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Ethnography in information systems research

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What is ethnography?

Ethnography is a research approach originally developed in anthropology, where its primary objective was to gain a holistic and multi-faceted understanding of the role of culture, that is, the socially acquired and shared knowledge held by the members in a social setting, in human activity. Providing a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the social setting under study was the primary product of ethnographic research. Today, ethnographic methods are applied in many academic disciplines, including sociology, organization studies and information systems, as well as in commercial settings (e.g., new product development might rely on insights into consumer lifestyles and preferences developed by ethnographers). Understanding how people make sense of things, events and phenomena in their everyday lives is a key goal of the ethnographic endeavor, thereby making meaning and knowing its central focus.

Practically speaking, doing ethnographic research has traditionally implied a long period of intimate study and residence in a well-defined community employing a wide range of observational techniques including prolonged face-to-face contact with members of local groups, direct participation in some of the group’s activities, and a greater emphasis on intensive work with informants than on the use of documentary or survey data.

(Conklin, 1968: 172)

A defining feature of the ethnographic approach is thus the researcher’s immersion in a social setting referred to as the field, as well as his engagement with its participants. There is an expectation of remaining co-present in the field for an extended amount of time (e.g., one year) and relying on firsthand, in-situ participant observation for data collection. This implies that the researcher is visible (and accountable) to the people whose everyday lives he is studying.

Additionally, ethnographic research is marked by writing: not only does the ethnographer record in as much detail as possible what she observed in the field (i.e., field notes), but also what she experienced while in the social situation, for example, how it feels to be in a place and to do certain activities; things that are puzzling and frustrating (i.e., diary).
Even though ethnographic research is flexible in terms of data collection strategies and typically includes interviews with participants and review of texts (e.g., documents, emails, social media posts), observing people doing things in their minute detail from a vantage point of immersive co-presence, quintessentially defines the ethnographic endeavor. Wherever possible, the ethnographer should also try her hand at the activities enacted by the people being studied, so as to gain an embodied, affective understanding of what life is like in the social setting. With such an immersive approach, the researchers do not only gain access to what is going on in the field, but also to how people make sense of it (i.e., what they say about it). This promises to generate in-depth insights, which is one of ethnography’s key value propositions (Myers, 1999).

Analytically, ethnography entails distinguishing facts from fiction, and deriving second-order concepts from first-order facts (van Maanen, 1979). Determining the facts of the situation requires the ethnographer to separate events from participants’ descriptions thereof, as the latter are likely to be influenced by the appearances that informants want to maintain vis-à-vis the researcher. Facts should be limited to observed activities (e.g., behavior) and be separated from the self-presentations put forth by participants as they talk about these activities. Generating second-order concepts (i.e., generalizable statements that explain the patterning of specific activities/events) from observed first-order data (i.e., facts) requires the ethnographer to derive the invisible structures and taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie people’s actions and interpretations. These second-order concepts become the building blocks of the researcher’s theory development, which ultimately elevates the rich description of the field into a scientific contribution.

Importantly, this analytical work is only feasible when bits of information can be assessed by comparisons across time, informants and situations. The extended time period in the field is thus a crucial element in ethnography, not only because it allows the researcher to build rapport with informants and observe similar events on multiple occasions under different circumstances, but also because it gives the researcher time to reflect on events and theories, test and discuss them with participants, and revise categories while co-present in the field.

Ethnography in IS research

One indicator of whether ethnographic methods are valued in IS research is their rate of publication in IS journals. Paré et al. (2008) found that ethnographies represented a mere 2.6% of the 189 publications they identified in their review of all empirical papers on the impact of IT published between 1991 and 2005 in Management Information Systems Quarterly, Information Systems Research, Information & Organization, and European Journal of Information Systems. More recently, Rowe (2012) argued that ethnographic research is rare in IS and, in order to encourage ethnographic studies, he announced a new category of IS research genres, namely, Ethnographies and Narratives, for the EJIS. Some papers in this category have already been published (e.g., Utesheva, Simpson, & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2016).

Another indicator of ethnography’s perceived value in the field of IS, is the number of calls for ethnographic research that are made. While calls for ethnographic studies are frequently made in order to answer research questions or resolve inconsistent findings in a specific domain (e.g., Overby, Slaughter, & Konsynski, 2010), Ramiller et al. (2008) make a particularly strong case for the role of ethnographic research in addressing the discipline’s struggles with producing insights relevant to industry. They propose a type of study that they label “boundary ethnography” to investigate research projects that involve both academics and practitioners. They anticipate that such studies might develop a set of best practices for research collaboration across the industry–academia divide.
While the review of the ethnographic studies in IS that is presented in this section is admittedly partial, it nevertheless highlights that ethnographies are published fairly regularly in our leading journals. It also points to the diversity of topics and approaches that fall under the umbrella of ethnography in IS.

**Organizational ethnographies**

Ethnographic research methods have been embraced in IS research particularly as a way of studying the organizational implications of information technology in use. Studies of work practice frequently rely on organizational ethnographies, whose purpose is to “uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation” (van Maanen, 1979: 540). Importantly, the study of practice is not just focused on what people do (i.e., the actions they take), but also on the social structures that enable and constrain their agency. From a structural perspective (Giddens, 1984), practice thus encompasses both structure, agency and the recursive, constitutive relationship between them (also Bourdieu, 1977).

The work practices that have been studied as organizational ethnographies in IS are varied but nevertheless tend to focus on knowledge creation and coordination. For example, in their study of task-based offshoring afforded by transformational technologies that enable the creation of digital artifacts, Leonardi and Bailey (2008) relied on a multi-sited ethnography of engineers in India, Mexico and the United States, to identify five new knowledge transfer practices. Levina (2005) followed the development of a Web application in a media company in order to gain insight into systems development practices that required collaboration among different professional groups (e.g., marketing, sales, IT). Knowledge practices found to be conducive to successful collaborative system design included reflection in action and boundary spanning.

In their nine-month ethnography of knowledge integration practices in a manufacturer of semiconductors, Howard-Grenville and Carlile (2008) identified how knowledge regimes – some of which were more powerful than others – were sources of incompatibilities that challenged the design of knowledge integration systems. Ravishankar, Pan, and Myers (2013) were similarly concerned with issues of asymmetries of power, albeit in a more global setting. The purpose of their eight-month ethnography of an Indian IT outsourcer was to understand the role of historical power asymmetries between the West and former colonies in the contemporary off-shoring relationships.

A key feature of organizational ethnographies is that the field site is an institutionally defined place of work (e.g., an office building, a hospital, a lab) and as such a geographic space that the researcher can physically enter in order to study the phenomenon of interest. The ethnographer is co-present and able to both observe events and ask people about their understanding of them. Even though the boundaries of the field emerge as the researchers decide who or what to follow in their data generation efforts, the definition of the field is nevertheless based largely on established organizational parameters (e.g., work groups, projects, artifacts).

Nevertheless, the organizational ethnographies in IS vary on a number of dimension. For example, when it comes to length of stay in the field, Garud and Kumaraswamy (2005) relied on 45 days of firsthand, ethnographic observation of knowledge processes to enrich their study of vicious and virtuous circles in the management of knowledge. In contrast, Vieira da Cunha (2013) stayed in the field over a 15-month period and completed 307 days of observation of a new sales unit in a telecommunication’s firm. Generally, the length of stay in organizational ethnographies in IS lies between six and 12 months.
The location of the research site also varies tremendously. While Wales et al. (2007) and Mazmanian et al. (2014) studied NASA engineers, whose technology-intensive work revolved around the use of software, data and screens, Miscione (2007) did participant observations of healthcare and healing practices in rural areas of the Upper Amazon, Peru, where a telemedicine system was being implemented. While some of the studies are single-sited (e.g., Leonardi, 2013; Oborn, Barrett, & Davidson, 2011; Schultze & Orlikowski, 2004), others rely on multiple sites (e.g., Leonardi & Bailey, 2008).

Another distinction between the studies is their data collection strategy, specifically with respect to what and or who is followed. While some researchers make either a project (e.g., Levina, 2005) or a class of artifact (e.g., Mazmanian et al., 2014) their key focus, others focus on an organizational unit (Mattarelli, Bertolotti, & Macri, 2013).

We have also seen some diversity in terms of the style with which ethnographic material is presented. For example, Schultze (2000) and Mathiassen and Sandberg (2013) relied on confessional styles of writing that make the researcher’s role as research instrument, generating both data and theoretical insights, evident. While these two studies are examples of reflexive ethnography, Lin et al.’s (2015) work is a critical ethnography, which “is concerned with social issues such as freedom, power, social control and values with respect to the development, use, and impact of information technology” (Myers & Klein, 2011: 17). In their presentation of their ethnographic material, Lin et al.’s (2015) highlight the macro-sociological power relationships at play in the implementation of an educational technology in rural Taiwan.

**Digital ethnographies**

There are also some examples of digital ethnographies in IS research. Digital ethnography is the study of phenomena that are created through computer-mediated social interaction by relying on the researcher’s firsthand observations of human behavior in online spaces. Phenomena that require digital adaptations of classic ethnographic approaches include virtual teams, online communities, virtual (game) worlds and digital social networks. While these distributed and technology-mediated social settings challenge the assumptions of physical co-presence and independent observation of embodied practices (i.e., such that a wink is a powerful marker of meaning) that have traditionally been a requirement of ethnographic research, digital ethnography recognizes that people are operating in virtual spaces that are characterized by a degree of uncertainty associated with users’ lack of access to the physically embodied person taking action online (Hine, 2015). Understanding how people live and work in these mediated settings and how they make sense of virtuality is thus of keen interest to digital ethnographers.

There is some disagreement among practitioners of digital ethnography about whether data about the participants’ online actions should be enhanced by engaging with them in their physically embodied selves in off-line settings as well. Because one of the ethnographer’s key challenges is separating fact from fiction, there is some concern about taking participant’s online actions and presentations of self at face value. Hine (2015), for example, argues that collecting data about online phenomena by interacting with the actual user enhances the validity of data and should therefore be pursued in digital ethnographies. In contrast, Boellstorff (2008) maintains that digital environments, like virtual worlds, are social spaces in their own right. Even though events and cultures in digital settings are intertwined with those of the actual world, they are real and legitimate to users. Boellstorff (2008: 61) writes:

If during my research, I was talking to a woman, I was not concerned to determine if she was “really” a man in the actual world, or even if two different people were taking
turns controlling “her.” Most Second Life residents meeting this woman would not know the answer to such questions, so for my ethnographic purposes it was important that I not know either.

Despite the divergence over how best to address the distinctions between virtual phenomena enacted by digitally embodied users who are nevertheless physically embodied and located in a geographical place, there is little controversy over the need for digital ethnographers to make themselves visible (and accountable) in the virtual space (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004) and to remain active in it for an extended period of time. The digital ethnographies published in IS provide us examples of how ethnographers can engage in the virtual setting for firsthand data collection.

In their study of virtual teams, Sarker and Sahay (2004) relied on their active role as instructors throughout a 14-week course that brought together students from an American and a Norwegian university for a systems development project. Because the project teams were composed of students from each geographic location, the authors were able to physically observe and interact with half the students, while relying on the digital project spaces to symbolically observe and interact with the other half. Sarker and Sahay (2004) thus drew on three sources of data for their digital ethnography: digital communications among team members (i.e., messages posted, files shared and chat interactions on the learning management platform the students were using), reflections of team members at the end of the course and their own impressions of the virtual teams’ collaborative practices throughout the course.

In order to study collaboration in virtual, open source communities, Howison and Crowston (2014) conducted a digital ethnography. Aware of the need to derive insights from reflection on his lived experience in the virtual community, Howison chose an open source project with relevance to his work life as a student. He then proceeded to engage with a bibliographic management software project daily for four years. He not only used the product, but followed the mailing list and bug tracker. While it is unclear whether Howison made himself visible in the community through active participation (e.g., by reporting bugs or contributing to their resolution), his long-time observations of the open source community were nevertheless contemporaneous and provided the authors with the kind of historical/cultural insight they needed to narratively reconstruct the software developers’ coordination practices from the trace data that the project archives represented.

The process of making digital trace records (e.g., transaction logs, version histories, source code, email messages) meaningful by attaching them to lived experience, which the authors refer to as “trace ethnography” (Geiger & Ribes, 2011), played a central analytical role in this Howison and Crowston’s (2014) study. Rather than using the voluminous amounts of digital traces that the developers’ work generated for quantitative analysis, the authors instead relied on their understanding of the activities, people and technologies that produced these digital records to invert the traces and generate qualitatively rich descriptions of different actors’ practices.

Chua and Yeow (2010) also studied open source development projects. They were particularly interested in the practices of cross-project coordination, which arose when multiple projects were working on a single piece of software in the open source environment. They observed this phenomenon in an open source game, Jagged Alliance 2 (JA2), whose ongoing development relied on modding different components, for example, developing new weapons or characters. Instead of just relying on the archival data of the 40 modding projects, the authors also used secondary data from wikis and online forums associated with some of these projects. What gave the project its ethnographic quality, however, was the fact that one of the co-authors was not only a player of JA2, but had also been observing the JA2 mod discussion.
board for three years. Even though it is not clear that the co-author made himself visible as a participant observer within the modding community during this time, his years of observation suggest that he had gained the kind of insider perspective that comes from being immersed in a community.

Greenhill and Fletcher’s (2014) study of labor practices in virtual game worlds similarly relied on the researchers’ active engagement in two games – Puzzle Pirates and Farmville – over an extended period of time. The researchers played Puzzle Pirates for three years and Farmville for 12 months. While they relied on blog posts and other third-party publications of people’s experience with Puzzle Pirates for additional insight on this game, they also conducted interviews and analyzed visual representations for insights that extended beyond their own experience of Farmville.

**Design ethnographies**

While ethnography draws on a variety of largely qualitative data collection and analysis methods, it can also become part of other research traditions. In IS, in particular, ethnography frequently forms part of design research (Crabtree, 2004; Sharrock & Randall, 2004). For example, in their action research project, Bjørn et al. (2009) relied on the insights they had gained from ethnographic observation to point out inconsistencies between the proposed designs and existing work practices during design workshops. Carugati (2008) relied on his position as a member of a systems development team to collect in-depth data on the development process.

The distinction between organizational ethnography and action research might not always be clear. Even though Crabtree (2004) advocates for the hybridization of ethnography and design research, the distinction he makes between using ethnography for design critique versus design practice is helpful in characterizing a study that encompasses both observational ethnography and interventionist design. To the extent that the ethnographic data is used to support an intervention (e.g., the design of a new technology or the implementation of a system in an organizational setting), the study is more design ethnography or action research. However, if the ethnographic material is used to evaluate a design approach without the lessons being implemented in the empirical context (i.e., design critique), the study can more readily be characterized as an organizational ethnography (e.g., Gasson, 2006).

**Ethnography in IS research: Quo vadis?**

Research methods should ideally be chosen to illuminate phenomena of interest. This suggests that changes in the phenomena a discipline wants to study need to be met with new methods or adaptations to existing methods. In IS, technological advancement is continuously changing the issues and questions researchers want to explore. For example, technological developments are fundamentally changing the nature of work and institutions as the workforce is becoming more mobile, virtual and global. This implies that work life is more fleeting, distributed and multiple than in the past. The distinctions between organizations and their customers are being challenged in an era of open innovation (Thorén, Ågerfalk, & Edenius, 2014). As more and more human activity is mediated and recorded by technology, digital traces are a key resource that can be mined through (big data) analytics. And increasingly complex IT infrastructures, including grid computing (Venters, Oborn, & Barrett, 2014), are being deployed.

Furthermore, technology is becoming so entangled in individuals’ everyday lives, that traditional boundaries of work versus play, actual versus virtual, and human versus machine can
no longer be taken for granted. Additionally, this increasing intertwining of the human and the non-human renders the user’s experiences with technology increasingly sensory, emotional and kinesthetic.

This list of trends highlights that IS research needs to grapple increasingly with the highly personal uses of technology (e.g., wearable technology and ubiquitous computing), where issues of multiple embodiments and the integration of technology with the user as an embodied, sensory being need to be explored. At the same time, the increasingly distributed, global and digital nature of large-scale infrastructures (e.g., digital traces, analytics) represent the other area of research that challenges our extant tools.

The increasingly fleeting nature of technology-mediated settings highlights the inadequacies of traditional social science methods (Law & Urry, 2004). Increasingly IS researchers are therefore seeking to not only study technological phenomena that occur outside of organizational settings (Yoo, 2010), but also understand the constitutive entanglement between the social and the technological in new ways. Socio-material theorizing represents a recent movement that challenges how IS phenomena are theorized, studied and represented (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

We also hear calls in IS for methodological approaches capable of analyzing visual data (Diaz Andrade, Urquhart, & Arthanari, 2015), as well as digital traces (Howison, Wiggins, & Crowston, 2011). Multi-sited, biographical approaches to the study of enterprise software are being advocated as an alternative to single-sited, organizational ethnographies (Williams & Pollock, 2012).

Ethnography, both as a method and as a genre of representation, has much to offer with regard to contributing key insights into these emerging phenomena of interest. However, ethnographic methods need to be adapted to deal more effectively with the ephemeral, distributed, sensory and embodied nature of contemporary phenomena. Law and Urry (2004: 403–404) maintain that our social science methods deal poorly with the fleeting – that which is here today and gone tomorrow, only to re-appear again the day after tomorrow. They deal poorly with the distributed – that is to be found here and there but not in between – or that which slips and slides between one place and another. They deal poorly with the multiple – that which takes different shapes in different places. They deal poorly with the non-causal, the chaotic, the complex. And such methods have difficulty dealing with the sensory – that which is subject to vision, sound, taste, smell; with the emotional – time – space compressed outbursts of anger, pain, rage, pleasure, desire, or the spiritual; and the kinaesthetic – the pleasures and pains which follow the movement and displacement of people, objects, information and ideas.

There are some forms of ethnography emerging in other fields that hold much promise for ethnographic inquiry of contemporary phenomena in IS. While these modes of ethnographic inquiry may challenge some of the tenets of ethnography as traditionally conceived, they nevertheless tend to preserve the core research practice of the researcher becoming immersed in the phenomenon/social setting for an extended period of time.

**Mobile ethnography**

Developed in the discipline of human geography over the last ten years (Novoa, 2015), mobile ethnography is part of a mobility paradigm that emphasizes movement – including networks,
relations, flows and circulation – over fixed places (Sheller & Urry, 2016). Nevertheless, it considers movement and moorings and seeks to examine different forms of mobility – for example, corporeal travel of people, physical movement of goods, virtual person-to-person communication – and their complex combinations. Instead of focusing on phenomena and people within a situation, mobile approaches to research seek to understand patterns of connection and circulation of ideas and people.

In operational terms, mobile ethnographies imply traveling with participants in order to gain insight into the embodied, sensory experience and constitutive aspects of movement. As a method, mobile ethnographies entail inquiries on the move – such as the shadowing, stalking, walk-alongs, ride-alongs, participatory interventions and biographies we describe – enable questions about sensory experience, embodiment, emplacement, about what changes and what stays the same, and about the configuration and reconfiguration of assemblies of objects, spaces, people, ideas and information. (Büscher, Urry, & Witchger, 2011: 13)

Experiencing and participating in the everyday movement of people in a co-present manner, is of utmost importance to this method. As such, mobile ethnography is a translation of traditional participant observation onto contexts of mobility. It means that the ethnographer is not only expected to observe what is happening, but also to experience, feel and grasp the textures, smells, comforts and discomforts, pleasures and displeasures of a moving life. It means following people around and engaging with their worldviews. It means focusing on mobility. (Novoa, 2015: 99)

Applied to IS research, the sensibilities of mobile ethnographies seem particularly valuable in studies of ubiquitous, mobile technologies and experiential computing (Yoo, 2010). Shadowing users of smartphones or mobile games (e.g., Pokemon Go) using these methods promises to provide us with rich insight into the role of sensations, embodiment and movement in the experience (or performance) of geographic space, thus rendering geographies more fleeting and ephemeral. In studies of less mobile technologies such as virtual worlds (Tom Boellstorff et al., 2012), online services such as Freecycle (Hine, 2015), or sharing economy applications (e.g., Uber), mobile ethnography might enable the exploration of the meaning and patterns with which online and off-line venues are traversed.

**Sensory ethnography**

Sensory ethnography takes as “its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice” (Pink, 2015: xi). It invites the researcher to do ethnography through the senses – vision, touch, taste, smell and hearing – and to account for perception that draws on the culturally shaped and intertwined nature of the senses in the research process. Sensory ethnography thus challenges the notion that ethnography relies primarily on observation, insisting instead that it is a highly reflexive and experiential process. Participant *sensing* (or sensory participation) – rather than participant *observation* – forms the cornerstone of this methodological adaptation.

An example of sensory ethnography is presented by Edvardsson and Street (2007), who were studying how different health care environments affected the understanding and
provisioning of care. They noted that nurse-ethnographer David Edvardsson’s senses were gradually changing during the fieldwork and that the insights he gained and the questions he asked shifted accordingly. Edvardsson and Street (2007: 26) explain:

While being at the ward as a participating observer, DE found that he instinctively joined the brisk pace habitually used by the nurses as they moved around at the unit . . . he found that the brisk movement and sound of the hurried steps of staff prompted the sensation of wanting to move with the pace of the unit . . . [this] led him to understand the way that corridors were used in these units as spaces of passage and not for lingering or chance encounters . . . This epiphany stimulated his curiosity to explore further how people moved around the unit and what this movement might mean.

Pink (2015) highlights that walking with others, that is, sharing their pace and rhythm, is a powerful practice of sensory ethnography, as it provides the researcher insight into others’ experiential world. It however also creates affinity, empathy and a sense of belonging with the participants in the field of study. By using walking as a form of research, sensory ethnography thus overlaps with mobile ethnography; however, it might enhance mobile ethnographies by making more explicit the palette of sensations that informs the experience of movement.

As the ethnographer relies on her own sensate experience as a guide to the experiential world of others, autoethnography features prominently in sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015). Autoethnography relies on the researcher’s narration of the self in order to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). It is particularly effective in the investigation of phenomena that are not only highly distributed but also sensory in nature, because the researcher can rely on her own experience as the primary source of data (Hine, 2015).

While there appear to be few published examples of autoethnographies in IS to date, those that are available rely on researchers’ self-narratives of being in virtual worlds. For example, Silva and Mousavidin (2015) drew on diaries of their own gameplay in World of Warcraft (WoW) over a three-month period in order to gain insights into how players develop strategic thinking; and O’Riordan (2014) relied on her experience of being in Second Life to explore what it means to be digital. Arguing that the hybridic state of existing simultaneously in actual and virtual spaces challenges basic assumptions about existence and experience, O’Riordan (2014) suggests that the narration of one’s own experience gives researchers the freedom to express their struggle to make sense of their experience in their unique, emotionally expressive voice. It is thus the complexly entangled nature of a self that is enacted in multiple venues through a variety of (digital) bodies that motivates O’Riordan (2014) to rely on self-observation as her primary data source.

Sensory ethnography can be fruitfully used in IS research. For example, Pantzar & Ruckenstein (2014) propose studying the emotional implications of data analytics, specifically in the context of the Quantified Self movement, where individuals rely on biometric trackers to monitor their bodies. What emotions do these analytics produce and how do people deal with them? Similar questions might be asked of social media, which rely on quantifications and rankings, for example, the number of likes on Facebook or number of followers on Twitter. What do such popularity and social influence analytics do – in terms of sensations – to users’ identities and sense of self? By asking these kinds of questions, sensory ethnography might significantly enrich our understanding of social media and other experiential technologies.
**Visual ethnography**

As Diaz Andrade et al. (2015: 646) assert, “the information systems field is overwhelmingly visual in nature.” Websites and social media (especially Facebook and Instagram) are rich in images and video, and individuals are increasingly relying on their smartphone cameras to capture textual information as images (e.g., photographs of a document or whiteboard). Researchers too increasingly rely not only on audio recording in their fieldwork, but also on photography and video recording (Pink, 2007). Visual ethnography offers one way of generating insights from these still and moving images. To date, however, IS research has failed to leverage such images (Diaz Andrade et al., 2015).

Visual ethnography can take one of three forms (Pink, 2007): studying society by producing images (e.g., the researcher producing photographs and/or video); examining visual representations that have already been produced, thus providing information about the social setting; or collaborating with research participants in the production of still and/or moving images that represent society. Ethnographers who take images of the social setting as part of their data generation effort find that the sharing of these images with their informants offers an occasion for sense-making and storytelling (Pink, 2007). As such, it is the conversation about visual representations during the course of ethnographic research that generates valuable insights. This approach is potentially viable in organizational and design ethnographies in IS.

Studying the visual representation of companies (e.g., websites) or individuals (e.g., social media profiles, avatars) is particularly promising in digital ethnographies in IS. How identities are produced through such digital images and what they come to mean in different settings are potential research topics.

Another approach to visual ethnography is the use of photo-diaries that are produced by research participants (Pink, 2007). Particularly effective in situations where the phenomenon of interest is difficult to observe – for example, because they occur in highly distributed, private spaces such as people’s homes – participants are asked to create visual representations of events and document them by describing the image in some way (e.g., when it was taken and why). They are later interviewed about their photo-diaries in order to elicit the meaning of the images further (Latham, 2003). This data generation method effectively turns research participants into apprentice ethnographers as they reflect on events and the material surroundings of their everyday lives. These photo-diaries may even approximate autoethnographies (Pink, 2007).

While Schultze (2014) relied on the photo-diary interview method in her work on the avatar–self relationship in Second Life, this work cannot be classified as a visual ethnography because the researcher was not immersed in the social situation under study (i.e., the virtual world) for an extended period of time. Even though she had an avatar and was periodically active in-world, Schultze (2014) did not spend the kind of time in-world as her research participants did. This highlights that reliance on photo-diaries as a data collection method alone does not make a study a visual ethnography; the researcher’s prolonged immersion in the social setting under study remains a core requirement of ethnographic research.

**Conclusion**

Ethnography as a method for generating and representing knowledge about culturally shaped phenomena (e.g., work practices) is well established in the field of IS. Even though the publication of ethnographic studies in IS journals is relatively rare (Rowe, 2012), ethnographic
research is being conducted and shared publicly on what appears to be a fairly regular and ongoing basis. Currently, the types of ethnographic research that are predominant in IS are organizational, digital and design ethnographies.

Because information technology is changing the nature of the phenomena of interest by rendering them more fleeting, distributed and global, social science research methods – including ethnography – need to be adapted in order to provide insight into these phenomena. While styles of ethnography – especially trace ethnography (Geiger & Ribes, 2011) – hold much promise for future IS research that involves digital trace data, this chapter highlights three types of ethnography – mobile, sensory and visual – that focus on the human experience of technology, especially as it pertains to mobility, sensation and embodiment. The hope is that this introduction to new modalities of ethnographic research stimulates experimentation with this research approach, which has much to offer as the field of IS grapples with the changing nature of phenomena.

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