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Exploring digital ethnography: From principles to practice. Routledge.

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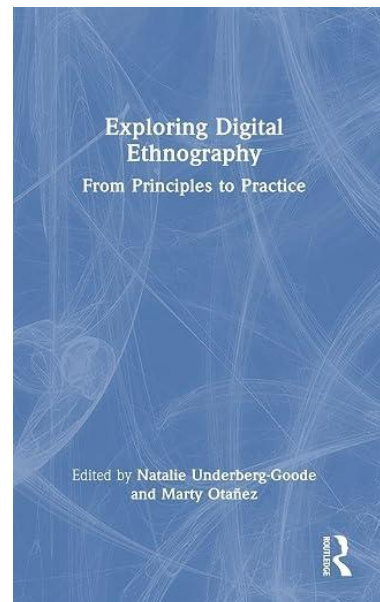
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Reviewed by Ainur Abdina
Astana IT University
Kazakhstan

Vichet Chhuon
University of Minnesota
United States

In the past 15 years, digital ethnography has transformed from a marginal specialization into a central direction within the field of qualitative social science research. However, as **Natalie Underberg-Good** and **Marti Otañez** note in the introduction to their edited volume, *Exploring Digital Ethnography*, the term digital ethnography tends to conflate two different methodological traditions which should be explicitly distinguished. The first studies how people create and live culture in digital environments—social media, video games, virtual worlds, and platforms, as represented by earlier works (e.g., Tom Boellstorff's [2012] *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*). This is “ethnography of the digital”—an adaptation of classical field methods for studying online communities. The second tradition uses digital tools to collect, analyze, and, most importantly, materialize ethnographic knowledge about real, “offline” cultures, and until recently, was on the periphery of academic attention. This is “digital ethnography as a method”—the use of digital media to represent cultural phenomena and it is this tradition to which the Underberg-Goode and Otañez collection is devoted.

The volume consists of an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. Methodological unity is achieved through four cross-cutting questions posed in each chapter: what is important to know about a given tool or method; how the approach balances art and practical ethnography; how reflexivity is built in; and what ethical issues arise. In Chapter 1, Erin Kathleen Bahl's “Multimedia



Ethnography with Comics” examines ethnographic comics through a multisensory approach that simultaneously represents the Other and distances oneself from them, discussing accessibility and the ethics of artificial intelligence. In Chapter 2, Jeslyn Parrish’s “Embodying Lived Experience in Interactive Storytelling” translates autoethnographic research into an interactive digital experience using Twine, validated through pre- and post-surveys. Next, Natalie Underberg-Good’s “Design Ethnography and Digital Heritage” describes creating an immersive website with a South American weaving community, drawing on Norman’s concept of affordances to account for local contexts and technological asymmetries. The team-led photo essay from Chapter 4, “Bidi Rollers in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, India: A Photo Essay” presents images of women rolling bidi cigarettes, with captions revealing working conditions and ethical decisions such as concealing faces. Chapter Five contains Marti Otañez’s interview with James Walsh, “Organic Theater Anthropology,” introduces the Romero Theater Troupe’s practice of having non-actors perform their own stories of labor injustice, including risks of institutional retaliation. The final two chapters are particularly good and relevant for teaching in the current political moment. Michael Kilman’s “World-Building as Pedagogy” (Chapter 6) and Dario Valles “Anonymity and Agency” (Chapter 7) deftly responds to hot button issues of political polarization and GLBTQ migration politics in North America. The book’s concluding chapter by Marti Otañez, who addresses the future of digital ethnography, particularly virtual reality, argues that ethnographers must participate in shaping how VR changes perception rather than merely adapting to existing technologies.

A primary strength of the reviewed collection is the ethical sensitivity that permeates all chapters. It is helpful to see how authors detail specific decisions in their projects: in Chapter 4, why they concealed participants’ faces and refused exoticization; in Chapter 1, Bahl discusses accessibility and AI ethics; and in Chapter 7, Valles describes protocols for physical safety. It was refreshing to see examples where authors acknowledge mistakes or unintended consequences, such as Underberg-Good’s project in Cusco that nearly exacerbated inter-community tensions, or Walsh’s account of administrators using a performance to intimidate employees.

What also makes this collection valuable is its focus on the Global South and vulnerable communities. Unlike many works on digital ethnography that concentrate on Western online communities or treat the Global South through the lens of the “digital divide,” this collection pays serious attention to communities from India, Peru, Mexico, and Central America. The authors reflect on technological asymmetries between the Global North and Global South, describing how differences in technological access required project redesigns and how photography can make invisible labor economies visible. Moreover, it was good to see the diverse traditions drawn on in the book. Design ethnography is represented through Norman’s concept of “affordances.” Visual anthropology and multimodality draw on the work of Sarah Pink and colleagues (2015), treating visual and auditory modalities as equal to text. Critical pedagogy forms the basis for Chapters 5 and 6, drawing on Boal and Freire.

That said, the book is not without its limitations. For one, there is no engagement with actor-network theory, which could offer tools for analyzing how digital objects become actors in the research process. Further, despite the editors' unified methodological framework, the quality of the chapters vary. The chapters by Bahl, Parrish, Underberg-Good, and Kilman are detailed, theoretically elaborated, and methodologically rich, whereas Chapter 4 (the photo essay) and Chapter 5 (the interview) felt less developed. For instance, the photo essay would have benefited from a discussion of how photographs were selected, edited, or how their impact was measured, and the interview is more journalistic than academic, lacking critical distance from Walsh's statements. Finally, there was a conspicuous absence of dialogue with quantitative or computational methods and critical data studies, which could have helped round out the collection. No chapter discussed how digital ethnography might engage with big data, network analysis, computational methods, or machine learning, apart from a brief mention of AI in Bahl's chapter. This narrows the understanding of "the digital" to multimedia representation, leaving aside the analytical possibilities of digital technologies.

Even with these limitations, the book makes several contributions to the field. The first is the systematization of approaches to multimodal representation of ethnographic knowledge. Although individual examples existed before, this collection is the first to present them within a unified methodological framework, making it a valuable educational resource. Another contribution is ethically sound protocols for working with vulnerable communities in the digital age. The chapters by Valles, Otañez, and Bahl offer concrete solutions to problems usually discussed only in general terms: ensuring participant safety when publishing photographs, making digital projects accessible, and working with trauma and the risk of re-traumatization. The third contribution is the expansion of what can be considered an academic output in ethnography. The book demonstrates that alongside the traditional monograph or article, the result of research can be an interactive website, a comic, a photo essay, a theatrical performance, or a pedagogical design. This has significance for public anthropology and communicating academic knowledge to non-academic audiences.

The book can be used as a primary or supplementary text in master's and doctoral level courses such as Digital Methods in the Social Sciences, Visual Anthropology, Advanced Qualitative Research Methods, Public Anthropology, and Higher Education Pedagogy. Individual chapters, such as Parrish's Chapter 2 or Kilman's Chapter 6, could be used in upper-level courses as examples of project-based assignments. For researchers and practitioners, the book will be useful as a source of inspiration and a methodological guide, especially for those working with vulnerable communities, planning participatory projects, or seeking ways to make their findings accessible to non-academic audiences.

In general, *Exploring Digital Ethnography* occupies a unique place in contemporary literature on digital methods. The editors have pulled together an impressive collection of studies that complement and extend other texts in this field including Sarah Pink and colleagues' *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (2015), Heather Horst and Daniel Miller's *Digital Anthropology* (2012), and Hannah

Knox and Dawn Nafus's *Ethnography for a Data-Saturated World* (2018). This book's primary contribution is perhaps the demonstration that the ethnographer today must be not only an observer and interpreter but also a designer, media artist, and facilitator. *Exploring Digital Ethnography* offers ethically sound, practically applicable, and replicable methods for researchers who want to move beyond the traditional academic format.

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About the Reviewers

Ainur Abdina is an associate professor at Astana IT University, Kazakhstan, where she teaches several courses related to the history and philosophy of science and education. Her PhD was awarded by Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University in 1997. Her research primarily focuses on various aspects of inclusive education, one of the significant areas of modern educational systems. In 2025-2026, Dr. Abdina was a visiting scholar at the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities.



Vichet Chhuon is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Chhuon's research has broadly focused on the experiences of immigrant youth and students of color to understand how school institutions might better help them realize their promise. Other writings have examined how notions of belonging and being known matter for young people's identities and relationships with teachers and other significant adults in school. He is the Book

Review Editor of the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*.

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