Ethno graphy

New forms of home blindness: Rethinking fieldwork methods in digitalized environments

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Abstract

Digital Anthropology has in the past two decades emerged as a field that seeks to better grasp experiences of being human within digital technology and culture. However, digital technology is today so entangled in everyday practices that it gives as little meaning to single it out as a specific field of inquiry as it does to leave it out. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Norway, one of the most digitalized countries in the world, we argue that the ubiquity of the digital re-actualizes classic debates in the discipline on 'home blindness' emerging from the methodological challenges of doing fieldwork in familiar surroundings. We argue that building on methodological and analytical perspectives from the home blindness debate can help us better understand what it means to be human in digital environments.

Introduction

Digital anthropology has over the past decade become an established field with a growing body of literature examining the embeddedness of the digital in social life and its implications for ethnographic practice (see e.g., Bengtsson 2011, 2014; Bruun et al., 2022;

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Geismar and Knox, 2021; Kaur, 2019; Miller, 2016; Pink et al., 2016; Douglas-Jones et al., 2021). A range of methodological innovations have suggested how to best capture digital practices as part of social lives, both offline (Bluteau, 2019; Broch, 2020; Walter, 2021; Waltorp, 2020) and in entirely digital domains (Boellstorf, 2015; Hine, 2015; Walton, 2018). Acknowledging the omnipresence of digital technology in people's lives, and insisting that such media are part of wider sets of environments and relations, Pink et al. (2016: 9) have proposed what they call a *non-digital-centric approach* to studies of social lives with digital technology. This implies a shift in focus, from the digital platforms and objects in themselves to how people are interacting with digital devices and their affordances in day-to-day practice. A non-digital-centric approach thus requires re-thinking fieldwork alongside and through digitalized social life, situating digital practices, meanings and imaginations in relation to the specificity of cultural and social worlds and locales.

The non-digital centric approach underscores Gershon, Lange and Taylor's point that anthropology has had a "somewhat tenuous relationship with what has come to be known as digital ethnography" (2023). This is because anthropologists engaged with the digital domain are methodologically and analytically faced with questions such as: what is 'digital' life as opposed to 'non-digital', 'physical' or even 'real' life? To what extent are these merely false distinctions, and are they even generative? While online social life is surely social life, is it qualitatively different from offline social life? And is ethnography conducted in entirely digital domains essentially different from a more conventional pre-digital one? These kinds of unsettled foundational questions form part of the enduring ambiguous relationship between the digital/non-digital and online/offline in anthropology and reflect a response to "the data moment" by positioning "ethnography as a counterpoint to data", or a "more sensitive qualitative component" to data-collection in digital domains (Douglas-Jones et al., 2021:11). Another set of questions prompted by digitalization concerns the need for conceptual re-theorization of established concepts such as personhood (Walter, 2021), the body/embodiment (Middleton, 2022), temporality (Boellstorff, 2015), kinship (Mogseth, 2021) and species and biodiversity (Nadim, 2021). For such re-theorization to happen, however, anthropologists need to mobilize sufficient curiosity to take the ubiquity of digital forms seriously as an analytic challenge. This article seeks to contribute to that necessary endeavor.

In this article we draw attention to a challenge that we have encountered in our ethnographic studies of digitalized social life in Norway and that we argue is becoming increasingly pressing for ethnographers worldwide, namely the challenge of digital 'home blindness'. Home blindness is a well-known methodological challenge when doing research in familiar settings. Scandinavian anthropologists have addressed this challenge for several decades, focusing primarily on the need to overcome one's own preconceptions in order to "transform cultural familiarity into systematic knowledge" (Gullestad, 1990). Issues of concern include the difficulty in mobilizing sufficient ethnographic 'curiosity' (*forbløffelse*, see Hastrup, 1995), the relation between evidence and interpretation, fieldwork practices and the need for comparison (e.g., Gullestad, 1990; Bruun et al., 2011).

We suggest that a similar kind of home blindness may occur when doing fieldwork in digitalized environments, and increasingly so as interlocutors and ethnographers alike are living their lives in what Bluteau (2019: 268) calls a 'postdigital age'. When the digital is no longer a novelty, but taken for granted as an everyday tool, it becomes 'familiar' much like the cultural milieu of the ethnographer's home environment. This effect is amplified by algorithms shaping our movements, feelings and perspectives (see Ruckenstein, 2023). Although the term 'postdigital' is slightly misleading as the digital domain is neither left behind nor equally shared, we argue that the ubiquity of digital environments (as a result of accelerating speed of digital appropriation across the world) makes the taken-for-granted-ness of digital practices a methodological challenge that needs to be addressed. In this sense, we are building on Bengtsson who argues that distance, not from not the culture one is trying to understand, but rather from the culture one is normally situated in, "is and should be acknowledged as a key aspect of an ethnographic approach and a dilemma particularly significant in studies of online cultures" (Bengtsson, 2014: 863).

Our discussion draws on the authors' shared experience of doing ethnographic fieldwork in Norway, one of the world's most digitalized countries, where we all live. Our material includes four separate fieldwork experiences in 2020-2022 as part of the research project *Private Lives: Embedding Sociality in Digital 'Kitchen-tables'*. Our familiarity with the digitalization of our respective fields varied and our methodological challenges related to home blindness varied accordingly. However, we all experienced that we, as well as our interlocutors, were absorbed into what Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2021) call 'digital environments' in multiple ways with implications for our research both methodologically and analytically, but also on a personal level. Drawing on our different yet somewhat similar experiences of conducting research on digitalized social life we ask: What are digital environments and how do they currently shape ethnographic fields? How can we avoid letting our interlocutors' and our own taken-for-granted-ness regarding digital environments curb ethnographic curiosity during fieldwork and analyses? And what is at stake for the fieldworker trying to comply with methodological ideals and expectations and represent the life worlds of her interlocutors, while cultivating her own curiosity and motivation for fieldwork? Our overarching argument is that insights from earlier anthropological debates on home blindness can contribute to a better and more grounded ethnographic understanding of human lives in digital environments and help us rethink the current boundaries of the familiar and non-familiar.

The article consists of two main sections. In the first section, we discuss the concept of digital environments and how it contributes to shaping the field and actualize notions of home blindness. In the second section, we turn to the methodological, personal and professional challenges of 'being ethnographic' (Madden 2017) in digitalized fields, and the reflexive awareness of digital embeddedness that is needed in order to take the digital domain seriously as an emergent dimension of social life, as well as a generative site of/for anthropological analyses. Finally, we discuss what is at stake for anthropological studies in an increasingly digitalized world.

Ethnography in ubiquitous digital environments

Miller and Horst (2021: 23) define the digital as "everything that has been developed by, or can be reduced to, the binary code—that is, bits consisting of 0s and 1s". They further argue that the establishment of binary code has transformed information and communication radically. By bringing together previously disparate technologies and content and changing human practice and meaning-making so thoroughly, digitalization requires anthropologists to ask and answer new questions about human social lives. The subfield Digital Anthropology emerged in the early 2000s to investigate how it is to be human with and in digital technology and culture. In this way, Digital Anthropology emerged to raise new questions not only about the digital as such, but also about the fundamental premise of human life-worlds and thus of ethnography in a digital era.

Several proposals have emerged for 'solving' and launching new methods to incorporate the digital (see e.g., Bluteau, 2019; Bruun and Wahlberg, 2022; Geismar and Knox, 2021; Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016; Ritter, 2021). One approach has been to contextualize and compare people's interaction with digital technology in the offline world (see e.g., Miller, 2016). Another is to conduct ethnographic research exclusively in specific digital spaces, for instance on Instagram, dating apps or other social media (see e.g., Boellstorff, 2015). Others have aimed to go "beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions about personal data" with innovative and creative methods to elicit ordinary people's affective relations and imaginaries concerning their digital data (Lupton and Watson, 2021: 466). While we agree that digital everyday lives raise new methodological challenges, we are also concerned that the emergence of digital technology has led to an over-complication in terms of the methodology needed to grasp digital social life, leading to a perceived but unnecessary methodological 'crisis' (see e.g., Ritter, 2021). Given the many attempts of developing ethnographic methods to fit the digital age, we argue that many scholars forget the inherent flexibility of the ethnographic approach (see however Bluteu, 2019; Dalsgaard, 2016; Walther, 2021; Waltorp, 2020). Rather than being a set of instructions, ethnographic methods have always been designed to emerge from the research problem and the field itself (Madden, 2017).

Pink, Horst and Postill et al.'s non-digital-centric approach contributes to detaching digital ethnography from prefaced digital methods. This is important, we hold, because "digital methods should always be developed and designed specifically in relation to the research questions asked. Some may require digital methods, others not" (Pink et al., 2016: 10). The insistence on focusing on people's worlds and lives as such, digital or not, echoes Hine's (2015) emphasis on the holistic aim enabled by ethnography and her challenge of generalized assumptions about the impact of new technologies. Hine states that anthropologists need to retain commitment to some fundamental ethnographic principles that entail a holistic approach; understanding the field as fluid, emergent and embodied. According to Hine, this is precisely what ethnography is constructed to do. However, she argues, we need an ethnography adapted for "the circumstances that the internet provides" (2015: 6). We strongly sympathize with these arguments and see our contribution as an extension of this idea.

In the Introduction to *The Palgrave Handbook of the Anthropology of Technology* (2022)*,* Bruun and Wahlberg emphasize the importance of fieldwork to capture "experience, embodiment, practices and materialities in the daily lives of those people and institutions involved in the development, manufacturing and deployment and/or use of the particular technologies" (2022: 3). However, as they point out, to understand how technology and social relations are weaved together one needs to go beyond conventional fieldwork for instance by studying technologies from the inside of the digital infrastructure (see e.g., Douglas-Jones et al., 2021; Geismar and Knox, 2021; Knox, 2021a; Maguire and Winthereik, 2019). This is because for most people, social life is digitally embedded, particularly for those who own a smartphone which for many is an extension of the self (Lupton and Watson, 2021). Digital technologies are both visible (e.g., smartphones, drones or GPS in cars) and invisible (e.g., internet cables and storage clouds) and infiltrate almost every facet of daily life. Some devices, such as smartphones and apps, are consciously appropriated, selected or blocked by the users, others less so, while some remain invisible and partly unknown (e.g., algorithms, AI and submarine cables).

All platforms or apps come with networked connectivity and commercial applications through the ubiquitous cookies. The effect of these on our screens, gaze and attention is often far beyond what most users can apprehend. Digitally generated data are integral to how many think about themselves and others, and "being away from the media has become the exception, not the norm, in the contemporary condition" (Boczkowiski and Mitchelstein, 2021: 26; see also Miller et al., 2021). As pointed out by Boczkowski and Michelstein (2021: x), looking into specific effects of digital technology can provide useful insights, however at the risk of "missing the forest for the trees". A similar argument was made by Malinowski a century ago when he in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* famously argued that "an Ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organization cuts out an artificial field for inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work" (1922: 17). Similarly, when studying digitalized social lives, we want to build on the idea that human lives and worlds are best understood as the totality of its interconnected parts—a whole which is more diffuse than the sum of its parts. Comparably, Knox (2021b) points out that technology and the digital is more felt than known, and sensed but not located, which suggests rethinking technology less as an artifact and more as an *environment*. As Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2021) argue, the main consequences of the rise of the digital in the contemporary world is that it has precisely become an environment that envelopes and shapes virtually all major facets of everyday life. Omitting the digital environment in ethnographic studies is thus becoming similar to other ethnographic failings like lacking sufficient language or conducting fieldwork which ignores one gender (Bluteau, 2019: 276). As Douglas-Jones et al. (2021: 9) argue, anthropologists currently find themselves needing to make sense of data—and not only their own—as an emergent ethnographic object. We thus argue for the importance of interrogating the digital as integrated spheres of people's life worlds in analyses, reflecting how the digital is enmeshed with many, even most, spheres of people's lived lives. However, as ethnographers and private persons in a highly digitalized society, *we* are also part of such digital environments. As we will discuss next, this can

easily make us blind to the different digital environments in which we do research and engage in on a day-to-day basis.

Home and digital blindness

The question of how to integrate the digital environments in ethnographic analyses echoes debates in anthropology concerning home blindness (see Frömming et al., 2021). The home blindness debates were mobilized as a critique, or caution, of so-called 'anthropology at home'. However, the epistemological challenges associated with anthropologies at home were never primarily about field location. That cultural and moral communities transcend spatial borders and continents has been widely shown in anthropological literature (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Lien and Melhuus, 2011). Rather, what was at stake was the ability to achieve anthropological insight in the absence of a strong cultural unfamiliarity that often affords the awakening of wonder and curiosity.

Others have problematized the difficulties of researching what is 'mundane' for the researcher (Jackson, 1987; Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992) as 'distance to home' has often been regarded as a fundamental aspect of ethnography (Strathern 1987). Bengtsson (2014: 872) argues that when researchers "stay in their own everyday life while conducting ethnographic research, the structural frames of our own private lives coexist with the frames of the culture we strive to understand". We argue, alongside Bengtsson (2014), that obtaining such distance to home is additionally challenged in digital environments because we often travel into the field without leaving our homes. As digitally literate, many of us are increasingly skilled at being two places at once. This implies sudden collisions, as well as seamless overlaps between home and field environment, such as for instance when having to reply to a Snap-message from a research participant while cooking for kids, or saying goodnight to family on Facetime while fieldworking in distant places. Although numerous studies demonstrate that challenges related to anthropology at home can indeed be overcome, and digital technology and methods have made it easier to follow interlocutors in different contexts and across different scales, we argue that new methodological blind spots are emerging and that it is useful to approach them through notions of home blindness.

Vike (2020) cautions against a certain conflation between the anthropologist's own country or 'society' and a sense of being 'at home'. Vike argues that the notion of being 'generally at home' can make the anthropologist claim familiarity on false premises, forgetting that people within one's own country inhabit quite different worlds. Home blindness can thus be understood as exacerbating an existing tendency to systematically overlook diversity and structural difference in one's own society. Home blindness may thus deepen false assumptions about (imagined) equality that mask asymmetries and racism (Gullestad, 2006), not least in the Nordic countries where egalitarianism is a strong social value (Bruun et al., 2011; Lien et al., 2001). This makes thick descriptions and attention to hierarchy and stratification particularly important for Nordic ethnography of digital sociality and digital environments.

Contemporary Norwegian society should indeed be seen as a digital environment. The Norwegian government has as an ambition to be a global leader within the digitalization

of public services (Astrup, 2019) and the country is consistently ranked as one of the most digitalized countries in the world, with high scores in broadband connectivity, internet use, business digitalization, digital public services, and digital skills (European Commission, 2022). Due to their high level of digital literacy, many Norwegians no longer think twice about having online consultations with their doctor, do all banking services from their phone, google information on the go, working from a home office in a remote mountain village, or organize one's social life through a number of apps. Many Norwegians, including ethnographers like us who live our everyday lives in the midst of such digital environments, are increasingly 'blind' to the pervasiveness of digital technology in our everyday lives—and its implications. For instance, few middle-class citizens in Norway may be aware that 3% of the adult population does not use internet at all and that 11% (about 600,000 persons) have very low digital skills (Schøyen et al., 2022). There are currently groups with low education, low-income, persons outside the labor market and elderly people that are risking exclusion from crucial public services because of digital inabilities—and who are struggling to 'hang on' (see Perminow, 2022). Many Norwegians were shocked when, in 2022, news spread that several elderly citizens received notifications that their bank accounts would be deleted if they failed to verify their user identity digitally. The action followed a government requirement that banks authenticate their customers to help minimize risks of identity theft, scam and money laundering (Eliassen and Sirum-Eikre, 2022). This case is just one of many examples of how digital blindness among public servants and people in the business sector alike may exacerbate existing inequalities regarding citizens capacities to participate in society.

We argue that because digital environments are continuously naturalized as a part of people's everyday lives, they easily pass under the radar of even the most experienced ethnographer as well. We thus need to ask ourselves when the digital should be singled out and not, methodologically and analytically—when it is an element that deserves explicit focus and when it can be left in the background. As is the case with ethnography in general, the approach should depend on the specificities of the situation and phenomena and require that the ethnographer is aware of one's potential blindness to the familiar. In the next section we examine our own field experiences of (digital) home blindness before moving into a discussion on how such challenges are simultaneously sources of ethnographic insight.

Digitally embedded fieldwork: Affective responses and epistemic anxiety

With classic ethnographic immersion into the field as a methodological strategy, fieldwork in digital environments calls for a serious effort on part of the ethnographer to craft an identity on the social media platforms used by their interlocutors. But what exactly does that imply and how does it shape ethnographic relations? How does it affect our situated positioning as ethnographers? To shed light on these questions, we will now discuss our experiences from four different fieldworks on digitalized everyday lives in Norway.

Broch followed urban and rural young adults, 20 years younger than herself, in their everyday life as they forged relationships, performed identity work and pursued their

aspirations through online and offline practices. Salinas worked among minority artists in Oslo whose experiences with racialized exclusion echoed her own as an immigrant to Norway, examining how they use social media to affect the politics of belonging in Norway. Bratrud did fieldwork in a Norwegian rural valley close to where he grew up, with a focus on new socio-political dynamics enabled by digital technology, while Lien, herself from South Norway, worked among Sami reindeer herders in North Norway, investigating the digitalization in and of reindeer herding practices in a region which was both familiar and unfamiliar. Thus, we all conducted fieldwork in our own society where some experiences are shared, but where we also found ourselves entering unknown social, cultural, emotional and political territories as part of our respective fieldwork practice. Aware of the need to reflect critically on home blindness, including notions of morality, personhood, egalitarian ideals and humor, what took us all by surprise was our shared experiences of home blindness towards the presence of digital media and digital tech-nology in our participants' relations and everyday lives, and hence in our informal modes of communication with research participants (e.g., frequent text messages and chatting through different apps). During fieldwork, it was also easy to *not* notice our interlocutors' varied uses of digital media and technology, not least because they often took it for granted that *we already knew* due to our shared belonging in a highly digitalized society.

Furthermore, as we tried to compensate for this ignorance, and be more attentive to digital modes of communicating, we found ourselves mentally exhausted and occa-sionally disengaged. Suddenly, our everyday fieldwork lives required concurrent and persistent use of apps, screens and other digital tools. This came in addition to following people around in their offline worlds, a practice we were all used to from previous (less digitalized) fieldwork experiences. We thus had a shared and immediate experience that digital ethnographic immersion can be exhausting, drawing both time and energy, but also diverting, or exhausting our ability for analytical and theoretical focus.

Academic life is already filled with a lot of screen time and digital tools are everyday fares. For some of us, the thought of studying 'the digital' brought a concern about falling into a hole of continuous feeds and scrolling. For others, the experience of intensely 'being there' on social media platforms was so emotionally exhausting that a break, or boundary against that experience, became necessary. If we identified 'technostress' (Bondanini et al., 2020) among our interlocutors—that is, the stress generated by the expectation to always be connected and within reach, we also experienced this form of stress ourselves. Whether we reluctantly resisted for a while or dived into it whole-heartedly, we all experienced that our relation to the digital domain was an affective relation from the get-go, charged by previous experiences and by individual differences regarding technical skills and digital literacy. In this sense, digital situatedness may be even more open-ended and diverse than the cultural familiarity making up conventional notions of field familiarity. This, then, creates unexpected challenges and personal differences regarding home blindness. Let us offer some examples.

When starting his fieldwork in rural Norway, Bratrud tried his best to postpone his engagement with interlocutors on digital platforms, other than in ways he was used to from everyday life, including text messages (SMS, Messenger and WhatsApp), being friends on Facebook, and mutual following on Instagram with the occasional like and

comment. He could have gotten away with this if it was not for the way he was confronted by Salinas and Broch who both had had to dive into the pleasures and pains of social media platforms from the very start of their respective fieldwork. He found a way out of his digital 'blind spot' after a conversation with Karen Waltorp whose work on everyday life among Muslim women in Denmark inspired him to engage in comparison with his earlier field experiences from Melanesian Island settings (see e.g., Bratrud 2022). Waltorp suggested he juxtaposed digital social arenas with social arenas in the Melanesian village: Instagram could be re-imagined to be the crop market, TikTok the church and Snapchat the secret men's house. By transforming what he pre-conceived to be the dreary black holes of social media into social arenas that were in fact significant for his interlocutors, Bratrud was able to overcome his reluctance towards fieldwork in the digital domain and thus also parts of his initial home blindness. Was Bratrud's initial approach less valid, or less professional than that of Salinas and Broch? We maintain that it was not, as with all ethnographic encounters, we relate with all our senses, fully aware that our own positionality shapes our field for better or for worse. Moreover, it shows that every perspective is situated and provides a view from *somewhere* (see Haraway, 1988). Reflexive awareness, not least when dealing with one's own shortcomings, is hugely important when negotiating methodological approaches as well as conducting analysis. Confronting his own hesitation to spend more time on screens and digital platforms made Bratrud overcome some of his initial constraints.

For Broch and Salinas the initial phases of fieldwork coincided with the first pandemic lockdown in Norway. What was imagined as a robust and holistic immersion online and offline, became reduced to first and foremost digital encounters. Online fieldwork was, however, not satisfying; observing, and talking through a screen felt highly limiting and scheduled. Ironically, however, the beginning of the offline fieldwork became a treasure hunt for the 'digital' and a fear of missing out, a paradox we all experienced. Our affective experience of digital immersion turned into an epistemic anxiety in relation to ethnographic practice.

As our shared project focused on digital sociality in everyday lives in Norway, we initially thought the smartphone had to be a central part of our study (see Eriksen, 2021; Miller, 2021). If our interlocutors' smartphones were not visible, we initially assumed that nothing relevant happened for our understanding of everyday life and the digital. Conventional ethnographic methods, as well as our previous fieldwork experiences had taught us the value of going with the flow and participating in our interlocutors' everyday lives. We had learned that insight emerged out of the different contexts we were part of. How could we mimic this strategy, while incorporating the digital dimension? Where and what constitutes contexts for digitalized social lives?

Seeking to overcome such epistemic anxiety we found ourselves inventing exercises that more or less forced our interlocutors to display and reflect on their digital lives to make it explicit. We started to ask questions including "can you please make a map of your phone?", "will you scroll through your Instagram with me?", "can you list all digital technologies used in relation to reindeer herding practices?" These were awkward questions that we asked to make our interlocutors 'reveal' their digital ways. Our capacity for observation gave way to our more or less desperate search for 'the digital', as if it was a

'thing' to look for. For a while, it was as if our understanding depended on forcefully making the implicit explicit, selectively mining our social encounters for traces of the digital that we could subsequently put on display. In hindsight, we have asked ourselves: Why did we try so hard? Why did we even start to look for methods that often brought us, and our interlocutors, out of synch, disrupting an otherwise fruitful flow of interaction and conversation, forcing interlocutors to dissociate or detach what for them was part of a more seamless continuum in how they live their lives?

A partial answer is that we could not assume that our interlocutors' digital practices would be familiar, legible, or even recognizable to us. Hence, a certain effort towards mapping their digital practices seemed necessary, yet awkward. *Not* doing so could potentially have exacerbated forms of digital home blindness by wrongly assuming homogeneity, or sharedness (see Vike, 2020). However, once we had a reasonable sense of what digital practices entailed, we decided to try less; to let go, and just be present in the field and trust what we knew as participant ethnographic methods. Ethnographic fieldwork is about following people wherever they take you, letting relationships develop at their own pace. Sometimes we were added to participants' digital social groups and followed them on different platforms. Other times we were not, and traced instead the presence of such boundaries between inside(r)s and outside(r)s. When included, we observed and took part in social lives online, such as closed Facebook groups, Instagram accounts, or the fitness app Strava—some of which were thematically oriented and others which were composed of professional networks or groups of friends. This gave us background observations to bring into face-to-face encounters, just as our interlocutors brought their online observations to *their* everyday face-to-face interactions.

As we stopped searching explicitly for digital social life and opened our eyes to the digital environments constituting our interlocutors' everyday lives, we became more attentive to the way digital media and technology facilitated, or challenged, relational encounters, hierarchies and access to knowledge. We took part in non-digitalized moments, such as gatherings at cafés and around the TV with phone screens down, or when artists deeply engaged in their artistic process or at a demonstration put their phones away in purses or pockets. Or we sensed Arctic winter temperatures that prevented reindeer herders more than a few seconds of finger-tapping on their cell phones. These moments of non-digital activities were just as important as those when a GPS program revealed the precise location of a missing reindeer, the entries on Strava revealed a particularly strenuous mountain hike, or those nights where Snapchat showed the location of a boyfriend somewhere he should not be. These were all moments that changed the way our interlocutors related to themselves and their surroundings, demonstrating the agentive properties of their digital media and technologies in ways that would not have been the same without them.

In the following, we introduce some flashpoints of our experiences when immersing ourselves in our interlocutors' digital environments and show how this impacted our own everyday life.

Ethnographic experiences in digital environments

Hurray! A message ticked in after the party last night. It's a group chat from Brita, the social motor in the group. The group chat seems to be created for this occasion only. Not everyone from the party was included, although I thought they were all close friends. I get a feeling of breakthrough: Brita's message makes me feel included in an inner social circle. But what about the other events and invitations where I am not included? "Come join us", "meet up at midnight", beeping telling us that someone posted. All of it leading to other possibly interesting and useful threads—ending up in mindless scrolling as hours tick by.

Scrolling, endless hours of scrolling. Looking at other interlocutors; they do it better than me, why do I not have the energy to follow up like they do? Looking at people outdoors or in their atelier, working the paintbrush. Looking at beautiful bodies and faces, always full of energy and with healthy colorful food on their plate. Looking at people working out, traveling, meeting up with friends and dancing to a concert. Looking at people fighting for justice online one day and demonstrating in front of parliament the next. Standing in the split between fieldwork, dinner, bedtime and Instagram and a growing set of grey hair. How do they, our young and elder participants and activists, cope? How do they manage to be content with their life and self? It takes a toll to be on these platforms. It visualizes all the things to wish for, all the things one wants to be good at and make happen and fight for. And the information flow never ends.

Digital technology opened fields for us all. As the personal vignettes above demonstrate, immersing ourselves in our interlocutors' digital environments also had its costs. By joining common apps, sharing content, communicating, and observing online, our digital fieldwork practices broadened our understanding and knowledge of digital communication, digital activism as well as digital fatigue. We are all bound to the non-digital world in one way or the other. But what are the consequences of being in the field both non-digitally and digitally? And is this distinction even meaningful? Which rooms do we enter, and for how long do we stay? When and where should we draw boundaries?

On my way to Oslo to meet Elinore, a two-hour train ride from home, a message ticks in: "Hey, I am on my way to Sweden. See you soon? <3". The tension sits in the shoulders, creeping up behind the ears and pokes at a headache, and it should repeat itself. Later that summer while I am on vacation with my kids, I am overly happy about an opportunity that pops up. If I leave the next day and make my three-hour drive back home, I can hang out with Sara for the rest of the week. As I have parked the car, I send a message telling her I am back and ready to meet up the day after: "Oh, I just left for Oslo and will stay there the rest of the week. You just must visit and hang out here". Why did I not call them before I left? Because no-one calls each other anymore, and the young ones, at least in this study, live in the moment, constantly on the move, apparently without a need to plan. There is always someone there. Not making a commitment is smart, something better might pop up.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork online became a rollercoaster of ups and downs. It also became a learning arena of intimacy, inclusion and exclusion, as Lien experienced during fieldwork among reindeer owners. A complex set of digital tools ranging from electronic ID ear tags, to GPS tracking collars and drones, turned out to have the potential for scaling-up, but also for concealing information. While vital information about the herd (weight, fecundity etc.) is publicly available through mandatory reporting, the animals' movement in the landscape is not. GPS collars reveal locations, but access to the password protected website that shows these maps is controlled by the research institute that supplies the collars and uses them for research, and only shared with reindeer owners. Yet, such data are now mobilized in legal battles against mining and windmills, enacting a shift of upscaling in which reindeer's fear of noise from machinery, becomes a fact that can no longer be ignored. GPS data thus enact both new boundaries and new modes of knowing, which Lien could easily have overlooked if she had not paid attention to their digital practices. Yet, exclusion in one digital realm was made up for by inclusion in another: Their recent appropriation of drones, created new opportunities for sharing. Some research participants produced mind-blowing drone-videos, from territories that were hard to access otherwise. Watching reindeer videoclips together at a kitchen table, thus became a way of sharing their experiences and affective attachment, creating a shared space for wonder about the animals' movements and their beauty, which was hugely facilitated through their digitalized way of 'being in the landscape'. Again, this shows that pushing for participation in the digital worlds of our interlocutors can teach us about social boundaries, unspoken rules and limited circuits of information, but also sometimes surprising moments of closeness and sharing. While we have found it is certainly worth the effort, it is also hard work, as this extract from Broch's fieldnotes shows:

> Waking up in the middle of the night, *Snap*, I forgot to send it to her. Now our 'streak', reflecting the number of consecutive days we had been sending Snaps to each other, was gone. The next morning, I woke up to a Snap message telling me to get my act together, we need to keep that score, so I am on top of her list. That way she does not forget me! I think it is a way of manifesting for her that I care about her too, that the number of messages sent and received tells her that I have her on my mind. It is hard though, pending between field, children, and other obligations – I do forget at times, or I send her a message the wrong way so that it does not count as a streak.

The information received online disappears fast. Both Snapchat and Instagram provide short-lived stories, sometimes you get a notification, sometimes not. This forces a conscientious effort to constantly be on guard. Not everyone feeds stories every day, what if a story is missed? This constant search for information, or data material, and its availability on several platforms forges a demand to check if anything new has happened. The restless need to constantly check for updates that Salinas experienced, in her work with activists led to countless hours watching negative news about racism, discrimination, war, trauma, neglect, abuse, and dystopic images of the future that her research participants posted and shared, was psychologically draining. At times it could lead to 'doom scrolling'—that is, "the compulsive seeking-out of bad news, which leads to feelings of

despair" (Saindon, 2021: 1). Even without the upsetting newsfeeds, several of us ex-perienced a constant beeping on our phones as an emotional burden. All of us experienced how mindless scrolling led to fatigue and feelings of our own shortcomings.

A fieldworker cannot be many places at once, and social media can become a constant reminder of everything one is missing out of. The shortcomings are manifold, and they beep in during dinner, at night and in the morning, at weekends and while in the field with other participants. The doors are never closed, it feels like—or the doors that *are* closed are not visible, some are closed along the way through a message thread. This feels different than the physical fieldwork, but is it? Adding the digital aspects of social media to participant observation amplifies the weight of 'patchwork ethnography'—that is, continuous trials of patching together something pertinent to achieve continuity in fieldwork in a busy everyday life (see Günel et al., 2020). Doing fieldwork in digital environments and being aware of it, requires new ways of handling and setting limits. It compels us to take a stand as to how much availability one can stand, to think through how to open but also close doors while in the field. When digital environments were less significant in our everyday lives, most ethnographers could retreat to a bedroom after a long day of fieldwork and close the door. Now, however, the field is ever present, in our hands, inviting us to have a peek, even from our bed. These are some of the consequences following from our efforts to take the intensity of our shared digital environment seriously.

As our short ethnographic vignettes above illustrate, what happens online highly affects movements, feelings and other experiences in the offline world. Moreover, it is not necessarily useful to focus on the digital as a separate domain; by doing so our meth-odological and analytical attention might quickly be drawn to the digital as a separate location. Rather, by using methodological and analytical strategies developed through ethnographies in familiar surroundings, we may more easily acknowledge the digital as *environments* that are a mutual permeation of the virtual and the physical world (Frömming et al., 2021: 14). We thus suggest that social relations should still be the point of departure, regardless of which platforms they operate from, and let studies of the digital grow out of a conventional fieldwork approach that is first and foremost attentive to what people do and how they move about, digitally and otherwise.

Anthropologists can easily overlook the implications of what it means to live in digital environments. Therefore, we also need to challenge the dichotomy between online and offline fieldwork and look for how digital tools have become embodied and enmeshed in the everyday—not only as practices but as contexts—seeping in, surrounding us just like the air we breathe. However, we need to simultaneously acknowledge that some distinct skills are needed to study and understand the digital. Anthropologists have always navigated different social settings, responding to various social cues, and making ap-propriate use technologies, mediawise and otherwise (see Pink et al., 2016: 109). As we increasingly live in digital environments, we need to mobilise established strategies of 'un-familiarization'. We argue that engaging in discussions on home blindness, asking what 'home' is and what it entails for our anthropological gaze, can open up the field and bring the digital forth without having to use a digital tool kit that may distract our attention from the enmeshed offline and online elements in digital environments.

Concluding discussion

Gary Larson's famous Far Side cartoon picturing villagers in a straw-hut rushing to hide TV-sets and video recorders while one-man shouts "ANTHROPOLOGISTS!" aptly conveys traditional ethnographers' inclination to highlight 'uncontaminated' social and cultural life, while overlooking globalization and technological change. While such disciplinary prejudice is largely overcome, the digital turn brings a similar challenge. Are we prepared to address profound shifts in practices of sociality and practices that digital technology and social media facilitate? Or will they remain hidden from view in much the same way as the TV-set in Larson's cartoon?

We have argued that as digital environments increasingly embed everyday sociality and practices, constituting social fields for ethnographers and interlocutors alike, we may benefit from reviewing earlier debates and concerns on 'anthropology at home'. Mobilizing insights and experiences on how to overcome the challenges of home blindness can help us notice 'the forest for the trees', sensitizing ethnographers to the ever-more intense penetration of digital tools in a widening range of social domains. We have proposed attention to the challenges that come with digitalized immersions, and advocated reflections on the making and unmaking of social and practical boundaries to handle digital fatigue and feelings of being left out.

Following Bengtsson (2014) we have demonstrated how engaging with digital domains affects the researcher as an embodied subject offline as well as online. Moreover, ethnographic research online may intensify well-known fieldwork experiences as the boundaries between 'field' and 'private home' are increasingly blurred. Instead of going home for analytical and mental distance, the field spills over into our private sphere through messages, notifications and algorithms that invite us to follow, or click on relevant persons or cases that might open or push our fieldwork further. We can get lost in an eternal hunt led by algorithms, curiosity, and digital possibilities, in a bottomless web (see Bengtsson, 2014; Ruckenstein, 2023). Research participants may turn their phone off and make themselves unavailable. However, that is not an option as a researcher. We might miss out on a lead, an invitation, an event or interlocutors' change of plans. The urge to be included and anxiety of missing out in the vast digital environment can easily lead to technostress, as described earlier, for our interlocutors but also to a large extent for us as ethnographers. We suggest that a methodological focus on digital boundaries of exclusion and inclusion is important to understand the constitution of many social networks today, and that ethnographers' own digital practices are key to such insights. All of this suggests a greater attention to the digital dimension of everyday life as part of nearly any, or at least many, kinds of fieldwork. This should, however, not be seen as an enthusiastic embrace of Digital Anthropology or Digital Methods as a subdiscipline and its own sets of tools. On the contrary, we propose that digital 'literacy' is taken up as part and parcel of the ethnographic method as it is taught and practiced by anthropologists. We believe that such broad engagement is necessary in order for anthropologists to grasp many forms of social change taking place today. Some questions may warrant the use of specifically digital methods, others do not. What we need is anthropological research that embed the digital in their ethnography through thick descriptions that take the digital

dimension seriously, while not setting it apart. Simultaneously, we need to remind ourselves that ethnographers have never had access to every aspect of people's lives. Most ethnographers recognize the fear of not being included and missing important events. However, we find the ubiquity of the digital environments, making up a fieldwork context as well as our personal lives, to intensify feelings of potential exclusion and inadequacy. We may be blind to the digital due to its familiarity, but also because it implies a constant option for scaling-up, and hence a constant need for delineating the field, reconsidering the relevance of our chosen interlocutors, and topics, again and again.

To conclude, embracing the digital turn within the ethnographic approach may re-vitalize our understanding not only of media technology and social media platforms, but of unprecedented modes of gathering, or of making collectives in the contemporary world. This is fundamental to reach a better understanding of polarization, identity formation and the conditions for democracy at large. Attention to digital data, "both the 'realities' that they trace and the realities that they produce", is fundamental for un-derstanding contemporary modes of knowing and their world-making as well as world-framing effects (Knox, 2021a: 109). Moreover, understanding the impact of the digital turn is key to addressing the challenges represented by transnational digital tech giants and their role as gatekeepers of digital communication. *Not* addressing these issues, but staying *home blind* to them, is associated with a risk that anthropology will have less to say about fundamental global challenges and leave the question of digital policy to disciplines with less holistic ambitions.

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