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Vignette 4

Internet Techniques for an Untimely Anthropology

Meg Stalcup

GM: But what again is untimeliness? How do we teach students to produce that?

PR: Well, I think that's a big question. The term is taken from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* and used to mark a critical distance from the present that seeks to establish a relationship to the present different from reigning opinion.

—George Marcus and Paul Rabinow,
Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary

Picture a classroom: the students are seated with their phones in front of them or an open laptop. A piece of paper and a pen are at hand. Voices merge into a low hum as they point at the screens, explaining to one another an experience so familiar that they have never before put it into words.

The task is to go to a website and use it. They take notes on what draws the eye, where they want to click, and such thoughts as occur to them, by habit or summoned through the curious externalizing nature of the exercise. We come back together as a group, and one student walks us through his navigation of the foreign-language version of a popular video repository. “Even though I don’t know what is written, the site makes it easy. I kind of automatically knew what they wanted when the box popped up—I had to allow cookies.” The other students chime in, discussing the colors and layout. He continues,

I like to look at videos when I get home at the end of the day. I just click around. So here I did what I usually do, which is scroll down to see the number of views and comments. I watch something and let the next video come up, because it knows the kind of thing I like. I don’t have an account here though and so the video that came up was random.

The goal of the exercise is to practice participant observation where many people now spend a significant portion of their time: online. Individuals access the Internet throughout the day, from work, school, a public street, or home. It can be a required component of those parts of life, or a break from them. As Annette Markham writes, “We carry the internet with us in our pockets”; for her research subjects, it is “so ubiquitous we don’t think much *about* it at all, we just think *through* it” (2016: 1, emphasis in original). In the context of the exercise, the students pay attention to this infrastructure. They begin to see things, such as the algorithmic experience of having videos chosen for them. They agree that this kind of scrolling is physically relaxing. It is a pastime they note they have in common, even though they do it largely alone.

Another student poked around a site where people post medical questions and doctors respond. She went on to do a semester-long project examining how young women get information on reproductive health and found that they do not “just Google it” (Richards 2018). Their approaches included Internet searches and pornography. Rather than

an endpoint, however, online information was fodder for debate and conversations with friends, family, clergy, and clinicians. Her research, too, tacked back and forth between the Internet and other sites. She met with members of a university-based sexual health promotion team; did interviews with them, a women's health blogger, and a nurse practitioner; and talked to peers about their personal histories and experiences learning about their bodies, birth control, and sex.

The students were employing Internet techniques, which are practices in the fieldwork repertoire adapted to blend online and offline, much as they are blended in people's lives. A list, which can only ever be partial, includes:

- maintaining and making relationships through social networking services and mobile instant messengers;
- observing the ways that people interact in and with online spaces;
- participating in wholly or partially online groups;
- learning skills for and in these milieus;
- asking digitally mediated questions (whether formally in arranged interviews or not);
- and exploring the many ways that all of this can be recorded and archived.

Casual conversation in a messaging app will produce an exportable file, but to remember the experience of that chat, the researcher might still take notes and incorporate them later. Understanding the other person's experience could require meeting face-to-face. Technology can be the focus of the research but not necessarily. As in the study of women's health information, Internet techniques come into play because digital technologies are part of people's lives. Their addition to anthropology's toolbox has come about as computer-mediating assemblages have become ordinary for many research subjects. Algorithms, big data and machine learning producing artificial intelligence (AI), access and lack of access to the Internet, and other aspects of the digital are significant shapers of existence (human and nonhuman) today. To the extent that lives involve these technologies, anthropological inquiry will too.

Just such making "the familiar strange and the strange familiar" is what anthropology has long claimed as its expertise (see Myers 2011). The Internet and its broader technological problem space pose methodological challenges, however, for a discipline that has traditionally drawn on the authority of "being there" to ground its claims to knowledge. What do we do when a phenomenon has global ramifications, but we still need to choose specific places to go? As we analyze what is available to us through social media, how can we get a sense of what remains unsaid? How do we identify anthropological objects when technological

ones are always changing? More broadly, what kind of anthropology might be able to address the movement that materializes in, but is not unique to, technological innovations?

Internet techniques are not answers, but ways of taking these questions to the field. They are tools to be employed in response to specific situations and goals. Developing anthropological practice for an ever-moving world is, withal, more than just a matter of techniques. Critically, it is about a mode of inquiry that can be called the “untimely” in which such techniques are used. The untimely is, as Gilles Deleuze put it, a state of becoming that is inopportune (*intempestif*), and, in Paul Rabinow’s conceptualization, ill-timed, inconvenient—and thus appropriate for thinking (2011: 60–62). The digital connotes speed and the ongoing emergence of novelty, inviting similarly timed and urgent responses. This makes it both harder and more requisite for the anthropologist to seek, per our epigraph, “a relationship to the present different from reigning opinion” (Rabinow et al. 2008: 59). Although discussed in breathless terms of futurism or, alternatively, as sensationalistic doom-saying, the issues that concern people about the Internet or algorithmic governance—trust, truth, privacy, security, freedom, individuality, intimacy—are better thought of as “perennial” (Langlitz 2013: 251). Such terms reference enduring ethical and political problems, now showing up in contemporary circumstances and configurations deeply entwined with digital media and related technologies.

If anthropology is to have anything of importance to say, it will not move strictly in time with the world it studies and problems as they are presented, by the news media, tacit disciplinary norms, or academic fads. It will seek instead an untimeliness that comes, at least partly, George Marcus suggests, from being in time with, and holding oneself accountable to, the substance and relations of one’s fieldwork (in Rabinow et al. 2008: 60). The recompense is the possibility of producing something inopportune in that it “disrupts those existing things and relations and changes their tone, register, and directionality,” yet appropriate, “at least retrospectively in that it reconfigures existing things and relations” (in Rabinow 2011: 60).

In an untimely mode, one might design a project that, as Christine Hine proposes (2015), takes as preliminary problem-spaces the “embedded, embodied, and everyday.” Digital phenomena are thoroughly embedded in people’s lives. It is untimely to argue that what the Internet is for different people is surely multiple and not yet settled, when most have already leapfrogged to trying solve the problems “it” presents. Observation and asking questions are therefore necessary to grasp meaning and significance they are ascribed in those contexts. One would also

look at how being online or the subject of algorithms is an embodied extension of the ways we are gendered, racialized, and classed in the world more generally. Underlying inequalities still structure access to the Internet, while facial recognition and search engines have racial biases (Hine 2015: 6; Noble 2018). Research therefore needs to attend to the discursive erasures yet continued reality of embodiment (Amrute 2016). Finally, the Internet, algorithms, and artificial intelligence are in many ways the infrastructure of the everyday. The dual task this presents is studying when and why this infrastructure takes center stage, as it has with fears about online radicalization to violence or electoral manipulation, and calling it back to attention when naturalized and overlooked.



Turning the Gaze

~~At my own screen, from my office, side by side and face-to-face, I have posed (naïve) questions and have in turn been redirected toward people, projects, and perspectives that were more in tune with the folks with whom I was working and who were integral to my research. What I came to understand is that as members of an intensely researched population, Inuit in communities across Canada's North strategically negotiate the terms under which they will participate: the research must foreground their interests and priorities. The phrase "not about me without me" refers to a sovereignty of subjectivity both within our interactions and across academic work. And so, my journey as a researcher meant that my own curiosities were set aside and I learned to begin projects by first asking people about their own interests and concerns. It became a multiview, multitextual, multidimensional journey with the intention of understanding and conveying multiple perspectives and variant stories.~~

~~Cruikshank argues that storytelling is a practice that is part of everyday life; it is a "framework for understanding historical and contemporary issues" (2005: 60). Part of my story in this telling is a mix of hubris, education, and coming to understand some things. In a chat about dogs with a young man, for example, I assumed that I was adding something thoughtful to a conversation about the traditional importance of dogs to the Inuit: "Some people think of them like their children," I said. "Except that you can eat them," my lunch companion replied. I could not tell if he was pulling my leg, but I was pretty sure that I saw a flash of irritation on his face. I had a pit in my stomach and worried that I had betrayed my lack of experience, my naïveté, my~~

Notes

Epigraph: Smith 1999: 176. Epigraph in Vignette 4: Rabinow et al. 2008: 59.

1. From the perspective of Inuit, Canadians who live outside of Inuit Nunangat are in the “south.” This chapter reflects that viewpoint.
2. Dr. Julie Cruikshank is the recipient the of 2019 Northern Science Award for her research with Athapaskan and Tlingit elders exploring and recording their knowledge systems and for building “a foundation of respectful relationships” that have helped “Yukon First Nations recognize and honour the strengths of their cultural traditions” (Polar Knowledge Canada, 2019).

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