

Fostering Social Justice Through Qualitative Inquiry

A Methodological Guide

Second Edition

**Edited by Corey W. Johnson and
Diana C. Parry**

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13 Digital Methods for Social Justice

Luc S. Cousineau

What Is Digital Inquiry?

Even before COVID-19, most of the interactions I had with my best friends happened online. We have been friends for a long time, live in different places, and keep different schedules, so most of our communication is digital. Online social interactions, friendships, and connections are a regular and normal part of my social life and the social lives of almost all adults, teens, and pre-teens that can access and afford reliable internet access and devices.¹ Because it is so normal, and the technologies that facilitate modern Western sociality are so ubiquitous, it is easy to forget that the digitally-mediated parts of our lives are different from our physical interactions: they are controlled, policed, monitored, and processed by our brains in different ways than face-to-face interactions.

From a research perspective, the normalcy of digital engagement and computing can sometimes lead us to believe that digital interactions (like discussion in Facebook groups, Twitter threads, and other social interactions online) are the same as our interactions offline, and so we believe they can be studied in the same ways we would study equivalent groups and interactions offline. When thinking about doing qualitative research online, you might ask the question:

Isn't digital qualitative inquiry just using the same qualitative research methods that we practice in the 'real world,' but online?

The answers to this question are complicated, and I hope to address many of them in this chapter, but the short answer is no—but the answer is also yes. Let me explain.

What Does “Digital” Mean?

“Digital,” the way that I will use it in this chapter, has two meanings. The first, more technical meaning is

the conversion of real-world information to a binary electronic digital format, in which signals or information are transformed into discrete alphanumeric values represented by electronic digits (as opposed to continuous streams of values used by analogue formats such as wavelengths or chemical photography).

(Dicks, 2012, pp. xxiii–xxiv)

A (simplified) explanation of this jargon is that in the digital, everything is broken down into collections of code (binary (so 1 and 0) in the example from Dicks) and that code is used to transmit, and (re)construct everything that happens in the digital.

The second, more pragmatic meaning of digital for our discussion of qualitative methods for social justice research is research data or settings that take place on, through, or are modified in some way by computer technologies.² This includes interactions, communities, and settings on the web, but also internet-adjacent technologies like SMS (text messaging), MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role playing games – like World of Warcraft), user interactions with mobile apps, or the use of smart-home technologies.³

History and Roots

The foundation of much digitally-mediated inquiry is the use of established and well-understood research methods to do research “offline.” You may choose to reach out to members of a Facebook group about bird watching and conduct dyadic interviews about their involvement; or observe and record guided focus group discussion sessions with a mother’s support group, to document how community support is built between individuals with similar experiences; or you may choose to observe and record the activity of a social group using ethnographic observation. Each of these are ways you can engage in research in digital environments using approaches that are not specifically directed toward, or always tailored to, digital spaces. The same considerations you might have about researcher power, group dynamics, representation, subjectivity, reflexivity, and important factors raised in the other chapters of this book remain when you choose to do qualitative research online, but they are further complicated by important elements of digitality and technology that are simply absent in many cases of physical face-to-face research. This is where things start to get more complicated.

Digital inquiry, or research that is otherwise digitally-mediated is different from face-to-face inquiry, and although we may employ ethnography, phenomenology, case study, grounded theory, or even postmethodologies, all digital inquiry requires a set of considerations that is reflexive of the unique and important challenges of digital research. There are volumes of academic writing about the development and differentiation of digital qualitative research methods, and to explore that variation in detail is beyond the scope of this chapter. Essential reading for those interested includes Paulus et al. (2013, 2017), the works by Dicks (2012) and Hand and Hillyard (2014), as well as specific readings for each broader methodological approach and its digital considerations, like digital ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Pink et al., 2016). This chapter is designed to help you see and begin to think through essential considerations in digital research, give you examples of successful and lacking digital research practices, and demonstrate how keeping these considerations in mind is essential to conducting social justice-minded digital research.

Methodological Variation

Important Considerations for All Digitally-Mediated Inquiry

The landscape of digitally-mediated qualitative inquiry is too vast to cover in a chapter, or even a single book, and many texts have been written to help guide you through the myriad ways that you might undertake this type of research. Dicks (2012) provided an early guide to digital qualitative inquiry that can still inform the research process today through some of the high-level considerations about the research setting. Paulus and colleagues (Paulus et al., 2013; Paulus & Lester, 2021) have authored handbooks on qualitative research in the digital world and the tools that can be used for that research. Boellstorff et al. (2012), Pink et al. (2016), and Hine (2015), have written about and provided tools for doing digital ethnography. Works by Hand and Hillyard (2014) and Mills (2019) on the use of big data in qualitative analysis are useful for helping to parse out the challenges that come with access to so much data. Rather than revisiting these methods, this section will

present what I believe to be the three most significant elements that should be present in all digital research, and how they relate to social justice work: how we use technology and who designed it; techno-sociality; and knowing your research space. Each of these considerations are essential to how the user (and researcher) experience is translated into research output. They have broad and specific layers of application, and while they do not need to be the central area of inquiry,⁴ understanding and acknowledging them is essential for fully considered digital research, especially if that research is meant to foster social justice. Each subsection will begin with a question or two; questions that you should ask yourself as you frame your research, and as you evaluate the research of others.

How We Use Technology and Who Designed It?

What are the affordances of the platforms (hardware and software) used in this research?

What influence might those platforms (the way they are made? who made them? and why?) have on the users, data, and researcher(s)?

Questions about what technologies are implicated in our research, and what they afford us the ability to do, are important considerations when engaged with digital inquiry. Affordances in this case, are the relational and specific things we can and cannot do with technologies, or “literally, what the platform allows its users to do” (Phillips, 2015, p. 61). How users access and engage with a digital platform, for example, can have a significant influence on their experience, and can also change the kinds of information and data accessed by the researcher.

What we see, take in, and analyze depends on how it is presented or available to us. This is true for all research, but in the digital context it has important layers. For example, the content you experience on one kind of technology (e.g., a desktop computer or laptop) might be different than the content you see on a tablet or mobile device. Figure 13.1 gives an example of these types of differences using the website reddit.com. The image on the left is how the site appears when it is accessed on a laptop. The image on the right is what that same page looks like when accessed on a mobile device. Since Reddit is optimised for mobile viewing, the main content (in the centre of both images) looks very similar, but notice that the laptop version has more content. It includes more user and website information, sidebar content that includes rules and links, an advertisement, and more empty space.

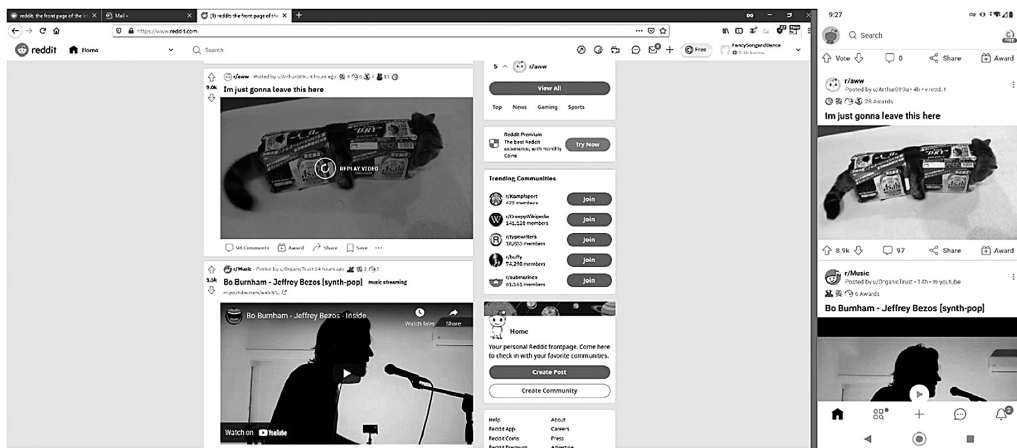


Figure 13.1 Side by side screen captures of desktop (left) and mobile (right) Reddit interfaces

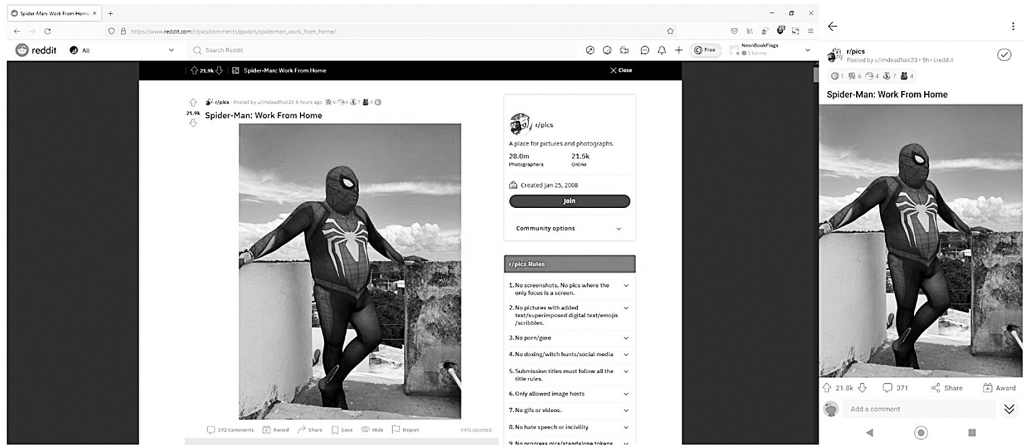


Figure 13.2 Side by side screen captures of desktop (left) and mobile (right) versions of the same Reddit post.

The differences continue as we explore individual posts and threads. The laptop version of the site opens links in a pop-up style window over the original content, where the mobile version moves to a new screen entirely (Figure 13.2). The laptop version shows more comments by default, continues to display the sidebar content with the community rules, and has other differences. The navigation of this content is also different, with the mobile version using tap and gesture commands native to mobile devices, but the laptop version being bound to the commands built into the web browser used to access the site.

The effects of these simple differences can be profound since using a website like Reddit on mobile devices shows different advertisements, engages with Reddit subcommunities in different ways, and the physical act of using the website changes. None of these differences is coincidental or by mistake, and they have material effects on our research.

To an attentive researcher doing digitally mediated qualitative research, these differences should matter. For one, the way that users engage with mobile applications is very different from the way they engage with desktop applications. With smaller screens, touch gestures, and smaller keyboard inputs, users are less likely to read or write long text posts (Vertanen & Kristensson, 2021). They also consume content in smaller bits on mobile (Keib et al., 2021). As a digital qualitative researcher, asking ourselves whether the way we normally access a digital community (usually via laptop) is the same or different from the users we study (perhaps by mobile device) is an important question because it will influence outcomes.

Second, thinking about the research interface should have us considering the companies and individuals who design our content. While internet access and social media might feel ubiquitous and common, ALL of the social media and digital services that we are most familiar with (including Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Google, etc.) are corporations with a profit motive. They have vast teams of developers, engineers, user experience specialists, advertising salespeople, and others to keep their services running, and money coming into shareholders. These companies have incredible power of influence, and those powers of influence affect individuals and social consciousness in profound ways. It should come as no surprise, then, that the most significant effects of that influence fall on those most traditionally marginalized in Western societies. Drawing on the work of Black feminist and technology scholars like Ruha Benjamin (2019), Sherri Williams (2015), Tressie McMillan Cottom (2017), and others, we can begin to understand corporate and programmer influence on technologies and people.

In 2018, Safiya Noble's book *Algorithms of Oppression* explored how the algorithms that generate search results (as well as the recommendations that we often use in our searches) serve to

perpetuate, inflate, and sometimes promote racism. Among the many examples Noble uses to explore this phenomenon is the construction of the term “black girls” in search results, and how black girls (and indeed all girls and women) are marginalized through an abundance of sexual and sexualized content in searches. “Women and girls do not fare well in Google Search,” she says “that is evident” (p. 71). Noble describes a type of cultural hegemony about gendered and racialized identities in search results that prioritize corporate interests, investors, and advertisers at the expense of the humanity of those represented (women and girls, and particularly black women and girls).

Noble calls these new kinds of racial profiling “technological redlining,” and like its non-technological namesake they are embedded into the technologies that we rely on every day – technologies that we assume are “benign, neutral, or objective, [yet] they are anything but” (p. 1). The crux of Noble’s argument, and the one that is important as we consider digital qualitative research for social justice, is that the technologies we use and rely on are not neutral, and that people, politics, and personal biases find their way into even our most ubiquitous technologies (like Google Search). These biases can have deep effects on individuals and communities, including the rampant and disturbing colonial sexualization of black girls, and are essential considerations for anyone who is engaging with digital qualitative research with social justice in mind.

Other authors have explored other ways that technology and its design have detrimental effects. Browne (2015) and Fischer and Mohrman (2016) have written about how surveillance technologies are deployed more readily and actively against people of color in the United States, and are tweaked to be more effective on black bodies. Breland (2017) explored how White engineers wrote both implicitly and explicitly racist code into software programs. Williams (2015) researched Black women using digital tools as ways to resist real-world and digital violence. Ruha Benjamin has written about the subject of Black subjugation through technology as the New Jim Code. On facial recognition in particular, Buolamwini’s (2017) work on the construction and deployment of face datasets for facial recognition demonstrated that Black faces and other faces of color were underrepresented, resulting in problematically homogeneous sets of facial data. The programming using those datasets resulted in a reduced ability of programs based on them to identify Black faces (Coe & Atay, 2021), and without existing racial prejudices coming into play (Bacchini & Lorusso, 2019).

If the implications of the important work of these authors is not already apparent, it explains why the hidden away underbelly of technologies (e.g., the programming, profit motives, or who makes up design teams) are significant in the research process, as well as how we might approach digital inquiry for social justice. Beyond what users might say or post in their online interactions, the technology that allows them to say it has a significant role in what we see, feel, and take in as users and researchers.

Techno-Sociality

How is interacting online different from interacting offline?

What might those differences mean for digitally mediated qualitative research?

Deeply connected to how we use technology and who designed it are techno-social considerations, or issues of internet social life. How we act and interact online can be very different from how we might act in the physical world, and thinking about how being online affects who we are and how we interact is important. Qualitative inquiry relies on the actions and interactions of people, and often in digital inquiry we are thinking about the person behind the screen as much as we are the words they write or the memes they post. Exploring people through their digital actions should lead qualitative researchers to questions of user identity, and what the social context of digitally mediated spaces does with identity (Richterich, 2014; Tufekci, 2014).



Figure 13.3 On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog comic/meme

© Peter Steiner, *The New Yorker*, July 5, 1993.

The dated, but still useful meme ‘On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog’ (Figure 13.3) is a tongue-in-cheek way of explaining that for the average user (or researcher) it is very difficult to know if online user personas are accurate reflections of people, or if they are even real people at all (i.e., are they bots?). A lot has changed in the 20-plus years since the dog on the internet meme took root, and it has taken on new life to help illustrate how dated the idea that nobody knows who you are on the internet is today. Big business (like social media), government, service providers, and others have sophisticated ways of tracking and identifying users; “These days, the last thing a dog wanting to hide its canine nature would do is go online!” (Tufekci, 2014, p. 17) (Figure 13.4).

The identity play that occurs online has been part of internet culture from the very beginning of the net. Stone (1995), Kendall (1998, 2002), Zdenek (1999), Boese (1998), Markham (1998), and other authors explored how early internet and web users played with identity and self-concept through their online presences, using gender and other identity markers in ways that allowed them to imagine the internet as a potential social utopia (Danet, 1998; Kitch, 2002; Plant, 1997). It was not long, however, before the pressures of existing social expectations came to some internet communities, demanding that users represent themselves “accurately” online. The net now, like the physical world, is rife with misrepresentation and fabricated identity, and for researchers it is important to have some sense that a spectrum exists.

To complicate (or perhaps uncomplicate) this further, we may decide that “accuracy” of online and offline representation is a non-issue. If what happens in a community is the focus of our inquiry, for example, then issues of identity congruence, “truth,” or fabrication in representation by



Figure 13.4 On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog comic/meme 2.0.

© Nitrozac & Snaggy.

individual users might be irrelevant, since our interest is in the whole community. At the individual level, we may not choose to draw a distinction between online and offline actions as representative of the user's "true" feelings, and so actions like trolling (for example) are not the disconnected actions that only occur online, but rather the manifestations of real feelings expressed openly (Lumsden, 2019; March et al., 2017; Phillips, 2015).

Regardless of your take on online versus offline realities, the research tells us that without person-to-person contact the way we react to others changes. Research on cyberbullying has been particularly focused on these ideas, as instances of violent speech (including pictures, videos, and other texts) or incitement to violence are more common online than they are in person-to-person interactions (Carlson, 2021). Researchers in this area suggest that this phenomenon is driven by a combination of lack of personal consequences (individuals enacting or inciting online violence towards others are unlikely to be prosecuted or physically rebuffed (Barlett et al., 2016; Riebel et al., 2009)) and lack of empathy derived from physical cues we receive from others in physical space (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Citron, 2014; Marín-López et al., 2020). These behaviors and psycho-social explanations have been extended to internet trolls as well, showing that lack of bio-physical feedback producing empathetic emotions, and the effect of community pile-on against single or small groups of users, push users to disinhibited online behavior (March, 2019; Wright et al., 2019).

The considerations around user identity and representation are just one of the possible issues digital qualitative researchers should think through and account for before they enter and study online communities. Again here, like with technologies and who designs them, taking a broad view and making conscious decisions in building a research project is necessary for building better, more trustworthy digital research for social justice.

Knowing Your Research Space

As a researcher, how familiar is your research setting?

Is the researcher a regular user, new user, or trolling for data?

To be able to properly consider the important ideas presented in the previous two sections, researchers need to know and understand their research settings. While it is certainly possible to

collect, analyze, and write about data collected from a digital community without being a member or understanding the nuances of that community, this type of research ignores the thick and deep influence that platforms and the users they attract have on the content. Like any community, snapshots of discussion or interaction might give a very different picture of users and the community than thorough exposure. If these snippets are not contextualized through an understanding of how that community operates, it could lead to partial or even harmful conclusions. While these are the same considerations that we have about community, interpretation, and research in all qualitative research, they are complicated in digital research by just how easily we can collect data. We do not require an inside connection to enter and research many online communities, and this can lead us to poor decision-making (and decisions that would not support a social justice orientation) in the spirit of fast and sexy scholarship.

To illustrate the importance of knowing your research site, I am going to turn back to Reddit, the site of my own research. Massanari (2015) describes Reddit as “kind of like a community, message board, carnival, and play space rolled into one. Oh, and yeah—you should know there’s some really disturbing stuff too” (p. 19). Reddit is all these things, and although it appears to be a simple content aggregator where users post content from elsewhere then talk about it, it is much more complicated. Beyond the important technological affordances that allow the community to operate (see Cousineau, 2021; Massanari, 2015), the history and politics of the platform and business have significant influence on users and content as Reddit continues to evolve.

For many years (2005–2015) Reddit was a site that removed almost no content (aside from material that was demonstrably illegal, like child pornography). Racist, sexist, and other hate subcommunities flourished on the site, as did communities dedicated to gore, death, and exploitative/non-consensual pornography. In 2015, under the leadership of Ellen Pao, significant policy changes were made to help reduce the level of these elements on the site, and the pushback from the community was so severe that Pao ended up leaving her position as CEO (Pao, 2017). Since 2015, a series of (sometimes significant) expansions and strengthening of harassment and user policies have changed the Reddit landscape in significant ways. Although these changes have not eliminated hate content, they have made significant progress in making Reddit a safer place for diverse users. They have banned a huge number of subcommunities, and continue to monitor and ban users who post content that violates their policies. Although there remains a long way to go, material change has come through changes in leadership, but also the increasing influence of investment capital and their desires to see usership and profitability grow.

Understanding the history and development of Reddit is important to research on the platform because, although we can still highlight the challenges faced by Reddit in housing and supporting problematic content (including content and communities that push users toward the far-right (Cousineau, 2021)), there is far less of this content on the site than there was even five years ago. So, while we might be tempted to continue to categorize Reddit as a place where unloved communities congregate, to do so without knowing and acknowledging Reddit’s past leaves scholarship on this issue open to critique. The same is true for discussions of user dynamics or discourse on any platform, and this example should demonstrate the need for researchers to be familiar (in a meaningful way) with their chosen research site.

Data Collection Strategies

Methods for collecting digital qualitative data include interviews, focus groups, and other types of data collection covered in this book—modified to be used online or digitally mediated in some other way. For detailed explorations of how these traditional techniques are best transferred to online contexts, books by Paulus (Paulus et al., 2017; Paulus & Lester, 2021), Dawson (2019), and Whiting and Pritchard (2020) have useful guides and ideas. In addition to these more traditional methods, there are other digital data collection methods that are specific to digital data. Keeping in mind the important considerations covered in the first half of this chapter, these might be

effective ways of achieving your digital qualitative research goals. As you learn about and consider these methods, remember that no method exists in a vacuum, and methods can be combined and modified to meet researcher needs and/or tailored to the researcher's philosophical positioning. This section will describe two common forms of qualitative data collection for digitally-mediated research—selective systematic data collection and observational data collection—then provide an example of how they can be used through my own research.

Selective Search and Application Programming Interface (API)-Based Software Data Collection

Platform-integrated selective search and Application Programming Interface (API)-based data collection are two different ways to do the same thing: collect specific information/posts/content from a platform. Platform-integrated selective search is the use of built-in search or filtering features of a digital platform to locate desired content. For example, you could use the Twitter search function to search for tweets that use a certain term or hashtag, like #qualitative. Twitter will generate an infinite scroll list of tweets that use that hashtag, and the researcher can work through them on the app or online version of Twitter. This technique is useful for getting information about a specific topic or event, but the researcher still must decide how that information will be captured for analysis. The researcher could take screen shots (using programs built into their operating system or third-party apps) and capture the tweets as images. They could copy the text of the tweets into a database they construct and manage themselves (old school using something like excel, or a qualitative analysis software), or they could use other tools designed to work with platform data like apps that use the API.

API-based data collection is a way to use data access provided by the platform to access large volumes of data and process that data in a variety of ways. Almost all social media platforms have API access, and many have rules about how the data can be processed. If you choose to go this route, make sure that you understand how the platform has set permissions for data use. If you are proficient in programming languages (especially Python), then it is possible to create your own programs to access and process API data. If not, then you can use a variety of third-party applications that will let you access, filter, and even analyze the data obtainable through the API. Twitter, to continue the example, has a variety of third-party applications that can be used for research, and recently created a special data access portal for academics that gives researchers access to historical Twitter data that had been previously inaccessible for research. Using the API or the built-in search tools are different ways to access data from online platforms, and both can yield huge amounts of data.

The type of data collection done through selective search or APIs is best suited for targeted research that has specific goals in mind and a set of factors that can limit the study to a manageable size. If you are wondering what I mean, in March of 2021 there were an average of 140 million tweets sent every day. That works out to around a billion tweets per week. You will need a set of parameters to help filter that number to a manageable size, even if you are using software to help you.

Scraping

Scraping is a term used to describe the collection of vast amounts of data from digital platforms in large swaths. This type of data collection is designed to collect large volumes of data that are subsequently subjected to different kinds of analysis, mostly to look for trends and patterns in an otherwise huge and unwieldy dataset. Like API-assisted data collection (this collection usually uses the API), scraping uses software to collect data. Scraping can generate such large datasets that they would be impossible to explore without the assistance of analysis software that can read the thousands or millions of individual data points and indicate what patterns, trends, or commonalities exist in the corpus that we have collected. Often, this “big data” research becomes a kind of qualitative-turned-quantitative analysis where patterns and frequencies are measured, and predictions made. Big data, while useful, is difficult to work with in qualitative contexts due to its vastness and

diversity, and special kinds of attention must be paid as qualitative researchers with these large corpuses of data (Hand & Hillyard, 2014). Mills (2019), in their book *Big Data for Qualitative Research*, argues that there is great potential in combining the strengths of big data and qualitative research, but that there are some significant challenges. In the context of social-justice orientations, Mills suggests, these challenges manifest with regards to data access and production, as well as how large pervasive datasets can have ethical, privacy, and surveillance implications, especially for those populations already marginalized.

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography, like ethnography, is a broad-spectrum term for a variety of approaches to social research in digitally-mediated environments, and provides “ways of accounting for the digital as part of our worlds that are both theoretical and practical and that offer coherent frameworks through which to conduct ethnography across specific sites and questions” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 7). Digital ethnographic work uses many of the same foundational principles of traditional ethnography, including long-term immersion and participant observation, and might include interviews, and other types of member-checking. There are some important differences though, in how we should think about digital ethnography.

Pink et al. (2016) suggest five principles for the use of digital ethnography, that serve as guides to implementing a researcher-specific version of digital ethnography. The first principle is multiplicity. There are multiple ways to engage with the digital, including interactions with online communities, but also through examining technology infrastructures or other means. Second is decentering the digital, and acknowledging “the ways in which media are inseparable from the other activities, technologies, materialities and feelings through which they are used, experienced and operate” (p. 9). Third is that digital ethnography must be an open event, best understood as “flexible research design” (p. 11). It must be able to adapt to the needs of the shareholders, in that sometimes, digital ethnography is done in partnership with non-academic entities or individuals. Fourth, the digital ethnographic process must be a reflexive process. Last, digital ethnography is unorthodox in the ways that it is presented and disseminated, and is properly positioned to be able to present its data and findings in ways that push against the traditional notions of where and how research is produced.

Where Pink et al.’s *Digital Ethnography* provides a set of principles, Boellstorff et al.’s *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012) provides a process-oriented approach to ethnography in digital landscapes. The book gives context and contrast between “traditional” ethnography and ethnography of virtual worlds, and provides useful (although sometimes dated) considerations around data collection, ethics, analysis, and knowledge production. Framed through the research experiences of the four authors, the book provides practical suggestions for the virtual ethnographer, and challenges them to give deep consideration to every aspect of their proposed project.

Other writings on digital ethnography and its intricacies have also added important ways of thinking to the consideration of digital ethnography. Abidin and de Seta (2020), citing Gatson (2012), discuss how the ethical frameworks, structures of the research projects, and the actual media that are used for study in digital ethnography are constantly in the making. They are informed by institutional and relational protocols, research expectations and deliverables, and “contextual, situated understandings of concepts like privacy or fair use” (Abidin & de Seta, 2020, p. 10). Baym (2009) wrote about the importance of reflexivity in the practice of digital ethnography, explaining that through researcher honesty about positionality and perspective that being consistently reflexive allows for “finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions” in epistemology, participation, and representation (p. 173). Beaulieu (2004) likewise notes that the inclusion of, and attention to, reflexivity helps to ground the research and bolster the legitimacy of digital ethnographic work.

The complex relational, technological, and sociological elements that contribute to the practice of digital ethnography make it challenging to define and discuss in concise ways, but the theory

discussed in this section should help you understand that digital ethnographic projects differ from traditional ethnography, and how useful a research approach this might be for digital qualitative research for social justice.

One Scholar's Process

The information provided above is all great in theory, but what does it mean? What does data collection for digitally-mediated research look like? In this section and the following section on data analysis I will use an example from my own work to illustrate one of the many ways that you might choose to collect and analyze data in digitally mediated research for social justice. This example should give you some idea about some of the moving parts and considerations you might have in your own research. My research on Reddit had two interconnected parts: observation, that included field notes and journaling about broad observations/comments; and systematic thread capture that included making copies of entire threads, the creation of a research notes data workbook, and more detailed comments/field notes. The observational part of my data collection took place over almost three years as I experienced the two communities I studied, and my description of this portion of my research will be very similar to the description of ethnography in Chapter 7. My observation was complimented by a three-month systematic collection of posts that made up my captured dataset.

Observation and Listening

Observation is a key component in ethnographic research, and as a member of the study communities, watching the community posts over time was an important part of understanding patterns of posts and community areas of interest. My long-term observation provided a wealth of information about how the communities operated, what discussions were regular and popular, and which were more uncommon.

Observation began with subscribing to both the /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill subcommunities of Reddit (called subreddits) and having their content appear in my regular Reddit feed. When posts were interesting or I found their titles offputting, I would explore the content of the post further. As I did these basic explorations, I made notes about what topics were frequently discussed, and what I found interesting, disturbing, or confusing. As this kind of observation continued, these notes began to show patterns about what kinds of posts I was seeing most often, and what content appeared most popular in the respective communities. As my observations continued, I began to note my feelings about my meta-analysis of the content I was experiencing, including the major themes discussed regularly in one community, and the repetitious nature of the other that made me bored. I noted how users interacted differently with one another between communities.

In addition to notes about my research communities, I also made notes about Reddit as a platform and the ways that it permitted, encouraged, and controlled the ways that users interacted. As I explored the voting system and numbers of votes popular threads received in my research data, for example, I learned about the various ways that time-since-posting, number of votes, number of comments, and other metrics had material effects on how content was displayed to users. I learned about how subscriptions changed what content appeared in users' feeds. I learned about Reddit's position as a private company funded by venture capitalists, and the internal politics that have had a significant influence on the platform's approach to controversial content.

Systematic Thread Capture

To complement the observational data, I wanted something more systematic, that would collect whole threads for deep analysis. I captured content from both communities three times per week over the course of three months. Collection consisted of making full-thread images of the top five

posts from each subreddit, twice each session, using two of the built-in sorting filters for Reddit content: hot and controversial. This approach yielded the top five most popular posts and the five most controversial posts at the time of collection for both subreddits. Overall, this generated 580 captured threads, averaging just under 46 comments per thread, and a total of 23,149 comments. To make these captures I used third-party software (in my case, Microsoft OneNote), and cataloged them in a database. Working with a browser add-in, I was able to image entire threads maintaining all the post information. Threads appear as long, single, scrollable images that can be viewed in the same type of infinite scroll as when the posts are viewed online, and combined with the Reddit setting to show all posts and replies for threads this does a good job of capturing the content (Figure 13.5).

An excel workbook was also used in this research to keep data points for individual posts, such as time of capture, poster, number of comments, and other data (Figure 13.6).

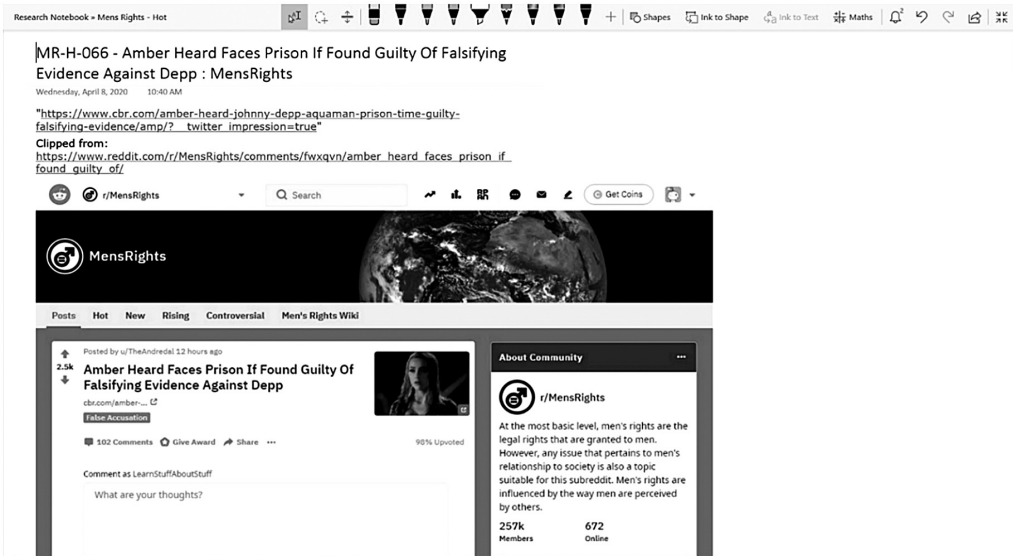


Figure 13.5 Example of captured Reddit thread using OneNote.

Post ID	Rank	Date	Time	Vote Total	Posted by	Time on	Flair	Upvote %	Comment Total	Title	Notes
MR-H-054	4	30-Mar-20	23:55	94	u/Tommy	9 hours	Feminism	97%	32	Norwegian investor wants to start a capital-fund	They take the idea of the women-only fund and make it about how this is discrimination a most reactions are about how this is wrong in that the men would just move on with their lives, but the women would likely blow up into a fight. There are a few different scenarios presented for that.
MR-H-055	5	30-Mar-20	23:59	639	u/frostym	19 hours	Discrimination	98%	81	From my brother's online psychology lecture today he hates leftists.	Forbes article linked to through a twitter post by Lisa Britton. The discussion is around the pay gap and its legitimacy, yes, but also about how women can be both influenced by deep social structures, and have free will.
MR-H-056	1	01-Apr-20	20:49	2000	u/TheAndreal	9 hours	Activism/Support	96%	75	Lisa Britton nails the gender wage gap myth: Twitter	This is clearly an april fools joke, but the guys in the sub really go on about it. Discusses rape of a boy by a woman and him having to pay child support. Lots of nothing about this and about how it is bad, but one post u/dubhhh with some legal references and precedents about this type of situation actually happening. - references to Hermesmann v
MR-H-057	2	01-Apr-20	20:51	2200	u/COm1c1	16 hours	General	98%	117	Boy raped at 14yo is forced to pay child support	Domestic violence meme that has the thread back and forth about it being a joke and not so a lynchpin for people going off about how terrible this is and how it is a real thing and if people don't take it seriously. Also some interesting stuff in here where people track down a source of the actual image, because, why not?
MR-H-058	3	01-Apr-20	20:53	947	u/robinnori	16 hours	Social Issues	97%	71	Domestic violence towards male is not a serious	Intactivism - COVID calling hospitals to see if they are violating the law by doing this elect
MR-H-059	4	01-Apr-20	21:09	127	u/DarthEc	8 hours	Intactivism	97%	41	Men's Rights Activists and Intactivists, we have w/procedure.	Although this starts being about the Spanish Women's march, it really turns into a lot of b
MR-H-060	5	01-Apr-20	21:11	2100	u/Admirab	1 day	Feminism	96%	158	Feminist rally being a potential COVID-19 catalyst and forth about what the sub is for and about whether all feminism is bad or not.	Older incident with black girls accusing white man of assault on the bus. Interestingly, the
MR-H-061	1	04-Apr-20	10:53	1100	u/Chm1c1	16 hours	False Accusation	97%	81	Three black girls attack a white man on the bus at that it is older doesn't come up until way down in the comments.	

Figure 13.6 Screenshot of excel workbook used for database notetaking.

Data Analysis

Like any qualitative research, data analysis for digital inquiry can be dictated by the theoretical and methodological approaches that you choose for your research. For example, you are not likely to choose manual coding if you have chosen to scrape a huge amount of data from a social media site—it could take years of full-time work! But, as described elsewhere in this book, there are a huge number of analytical methods that can be applied to qualitative data, and this remains true if your data are collected from digital sources. You may set out at the beginning of your research to conduct a more traditional qualitative analysis of the transcripts obtained in your dyadic interviews. Or, having conducted an ethnography, you might be engaged in ongoing and complex ethnographic analysis through field notes. You may also have chosen to use analysis software, either as your primary analysis tool, or as a helping hand to manage your data and thoughts. All these choices are worthwhile and generative ways to approach your data, and other chapters have covered the ongoing and layered analysis of phenomenology (Chapter 4), the procedures of coding (Chapter 5), field notes and discourse analysis (Chapters 7 & 10), and the non-prescriptive value-guided approaches of PAR (Chapter 11).

Since each of these approaches can be applied to digital data the same way they are applied to “traditional” data, I will not revisit them here. Instead, the remainder of this section will speak directly to the ways that digital research data can look and feel very different from more traditional data. Like we did in the data collection section, exploring exactly how I approached the analysis of this data is a worthwhile way to exploring how complicated and specific this can be.

One Scholar's Process for Digital Data

Each post (image) was reviewed, reading the original text provided by the poster, following any major link provided, and/or watching any media that was included as part of the post (this included YouTube videos, news articles, blog posts, and links to other websites). After this, I read the top three parent comments and using the information from the post and those comments I noted a basic thematic structure to the arguments being made in the post. I then read through all the thread comments sequentially. After the first 25 posts were reviewed, I noted significant themes that emerged from the posts and threads. For example, this early list for /r/MensRights included: anti-feminism; base arguments for the community; solidarity; domestic violence; relationships; body issues; masculinity; and cultural bias. Threads were then given, or more, of these designations as I worked my way through the posts and comments.

As analysis progressed, these initial themes were expanded, contracted, separated, and augmented with comments and thematic content from comments throughout the set of empirical materials. Broader discourses began to emerge, including broad adherence to the politics of the right, male superiority, questioning of women's (in particular feminist's) rationality and intelligence, and meritocratic neoliberal understandings of work and personal value (see Figure 13.7 for one example). When specific themes or connections were identified in the comments or posts, that content was either recorded in the research notes, or copied and pasted as exemplars using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, creating an ongoing library of content. The result is a searchable database of content that reflects the significant themes and discourses that emerged from the data, ready to be reinscribed under the deeper categories of discourse.

What I have described here is the same process that researchers engage with any time they do discourse analysis or other types of coding for qualitative research; so what makes digital inquiry different? At the surface level, nothing is different. Where the important differences, and especially the differences that speak to concerns for social justice, show themselves is when we begin to engage with the previously discussed considerations for digitally-mediated research in the form of meta-analysis.

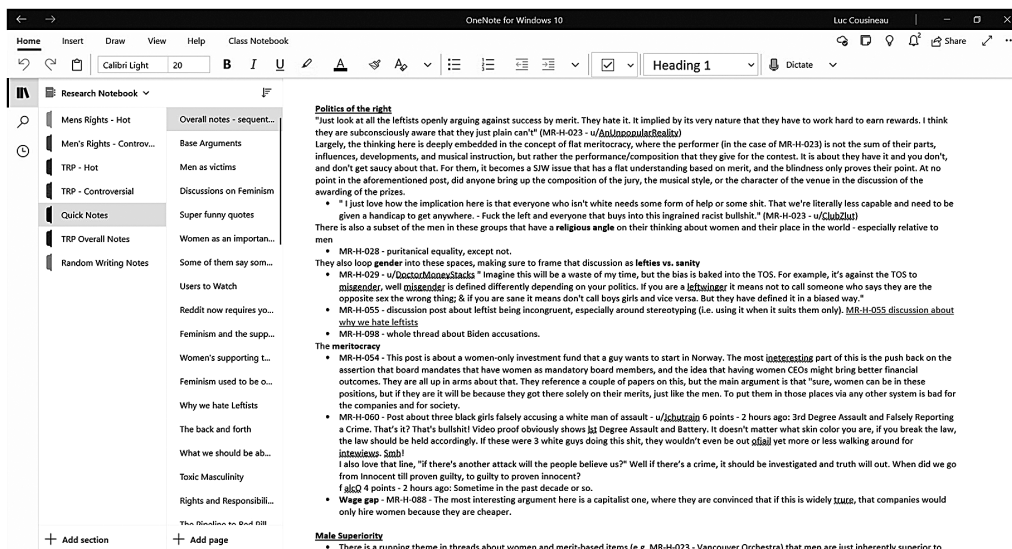


Figure 13.7 Screen capture of OneNote data notes reflecting politics of the Right in /r/MensRights.

Understanding the way that Reddit sorts and presents content to users—meaning the way that it defaults to sorting content by “hot,” or presenting posts that have the most favorable combination of votes, comments, and user-activity—is one of the steps in providing a more nuanced understanding of Reddit communities. Content that supports the ideological narratives of Reddit communities is more likely to get upvotes within those communities, and users are more likely to engage with it. The more users engage and upvote the content, the more likely it is to appear at the top of the subcommunity page as “hot” content, where it is seen by more users, and becomes more likely to appear in other users’ feeds. Therefore, if we are only observing content filtered through Reddit’s “hot” filter, then we are likely to only see content that supports the community narrative, and we exclude dissenting views and counterdiscourse. The implication here is that the considerations for all digitally-mediated research are essential for helping us understand users and community dynamics as we do our research. Without considering the technologies, techno-sociality, and the specifics of the platforms we use, we leave quite a lot out of our research.

Social Justice and Ethical Considerations

We have covered several concerns throughout this chapter, with a particular focus on ways that you might consider elements of technology and digital landscapes in important ways as you take on digital qualitative research. The final section of this chapter will discuss the ethics of digital qualitative research, and how complicated questions about public and private, open and accessible data, and whom we choose to protect versus whom we choose to expose, come to bear as we engage in research.

Like the other sections, the conversation about ethics in digital research always occurs in addition to long-standing ethical considerations that are important parts of social justice-oriented research. Imperatives of researcher reflexivity, power, and representation are just as present for digital research as any other. The unique considerations of digital research are mostly about data, and what is appropriate use of digital data. What are public, and what are private, data? What duty of care do we owe to users? Some of these questions should be asked by ethics review boards, but it is wise to ask them yourself before you submit your project for review.

Are the Data Public or Private?

The question of whether data we collect are public or private is perhaps the most important ethical question, as it acts as the foundation of how we might proceed. As most institutions do not require human subjects' ethics review for public data, asking whether the data you wish to collect are public or private is an important question, and a complicated one. The measure that is most often used to determine whether data are public or private is whether anyone can access those data, or whether some sort of special permission is required. For example, if you would like to access data from a Facebook group and that group is public, likely the users have a reasonable assumption that what they post is public as well. But, if the group is private and you require permission to access the discussion, then your data will likely be considered private and should require review board approval. The same is true for any social media that has a combination of public messages and private chats, like Twitter. For a site like Reddit, where a login is required to actively participate, but anyone can view content as a visitor,⁵ the question is more complicated. While some might contend, because Reddit has usernames that are not necessarily tied to physical identities (contrasted with Facebook, for example), that users have an assumption of privacy, I have argued that user behavior demonstrates there is no such expectation. I contend that Reddit data are public, but I have also applied for (and received) ethics clearance for my Reddit work.

The significance of the public/private discussion is that: (1) when in any doubt, seek advice (and potentially clearance) from your institution's ethics review board for the collection and use of digital data generated by users, but (2) also remember that those reviewing and granting that clearance likely have spent far less time considering the nature of the data and the implications of your research than you have. Be prepared to provide information and explanation to them, and it is wise to reach out to an ethics liaison to help you through the process. With your knowledge about the technologies, techno-sociality, and platform, you are in the best position to educate and discuss the public/private nature of the data you wish to collect.

Do I Owe an Ethics of Care to the Users I Study?

With social justice-oriented research, the answer to this question will almost certainly be yes. In using the cultural texts of users for academic study, researchers should have an obligation to users (participants). Relative to research, the feminist ethics of care calls us to create a research practice that can help to "repair our world" by carrying feminist epistemological principles through, among other areas, the management of different realities and understandings between researcher and researched, and complex questions of power in research and writing (Stanley & Wise, 2013, p. 23). We are called to do so by treating our research subjects as agentic actors, real people, and to understand that our research has consequences for those researched, as well as for ourselves, and society (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

One way that we can practice an ethics of care is to be careful about identifying our participants overtly in our work, meaning that just as in non-digital research and writing we should obfuscate our participants as best we can. While in physical qualitative research it might be sufficient to give our participants a pseudonym, in digitally-mediated research this is often insufficient. With powerful search tools at every internet user's disposal, content from digital platforms might be only a few clicks away. Markham (2012) suggests that one way to maintain an ethics of care for participants is to also obfuscate their content through fabrication of names and narratives. This could be as simple as paraphrasing instead of direct quotes, but Markham also suggests that the researcher could rescript content to provide the same experience to the reader of research, but without exposing the user/participant. Although this might seem laborious, it does pay attention to the potential safety of the user/participant. Debates about the value of obfuscating all users/participants notwithstanding,⁶ the practice is a good one if we are concerned with social justice as part of, or the goal of, our research.

Conclusion

Unlike some of the other methodologies and concepts covered in this book, using digital research for social justice does not have a single or specific approach. It is instead a setting for qualitative research for social justice that has unique contexts, different frames, and special considerations that come in addition to those needed for all qualitative inquiry. In this chapter, we have explored how the unique contexts of technologies and their histories have direct and material impacts on the research process. In learning about these unique impacts, we have explored three ways in which all digital scholars should be attentive in their research: technology design and its affordances; the influence of techno-sociality; and the importance of researcher knowledge about the research setting.

Who designed the platform we use to conduct research, and why that platform performs in certain ways is essential to properly understanding the ways that data are generated in digital contexts. For example, Reddit was founded in, and has the highest number of users from, the United States, so it is reasonable that most content on the site is focused on that country. Individuals behave differently in digital interactions than they do face-to-face, so different types of online interaction (text-only vs. with photos vs. with video) will elicit different reactions from users. Understanding the history of a website like Reddit allows for much better understanding and nuanced interpretation of hate or other problematic content on the site. These considerations matter.

When using digital methods to collect and analyze those data, many of them look quite like their non-digital counterparts. The differences lie in how you access, catalog, capture, and process those data elements, then how you integrate the meta-considerations for all digital inquiry. In some cases, you may collect data using platform or software tools and these data, although unique to digital inquiry, are treated the same as all other qualitative data—with care and attention.

In the context of qualitative inquiry for social justice, the most important take-away from this chapter comes back to learning about the technology and techno-social elements of the digital spaces you choose to study. While it can be easy to gloss over the backgrounds of the technologies that fuel our social lives and digital inquiry, it is in those backgrounds that we find the most significant implications for technologies effects on social justice. When you consider the history of digital computers and the internet, for example, you likely envision rooms full of white men: men like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk. But the real history of the development of digital computing is filled with women's faces and women's inputs, ignored by most of the histories we have been told about these technologies so essential to our lives. Every technology has stories like this, from the women who ran the first digital computers in World War II (Hicks, 2017), to ousted CEOs who tried to enact change in Silicon Valley (Pao, 2017). Discussion about major technological breakthroughs, like facial recognition technology for example, often fails to recognize who is marginalized until someone from that marginalized population can make that failure public (Buolamwini, 2017). The real impact of doing digital inquiry with social justice in mind is that we can look deeper at the technological spaces we inhabit and research, and search out what is missing in the discussion. We can also get a better understanding of why we see the things we see in online community when we do qualitative inquiry. These considerations are essential as we work toward a better future.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Thinking about your experiences on social media, how much to you know about why certain content is recommended to you? How could you find out more about how your favorite social media chooses content for you to see?
- 2 Have you ever experienced (personally or as a witness) socially unjust behavior online? What, if anything did you do about it at the time? How could you use social justice-oriented research to better understand this type of situation?

- 3 Thinking about doing research with a Facebook group about climate activism in your city, what steps would you need to take to properly prepare as a researcher to conduct trustworthy research?

Notes

- 1 It is important to acknowledge that even in Western democracies like Canada and the United States, some of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, there are still significant numbers of people that do not have reliable access to high-speed internet or cellular service (Freeman et al., 2019; Hamblly & Rajabian, 2021).
- 2 I want to acknowledge upfront that this definition is simplistic and potentially problematic for scholars who are particularly interested in the study of technology, digital integration, STS, or others, but for the purposes of this chapter and the work it intends to accomplish, this definition is sufficient. For further reading the topic of digitality see (Bowen & Giannini, 2021; Cottom, 2017; Franklin, 2015).
- 3 Several of these examples use the internet to transmit and receive data of course, but our interactions with games, technologies in our homes, or even the apps on our mobile devices differ from our interactions with websites, thus making them internet-adjacent.
- 4 It would be exceedingly challenging to discuss each of these elements and your new research in a single chapter or manuscript.
- 5 This is true, except for private subcommunities that require moderator permission to enter, and quarantined communities that require a verified email address.
- 6 This is something I have discussed at length (Cousineau, 2021).

Recommendations for Further Reading

On the Influence of Technologies and Importance for Research

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press.

Noble's book catalogs and deconstructs the influence of algorithms and who builds them on search results, knowledge production, and people as we increasingly rely on private corporations to be the brokers of knowledge in late capitalist society. Framed through black feminist technology studies and information studies, this book provides important insights into how we are all affected by search, and how the ubiquity of private mega-corporations like Google and Facebook can have deleterious effects on those already subjugated in society.

Abbate, J. (2012). *Recoding gender: Women's changing participation in computing*. MIT Press.

This book provides a thorough and readable history of women's participation in the development of digital computing, and how that participation has been changed, cloaked, and erased through the social mores of gender and power. It helps to answer questions about why we see technology, and especially computers as spaces for men and boys before women.

Gillespie, T. (2017). Regulation of and by platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social media* (pp. 254–278). Sage.

In this chapter, Gillespie discusses the sites and services that host public expression, and organize user content for public circulation without having produced or commissioned it. These platforms have tremendous influence and ability to sway public opinion, while working simultaneously in public, private, and governmental spheres. This reading provides a way to consider the wider influence of platform politics.

On Digital Methods

Paulus, T. M., & Lester, J. N. (2021). *Doing qualitative research in a digital world*. Sage.

Paulus and Lester provide a guide for doing qualitative research in digitally-mediated context. The chapters of the book can serve as reference materials in research design, or could be used to build and work through a research project from start to finish. This text is a good choice for novice digital researchers, or those looking for deeper exploration of their digital research approach.

Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. Sage.

Designed as a set of considerations for the digital ethnographer, this book can help those looking to engage with digital ethnography in working through the challenges and complexities of designing digital ethnographic research. Best suited for those with previous knowledge of ethnography, the guideposts in this text provide researchers with thought-provoking reflections for their research.

Cousineau, L. S., Oakes, H., & Johnson, C. W. (2019). Appnography: Modifying ethnography for app-based culture. In D. C. Parry, C. W. Johnson, & S. Fullagar (Eds.), *Digital dilemmas: Transforming gender identities and power relations in everyday life* (pp. 95–117). Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

This work provides an example of applied social theory to methodological design through the development of a new methodological approach designed for use with mobile apps, particularly Geo-Social Networking apps—otherwise known as dating/hookup apps. The authors present elements that researchers should consider when engaging with app-based research that will render more robust research data, and better-considered conclusions about social developments and experiences through mobile apps.

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