ОБЗОРЫ И РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Recent Books on Digital Research Methodology for Social Scientists: An Overview

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Abstract. The article presents a brief consideration of recent methodological publications on digital methods in social sciences and humanities, written by the leading specialists in the field of contemporary digital media research. The methods discussed are often subdivided into two main groups, the first one referring to uniquely digital methodologies applied by social scientists for understanding digital technologies and their roles in such disciplines as science and technology studies, techno-anthropology, anthropology and sociology of media, etc.; the second one, pertaining to traditional methods of social and cultural research, is applied to new cyber-media and thus adapting and transforming these methods to what is perceived (compared to classical fieldwork sites and locations) as a radically new environment. The review is focused on the current needs of digital anthropological research, although it is not limited to socio-cultural anthropology and ethnology. As each of the publications and/or methods discussed is adjusted to a certain range of objects or subjects of study that could be thematically classified, their inclusion in this review pays attention to such thematic fields as cyberidentity, users' interests and behavior, digital mediation, ethics of online research, and societal and technological innovation and change.

Keywords: digital media, cyberidentity, digital technologies, culture of everyday, online research methods, digital anthropology, Internet studies

Новые книги по методологии цифровых исследований в социальных науках. Обзор

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Аннотация. Представлен краткий обзор последних публикаций по цифровым методам в социальных и гуманитарных науках, написанных ведущими специали-

стами в области современных исследований цифровых медиа. Обсуждаемые методы часто подразделяются на две основные группы. Первая относится к уникальным цифровым методологиям, применяемым исследователями для понимания специфики цифровых технологий и их роли в таких дисциплинах, как исследования науки и техники, техноантропология, антропология и социология медиа и т.д.; вторая группа объединяет вполне традиционные методы изучения общества и культуры, которые могут использоваться в отношении новых кибермедиа в результате их адаптации и трансформации к тому, что воспринимается (по сравнению с классическим полем и местами полевых исследований) как радикально новая среда. Обзор ориентирован на текущие потребности цифровых антропологических исследований, хотя и не ограничивается социокультурной антропологией и этнологией. Поскольку каждая из обсуждаемых публикаций и/или методов адаптирован/а к определенному кругу объектов или предметов исследования, образующих несколько тематических областей, их включение в данный обзор учитывает такие темы, как киберидентичность, интересы и поведение пользователей, цифровое опосредование, этика онлайн-исследований, а также социальные и технологические инновации и изменения.

Ключевые слова: цифровые медиа, кибер-идентичность, цифровые технологии, культура повседневности, методы онлайн-исследований, цифровая антропология, интернет-исследования

The exponential growth of Cyber-Universe has become an established and thus trivial fact, but its consequences for everyday life, culture and social relations remain under-researched, whereas the traditional methods of social sciences and humanities, dealing with the transformations of social life and daily routines, are sometimes inadequately adapted for the new realities. During the last quarter of a century social scientists in order to grasp the specifics of new media have drastically reformed their methodological toolkits and have redrawn the boundaries of their respective disciplines and domain specializations, all with the aim to accommodate the novel behavior patterns, rules and procedures that the new information technologies have demanded from various societies and cultures across the globe. The relevant bibliography, even if we take into consideration only books on digital methods in social sciences, thus neglecting the related publications on methods designed specifically for humanities, is vast and rapidly growing with every passing year. So, for a novice it is indispensable to get some navigation assistance in proliferating digital methodologies.

The author of this review aims to meet such a need, but due to the limitations of the article size restricts his analysis in terms of *focus* (the books on methods for anthropologists, rather than for sociologists, or political scientists, have been selected), of *scope* (only ten books have been picked among many others; the criteria of choice are explained below) and *availability* (all books under review have digital editions and are readily available either for online reading or purchase).

What a neophyte of digital research needs is a compendium that covers every method and each stage of every procedure along with the bibliographies for each of the methods or subjects. Fortunately, such a compendium exists, although it is an almost 700-pages volume with 36 chapters, written by 70 scholars and covering all the necessary steps in sufficient detail, from research planning and design to results analysis, from sample methods to research ethics, and from assessing data quality to using AI for data mining. Its first edition with 27 chapters appeared in 2008. It has been thoroughly revised and supplemented by nine new chapters when its second edition has been published in the famous SAGE reference series as "*The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*" ten years later (Fielding, Lee, Blank, 2018). This handbook has been a great success (it has more than a thousand citations), and social science scholars have extensively used it during the pandemic years, when much of field research went online. Its editors have created a unique website with resources that have been specifically designed to online support of digital studies (https://study.sagepub.com/ onlineresearchmethods2e). The handbook is comprehensive not only in terms of methods and procedures, but also in terms of disciplines covered. Among its contributors there are sociologists, human geographers, media and information studies scholars, psychologists, demographers and statisticians, economists and specialists in business and organization studies, criminologists, computer studies experts, and finally several anthropologists, including such world renowned authors as Michael Fischer, director of the Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing, vice president of the Human Relations Area Files at Yale, and the author of the book *Applications in Computing for Social* Anthropologists (1994). The sheer scope of overview of relevant methods makes SAGE Handbook the first choice among reference guides in the area of social science digital research tools. An anthropologist would certainly appreciate the chapter on the modes and varieties of virtual ethnography, written by Christine Hine. Other pertinent materials include chapters on textual analysis of blogosphere, online research methods of cybergaming, online interviewing and focus groups, cartographic representations of online data, and artificial intelligence in web research.

Another volume on ethnographic methods in the context of network research is *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography* (Hjorth e.a., 2017). Unlike the handbook discussed above, this is a more theoretically and problem-oriented collection of texts on digital research methods. The authors of its 44 chapters are engaged in the debate on what digital ethnography means and how it transforms the concept of anthropological fieldwork (Part I of the book); they analyze the transformations of social fabrics of human groups and societies due to the introduction of new information technologies (Part II); tackle the thorny issues of visibility, voice, online power and authority (Part III), and wrestle with the ideas of place, mobility and co-presence in virtual environment (Part IV). They present research on play and gaming on

the web (Part V), delve into online arts, including photography and film-making (Part VI), assess online infrastructures, such as digital archives, both textual and musical, and mobile financial instruments, etc. (Part VII). Two final parts of the *Companion* are devoted to politics (media activism, political agency, environmental policies, etc.) and to the issues of digital design. The first part that deals with theoretical issues would be especially stimulating for both young and experienced virtual media anthropologists; it features inputs from such leaders in this field as George Marcus, Mike and Kim Fortun, Christine Hine and John Postill.

For those media anthropologists, who want to probe deeper into the history and current state of media studies, there is a seven-volume online edition of *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies* (Valdivia, 2014), featuring more than two hundred articles by 230 international scholars from across the globe and covering a wide array of subjects from media audiences and media production to media effects and futures. All volumes of this *Encyclopedia* are thematic, and the seventh one is devoted to research methods in media studies; its chapter 22 covers digital ethnography of media practices and contains an overview of relevant methods (Ardévol, Gómez-Cruz, 2014). The chapter authors provide an overview of the different approaches to digital ethnography depending on the object of study, including (1) the ethnography of online communities, virtual worlds, and social media sites; (2) the connective ethnography proposal through online and offline field settings; and (3) the ethnography of everyday life and the issue of audiences and creative practices in digital media. They also discuss methodological issues relating to conduct of online ethnographic fieldwork, with such issues as participant observation, interviews, as well as digital tools for registering, analyzing, and presenting data. However, one should keep in mind that the focus of this entire collection is on media studies in general, not only on digital media, and the anthropology of media is not emphasized by its various contributors.

Beyond such large-scale reference sources on digital methodology there are collective monographs on methods and quite a number of books by individual authors that merit a digital media anthropologist's attention. I would mention only one such monograph, written by an team of leading anthropologists Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, with a foreword by George Marcus, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method* (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Chapters 4–7 of this book provide a step-by-step description of online ethnographic research, starting with preparation and research design (ch. 4), going in detail into the specifics of participant observation in virtual worlds, including the issues of fieldnotes and data organization (ch. 5), outlining the web interviewing and interview transcription (ch. 6), as well as a diverse array of other relevant data collection methods, such as capturing chatlogs, screenshots, audio and video files, etc. (ch. 7). The book includes also chapters on ethics, data analysis and the

research results writing up. George Marcus compares this book to the *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, the famous handbook of methods that has served for many generations of ethnographers (Marcus 2012: xiii).

As for the books by individual authors there is yet one more reference source on methods, written by British internet researcher Catherine Dawson (2020) that contains description of sixty various methods for online research, including digital and mobile ethnography; ethno-mining; link analysis; mobile phone interviews; online experiments, online interviewing and focus groups; online observation; smartphone app-based research; social media analytics, etc. Interestingly, there are separate entries for digital and online ethnographies: the author views the term 'digital ethnography' as an umbrella notion, encompassing "all forms of digital technology-based ethnography including online, mobile and offline ethnography involving digitalization" (p. 93); the alternative terms include *virtual ethnography*, *network ethnography* or *netnography*, *cyber ethnography*, and *web ethnography* or *webnography*. A standard entry or a chapter of this book contains a definition of the term under consideration, a description of procedures, practices, or technologies it implies, some examples of application of the method or a family of related methods, and a list of relevant publications.

There is a number of authors who have made especially significant contributions to the field of digital ethnography, exploring its applications, challenges, and ethical considerations. Within a short overview it is impossible even to mention all the leading scholars in this field, so I mention here only a few of them, whose impact on the digital research methodology seems to me especially noteworthy, and whose books should be read by every student of digital anthropology. My list of names starts with American scholar Annette Markham, Chair Professor of Media Literacy and Public Engagement at Utrecht University, Professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, and senior research fellow at the Center for Information Policy Research at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, a specialist in internet research ethics, who has authored and edited several books, including *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*, focused on user experiences (1998); *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method* (Markham, Baym, 2009), a book of interviews with the leading digital media scholars; and *Metaphors of Internet: Ways of Being in the Age of Ubiquity* (Markham, Tiidenberg 2020), whose authors explore currently dominant metaphors for Internet and the transformations of its experience. For much of her career as a digital scholar she has been specializing in adapting methods to study the impact of digitalization on identity formation and organizing practices.

Among influential authors, whose books on digital research are viewed as contemporary classics of digital ethnography and could be recommended for every student of cyberspace, is Christine Hine from University of Surrey, UK. She has published *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), and *Ethnography for the*

Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday (2015). In these books she has thoroughly analyzed such methodological issues as the nature of virtual objects in ethnography, the crisis in online ethnography in terms of face-to-face interaction, authenticity and identity in internet contexts, the place of internet in ethnographies of the everyday, etc. She has also edited, individually or as a member of editorial teams, several volumes of article collections, including *Virtual Methods. Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (2005) and *Digital Methods for Social Science. An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation* (Snee et al. 2016). Both edited collections have covered a wide range of topics from the role of maps in virtual research to the intriguing issue of fieldwork boundaries in cyberspace, and such innovative research methods as asynchronous interviewing and photo elicitation. The methods discussed in these books include various ethnographic approaches, participant observation, interviews, surveys, time and media diaries, trace data, and online experiments. Specifics of digital worlds in comparison to traditional anthropological field research such as the changed conditions of fieldwork, of interviewing, and data collection, the (in)visibilities of online fields, and the relevant aspects of research ethics (anonymity, informed consent, the distinction between public and private spaces) have also been considered by the authors of these volumes. Hine in her introductions focuses specifically on the relationship between the ethnographic method and Internet studies. She distinguishes three main approaches, which she defines as 1) virtual ethnography, 2) connective or online/offline ethnographies, and 3) ethnographies of Internet in everyday life, each approach demanding specific research methods, albeit sometimes applied to the same research case (Hine 2005: 1–16).

The research by E. Gabriella Coleman, a professor at Harvard University, is well known among online scholars and could be recommended for her ethnographic approach to digital media, particularly in the context of cultural politics and vernacular cultures. Her specific focus is the hacking culture, on which she has written several books and articles, including *Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls* (2012); *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking* (Coleman 2013); *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (Coleman 2015). In these books she explores the cultural and moral practices of hackers, including ethics and aesthetics of hacking, and the social contexts in which hackers operate. She delves into the world of the group *Anonymous*, examining various faces and roles that this group has taken on over the years, particularly in the context of free and open-source software movement. She has also studied the intersection of hacking, phreaking, and trolling, examining the cultural contexts in which these activities occur (Coleman 2012). In her book on participation, co-edited with several of her colleagues (Barney et al. 2016), she examines the participatory condition in the digital age, highlighting the ways in which digital technologies have changed the modes we interact with information and with other people. Her

publications are full of methodological insights and comprehensively described cases of methods implementation and thus could serve as useful guide for digital research students (e.g. her review *Ethnographic approaches to digital media* (Coleman 2010) is an excellent introduction into digital research methods).

Another sociocultural anthropologist, Heather Horst, from Western Sydney University focuses her research on material culture, digital media, and technology, particularly in Pacific Island contexts. She has co-authored several books pertaining to digital communication technologies: (with Daniel Miller) *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication* (Horst, Miller 2006), and as a collective authors team member *Hanging Around, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Ito et al., 2010). Horst has also taken part in an innovative collective compendium *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* (Pink et al., 2016), which covers such domains of digital research as experiences, practices, things, relationships, social worlds, localities, and events. She has also co-edited (again with Daniel Miller) an article collection *Digital Anthropology* (Horst, Miller 2012), and with Robert J. Foster *The Moral Economy of Mobile Phones: Pacific Island Perspectives* (Foster, Horst 2018)[1]. The first collection includes an important contribution by Tom Boellstorff (the author of the famous *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*), titled *Rethinking Digital Anthropology* (2012: 39–60). According to Boellstorff digital anthropology is not a discipline (in opposition to virtual anthropology, which is), but a special technique, predicated on online participant observation (p. 40).

Besides *Coming of Age*, an ethnography that documents *Tom* Boellstorff's three-years long fieldwork as a player in cyber-game *Second life* (2008) and his co-authorship in the already mentioned handbook of online research methods (Boellstorff et al. 2012), he (with Bill Mauer) co-edited an article collection *Data, Now Bigger and Better!* (Boellstorff, Maurer 2015) that discusses the salience of big data for society; its authors seek "to contribute to a vitally important debate over the relationship between data, power, and meaning in the contemporary world" (p. 3). His most recent book on gaming *Intellivision. How a Videogame System Battled Atari and Almost Bankrupted Barbie*, co-authored with Braxton Soderman (Boellstorff, Soderman 2024) covers an overlooked videogame system made by Mattel Electronics and sold from the late 1970s to early 1980s. The book chronicles in great detail the period in the history of US video games industry when video-gaming moved the arcades into the home. Based on over 150 interviews with programmers,

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[1] Another useful book, demonstrating how a cell phone has altered our everyday life has been written by an Italian scholar Maurizio Ferraris (translation by Sarah de Sanctis [Ferraris 2014]).

engineers, designers, marketers, and executives, it is an example of multi-sited ethnography and anthropology of materiality, completed with history of all the relevant events in cultural and economic context in the early games industry.

As we all very well know, the choice of methods for online (as practically for any other kind of) research depends to a very large degree on the subject (thematic area) and objects of a particular research project. An anthropologist may study business culture or religion, online communities or smartphone users, media audiences or online behavior, solidarity and identity politics on the web or alienation and race issues, rituals or folklore, cyber-sport or gaming, digital materiality or intangible heritage, etc. Each such field with its methodological and conceptual toolkits now, after more than thirty years of web research and digital studies development, has been comprehensively covered in in academic publications, that is why the reading of reference books on methods should always be supplemented for each particular case by a thorough acquaintance with the work of scholars, who have made substantial contributions to this   particular research domain and whose sometimes idiosyncratic methodologies might be borrowed and refined for further research.

There are many more excellent authors, whose names have been mentioned in this review only in passing (such as Sarah Pink, or Daniel Miller), or even not mentioned at all (such as Chris Kelty, whose book *Two Bits. The Cultural Significance of Free Software*, 2008, although not immediately relevant to the methodological literature discussed here, is definitely a must for understanding the information technology behind the digital reality [Kelty 2008]). Besides books there are thematic academic journals, such as *New Media and Society*, that certainly merit attention of a social scholar with an interest in web-mediated research. This review has not touched as well upon the more specific literature, tailored to the needs of many special anthropological subdisciplines. For instance, anthropologists, specializing in the study of religion/s, who want to enrich their toolkit by methods of online research, might find useful a chapter on digital ethnography, written by Anna Neumaier and published in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (2022), in which she discusses specifics of online research of religious communities with a particular focus on virtual field construction and research ethics. But any review is a product of selection and constraint. The reviewer hopes that the books and authors included in this overview would serve as a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction into the online research methodology not only for anthropologists, but also for social scholars of many disciplinary interests.

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