2020; Lingel 2017a, b). Rather than gathering a set of papers focused solely on methodology, we wanted an empirical collection, where authors could show how they used digital ethnography to gather evidence, make claims, and advance theory. These contributions all demonstrate sociological value in their capacity to offer insight into phenomena like understanding changing norms of health and diagnosis (Ross Arguedas), disparities around class and privilege (Rosa), and the social dimensions of rituals around food and eating together (Bascuñan-Wiley et al.). But in addition to developing key sociological insights, these papers create opportunities for future ethnographers to learn and plan future projects, with the benefit of reading papers that lay out the turning points, the struggles, and the advantages of digital ethnography. We hope that readers will take away a sense of how to make a plan for assessing the role of technology in the communities, sites, and practices that they are following. As a way of considering the collective contributions to these empirical pieces, we invited Dr. Mario Small, whose expertise in ethnography has guided and inspired countless researchers in sociology as well as many other fields, to respond in an afterword. His contribution underscores both the importance of digital technology as a focus for sociology, and the different but equally valid approaches that one can take to bringing online life and practices within the sphere of sociological study.

Across the ethnographic approaches gathered in this special issue, the digital is centrally relevant (Markham 2016, 2020), but not monolithic. Thus, there is no one single way to do digital ethnography: as the projects in this collection demonstrate, there are different ethnographic designs, with varying physical and digital proximities, varying modes of entry into the field, and varying goals and timelines of the project. In some cases these variances also stem from contingencies of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Projects and the Pandemic

The pandemic has taught us many things, one of which is that virtual communication is essential to our basic, social functioning. Indeed, one finding that cuts across these papers is the entanglement of the digital in our everyday lives. As a result, the conservative view of ethnographers with stalwart resistance to the digital is no longer possible or welcome to an increasing number of researchers, both inside and outside
sociology. In this sense, the pandemic has helped to legitimize the necessity and possibilities of paying attention to the digital within ethnographic work.

Digital ethnography is highly adaptive to the social demands of the moment and the “versatility of sociality” (Bascuñan-Wiley et al.). Several studies in this special issue are shaped by pandemic restrictions on fieldwork in person and serve as empirical studies of digital transformations brought on or made more salient by the pandemic (e.g., Bascuñan-Wiley et al.; Evans; Ferrari). This special issue also features projects completed entirely or in part before the pandemic that reveal fundamental changes to social order and everyday interaction in the digital age. For instance, Lane and Stuart show in their fieldwork how various neighborhood actors use the “communication visibility” that social media affords to divert and de-escalate urban violence, forcing sociologists to think differently, more broadly, and further “upstream” about the third-party actors, relationships, and processes surrounding neighborhood gun and gang violence. Baldor’s Philadelphia Gayborhood study, meanwhile, captures a new relationship type and interactional problem in digitally mediated neighborhoods where meetings between strangers in persons are routinely yet no less awkwardly reshaped by prior acquaintanceship on social media.

Returning to our earlier categorization of proactive and reactive ethnographies, we should add that the pandemic created its own influences on whether, when, and how to incorporate digital methods. For many ethnographers, crises like the pandemic felt primarily disruptive of in-person fieldwork. For others, digital technologies became a valuable lifeline that allowed for continued dialogue with and observations of interlocutors. Recognizing that bringing the digital to ethnographic work is sometimes a pull from the communities we study and sometimes a push from exigent circumstances, we hope this collection can provide guidance to both the proactive and reactive forms of bringing online tools and communities within the sphere of ethnography.

Craft and Rigor of Digital Ethnography

It’s a mistake to think of digital ethnography as simply a matter of adding the digital to conventional ethnography. At its best, digital ethnography is an orientation to a set of relationships between people and technologies. We would also discourage thinking of digital ethnography solely as a matter of convenience, allowing us to observe or interview people in locations or under circumstances that aren’t amenable to in-person meetings. Indeed, we embrace digital ethnographies that retain the inconveniences of ethnography: of meeting people where they’re at, doing the things that participants are doing on their time and not on our own, and recognizing the complexity of overlapping platforms, devices, and communities. Digital ethnography should also retain the awkwardness inherent to ethnography. After all, it is fundamentally awkward to insert yourself into a situation for the purposes of research, even if you are a part of the community you are studying (Colic-Peisker 2004). The inconveniences and awkwardness of ethnography are key to fieldwork, to understanding a community, and one’s place in that community as a researcher. Rather than imagining that digital technologies are valuable for ethnography primarily because they can
ease communication flows or smooth out awkward encounters, we would insist that the difficulties, inconveniences, and awkward encounters of fieldwork should carry over to digital ethnography.

In looking across the pieces that comprise this special issue, we see some patterns in how these ethnographies were conducted to inform future ethnographers as they formulate their plans and embrace the inevitable challenges of fieldwork. Most of the ethnographers in this special issue created or adapted their own social media accounts to link to the people and processes they wanted to study. Creating an account is an important mode of understanding the people we study, helping us to get a sense of the social hierarchies and values within a community, and build rapport with participants. Building profiles also open us up to the specificities of a platform’s politics and norms. For example, although they study vastly different communities, both Ferrari and Ross Arguedas argue that Instagram’s specific design norms and policies shape how particular communities form and interact. As a whole, creating online profiles can provide points of access to and ways of constructing, moving about, and making decisions about the field site (Burrell 2009).

Digital ethnographies engage deeply and thoughtfully with technology, requiring new forms of adaptability and expertise for ethnographers. For the pieces in this collection, online sightlines and ties were also combined with remote or in-person interviews and, in four of the seven papers, observations and fieldwork in person. All of the papers treat the digital as slices of social life entangled online and offline (Hine 2015) rather than the whole or totality of a community. For studies on and of social media, digital ethnographers inevitably encounter algorithms that structure the visibility of digital field sites by making certain user accounts and contents more noticeable and available than others (Christin 2020a, b; Seaver 2017). Ross Arguedas and Ferrari each leverage algorithmic recommendations (Christin 2020b; Leaver et al. 2020) to find and recruit participants. Other ethnographers in this issue, such as Baldor, Evans, and Lane and Stuart, rely primarily on neighborhood-based relationships to determine which participants to study online. Lane and Stuart discuss what it means to digitize urban ethnography in ways that allow the ethnographer to compare, contrast, and track outcomes between online interaction and neighborhood events, and vice versa. In all cases, ethnographers on social media must wrestle and engage with the logics and politics of these platforms (van Dijck 2013), even if they remain “black boxes” (Christin 2020b), and how best to incorporate various platforms and platforms features (e.g., Instagram stories) into recruitment, study designs, and the everyday flow of fieldwork. Through his study of the career-building, social media practices of young, aspiring Hip Hop artists and mentors at Dreamer Studio, Evans learned to conduct fieldwork and ask meaningful questions within and across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Clubhouse, in addition to the physical space of the recording studio. Meanwhile, Rosa shifts the focus of digital ethnography onto the code, internet nodes, and decision-making points and actors that undergird the internet, social media, and various communication technologies in ways that shape and sustain global inequality.

While we are drawn to digital ethnography for the opportunities that it affords, it also presents important challenges, not least around ethics (Markham and Tiidenberg 2018). Screenshots and other materials that digital ethnographers typically collect
include traceable, searchable data that identifies participants and third parties, which raises questions about if, when, and how to intervene in the collection and presentation of that data. Initiating the ethnography and choosing to write about people may open social scenes and networks that cannot be closed off again without taking extreme measures of de-Googlization (Shklovski and Vertesi 2013). While non-digital ethnography is certainly not free from harms of representation (see Moreton-Robinson 2021), digital methods carry added challenges around managing visibility that may require digital ethnographers to adapt specialized strategies, such as the feminist ethics of care that Ross Arguedas uses in her paper (see also Clark-Parsons and Lingel 2020).

For those with lingering concerns about the need for or value of digital ethnography, we hope that reading these papers will demonstrate the depth of observation and insight that this method yields. Even for more reactive projects, where attention to the digital may have seemed primarily like a form of convenience or necessity, we see that digital work produces vibrant, complex accounts of people and practices. While digital outreach can initially feel like primarily a matter of saving time or research funds, these projects reveal just how much heavy lifting had to go into ultimately getting to know the field, getting to know the people, recruiting the people, building trust, and collecting meaningful personal narratives and perspectives.

**Creativity and Inclusivity**

Digital ethnography is here to stay. It is our goal with this special issue to encourage and help foster the kinds of creativity and interdisciplinarity we need in ethnography to be able to not only update qualitative sociology, but to make sense of social life that is increasingly coextensive with digital technologies. Digital ethnography, as these empirical papers demonstrate, is an exciting and malleable craft that can be done rigorously and that gives great leverage to help construct and understand a field site. This style of research also pushes sociologists to be more inclusive about the strategies employed to collect ethnographic data and the concepts and theories used to frame and analyze this data. It is not a new empirical approach, although only recently, with “big data,” algorithms, and predictive analytics, have many sociologists, particularly in the U.S., become more widely interested in digital research (Markham 2020; on digital methods in sociology, cf. Hampton 2017; Lupton 2014; Selwyn 2019). Digital ethnography has an established history across disciplines, including communication, media studies, information science, internet studies, cultural anthropology, and marketing (see Murthy 2008, on bridging digital ethnography with sociology). Digital ethnography also has a rich and vibrant history outside the Global North (e.g., Chan 2014; Takhteyev 2012; Treré 2015), which provides important sociological insights in their own right while also representing the need to decenter mainstream narratives of technological origins and values (see also Rosa, this issue). Digital ethnography is an opportunity for qualitative sociologists to bridge literatures, import concepts, theories, and methodological strategies, and practice greater interdisciplinarity and inclusion. This integrative spirit has shaped the selection of the authors and projects convened for this special issue, and is reflected in the article framings and references.
This volume, we hope, helps to legitimize further and inspire even more creative, cross-disciplinary, and rigorous forms of digital ethnography.

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