

# Digital Ethnographies

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This issue of the *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* takes as its theme ‘Digital Ethnographies’. This theme presents many challenges – challenges of interpretation, as well as application. The first is the almost customary challenge of acknowledging the dual meaning of ethnography as a research methodology and a product or outcome of a research process. The second is the consideration of the ways ethnographic data can be used in contemporary scholarship, whether one is interested in emergent online communities or more traditional contexts. The third is the possibilities of electronic publication for the use of ethnographic data recorded in digital forms.

The five articles in this issue address these challenges in different ways. The articles by Jon Marshall and Dana Walker explore challenge of applying ethnographic principles and approaches to the study of communities in the virtual world – and the relationship between the virtual and ‘actual’. Marshall interrogates the issues which arise from the hidden and ambiguous nature of online life. He argues that ultimately, ethnography and online daily life are similar procedures in which people go about constructing ‘culture’ to make sense of others and interact with a degree of predictability. Ethnographers can learn about culture and society by learning how people themselves go about understanding and making those processes. There is no overarching single vision. Any understanding is always based in interpretation, experience and conflict. Ethnography is not above, but within, cultural interaction. Walker is concerned with the digital aspect of cultural practices and explores the question of how to construct the location of a project when it cannot be easily placed either online or offline. For her this is both a methodological and a theoretical question and she uses her own work on city-specific discussion forums in Philadelphia to highlight the complexities of this issue and to challenge the conventional wisdom that space and place are irrelevant in cyberspace. These articles should both provide useful guidance and generate debate amongst other researchers interested in applying ethnographic approaches to online contexts.

Peter Read and Suzana Sukovic describe a project which attempts to digitally reconstruct the Aboriginal history of Sydney. The project incorporates new and forgotten material in a knowledge base of post-invasion Aboriginal history, using tagging, timelines and digital mapping to provide multiple paths to the text, videos, still images (and in the future 3D reconstructions) to be found in the knowledge base. The project, which involves close cooperation with Indigenous people, aims to make this digital history available as an educational and cultural resource.

The articles by Andrew Jakubowicz and Mara Moustafine and James Goodman, Rebecca Pearse and Stuart Rosewarne demonstrate how electronic publication enables ethnographic data to be presented in digital form, rather than merely being transformed into the static medium of text. In doing so, they explore not only new ways for ethnographic research can be carried out but also disseminated. In their exploration of the transformation of public space in Melbourne, Jakubowicz and Moustafine present the words of participants in their study as digital video as well as text. Instead of using footnotes, they use the technologies to link to websites and other sources of more detailed information, allowing the reader to explore these aspects in the level of details which suits them. They have used the complementary technology of a blog to encourage readers to provide comment and feedback on the article. Goodman, Pearse and Rosewarne are developing a video ethnography of climate agency. In this report of a longitudinal study, they track activist strategising as a reflexive process of creating agency and use photographs and videoed interviews to deepen insights into the contexts for climate activist praxis.

This issue is significant as an acknowledgement of the future of scholarship, where new technologies narrow the gap and blur the boundaries between study participant, researcher and 'reader'. The articles by Read and Sukovic, Jakubowicz and Moustafine and Goodman, Pearse and Rosewarne offer glimpses of how digitally recorded data can be used and re-used to create new knowledges and understandings. They offer a glimpse into a new genre of scholarship, one which transcends the mono-modal narrative form of the traditional printed article. The editors of the *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* expect that the articles in this issue of the journal will be the first among many to explore the implications of digital representations and electronic forms of publication for research and scholarship.