

Features and form: Appropriating digital storytelling for public ethnography

Ethnography

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Abstract

Ethnography may have a unique capacity to capture the attention of non-academic publics, but if it remains tied to conventional publication and dissemination strategies, this capacity will remain unrealized. This article examines the possibilities and challenges of appropriating digital storytelling for public ethnography. To do so, we consider how two key features of digital storytelling platforms—multimodality and multilinearity—can help ethnographers make public ethnography. We show how these features can be used by ethnographers to publicize and politicize ethnographic accounts and translate descriptive and theory-driven ethnography for non-traditional audiences. Making effective use of multimodality and multilinearity has practical and epistemological implications. Appropriating digital storytelling for public ethnography recasts how ethnographers use theory, create and configure ethnographic data, deploy interpretive and evaluative schema, and structure accounts. Though challenging and potentially risky, we contend that if ethnographers want to make a difference, they should experiment with making ethnography differently.

Keywords

Public ethnography, digital ethnography, digital storytelling, ethnographic writing, ethnographic representation, multilinearity, multimodality, public sociology

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Introduction

Ethnography may have a unique capacity to capture the attention of non-academic publics, but this capacity remains largely unrealized (Fassin, 2013; Gans, 2010). Ethnographers often report on topics of general interest, from the extraordinary to the mundane, and rely on widely familiar narrative styles that include dialogue, anecdote, and description. Not only do ethnography's rhetorical and substantive characteristics appeal to general audiences, so does its implied research method (Vannini, 2019). The idea that researchers may learn about others directly through immersion and sustained dialogue resonates powerfully (Gans, 2010; Vannini, 2019). Consider, for example, the recent popularity of Matthew Desmond's (2016) *Evicted*, Didier Fassin's (2016) *Prison Worlds*, and Arlie Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land*. These ethnographies have not only attracted a broad readership but also intervened in public debate on critical and timely social issues. While these examples highlight the possibility of public ethnography, they remain outliers; public ethnography is still far from the norm.

Recent calls encouraging scholars to engage in public debate and produce more public-facing research emphasize the potential of digital media to enhance our public efforts and attract a broader audience (Cohen, 2019; Daniels et al., 2016; Healy, 2017; Stein and Daniels, 2017; Sternheimer, 2018; Vannini and Milne, n.d.).¹ Scholars are advised to leverage digital social media to circulate and publicize their work more broadly (Daniels et al., 2016; Healy, 2017; Stein and Daniels, 2017). Given the ubiquity of digital media in everyday life, embracing new forms of multimedia communication is seen as a way to convey scholarly insights in formats that are more legible and accessible (Vannini and Milne, n.d.).

While the advice that scholars can and should embrace digital media as part of a broader public strategy is welcome, it is not clear how it relates to ethnography. Ethnographers can post their work on open-source digital platforms (e.g. the Center for Open Science), use multimedia formats like podcasts and video abstracts, or pair multimedia files with published articles or books. Yet, much of the advice about digital dissemination is unsuited for ethnography. By and large, ethnography does not lend itself easily to pithy tweets, soundbites, or parsimonious data visualizations. The strength of ethnography lies in its sustained gaze, detailed description, attention to complexity, and capacity for contextualization. These are features that remain almost confined to the favored (if not fetishized) form: the book-length monograph.² And yet, what makes ethnography potentially attractive for diverse publics is that ethnographers share the "public's predilection for intimate, personable, context-bound, curiosity-evoking renditions of life" (Vannini, 2019: 6; see also Vannini and Milne, n.d.).

Our point of departure is, as Fassin (2017: 392) argues, that public ethnography demands scholars leave the "confines of the academic world" and the "typical modes of expression and channels of dissemination". If scholars "need not be confined to the written word" (Back, 2012: 28), they should also not be tied to traditional digital media and dissemination strategies. Building on scholarship on

hypertextual and digital ethnography and important experiments with digital representation, we explore the practical and epistemological implications as well as the narrative, representational, and argumentative possibilities that digital storytelling tools afford ethnographers interested in going public. Our inspirations are off-the-shelf digital platforms designed specifically for social scientists (e.g. ArcGIS Story Maps, KnightLab's various tools, Scalar), and the many multimodal storytelling applications now available for general use (e.g. Atavist, Cowbird, Stellar).³ As sociologists, our discussion is informed by sociological ethnography and debates about public sociology (Burawoy, 2005), though we imagine it may be useful for ethnographers in various fields.

We focus our discussion of digital storytelling for public ethnography on two key features of many digital storytelling platforms: the ability to build multilinear (networked, linked, scaled, recursive) and multimodal (visual, audio, spatial, in addition to textual) accounts.⁴ We argue that these features offer unique possibilities for ethnographers interested in public ethnography. By using multimodal and multilinear storytelling, ethnographers can create descriptive and theory-driven accounts that are accessible and invite public debate and action. Appropriating these features, however, can transform ethnographic writing and reading, and has implications for how ethnographers use theory, create and configure ethnographic data, and evaluate ethnographic accounts. While these features introduce challenges and risks, embracing these may be necessary if we hope to engage beyond the academy.

Public ethnography and its forms

Public ethnography, like public scholarship more generally, can mean various things. Our understanding of public ethnography builds on Vannini and colleagues (Vannini, 2019; Vannini and Milne, n.d.) who argue that public ethnography must be *made* for non-traditional, non-academic audiences and not for scholars and students. Though traditional scholarly ethnographies may, on occasion, capture public interest, ethnography is not public if it is not "meant for the public". In this way, we depart from Burawoy's much debated and often criticized distinction between public and professional, critical, and policy scholarship. For Burawoy (2005), public sociology can be either "traditional", wherein academic research is disseminated with hopes of shaping public debate, or "organic", wherein researchers engage directly in a collaborative relationship with an organized civil society public. Neither formulation emphasizes the intended audience or the communicative work that engaging publics entails.

If ethnography is not public unless it engages an audience, achieving communicative success is key (Gans, 2010; Vannini, 2019; Vaughn, 2005). Because of this, ethnographers interested in public ethnography must concern themselves with the likeability and accessibility of their work (Fassin, 2017) and, in turn, ethnography's form and format. Ethnographers may need to experiment with literary styles, creative storytelling, and various media (Vannini, 2019; Vannini and Milne, n.d.). At the very least, ethnographers must be willing to refuse conventional

forms and publication practices that explicitly bar non-academic audiences (Fassin, 2013, 2017). These include the practices and conventions of academic writing (e.g. reliance on jargon) and academic publications (e.g. paywalls and restricted access and distribution).

Beyond popularization, public ethnography in our view includes a second dimension: the capacity to intervene in public debate and animate policy or political change. As Fassin argues, public ethnography is often *politicized* ethnography, concerned with introducing certain questions or perspectives into the public sphere or with an eye on impacting policy (Fassin, 2017; Scheper-Hughes, 2009; Vaughn, 2005). From this perspective, publicness is achieved insofar as ethnography contributes to public debate or political action. Form is no less important for politicization. Traditional formats like the ethnographic monograph or journal article function to affirm the author's membership into a scholarly community, while in most cases circumscribing debate on ethnographic findings to that same exclusive circle (Fassin, 2017: 5). Ethnographic insights or critiques can, but rarely do, transcend these circumscriptions.

While the ubiquity of digital storytelling suggests it as a more public form, we understand digital storytelling tools and their features as *potentially* public and ethnographic. As Ruppert et al. (2013: 25) note, digital tools have "qualities, which are likely to be both similar to and different from those of longer-standing social science methods". But, the affinities between digital methods and social research traditions emerge through use (Marres, 2017: 103). Just as digital tools become sociological "through their deployment and context of use" (Marres and Gerlitz, 2016: 41), digital storytelling must be appropriated for public ethnography. Before examining how we might appropriate digital storytelling and exploit its potential affinities to popularize and politicize ethnography, we turn first to the possibilities and risks scholars have long associated with digital representation, reading, and writing.

Digital ethnography: Possibilities and risks

Ethnographers have, for some time, grappled with the effects of the digital on ethnographic methods (Ardet and Thome, 2004; Boyd, 2008; Dicks et al., 2005; Hine, 2005, 2008; Murthy, 2008). Scholars have explored how the digitization of life and work challenges *in situ* observation and reshapes how ethnographers conceptualize the field and practice fieldwork (e.g. Domínguez et al., 2007; Käihkö, 2018; Lupton, 2014; Murthy, 2013; Pink et al., 2016), how we collect data (e.g. Buchi and Volger, 2017; Dicks et al., 2005; Golder and Macy, 2014), and connect with informants and interlocutors (e.g. Boellstorff, 2008; Carter, 2005; Murthy, 2008; Tufekci, 2017). While the take-up of digital tools for research and data collection has been steady, scholarly interest in digital publication has ebbed and flowed.⁵

Early experiments with hypertext and hypermedia generated excitement about the theoretical possibilities of digital representation. Most notably, Landow (2006

[1992]) argued that hypertexts could enact at the level of the “text” a rhizomatic and decentered ontology that mimicked post-structural and postmodern theoretical traditions. In that vein, Latour (2005) and his colleagues have remarked on the likeness between the networked architecture of the digital and Actor-Network Theory. More recently, scholars have theorized the ways in which digital texts challenge ontological assumptions embedded in our research methods (e.g. Marres, 2017; Ruppert et al., 2013) and the degree to which these tools are “hard-wired” to resemble certain knowledge-making agendas (e.g. Latour et al., 2012; Marres and Gerlitz, 2016). Building on this research, Marres and Gerlitz (2016) for example, show digital tools and methods as interfaces, where different theoretical and methodological traditions intersect and overlap in generative, though less determined ways.

Other scholars, frustrated with the perceived limitations of linear texts, found opportunities in multimodal digital representation. Scholars across various disciplines showed how digital platforms, like other mimetic media, could help ethnographers approximate complex, sensory social worlds (Coover, 2009; Marion and Offen, 2009; Pink, 2015; Underberg and Zorn, 2013; Underberg-Goode, 2016). Like ethnographic film, multimodal digital ethnography can be leveraged to create “spaces analogous to those we experience in everyday life, as we sample visual and other sensory information” (Marks in Pink, 2015: 140). The sensorial possibilities of multimodal storytelling coupled with multilinear features can be used to represent dynamic social processes that are often “open, processual, non-linear, and constantly on the move” (Adkins and Lury, 2009: 16; Back, 2012; Back and Puwar, 2012). As Dicks et al. (2005) note, the “journey” through multimedia, multilinear digital texts seems analogous to the ethnographers’ own journeys through the social world. For Underberg-Goode (2017: 105) digital multilinear and multimodal features produce a sense of “immersion” that can be deployed in a kind of “imitation or simulation of [social] activities and processes, including the research process”. And as Underberg and Zorn (2013) show, these qualities can be used effectively to engage audiences in interactive and exploratory ethnographic environments which bring to life otherwise distant and out of reach spaces and cultures. Multiple media can create different entry points and experiences for different audiences.

Despite the theoretical and representational potential of digital tools, their use has remained sporadic. Important examples across various fields have demonstrated some of the possibilities that digital tools present ethnographers (e.g. Dicks et al., 2005; Underberg and Zorn, 2013; Underberg-Goode, 2017; Vannini and Milne, 2016; Yates-Doerr and Labuski, 2017). But in contrast to digital data collection and analysis, the take-up of digital representational platforms has been more limited. We speculate this is at least in part a result of the risks digital tools pose to ethnographic authorship and ethnographic expertise.

To the degree that multilinearity can enact a decentered text, this feature also invites “very active readers” who might engage in “reading-as-writing” (Landow, 2006 [1992]). In other words, digital texts invite readers to challenge authorial

control. For Dicks et al. (2005: 17) digital “reading” is “more research oriented, more akin to a secondary analysis of a (carefully edited) database”. As readers move through the text, they take on the analytic role we tend to associate with the author of ethnographies. Moreover, as readers interpret digital data in ways ethnographers might not have anticipated or reassemble texts by linking them with others, the intended meaning can be upset and the ethnographer’s hold over the ethnography weakened.

While in no way reducing epistemological questions to mechanical ones, digital ethnographers have suggested scholars can retain some control over digital texts through careful and deliberate text construction. For example, authors can decide to limit the journeys through a text with suggestive sequential pathways, the use of nodes or tracks, or by assembling and linking data in particular ways (Dicks et al., 2005). In turn, however, these practices transform ethnographic writing, a fetishized if at times underspecified and underappreciated aspect of the ethnographic craft. For a generation of scholars battling cumbersome digital platforms, constructing effective accounts required learning coding and computer programming. Some described writing as “design” as ethnographers became concerned with the technical, aesthetic, semiotic, and material aspects of montage, combining, and juxtaposing various digital elements (Dicks et al., 2005: 76). Other scholars embraced this challenge by creating collaborative multidisciplinary groups (Underberg and Zorn, 2013). Whether writing has become more like coding or design, what is clear is that using digital tools has implications for the “reading” and “writing” of ethnography.

With these possibilities and risks in mind we now turn to how multimodality and multilinearity might be appropriated to popularize and politicize public ethnography specifically. To do so, we consider how these features fit with and recast ethnography’s long-standing imperatives to produce thick descriptions and present relational, theory-driven accounts. We also consider the implications of appropriating digital storytelling not only on “reading” and “writing” ethnography but also on how ethnographers create and use data, engage with theory, and evaluate ethnography.

Multimodality: Enlivening description and public contestation

Ethnography is often characterized by its “thick description” and the vitality and richness of ethnographic accounts. For Geertz (1973), “thickness” is the result of indexing context and experientiality and layering that with interpretation. When data are deployed and interpreted effectively, they can produce a “‘you-are-there’ sense of immediacy” (Katz, 2002: 71). This sense is conveyed when actors are shown in the “obdurate contours of their immediate environments” through vivid data (Katz, 2002: 72). As Katz (2001, 2002) argues, ethnographers tend to evaluate ethnographic work by focusing on the rhetorical inventiveness and effectiveness of “data passages” as well as the variety and richness, situatedness, nuance, and poignancy of data representations. But, though qualitative research

is varied and ethnography in particular, “eschews thoroughly pre-fixed designs for data gathering” (Katz, 2001: 446), we tend to rely on limited forms: written field notes, recorded and transcribed interviews, and, occasionally, photographs.⁶

Thick description is, in large part, what makes ethnography appealing to non-academic audiences (Gans, 2010). The multimodal features of digital storytelling suggest some narrative and representational opportunities for ethnographers interested in translating thick description for public audiences. Using multiple communicative modes allows authors to construct narratives that capture aspects of social environments not easily represented through text, or for that matter, through any singular mode. Just as ecologists may rely on multiple data forms to account for the diversity and richness of an ecological environment (by showcasing sounds and pictures in conjunction with text), ethnographers can rethink how social life can be represented by highlighting complexity through different modes and media. To take advantage of multimodality we must, of course, produce and use different kinds of data (e.g. text, video, photographs, audio, animated, and/or illustrated pieces). In this way, ethnographers could be more like the publics they want to reach. Lay publics, journalists, and policymakers consume, are immersed in, and increasingly produce multimedia all the time (Lupton, 2014; Pink et al., 2016; Tufekci, 2017). By building on these public digital practices and digital literacies, multimodal ethnography can become more relatable, accessible, and likeable.

Creating thick multimedia accounts is not just a technical matter. Producing and assembling ethnographic media effectively requires first noticing and recording aspects of social life and the material environment we consider background, and which ethnographers sometimes ignore when writing observation fieldnotes or translating these into final written accounts (Emerson et al., 1995; Van Maanen, 1988). Collecting visual or audio field notes can help. For example, as Back (2012) describes; the use of digital photos allowed researchers to engage with “motion”, a surprisingly meaningful dimension that patterns social life but which the researcher would have otherwise dismissed. Likewise, recordings can capture soundscapes that add depth to our understanding of how meaning is constructed in the interview encounter (Back, 2012). Whether through aural or visual media, ethnographers can draw attention to taken-for-granted social and meaning-making processes that can be difficult to communicate only through text.

As others have remarked, multimodality can also help create or convey emotive or affective landscapes often silenced in written accounts (Marion and Offen, 2009). The capacity of stories, and multimedia stories in particular, to stir emotion can be used to publicize and politicize ethnography. Emotive storytelling draws in publics. And, as social movement scholars know, stirring emotions can be politically productive (Goodwin et al., 2001; Jenkins et al., 2016). Together, thick description that mimics everyday life with everyday media, and touches emotional chords can foster a sense of “presence” that tends to be limited in textual academic accounts (Fassin, 2013: 634). By appropriating these features, ethnographers can elicit the kind of empathy, understanding, or anger that often precedes political action.

The publicization and politicization potential of multimodal digital storytelling depends on how effective we are in making use of media and constructing our texts. If in writing we are confronted with and make choices every time we enframe, quote, piece together insights from primary and secondary sources, or organize themes into chapters, the choices seem to multiply as we engage various communicative modes. In moving from “documenting” toward meaning-making (Guggenheim, 2013), we must account for the polyvocality of different media and their juxtaposition. Deploying photographs or audio to simply “enhance” our written observations or interview transcripts, or as part of an empiricist impulse to tell a fuller or more complete account, is not an effective way to use multimodal platforms (Vannini and Milne, n.d.). Diverse media can operate independently, but arranged together, they construct a new ecology of representation. Different communicative and representative modes together can create new understandings and insights or raise new questions. In assembling digital public ethnography we must consider how different media speak to each other and to our intended publics.

The “Pine Ridge Community Storytelling Project” (Huey, n.d) published in the digital storytelling platform Cowbird.com was not made by an ethnographer, but in our view, it helps illuminate some of the opportunities and challenges of appropriating multimedia storytelling for public ethnography. The story went through two major authoring phases. The first, sole-authored, version of the project was published by documentary photographer Aaron Huey in *The New York Times* (Estrin, 2009). Huey’s goal was to create a photo essay on “poverty in America”. While some praised the project, critics noted immediately that Huey’s original piece, a mostly photographic representation of the Lakota people, provided an “incomplete view” (Estrin, 2012). Critics from within and beyond the community depicted, argued that Huey had reduced the rich, lived experience of the Lakota community to a singular story of poverty (Estrin, 2012). In response, Huey worked with community members from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to assemble a second story, intended to capture the multiplicity and richness of life in Pine Ridge.

For the revised “Pine Ridge Community Storytelling Project” members of the community assembled and arranged new photos, videos, audio recordings, and text in a less curated, less edited, and more experimental way. Participants not only uploaded media, but also introduced new tags and themes to arrange the story. “Readers” can move through the story site randomly or by following the work of one contributor or tags that indicate a place or topic. Whereas Huey “authored” the first story, in this version the stories come from the many storytellers (who upload and tag media, or overlay photos with text or audio, for instance) and the “reader” who draws connections between media. For the community involved, the accessibility of the storytelling platform, and its openness to video, audio, and photo, presented an opportunity to comment and contest a taken-for-granted portrayal of poverty. Critics lauded this second version as presenting a more “complete view” of the community, while participants noted that the media they shared created a sense of “reality” that better captured their experience (Estrin, 2012).

Our point is not to critique the first account or argue that the second crowd-sourced version was better or somehow more complete, but rather to draw attention to the project's publicness. The first account, though criticized, drew a concerned and emotionally invested public. This occurred precisely as a result of how Huey used photographic media and text to represent (or fail to represent) community life. In turn, the project produced debate about poverty, race, and the politics of representation, among other topics. As a result, community members took action, producing a second multimedia story which served to expand the audience and extend public debate. The Pine Ridge project reminds us that ethnographic knowledge always "coexists with other forms of knowledge" and suggests that multimodality as a feature of public ethnography can help "[forge] links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 39).

Multilinearity: Inventive interpretation and public debate

Ethnographers often aim to tell what Charles Tilly (1999) called "superior stories" that show social relations and practices as "indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the non-human environment" (p. 448). For Tilly (2002), "superior stories" contrast with standard narratives characterized by their "combination of unified time and place, limited sets of self-motivated actors and cause-and-effect relations", which reduce or eliminate "errors, unanticipated consequences, indirect effects, incremental effects, and environmental effects" (Tilly, 2002: 32) that shape events. Multilinear digital narratives may be configured to enact complex social relations and the multiplicity of meaning and interpretation that characterize specific events and much, if not all, of social life.

At the same time, multilinearity might be leveraged by ethnographers interested in embracing relationality not only in the construction of the object of study (Desmond, 2014, 2016; Tsing, 2005) or through analysis (Emirbayer, 1997; Somers, 1994), but also at the level of and through the "text" itself. For Somers (1994: 616), relational narratives privilege "constellations of relationships . . . constituted by causal emplotment", a relational narrative, in turn, "renders understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices". A relational digital account can highlight "unfolding transactions" (Emirbayer, 1997) and how meaning is constructed through connectivity. By taking advantage of the multilinear features of digital tools, ethnographers can create accounts that privilege linkage and entanglement and help represent a relational social ontology.

The ability to make "superior" relational accounts using the multilinear features of digital storytelling tools suggests some opportunities for public ethnography. First, consider the challenge of publicization and making ethnography likeable or accessible. Multilinear narratives are formed by collections of related content, configured into coherent storylines or pathways suggested by the author. While

the author creates possible pathways through the story, this feature presumes some form of interactivity. Readers have the option of following a narrative sequentially, moving through the account by following the linkages, pathways, references, and scales created by the author, or by moving through in ways they find more engaging. Greater interactivity means that stories can take on new directions and inspire new ideas. As “readers” invent or suggest new pathways, new meanings are created (Horst and Michael, 2011; Marres et al., 2018; Michael, 2012). In this way multilinearity invites methodological inventiveness (Lury and Wakeford, 2012; Marres et al., 2018).

The risks associated with freeing the reader to move through a potentially ambiguous text invite us to reflect upon the relationship between theory, meaning, and form. Meaning is not only generated by content, but also by the form in which a story is presented or ordered (cf. Marcus and Cushman, 1982; Somers, 1994; Wagner-Pacifi, 2017). And yet, scholars rarely problematize or reflect on our privileged forms. Important exceptions notwithstanding (e.g. Mol, 2003) ethnographers do not often consider the shape and structure of a written text explicitly. Few ethnographers tend to share Fraser’s (2012) inclination to treat writing as “something material” and to include this materiality as a part of their theorization process. For multilinear digital narratives to be configured for public ethnography, we must acknowledge not only that form is consequential, but indeed, that meaning depends on how we give a story form. What appears at first glance as the technical work of digital text construction, such as building pathways, connecting tags, ordering elements, building links, are actually key interpretive and analytic tasks (cf. Dicks et al., 2005).

Though communicative agreement between the ethnographers’ intent and a reader’s interpretations is never assured, with multimodality and multilinearity it seems ever more fragile. To be sure, an ethnographer might create interpretive pathways that direct “readers” attention to the foreground or the background of an image, provide captions or narration, use tag or other organizational schema, or strategically juxtapose primary and secondary media to provide additional context. Here we find Glaeser (2011) and Somers (1994) understanding of theorizing as “emplotment” instructive. For Somers (1994), evaluative and selective “emplotment” is how theoretical meaning is created. Similarly, Glaeser (2011) has argued that theory can be developed by iterating between alternative narrative plots to mine data for meaning and to better integrate data in our stories. Theorizing, therefore, is the work of selecting and connecting happenings, data, and events in the process of *forming* a story. Though these authors consider emplotment largely an analytical and discursive practice, we take it as a material and practical task where ethnographers configure digital accounts through “emplotment”.

One recent example of a digital public ethnography that deploys multilinear storytelling effectively is “The Quipu Project” (The Quipu Project, n.d.). This project examines the effects of the large-scale, state-sponsored sterilization of indigenous men and women in Peru in the mid-1990s. Through historical

argumentation and nearly 200 personal narratives, the project historicizes and contextualizes state violence and documents the effects of this event on survivors. The project also theorizes the role of collective counter-memory, meaning-making, and record-keeping. This theorization is achieved through the way text and other elements are sculpted, connected, plotted, and ordered. As its name suggests, this account takes the form of a “Quipu”, a pre-colonial Incan record-keeping method that uses different colored knots and threads to produce complex, tightly woven records and accounts. The Quipu acts as the analytic framework that explains how knowledge and memory are constructed collectively and also how counter-hegemonic narratives depend on multi-vocal knowledge-making (Brown and Tucker, 2017). The audio narratives from research participants are connected to photos, informative text, and user-generated commentary through a visual network of clickable tags that weave personal narratives with themes and responses. The tag themes (e.g. “The Sterilization Programme” and “The Operations”) are drawn from participants’ own contributions.

The Quipu is both the theoretical entry point and an artfully arranged structure that draws the reader in. While the creators provide instructions to guide “readers” through the theory-driven plots, the experience is not static. How one experiences the project depends on whether she chooses to engage the story through themes or individual narratives, and on the media that draws her in. Made explicitly for public consumption, the project’s authors are attentive to different literacies and “readers” can listen to recordings, read text, or view photos and videos. This provides entry points for non-traditional publics who would otherwise not have access. As a result, the story has had important political effects. The Quipu Project offered a powerful critique of the official state narrative, while creating opportunities for organizations in different parts of the country to connect and strengthen their campaigning activities. In turn, this has facilitated the emergence of indigenous discourses on reproductive rights, a topic which in the Peruvian context was dominated by urban elites (Global Insecurities Center, n.d.).

Building on ethnographic skills and sensibilities

Producing digital public ethnographies like “The Quipu Project” requires extensive coding and design skills, refined aesthetic and artistic sensibilities, and perhaps the long-term collaboration of interdisciplinary teams (Brown and Tucker, 2017). But the popularizing and politicizing potential of digital storytelling can be achieved much more modestly. With devices like smartphones, ethnographers can now capture high-quality images, video, and audio recordings. At the same time, digital storytelling platforms like Atavist, for example, allow authors to easily bring together diverse media—charts, slideshows, social media embeds, video, audio, and text, among others—to tell a cohesive, interactive, and “media-rich” story (Atavist, n.d.). In addition, ethnographers can experiment with digital storytelling platforms made for social scientists, like KnightLab’s various digital storytelling tools, ArcGIS Story Mapping, and Scalar. Scalar, for example, is an open source,

long-form authoring and publishing platform authors can use to structure born-digital, multimedia essays or book-length works in hierarchical, nested, or multilinear forms (Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, n.d.). While these tools may require more specific skills, in our experience, with some training (often available directly from the platform designers) and practice they become easier to use.

While the ubiquity and relative ease of new digital storytelling tools should temper some of the anxiety around producing digital public ethnography, we do not mean to suggest that making digital public ethnography depends on merely mastering a tool. As the discussion above emphasizes, appropriating digital storytelling for public ethnography has both practical and epistemological implications and challenges long-established research and writing practices. But, rather than thinking of the skills and sensibilities needed to make digital public ethnography as wholly new or different, we see them as complementary to what ethnographers already do.

Ethnographers are trained to “see” ethnographically and develop a unique attentiveness to the social and material world through the practice of fieldwork. Even the most traditional of ethnographers, focused on producing work for a strictly academic audience, is trained to be attentive to what people say and do, how they move through space and interact and engage with the world around them. Though there are classes and resources that help guide students of ethnography, experienced ethnographers develop their style, point of view, and unique sensibility to unfolding social life through practice (Emerson et al., 1995). Developing our ways of seeing so that we are better able to collect audio, visual, and other media for digital public ethnography builds on our well-honed observation skills. At the same time, like our unique observation styles, this sensibility is best learned through practice.

Likewise, using media to construct multilinear stories builds on ethnographic writing. Writing ethnography is an iterative process that unfolds as we move back and forth between writing and analysis or writing-as-analysis. To the degree to which ethnographers succeed in writing well, and well-received ethnography, it is largely the result of sustained practice. Most ethnographers receive no formal training in writing. Instead we write, share our work with our intended audience (other scholars and students), and rewrite. Framing media and arranging them alongside other elements to produce a coherent and effective narrative is not unlike the process of selecting quotes or passages from our observation notes, contextualizing these and adding description, piecing together theoretical insights or primary and secondary sources, and organizing themes into chapters. Producing effective multimedia digital stories, like effective written textual ethnography, requires experimentation and iteration. As anthropologists have long argued, scholars would do well to pay more attention to the “styles of text construction” (Marcus and Cushman, 1982), whether analog and text-based or digital and multimedia.

Publishing multimedia accounts raises concerns around privacy and anonymity. In written accounts, respondents can often retain some degree of anonymity when

we aggregate individual perspectives into larger themes, use pseudonyms, or refuse to attribute quotes and descriptions. In multimedia accounts, however, the use of images and audio clips can seem to remove this protective barrier and media published online potentially reduces respondents “right to be forgotten” (Rosen, 2012 in Lupton, 2014). At the same time, people hold “ambivalent and paradoxical” ideas about digital privacy (Lupton, 2014). To mediate these concerns, ethnographers should be as clear as they can about the options available for research participants and interlocutors and develop a set of guidelines for data ownership and privacy (de Koning et al., 2019). Multimedia accounts, in which individuals or communities remain anonymous can be very effective, even as they mask particular identities.⁷ This is a third area in which ethnographers can draw on their training and sensibilities. Ethnographers have long grappled with questions about when and how to protect the identities of those we work with, and when and how to respect or reject the ways interlocutors and research participants want to be represented (e.g. de Koning et al., 2019; Duclos, 2017; Mosse, 2006; Reyes, 2017; Scheper-Hughes, 2000).

Conclusion: Making a difference, differently

Making public ethnography is a “delicate task” which requires finding “an appropriate format for an extended readership while respecting the ethnographic epistemology” (Fassin, 2013: 627). In this article, we began this task by examining how digital storytelling can extend our readership and reach, while respecting what makes ethnography uniquely suited for public consumption in the first place. The purpose of this essay is not to provide a full inventory of the opportunities and challenges of creating digital public ethnography. Instead our goal was to reflect on the complex relationship between the stories ethnographers tell, the forms in which they tell them, and the audiences they reach. Our discussion focused on examining how two nearly ubiquitous features of digital storytelling platforms, multilinearity and multimodality, might be appropriated for public ethnography. We showed how multilinearity and multimodality can help ethnographers publicize and politicize ethnographic accounts and translate descriptive and theory-driven ethnography for non-traditional audiences. We argued that there are affinities that can be exploited between multimodality and thick description and multilinearity and relational, theory-driven accounts, and that digital storytelling tools offer unique possibilities for publicizing and politicizing ethnography.

Making effective use of multimodality and multilinearity has practical and epistemological implications. And, appropriating digital storytelling for public ethnography recasts how ethnographers use theory, create and configure ethnographic data, deploy interpretive and evaluative schema, and structure accounts. By highlighting the representational possibilities of these features of digital storytelling tools, we illuminate how different features and forms bring different dimensions into view, offer entry points for potential publics to engage our work, and invite distinct interpretive and political possibilities (cf. Bell, 2012; Harper, 2012).

Incorporating new digital tools or developing a practice of public scholarship can seem like time-consuming and risky endeavors that run against the productivity standards and evaluative schema to which ethnographers, like all academic scholars, are held. Digital storytelling does not fit nicely into what is considered “intellectually serious activity” (Hays, 2007: 88). We agree that when it comes to digital scholarship “what is needed is a broader and more inclusive view of what counts as important, social scientific research” (p. 88). Likewise developing effective public scholarship, wherein we intentionally make work for public consumption that eschews scholarly conventions and is explicitly political, runs up against the famously awkward, if not antagonistic, relationship sociology and anthropology have with public engagement (Calhoun, 2007; Fassin, 2017). Though challenging and potentially risky, we contend that if ethnographers want to make a difference, they should experiment with making ethnography differently.

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Notes

1. In the United States, these calls are joined by institutional efforts. The American Sociological Association (ASA) for example, has hosted several digital media workshops, and, in 2017, unveiled a strategic public engagement plan that relies primarily on the use of digital media tools to increase the public reach and relevance of sociological research (American Sociological Association, 2017).
2. The exception to this is, of course, ethnographic film (see Coover, 2009 and Pink, 2006).
3. The repertoire of digital tools and features we discuss is not exhaustive. In this article, we focus mostly on how ethnographers might engage off-the-shelf as opposed to bespoke tools. Constructing tailored platforms requires longer term engagement with digital tools, strong digital literacy, and/or creative, interdisciplinary experiments. Because ethnographers have been slow to experiment with digital publication, we think it is important to first examine how and to what effect they may appropriate existing and relatively easy to use tools. This is not to say, however, that we view off-the-shelf tools as neutral or not requiring digital literacy, but rather that we should begin by reflecting critically on the opportunities and challenges of existing tools.

4. We focus on these features not only because of their ubiquity, but because sociologists interested in the impacts of digitization on methods have previously recognized their importance (e.g. Back, 2012; Marres, 2017). These features are also prominent in earlier discussions about digital technology within the digital humanities, literary and cultural studies, and digital studies (e.g. Bolter et al., 1999; Hockey, 2000; Manovich, 2001; Schreibman and Siemens, 2008; Schreibman et al., 2007).
5. We recognize the distinction between the fieldwork and research phase and the writing and representation phase is artificial. However, here we focus on ethnographic digital and publication and dissemination; the aspects of digital representation that connect to making ethnography explicitly for a public audience.
6. Linguistic and visual ethnographers have long made use of multiple forms. In traditional sociological ethnography this is less common.
7. A recent animated video produced by the BBC and UNICEF portrays the life of a girl kidnapped by Boko Haram (BBC News, 2018) that does not show us who she is still provides a rich account of her experience. Ethnographers can experiment with similar arrangements that account for the privacy needs and norms of respondents.

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