



Giving Voice to Underrepresented Communities Online Through Investigative Digital Ethnography

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Abstract

This investigative digital ethnography assignment described in this essay is designed for an upper-level undergraduate course in Investigative Journalism, and is intended to sharpen student skills using two distinct contemporary research methods: open-source intelligence (OSINT) gathering; and digital ethnography. While open-source data collection often includes information gathered from public records, libraries, and news media, this assignment focuses on the use of online and social media. Moreover, by analyzing online and social media data through ethnographic methods, students learn how to understand the meaning of the OSINT collected data to the affected, underrepresented, or marginalized communities that are the subject (and the center) of their investigation.

Investigative reporting and digital ethnography

Any investigative reporting curriculum needs to be grounded in the history and methods of investigative reporting in the United States from the Progressive Era muckrakers through the more contemporary political watchdogs. Once that is accomplished though, students are primed to expand their basic reporting techniques into two more distinct contemporary research methods, including open-source intelligence (OSINT) gathering, and digital ethnography. Advanced instruction and practical exercises focusing on ethnographic methods of journalism, and OSINT data collection should allow students to apply core

ethnographic principles of immersion, observation, detail and interpretation with OSINT techniques for collecting and analyzing publicly available information to produce digitally based investigative ethnographic reports.

Perhaps, what makes digital ethnographies most distinct from more traditional forms of news reporting is that digital ethnographies are less about the style of reporting and more about the research process that produces the reporting (see Friedberg, 2020). Once students determine a topic to investigate, the following process to complete the report involves: (1) identifying actors relevant to their topic, including specific

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individuals, cultures, sub-cultures, communities, etc.; (2) monitoring information and communication flow among the relevant actors; and (3) ultimately, assessing the impact of the actors and information. For the assignment described in this essay, students are provided the following guidelines to help direct them in this process:

Topic/actors/research questions: What are your research questions? What is it that you want to discover through your investigation? Are you investigating an imposter account, a sub-culture, a marginalized or underrepresented group, a conspiracy theory targeting a specific group, etc.? What specific social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, X, Instagram, Nextdoor, etc.) are relevant to your investigation?

Monitoring accounts and content: Create a new account for each social media platform that you are monitoring. Do not use any of your personal accounts. This allows the platform's algorithm to help direct you to relevant accounts and content (which can be done through searches for hashtags, accounts, memes, etc.). Be sure to document your findings and create databases of relevant content (e.g., URLs, screenshots, lists of topics, hashtags, accounts, etc.). Also, create timelines of events, activities, and other phenomena that you observe.

Observation and assessment: Through the process of observation, you should become familiar with slang, acronyms, code words, symbols, phrases, etc. that are relevant to the actors and communities that you are studying so that you can better assess meaning and impact.

Rationale and learning outcomes

The combination of ethnographic and OSINT methods in investigative reporting projects empowers journalists to understand meaning from systematically collected data. Rooted in ethnographic research principles, investigative journalists recognize the limitations of objectivity in traditional beat reporting. Instead of neutrality and balance, ethnographic reporting focuses more on accuracy and fairness. Moreover, investigative ethnography allows journalists to describe in a respectful way communities that are typically underrepresented or marginalized by traditional journalistic routines and media narratives. Whereas conventional reporting tends to focus on ex-

traordinary events, government actors, political and business leaders, celebrities and other elites; ethnographic journalism emphasizes diversity, pluralism, subcultures, marginalized communities, everyday people and unheard experiences. These latter kinds of groups tend to have less political power, although they are affected by political issues in more significant ways than politicians, business leaders, and other celebrities. Papacharissi (2016, p. 19) described these sorts as “affective publics,” and explained how social media platforms afford them with more ability to challenge “dominant political narratives by presenting underrepresented points of view.” While traditional journalism strives to maintain an analytic distance from the subjects they report on while applying outside knowledge and expertise, ethnographic reporting does the opposite and endeavors to give voice to people who are comparatively marginalized or underrepresented. The goal of ethnographic journalism is to set professional expertise aside and understand the perspectives of those being reported on. The investigative digital ethnographer is a conduit to explain the meaning of content and phenomena observed online (see Cramer & McDevitt, 2004).

When this assignment was implemented in spring semester of 2024, there were several exemplar investigative digital ethnographies in the class that centered their reporting on sub-cultures or marginalized groups and gave voice to these communities instead of state actors, celebrities, or other powerful private interests. For instance, one report focused on minority groups online that had been targeted by extremist political groups that propounded white replacement theory through the misuse of anthropological research. Another investigation studied “Swiftie” groups on social media, and how they were being vilified by far-right political groups and pundits for their admiration of musical artist Taylor Swift. Through detailed observation the student reporter found that the targeted group of “Swifties” became encouraged through their experiences to be more politically aware and active, especially on women's issues. Yet another report examined a community that found itself in a food desert after a popular supermarket grocery store moved to another neighborhood near a city university.

Challenges and Ethics: Digital vs. Traditional Ethnography, and Online Personas

While students are familiar with traditional journalistic research methods, such as observation, interviews,

and data collection, they are less likely to be at ease with ethnographic approaches, which are less typical and that stand contrast to some of the ethics of hard news reporting. For instance, traditional ethnography entails participation in the activity and empathizing with the people being studied. Furthermore, ethnographic journalism introduces its own set of ethical considerations, such as verification over objectivity, avoiding bias, and the “Hawthorne effect” (see Perera, 2024), deciding on covert or overt observation, as well as respecting confidentiality.

To address these concerns, students created on-line personas (OPs) when observing online communities and were strictly limited to passive observation only. Even though students were prohibited from engaging with other accounts using their OPs, they were required to create social media profiles (OPs that were wholly separate from their own personal social media accounts) that would interact with the platform’s algorithm and generate useful information and content. The minimum amount of information that students used in their OP creation included, a first and last name, date of birth, as well as a geographical location that were all different from their own. Additionally, students selected specific regular time frames when they would go online and observe content.

These parameters addressed several of the considerations noted previously. Through passive observation (not interacting with communities being observed) and the specified time frames of observation helped to focus students on verifying the regularity of observed phenomenon and minimizing opportunities for perceived bias through any positive or negative interactions. Moreover, this kind of covert observation also minimized the “Hawthorne effect” in which people may modify their behavior and actions if they know they are being observed.

Digital ethnography is a purposeful method for observing cultures and communities that exist exclusively in cyberspace. Another advantage of using ethnographic methods online, rather than the traditional in-the-field approach, is that it introduces students to the fundamental concepts of ethnography without the additional training, time commitment, and other risks associated with the approach.

That said, digital ethnography introduces others concerns when training students how to use the method. Perhaps, most obviously, cyberspace (like real space) can be a dangerous place, especially if you are studying unsavory groups and activities. There is

always the risk of coming across content that is personally triggering. In such cases it is important that students work closely with the instructor on their selection of topics to identify potential risks and possible affects. This is also why it is essential that students are fore versed in the history of muckraking and the nature of investigative reporting before starting ethnographic research in online spaces. This is an advanced journalistic research method and is only appropriate for upper-level students.

Conclusion

Investigative journalism has been celebrated in films such as *All the President’s Men* (1976), *The Insider* (1999) and *Spotlight* (2015) as using old-school reporting methods to expose corruption in government, business and religious institutions. This kind of idealization about what good investigative journalism can do, and the powerful elites that it focuses on has likely inspired student journalists in the classroom for decades. With the growth of online sources and social media though, investigative reporting methods have expanded as well. Perhaps, it’s time for the focus of investigative reporting to expand further to include non-elites and the “affective public” described by Papacharissi (2016). As this essay has sought to demonstrate, open-source data collection from online and social media when combined with digital ethnographic analysis can allow students and professional journalists to center their investigative reporting on underrepresented or marginalized communities that are affected by the activities of leaders in government, business, or other private organizations.

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