

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY IN COVID-19: IMPROVISATION AND INTIMACY

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COVID-19's uncertainties have reminded researchers of how improvisation is both an inherent and a limiting aspect of ethnographic practice. The pandemic also generated a rise in highly improvised digital ethnographic research, producing fresh questions on the domain's relative ability to realize social intimacy with participants. I reflect on both pre-fieldwork and fieldwork experiences between November 2019 and September 2021, while considering what it means to fail and succeed with improvisation during the outbreak. By extension, I ask when improvisational practice should be abandoned to balance a researcher's affective survivance in the field. I additionally explore several challenges and advantages found through improvising to digital ethnography. Focusing on material affordances and digital ecology, I review some of the benefits its mediation yielded over everyday community dynamics, while considering digital life as relatively complex and resource dependent. Nonetheless, with COVID-19 further shrinking the analog-digital divide in everyday life, I suggest a greater urgency for ethnographers to treat digital intimacies as equally legitimate and insightful as their analog counterparts.

Keywords: Ethnography, digital-mediation, improvisation, intimacy, COVID-19

Introduction

Improvisation. It can be defined as 'the action of responding to circumstances,' doing so 'spontaneously, without preparation, or on the spur of the moment' (OED 2022a). Conducting fieldwork during the original COVID-19 outbreak served as a potent reminder of both its inherent role and limitation in the practice of ethnography. This is because, to borrow the words of another anthropologist, ethnography necessitates 'an uncertainty that is lived, experienced, felt – at times debilitating, at other times liberating' (Calkins 2016: 46). In addition, as an act of methodological 'survivance' – understood here as 'the ability to continue' (Vizenor 2008a: 19) – improvising amid the pandemic led many researchers to abruptly adopt digital

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modes of ethnographic research. This has generated new waves of reflections over the relative effectiveness of digital experience in realizing ‘appropriate’ levels of social intimacy. Nevertheless, despite the novel temporalities caused by the pandemic, the considerations and debates they invite are anything but new. In this article I explore both these themes while reflecting on my own experiences of digital ethnography, improvising in response to COVID-19.

Strictly speaking of course, *ethnography* – a ‘theory of description’ (Nader 2011: 211) textually rendering ‘social worlds’ (Abu-Lughod 2000: 261) of and between humans, or, documenting psychological and subjective experiences that ‘both shape, and is shaped by social and cultural processes’ (Hollan 2001: 48) – is not a method, but the final product of several. In addition to participant observation, it is commonly supplemented via a range of other qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as comprehensively outlined by others (e.g., Bernard 2018). This article reflects solely on participant observation (i.e., ethnography’s core) and interviews.

When to improvise?

Demonstrated through older epistemological conflicts between ethnography as a scientific versus artistic or technical practice (Malkki 1997), improvisation has been long identified as a key cornerstone of its craft. Such analysis can be traced back to at least the 1930s in anthropology (e.g., Firth 1936), where it was stressed as central in permitting a creative aspect to data construction, while simultaneously balancing it with some form of evidence (e.g., what, or how someone did, said, embodied). This train of thought flew in the face of popular positivist approaches to social scientific research, as well as the very ideas of ‘evidence’ and ‘science’ (Whitehead 1967). As previously described by others, the issue with empiricism in anthropological approaches to ethnography is that its standpoint is ‘a working principle’ (Firth 1936: 18). This, in essence, provoked the conclusion that ethnography is a fictitious product, yet *not* one of fiction.

Later established as a simultaneous empiricist and improvisational method, some considered the latter as one of three fundamental co-existing ethnographic practices, alongside critical theory, and everyday ethics (Malkki 2007: 164). This is because mastery of single or multiple methods are indispensable, yet ultimately insufficient to the production of ethnography. Rather, they are only techniques, or tools of the art itself, the art being their improvised synthesis through a thorough understanding of the context/s in question. This is not to be confused with a static agreement on how improvisation ‘should’ be accomplished, and neither is it to suggest ethnography is conducted in the absence of any rules whatsoever. Instead, it is that ‘improvisation is the tradition’ (Malkki 2007: 180, my emphasis).

COVID-19 forcibly reminded many ethnographers of this tradition’s significance. Moreover, it simultaneously explores its pragmatic limitations, shedding light onto recent, yet pre-COVID-19 (hereon ‘pre-COVID’) discussions on what it means to fail in the field (Mattes and Dinkelaker 2019). Both proved true for me. On one hand, it is what enabled me to successfully readjust my approach to the pandemic. Yet, on the other hand, multiple instances of failure along the journey – ‘the journey’ including both pre-fieldwork and the following year

in the field – forced me to question when and where improvisation reaches its limit.

Original fieldwork arrangements appeared settled around November 2019. A work visa agreed, I was to be stationed as a Teaching Assistant at a school in Saitama Prefecture (Japan). Researching a recent expansion of *International Baccalaureate* (IB) across the nation-state's education sector, the school had introduced a predominantly Japanese-mediated version of the IB's Diploma Programme,² an internationally recognized curriculum and qualification for entry into higher education. An ethnography of the programme's everyday life for students, parents, and facilitating faculty in the school's community was to act as the heart of my doctoral research. The arrangement felt ideally suited. A formal position would permit a highly participatory approach to participant observation,³ easy access to an otherwise slippery visa, and direct financial support via a subsidized salary that would cover most of my fieldwork costs. Despite having never hired an employee outside of Japan before, the school demonstrated generous support by working through an exhaustive list of steps outlined by the Japanese Government's Immigration Bureau on recruiting processes.

The visa procedure was formally initiated in February 2020, but soon stalled once mainstream news and popular media across the world lit up with fear over a highly contagious, deadly, and fast-diffusing disease. True to the fears of virologists, it would later realize one of the most perilous global pandemics in recorded human history. Unsurprisingly, ethnographers conducting fieldwork around this time described intense feelings of fear and 'despair' (Hidalgo and Khan 2020: 190). Given such extraordinary and unsettling circumstances, it was mutually agreed that travel to Japan was no longer in the interest of safety for either those in the school community or myself. This was my last interaction with the school for the remainder of my doctoral degree, all but eradicating months of preparation and early rapport.

At this stage, living in a student dormitory at St. Antony's College in Oxford (UK) during the March 2020 national lockdown, I had emphatically failed to improvise. There were two reasons for this failure. First was the inability to establish access to a viable field-site, with a blanket closure of schools enforced across Japan. Even when they reopened several months later, all potential schools remained understandably hesitant to permit my travel, even during the intermittent windows when relevant laws and the political climate allowed it. Of course, should that barrier have been somehow surmounted, there remained the moral dilemma of proximity (Strong et al. 2021). Could I live with being potentially responsible for my own body (i.e., the predominant research tool of any ethnographer) causing the serious illness, or worse, death of another in the name of research? Such a nightmare scenario paralyzed me.

This neatly leads into the second reason: my own state of mind. Feeling disappointed was difficult when failing to locate alternative field-sites. COVID-19 was spreading at a particularly alarming rate in the UK at the time. Streets were eerily silent, and soon accompanied by horrific statistical data on infection and mortality rates through a host of mainstream news networks, popular media, and key informative bodies, including the UK's National Health Service (NHS) and World Health Organization (WHO). Regular access to

² This initiative is officially termed the Japanese Dual-Language Diploma Programme.

³ I partially highlight this to acknowledge approaches to participant observation deemphasizing participation (e.g., Jeffrey and Troman 2004: 545), as part of increasingly hyphenated practices of ethnography across the social sciences (Scott-Jones and Watt 2010) influenced by a dynamically shifting knowledge economy (Mills and Ratcliffe 2012).

distressing accounts from one family member working on the frontlines in the NHS only added to the anguish. The college I resided in was now largely deserted. With over 80% of the student body comprised of non-UK nationals, many promptly departed on flights home fearing incoming lockdowns and travel restrictions, in a number of cases leaving most their personal belongings behind. This ironically left a safer environment for those who remained, though it did little to improve the general atmosphere of shock. For a time, my research no longer mattered. Neither did my degree.

Such practical, psychological, and moral limits had been met by countless other researchers, including within my primary cohort at Oxford University's School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (SAME). Several paused research pursuits immediately, some for almost two years. At certain departments around the world these intermissions were institutionally forced, with, for instance, ethics boards shutting down altogether. Those who continued at SAME were generally restricted to a handful planning fieldwork in rare, unaffected areas of the world where COVID-19 had – at the time – dissipated, or those managing to retune their methodological approach. For the latter, some adapted in creative ways by synthesizing elements of digital methodology, although data would often remain scarce, unable to be exclusively relied on. At this point I was none of the above, for I had failed to improvise at all.

This bitter reality invited a thought: what does it mean to fail in fieldwork? It had been the subject of much discussion among anthropologists and ethnographers not long before COVID-19 (e.g., Takaragawa and Howe 2017). Indeed, many of the difficulties facing ethnographers are well established. Gaining necessary ethical clearance from relevant bodies can be problematic. Even when successful, other ethical considerations, such as what constitutes a fair or reciprocal relationship between ethnographer and participant, can remain disquietingly cloaked. Arranging access to an appropriate field-site or community can be fraught with obstacles (Ortner 2010). The risks of accumulating too much data to constructively manage can be as dangerous as gathering too little, a notion my doctoral supervisors were often keen to stress. Delving into and interpreting one's forest of data can feel overwhelming, aimless, or theoretically unrewarding. Capturing the lucidity of life experiences through ethnographic description can prove elusive (Hovland 2007: 1). Certain methodologies can prove challenging to execute, or fail to realize appropriate results (O'Brien 2010: 5-9). It is, however, considerations over the various affective demands that fieldwork exerts on the ethnographer, that particularly resonated with my journey (Stodulka et al. 2018).

Improvisation from physical to digital ethnography ultimately proved successful. That said, this success was punctuated by multiple moments of failure. This is because the ability to adapt to the field is a dialectical process. To be realized, *both* ethnographer and their environment/s of focus must sufficiently attune to permit it. A myriad of ramifications wrought by COVID-19 demonstrates the role of context, as it is mostly impervious to a researcher's influence, no matter how experienced or skilled. Meanwhile, discussing the former's role means not only being prepared, but actively encouraged to acknowledge where one reaches their limits as beings. After all 'if any anthropological fieldwork went *strictly* to plan, it would

actually have to be considered a failure' (Mattes and Dinkelaker 2019: 229, my emphasis).⁴ Some degree of failure is therefore not only necessary for success, but often responsible for molding it.⁵ I discovered new contexts to approach my research questions because of a period of psychological disillusionment caused by COVID-19, *because* my original plans proved fruitless.

On a hunch, I shifted ethnographic focus from IB programs at schools to IB teacher training programmes at universities in Japan. I also steered away from exploring the relationship between universities and national government, and instead on the former's ties with the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). These decisions were little more than gambles, hedging my bets that should the temporal climate continue to hinder any chance at in-person ethnography in Japan, that universities and international organizations stood a better chance of surviving digitally. It paid off, with these respective parties making unprecedented choices to operate in either fully digital or, less commonly, hybrid formats. Schools, on the other hand, did neither for any extensive period when reopened. As a bonus, my futile attempts at securing a relevant visa, and the moral dilemma of exposing myself and others to COVID-19 in the name of research conveniently evaporated. I resultingly completed a one-year digital ethnography while based at a university dormitory in Oxford between September 2020 and 2021. The field successfully attuned to the ethnographer.

However, this methodological *survivance* – to draw on a concept expanded on by other anthropologists (Vizenor 2008b) – was accompanied with significant sacrifice. Developed in the context of Native American studies, survivance stories are commonly renunciations of 'detractions,' 'obstruction,' and 'tragedy,' while conversely being celebrations of 'continuance' (Vizenor 2008a: 1, 19). In this context, however, survivance acknowledges *both* adversity and perseverance. When personally reflecting on the former, for example, transitioning to digital fieldwork resulted in a crushing loss of funding from a foundation focused on Japan-related research. Provisionally awarded in June 2020 under the assumption I would be physically in Japan, a year later (i.e., towards the end of my fieldwork period) the committee decided they could not finance 'purchases not associated with fieldwork directly in Japan.' This left me in a financially vulnerable position both during and after fieldwork.

Another demanding hurdle lay in acclimatizing to nocturnal life. As someone who had never experienced night shifts before, doing so for a year while in strict isolation amid a volatile COVID-19 climate was utterly exhausting. Even when a nocturnal rhythm was somewhat realized, maintaining it proved equally difficult for the remaining year. This was further complicated by having to repeatedly arrange for a physical arrival in Japan, staying alert for a sudden switch to physical fieldwork that never arrived. This inability to switch was caused by a combination of factors, ranging from a blanket ban on foreign nationals between late-December 2020 and February 2021, several State of Emergency declarations by the Japanese

⁴ I emphasize 'strictly' here to acknowledge that ethnographic fieldwork is naturally capable of following very closely to plan. I simply argue it impossible for all contingent aspects (e.g., how a field-site changes over time, how a participant's behaviour alters over time, how the ethnographer feels over time), to be impeccably forecasted.

⁵ It is also worth highlighting that 'failure' sometimes *equates* to success. An interview that went poorly, for example, can itself prove highly instructive (e.g., understanding why it went poorly could reveal profound insight for a given socio-cultural context).

Government, and the mass outbreak of the Delta Variant in the UK. Most critical, however, were the eventual decisions made by relevant universities and organizations to retain digital operations.

My journey – alongside those of countless other ethnographers – emphasized not only the ecological limits of improvisation, but also the affective limits of individuals. Keeping track of one's emotions had never felt more important. More anthropologists have been doing this in general, sometimes compartmentalizing them into separate journals altogether (Stodulka et al. 2018: 525-527). I accomplished this through short audio recordings, finding it easier to reflect on personal feelings verbally. This exercise helped to keep my subjectivities in check with ethnographic data, while informing me of how well I was affectively coping with the field. At times, the truth was that I was not. Despite an essentially seamless integration to digital life across the Asia-Pacific, extreme prolonged physical isolation in Oxford was taking its toll on my well-being. On some nights this translated to feelings of discombobulation, handicapping my social awareness. Digging deep into mental fortitude miraculously saw me through such periods, but for a number of months post-fieldwork the side effects of this push became clearer. A vaccine finally in hand, I accomplished little more than basic human functions as I slowly returned to life with the sun.

Acknowledging and empathizing with loss from COVID-19 is important. That said, there are several positive outcomes the pandemic has inadvertently achieved. To emphasize but one of these here, it has exposed many of our often-concealed human vulnerabilities, underscoring a need to better reflect on, and describe the successes *and* failures that go into maintaining ourselves in the field. My experience confronted me with an uncomfortable, and hopefully stimulating enigma. Did I succeed because I persevered through an arduous year of fieldwork? Or did I fail because I sometimes willingly chose to neglect my own self-care to realize this 'success'? Perhaps COVID-19 can act as a timely debate for researchers to consider the potential risks of championing the former, and potential benefits of critiquing the latter lines of thought.

Taking digital intimacy seriously

Rays of sunlight glazed the curtains as I rolled out of bed. It was the end of December 2020, and my first time rising with the morning since initiating fieldwork in September. Term ending for the new year holidays in Japan offered a brief respite from nocturnal life. I was soon to attend a *nomikai* ('social pub') event of around 15 students affiliated with a university I pseudonymously refer to as the Japanese Institute of Education, or JIE. Organized for the late evening in Japan, it was a rare instance when participant observation would take place during my morning in the UK.

Following arrangements via a group chat on Japan's mainstream messaging app, LINE, I grabbed a bottle of ginger ale from the fridge before settling down at my desk and initiating Zoom. As a general non-drinker I was somewhat relieved. It would have been risky at best, and anti-social or disrespectful at worst, to avoid consuming at least some form of alcoholic beverage had the event taken place at an *izakaya* ('Japanese-style bar'). Thanks to the event

occurring digitally, however, all of us were tucked away in family houses, flats, or dormitories. Some would swig through as many as six cans of beer during the four-hour session that followed, while others made do with a glass of wine or water. A few decided to smoke, another blessing in this format. At present, few, if anyone, can escape becoming a second-hand smoker when socializing at an *izakaya*, or most other types of dining establishments in Japan. As a non-smoker often experiencing unpleasant physiological effects through inhalation, it was refreshing to be in control of my air. The usual pressures of integrating into the socio-cultural norms of a single environment dissolved. Instead, all were sharing separate environments catered towards their preferences with everyone else, creating a new (Ahlin and Li 2019), more inclusive environment.

After exchanging greetings in the main room, the central organizer suggested splitting people into breakout groups between three and four, alternating participants every 30 minutes. We all agreed, repeating the process between three to six times, with some leaving Zoom earlier than others. Utilizing breakout sessions in this way also revealed its benefits to a physical setting. There was no need to filter one's hearing or strain one's voice over the ambient noise of an establishment. In addition, the group enjoyed chances to socialize with all its members, where physical limitations often constrain individuals to only converse with a select number. Conversations spanned a wide array of topics, ranging from IB, teaching careers, and educational policy to family life, popular entertainment, and desires in life. My engagements provided multiple moments of humor and contingency. Some jested with their pets. Others kept an observant eye on their toddlers off-camera while maintaining a veneer of calm. A couple, after drinking a generous amount, turned deeply philosophical, disclosing personal insecurities with life through introspective yet often amusing tales.

These *nomikai* were arranged by students in exclusively online spaces due to overarching fears and anxieties with COVID-19. They also acted as a gesture of respect for those unable to reside in the same city because of regionalized lockdowns. It was a time when physical isolation was fervently encouraged, and when 'the home' transformed into the most consistent place of everyday socialization with the world. Yet, despite this improvised environment, such gatherings deepened bonds in ways impossible in-person. Experiencing these sometimes-profound moments of social intimacy made me reflect on the connection between digital domains and human relationships. After all, if the quality of a given ethnography is largely, if not entirely dependent on how socially intimate an ethnographer is with their community(ies) of interest – as other anthropologists suggest (Funk and Thajib 2019) – then how might this be influenced by its mediation? By 'mediation,' I refer to two specific domains in which realities are constructed: the *digital* and the *analog*.

I choose 'analog' purposefully. 'Physical' is more commonly used as a contrasting term to 'digital,' although analog is also used by digital theorists (e.g., Elwell 2014) and anthropologists (e.g., Gadsby 2016). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), analog can be defined as that which is 'typically contrasted with digital' while also designating 'the original or traditional form of something that has a digital or computer-mediated counterpart' (OED 2022b). The same is essentially true of physical, and remains an entirely appropriate alternative. However, *unlike* physical, analog carries a more colloquial sense of *a way things used to be* (OED 2022b). The idea then, is that its use might further stimulate social scientists to

challenge the paradigmatic treatment of its relationship with the digital.

As is now well-established, much of humanity continues to grapple with a mistaken conceptual compartmentalization ‘between the virtual and the real’ in the growing wake of *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Elwell 2014:234). This persists despite the fact that digital reality and experience, as discussed at length by other anthropologists, is equally capable of being as ‘real’ or ‘unreal’ as its analog equivalent (Boellstorff 2016a). Simply put, digital life should be no more or less ontologically legitimate to its analog counterpart. Treating both domains as such is becoming increasingly obvious in anthropology and broader social science, although, as pointed out by others, even experienced researchers of digital domains struggled to grapple with this reality from as recent as the mid-2010s (Boellstorff 2016b: 387-388). Change imposed by COVID-19 has re-energized discussion about the role of digitality among social scientists. Early examples of post-COVID-19 (hereon ‘post-COVID’) literature paints a mixed picture of how ethnographers have treated digital life, with some continuing to analyze it as a phenomenon somehow less legitimate than its analog other.

The deployment of ‘remote’ helps demonstrate this trend. A casual glance at its associations in the OED are immediately concerning: ‘far away,’ ‘indirect,’ ‘opposed to immediate or proximate,’ ‘divergent,’ or even ‘unfamiliar as if through distance; foreign, alien’ (OED 2022c). Such definitions evidently treat it as something incapable of realizing close, direct, intimate, or familiar human connection. Yet, it is precisely terms like ‘remote fieldwork’ or ‘remote ethnography’ that remain at risk of being synonymized with the digital and online. For example, one ethnographer more recently carried out a mix of analog and digital ethnography in Nepal, concluding that while ‘remote ethnography’ constructed new forms of intimacies (e.g., text-based intimacies via social chat apps), it was ultimately unable to compensate for what offline fieldwork lost (Jaehn 2021). They were cautious with their use of remote as a descriptor, using it to describe experiences after switching to digitally mediated research. In their own words, they found ‘online spaces as rather limiting and inappropriate in sustaining the intimate relationships that had been possible offline’ (Jaehn 2021). In this scenario, online spaces had failed to realize little more than *remote* experiences.

Like the example above, much post-COVID ethnography existing at the time of writing is generally comprised of research conducted both before *and* after the outbreak. This fact alone is significant, as they stand in sharp contrast to a rich range of ethnographies conducted pre-pandemic that mostly, if not exclusively draw on digital-mediated experiences. This is easily appreciated through several volumes on digital ethnography (e.g., Boellstorff et al. 2012; Pink et al. 2016; Hjorth et al. 2017) and the established subdiscipline of digital anthropology (Horst and Miller 2012). They collectively demonstrate a growing range of contexts where analog mediation instead becomes the compromised or less relevant alternative. For instance, various anthropologies and ethnographies of metaverses, such as Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) environments, showcase scenarios where everyday social dynamics can only be coherently appreciated within digital spaces (e.g., Boellstorff 2009; Nardi 2010). The same is true of ethnographies blending digital and analog aspects (e.g., Malaby 2009; Gadsby 2016; Bluteau 2021a). More recent post-COVID digital research, on the other hand, has often been dramatically improvised. As the experience of others highlights (e.g., Jaehn 2021), the sheer scale and abruptness of improvisation can be prone to failure, if ‘failure’ is

defined as an insufficiency of social intimacy with participants. That said, others conducting fieldwork around this juncture conversely enjoyed success in this respect, exemplified well by one ethnographer's account of their sudden departure from their physical field-site:

But social life did not wholly disappear with the arrival of Covid-19. Rather, it began to adapt and to take a new shape, even while also falling back into some of the rhythms that we were already accustomed to. The bonds and life I'd built in Máncora did not disappear either; instead they shifted into new configurations that allowed me to glimpse at things I hadn't and couldn't have seen before. (Hidalgo and Khan 2020: 190)

Others have since provided a more detailed reflection over the various pros and cons that may accompany digital fieldwork for social scientists (Howett 2022). Howett's experience with digital interviews during their extensive research in Ukraine strongly resonated with my own. For example, an interesting tendency for participants to better express their personal selves when situated in familiar environments (Sullivan 2012: 55-57; O'Connor and Madge 2017), or the adverse effects that a lack of internet speed and other material affordances (Nardi 2015: 18-19; Kaptelin and Nardi 2012) can exert on everyday digital experience. They also emphasize a greater need to treat the field as something not 'limited to a geographic space with people and places "on" it,' but rather 'as a continuum of spatio-temporal events and relations between people in diverse sociopolitical contexts' (Howett 2022: 396). This conceptual step is imperative if digital ethnography is to be treated equally with its analog other. Incidentally, it was precisely this older definition of 'the field' that was responsible for the loss of my previously mentioned grant, while it was this proposed alternative that permitted my transcendence of analog geography. Despite an ethnographic focus on JIE, I also collected material from several other universities, gaining comparative insights that would have been otherwise impossible to attain in-person owing to their physical separation from one another and JIE. Furthermore, I could ignore national borders entirely while at the IBO, conducting a participant observation of its relevant administration that spanned the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Once more, however, remoteness is evoked, this time through the notion of 'remote embeddedness' (Howett 2022: 394). The idea itself is a valuable one, describing a successful social integration into the lives of participants via digital mediation. Yet, precisely because of this success, the semantics of 'remote' are conceptually juxtaposed with the concept of 'embeddedness,' distorting how digital distance is experienced both relationally and geographically. As such, *digital embeddedness* may better describe the notion. In addition, a conceptually problematic distinction is made between what is referred to as the 'mediated' versus the 'in-person' (Howett 2022: 387), inferring that the latter is somehow unmediated. Naturally, all human reality and experience, analog or digital, *must* be mediated. Analog mediation is also susceptible to interferences in quality. For instance, humans diverge considerably in their sensory abilities (e.g., one's sight or hearing), impacting the type or quality of data gathered and described by a given ethnographer. That said, digital mediation is certainly more complicated. If the analog is defined as that which is solely mediated through our bodies, then the digital is this plus the various material affordances required to generate it. Aside from internet accessibility, reliability, or speed, some of the most immediately obvious and often

cited examples include ICT skills, as well as hardware and software familiarity (e.g., Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Lobe et al. 2020). Falling short on any of these aspects and more, digital experience quickly turns unpleasant and inorganic. Assuming the ethnographer's senses are fully functioning, social interactions deteriorate to levels incomparable to most analog interaction.

Interruptions to the fluidity of digital life were rare during my fieldwork, but often severely disruptive when surfacing. Community coherence differed greatly depending on how competent and comfortable people were with using digital platforms. A few of my interviews, typically averaging around two hours in length, were reduced to as little as 20 minutes due to poor internet connectivity, turning casual discussions into vexing encounters. Poor connections or a lack of competence could lead to wide-ranging issues, such as where a participant's voice is only partially captured, or worse, when my own response is received long after having expressed it. These instances of intermittence and time-lag⁶ disturbed the expected fluidity of organic human interaction, encouraging those involved to abandon conversation relatively quickly.

Then there were more substantive limitations. Video conferencing apps like Zoom, for now at least, can overly systematize groupwork and activities. By essentially restricting people to clinical, turn-based monologs, it obstructs natural junctures of interruption often taken for granted with analog equivalents. Another barrier related to the broadly inescapable lack of geographical mobility. Especially where fixed webcams or laptops are concerned, we remain broadly constrained by the visually static environments they create. A total reliance on digital mediation rendered me unable observe discourse before, between, and after classes on the analog campus between students and staff, as well as the broader environment of JIE itself. I could not capture analog activities beyond the rare instances when a student might briefly guide me via a smartphone. However, as it transpired, COVID-19 dramatically limited such informal exchanges, as the students who attended hybrid classes in-person were encouraged to leave campus promptly once lessons ended.

In the light of this, it is tempting to conclude that ethnographic data quality is contingent on the standard of material affordances generating it. This leads to what was the most peculiar methodological finding from my fieldwork. A series of events occurred when a lack of stable connections paradoxically *enabled* a deepening of social intimacy. The principal example of this involved early classes at JIE. Having made the decision to run its entire programme in a mostly digital and otherwise hybrid capacity, the institution sometimes struggled to execute classes as desired due to unstable internet connectivity, later upgrading its hardware infrastructure to help address the issue. The result proved unexpectedly valuable for participant observation during hybrid classes.

Picture the scenario. The facilitator's laptop acted as the host for the Zoom room, its camera positioned to ensure visibility of the physical classroom. Those participating in-person simultaneously connected their devices – principally laptops – to the Zoom session, integrating with their digital-only peers. For this format to be successful, the institution's internet had to support the facilitator's laptop and student devices inside the physical building, *as well as those*

⁶ I do not mean to infer such intermittence or time-lag as a uniquely digital characteristic. For instance, it was also a feature of old analogue telecommunication, especially across long distances.

of each individuals' residences participating online. It was problematic then, that JIE's internet could occasionally be severed entirely. This would naturally cause all devices reliant on its network to lose connectivity. To people such as myself, JIE had disappeared. However, *only* JIE disappeared. In other words, those relying on internet networks independent of JIE's lingered on Zoom, reconfiguring a new social environment. Marooned in cyberspace, this fresh setting caused all still present to laugh, an ethnographer's blessing. Having barely initiated fieldwork, it immediately broke the ice with multiple students. The moment granted a precious opportunity to re-introduce myself to others informally, for them to speak frankly about initial impressions of the course, and establish a level of familiarity not attained with others until many months later. Eventually, after about 20 minutes, connection was re-established with JIE, teleporting us back into the classroom and forcing us to immediately retune ourselves to more formal etiquette. This example demonstrated one of a few bizarre occasions where poor material affordance enhanced social intimacy and embeddedness with participants.

In hindsight, my field-sites of interest were best accessed digitally, to the extent that a solely analog ethnography would have failed to yield sufficient data for my doctoral thesis. This is because the various communities of ethnographic interest were themselves digitally constructed, with only a handful of participants ever meeting in-person. A combination of COVID-19 variables dramatically impeding physical interaction, along with a focus on students (i.e., customers), university staff and organizational representatives (i.e., employees), allowed both the resources and impetus for participants to embed themselves into digital lives. This was complemented further by a general rise in ICT competencies – especially among younger generations – allowing many to express themselves in an equal, if not sometimes better manner to how they would in analog life (e.g., De Seta 2020). A key reason for my experience contrasting with several other post-COVID examples lies with the fact that, while tantalizingly close, my fieldwork had not been initiated when the outbreak occurred. I was forced to replan, or, at the very least, wager accordingly with knowledge of the pandemic.

In the end, digital mediation turned out to be the normal approach, while analog mediation became the experimental alternative, a paradigm shift which should no longer be considered new (Bluteau 2021b). As a final example to illustrate why, others described a phenomenon coined the 'always-on' webcam in relatively low resource localities well before the pandemic (Miller and Sinanan 2014: 54), writing the following in primary reference to Trinidadian society:

As the technology has become more reliable, it is also possible to simply leave webcams on in the background, while going about one's general household activities such a cleaning, cooking or studying, without directly paying attention to the other person, remaining aware of where they are and what they are doing. (Miller and Sinanan 2014: 55)

Forced to acclimatize to digital modes of learning, teaching, work, and everyday socializing in ways otherwise challenging or impossible due to the COVID-19 landscape, such always-on or on-for-a-while moments emerged on various occasions. Aside from *nomikai* events, interviews conducted with select participants lasted for an average of five hours with cameras on. This was not because we had five hours-worth of formal content to discuss, but rather that we

chose to converse in between taking breaks, preparing drinks, relaxing quietly with some reading, or conversing on topics of ordinary interest to them. Similar events also transpired through casual chats with select participants.

Since completing fieldwork, participating universities and the IBO – including their various conferences held exclusively online at the time – have since broadly moved back to analog life. This has, in most cases, led to a return of community dynamics where the everyday is predominately experienced in the analog realm. Digitally mediated attempts at understanding the same institutions at present would fail to realize consistent levels of social intimacy, a striking reminder of ethnography as a fundamentally situated experience. Nevertheless, COVID-19 caused, for a time, digital ethnography to be *the* approach in achieving the deepest possible level of social embeddedness with relevant communities and individuals. This is regardless of whether the environment was centered on a classroom, staff meeting, accreditation process, conference, texting app, or a laid-back chat over drinks.

Conclusions

As COVID-19 has vividly demonstrated, ethnography *requires* uncertainty.⁷ Precisely because of this, improvisation is integral to its practice. Equally, however, the pandemic's extraordinary scale of disruption exposes the limits of improvisation, while revealing the intrinsic role failure plays in realizing successful ethnography. Moreover, the affective demands thrust onto the ethnographer by the outbreak, and the extent one does or does not cope under exceptional circumstances raises uneasy ethical questions. It calls for a methodological understanding of survivance, one that balances a researcher's mental and physical health with perseverance. COVID-19 has additionally revealed the difficulties in realizing consistent levels of social intimacy within greatly improvised digital spaces. These obstacles are multi-faceted, ranging from material affordances to censorship, from ICT literacy to suitability. Regardless, as my tale of digital ethnography during the pandemic exemplifies, the analog-digital distinction to human intimacy is fast shrinking, inching ever closer to towards transmediated experience. Accordingly, an ethnographer's ability to shift fluidly between these spaces has never been more pressing.

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⁷ Or, if this feels overly definitive, ethnography *entails* uncertainty.

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