

# Cues for Ethnography in Pandamning Times: Thinking with Digital Sociality in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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By

Covid-19 has made the world strange. For many, efforts to stall the pandemic have initiated an unprecedented enclosure of our lives within the familiar walls of our homes, while simultaneously increasing our reliance on digital media to maintain personal and professional connections. This reordering of social worlds and blurring of boundaries between our public lives and private spaces raises a fairly obvious anthropological question: in an online age, what is “social” about social distancing?

We (Keleman Saxena & Johnson) are friends, writing partners, and environmental anthropologists. In our collaborative work on the extension of digital technologies into seemingly out-of-the-way places, we share a concern with the interminglings of materiality and meaning-making, and the role that digital technologies and online platforms play in mediating these relations. Our interest in the extension of digital technologies and platforms overlaps with our interest, as environmental anthropologists, in more-than-human worlds. We draw from the insights of other anthropologists who have pointed out that the turn to the study of ontologies allows for understanding the digital as “real,” materialized, and materializing.<sup>[1]</sup>

Watching the pandemic unfold, we have grappled not just with its personal effects, but also with how to consider it as ethnographers and educators. What does this pandemic mean for the world(s) we continue to build our careers studying, and how should we take it into account when advising students whose own research projects coincide with this period of upheaval? As others have recently acknowledged, the current crisis is likely to have far-reaching effects for field research, especially immersive ethnography.<sup>[2]</sup>

Moving methods online may be one part of the answer, but here we argue that ethnographers should also look at the Covid-19 pandemic – and more explicitly, at the expansion of digital communication technologies and platforms within it – as a “revelatory crisis.”<sup>[3]</sup> In this context, we propose a

series of “cues” for ethnographic attention in this moment of multiple cultural, material, and political transformations.

We think of these as cues, rather than research questions, because thinking ethnographically about (and during) this pandemic seems to us a slow exercise in distinguishing sound from noise. It may be too early to identify patterns of discourse or behavior that will prove enduring and significant, or to pinpoint those which are ephemeral (and what that ephemerality means). Even so, much ethnographic research relies on using intuition and careful attention to sense patterns in social interaction, which subsequently underpin formal research questions. To this end, we suggest three themes that anthropologists might attune ourselves to in this period of global disruption.

**In the movement of labor and personal relationships to digital platforms, what differentiations – implicit or explicit – emerge between the kinds of relationships that can be materialized digitally, versus those that require face-to-face contact? What are the implications of these differentiations for power, and vulnerability?**

The movement of life to online forums is a form of privilege, available largely to those whose work was computer-based before the pandemic. It reveals and exacerbates inequalities between those whose paychecks are secure and those whose paychecks are not. But reliance on digital media is not *only* a function of privilege, and not always in the ways one might expect. Digital platforms, for example, facilitate the continued employment of some “essential” work like Instacart shoppers, restaurant delivery workers, and an assemblage of increasingly insecure employees that make the Amazon empire possible. Digital media are also important forums for sharing information, like news about unemployment benefits and employment opportunities, as well as government advisories and medical advice. The “digital divide” – between those online and those not – is real, but not stark; it takes on unexpected contours, increasingly visible under current conditions.

The emerging differentiations between work that can be performed through digital technology and work which cannot invite ethnographic attention. In the US, where we are located, paid labor has effectively been moved into a three-tiered system: labor that can be performed remotely has largely shifted to work-from-home online platforms; “essential” labor, which cannot be performed remotely and is necessary for the functioning of basic health and economic systems continues, ideally under social distancing guidelines; and work that cannot be performed online and is not “essential” has been curtailed.

If, thinking with Judith Butler, “vulnerability” is a way to name “the porous

and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives,”<sup>[4]</sup> then the intended effect of this cordoning-off is precisely to limit this interconnection, thereby lessening the spread of the virus among physical bodies. An unintended effect is to differentiate exposures to other forms of risk and vulnerability, like insecurity in food and housing, domestic violence, and the overburdened infrastructure of state unemployment benefit systems. The formation and deepening of labor and social differentiations – whether we follow these contours, or others – offers a starting point for ethnography.

Convergences or divergences between affective and paid labor, like relationships of caregiving, are also key sites for ethnographic noticing. For example, just as certain kinds of work have moved online, schools have closed and daycares have shut down. These circumstances bring about a spatiotemporal convergence between affective and paid labor within households, and curtail or shift other caregiving (and teaching) relationships to online forums. Ethnographers might consider, for example, the gendered implications of these convergences of labor, or track how and for whom these shifts in time-use and responsibility endure as the scaffolding of stay-at-home orders begins to dissipate.

Meanwhile, many paid caregivers whose work must be conducted face-to-face, like health care workers coming in direct contact with patients ill with Covid-19, are reshaping their family relationships, e.g. staying in separate apartments or areas of their homes to avoid increasing their families’ exposure to the virus. While healthcare workers implement distancing within their personal lives, they use digital platforms, like Zoom, to enact a sense of closeness for those unable to receive visits from their loved ones, whether elders quarantined in assisted living facilities or patients sick with Covid-19. In these cases, digital platforms can substitute (even if they cannot fully replace) vital social relationships, providing the comfort of a loved one’s appearance and voice (when possible) across family separations.

Similar themes extend into the arena of grief. With social distancing guidelines limiting the size of group gatherings, Zoom, Skype, Facebook, and YouTube livestreaming features, among others, are being used to extend the reach of mourning beyond those able to be physically present. As one observer notes, “The global coronavirus pandemic has forced people to think about death, while simultaneously upending the ways in which we are used to experiencing grief and loss.”<sup>[5]</sup> Although now more widely adopted, digitally mediated funeral services and the necessity for them are not novel developments. They have been, for example, woven into funeral services in the Philippines for at least a decade in order to allow Filipinos working overseas to participate in their loved ones wakes.<sup>[6]</sup> Ethnographically, we are compelled to ask: how do digital forums offer

possibilities for extending care, and caregiving, when face-to-face contact is inadvisable? Where do they fall short? What forms of relating are curtailed, and what novel social relationships do they enable? What insights may be gained by thinking comparatively about labor, grief, and digital technologies across contexts before, during, and after the pandemic?

As Butler asserts, “The internet has more fully claimed its place as the new public sphere, but it can never fully substitute for the gatherings, both private and public, that allow losses to be fathomed and lived through with others.”<sup>[7]</sup> Drawing from long-standing concern with the functions, meanings, and meaning-building of social rituals, ethnographers are well-positioned to explore the role that digital platforms play in acknowledging these moments of personal and collective loss, and how these intersect with other spheres of social life, both offline and in other online arenas.

**How are collective experiences imagined/enacted through social media? What is the role of algorithms and other forms of amplification in creating collectives (or the illusion thereof), and across what scales?**

A second broad set of cues for ethnographic research centers on shared ideas of experience emerging on social media as the pandemic unfolds. We might think of these as “pandemic imaginaries” with world-building effects. Considering these forms of collective imagining both draws on and extends Appadurai’s suggestion that “electronic mediation” is a key element of the condition of modernity.<sup>[8]</sup> Digital media have a broad, collective reach – but this reach is not undifferentiated.

For many under stay-at-home orders, interactions with social and digital media (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Netflix, Hulu, online journalism, etc.) have taken on outsized importance for social interaction and learning. Within these emerge forms of collective imaginative production: videos of Covid-19 patients being released from hospitals to the applause and tears of health care workers; images of wildlife “retaking” iconic urban environments; images of armed civilians protesting stay-at-home orders in state capitols; or counter protests from healthcare workers. These media form the basis for meaning-making, the development of collectively understood narratives about what is happening, how, and why.

Much has been made of the extent to which social and political groups diverge on social media, and how easily these platforms – through algorithms and individual choices – narrow one’s exposure to differing sets of experiences and interpretations. But just as these emerging

imaginaries enact a sorting of people by political beliefs, they also provide forums for discussion, disagreement, and compromise. Comment sections of articles posted on Facebook and Twitter by news outlets are filled with threads debating what is actually happening and what ought to be done. Participation in these online public fora is amplified by the sheer numbers of people sheltering in place and the widespread adoption of smartphones. As ethnographers, we can track the contours of these debates and the claims made within them. In the process, we can (and should) contest simplistic explanations of contemporary political difference as forms of “tribalism.”

Some commonality is forged across assumed difference as commenters articulate meanings made through their experiences of the pandemic, and contest how their identities are mobilized to advance particular positions. Johnson, for example, is tracking the comment sections of articles addressing the pandemic published by and posted to Facebook from the IndyStar, self-described as “Indiana’s most trusted news source.” As confirmed cases and deaths continue to rise, she notices, for example, commenters admitting their own initial rejection of the virus as real or as a real threat, until they themselves, or someone they know, struggled to breathe as Covid-19 took hold in their lungs. Others are disclosing their own diagnoses of PTSD, depression, and anxiety to reject calls made to “open the economy” in the name of protecting those with mental health conditions. Others still contest dominant framings of the economy as closed, or that people have long been taking social distancing seriously; they, after all, are still working at home improvement stores, where they say every weekend is like “Black Friday.”

As ethnographers, we can notice and document the emergence of shared and contested forms of worlding under pandemic conditions. In this pursuit, social media offer platforms to track where meaning-making congeals around particular events and ideas, and how articulations of their significance diverge. Different platforms, different algorithms, and different people may enact distinct versions of this crisis, in ways that are simultaneously ideational and material. These distinctions emerge from and perform real work in the world, and in the process, may well generate more-than-ideational multiplicities.

**As stay-at-home orders are lifted, what are the ensuing effects of public health efforts to trace, count, and manage populations, or failures to perform these actions? And what role do digital media play in these efforts or omissions?**

As we write, in May of 2020, federal-level guidelines on social distancing in the US are expiring. Statistics at state levels noting increased numbers of ICU beds and ventilators are being mobilized to justify “opening the

economy,” even as confirmed Covid-19 cases and death tolls continue to rise. Fewer cases in counties outside of state epicenters are used to justify their “opening,” even as local hotspots (for example, at meat processing plants) continue to emerge. Meanwhile, the extent and availability of testing for the virus, and for the antibodies that result from prior infection, are the subject of heated debate: Are there enough tests? Do antibodies actually confer immunity, and if so, for how long? What does this “opening” mean, and for whom? Are available medical facilities sufficient to serve those at highest risk? Will “opening” really have the intended effect of easing the economic suffering of those who are most vulnerable?

Ever-present within these scenarios are references to numbers, counting, and equations. The volume of social media discussion of the concept of “flattening the curve” is indicative of this, as are the concatenation of graphs produced and disseminated by news and academic outlets.<sup>[9]</sup> These show the evolution of the “curve” in specific places, with data updated multiple times per day. In the process of distinguishing sound from noise, these graphs and conversations call to mind larger bodies of writing on the practices of counting, tracing, and defining, and the power of these techniques of governance to control and manage populations.<sup>[10]</sup> In the Covid-19 pandemic, too, numbers play key roles in developing intelligibility from the unintelligible; of making the incomprehensible comprehensible, and governable.

Perhaps a key example to think with here, in contrast to the emphasis on numbers describing medical facilities, is the dearth of information to assess disparate effects of the pandemic on US minority groups. At the time of writing, while state and federal agencies have released statistics demonstrating higher death-rates from Covid-19 among populations the CDC defines as “Non-Hispanic Black or African American,” comprehensive statistics on infection, hospitalization, and death rates of minority groups remain unavailable. Ethnographers are well-positioned to consider both the presumed meanings and the silences around such figures, and to consider the extent to which these numbers relate to lived experiences of vulnerability, whether explicitly health-related or otherwise.

Ethnographically – and as theorists – we suggest directing attention to the kinds of equivalencies (moral, economic, and otherwise) that numbers, and the imagination of numbers, underpin as quarantine turns to “tracing.” Where do numbers direct our attention, and what do they obscure? What kinds of power relationships do they reflect, enable, or develop? What tradeoffs are they mobilized to justify? What are the implications of these tradeoffs for lived experiences, and for whom are these implications most salient? And how is surveillance reincorporated into social behavior, reflected and reinforced at the level of individual

self-governance and collective action?

As the pandemic proceeds, digital devices and platforms are again poised to play key roles. Digital technologies are also being called on to generate data that will be used for managing populations, and individuals. Discussions of the steps needed to “safely” reopen public spaces almost always include the practice of “contact tracing,” or testing those who have come into contact with those infected with the virus to identify and halt the spread of the disease. Smartphone apps are now in production to address the challenges of contact tracing in large public spaces, relying on phones’ geolocators to identify those who have come into close proximity of an infected individual.<sup>[11]</sup> These kinds of technologies have already been used in East Asian countries’ response to the coronavirus outbreak,<sup>[12]</sup> and have been suggested in the US not only for general public spaces, but also specifically for use on college campuses.<sup>[13]</sup>

Especially in the absence of coordinated government intervention and investment, digital media and private markets for “big data” seem likely to define how tracking and tracing are integrated into the development of a new sense of “normalcy,” in the vein of what Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.<sup>[14]</sup> If we must “opt in” to be declared safe to work, or to benefit from social safety nets, is opting out even an option?

Last – but certainly not least important – while we write from a situated perspective within the US, the patterns of action surrounding counting, tracing, and controlling may also be particularly important for friends, colleagues, and interlocutors in our fieldsites located elsewhere. The contours of state action and the role of digital media in that action will vary from place to place alongside specific political and legal contexts and constraints. Political movements, state assistance, and medical care may be key avenues through which the tracing and tracking capabilities of digital technologies intersect with material wellbeing. The intersections between the Covid-19 pandemic and data, privacy, and vulnerability merit sustained ethnographic attention, especially in contexts where the leap to digital connectivity has been recent and fast.

### **Onward Provocations: Where is the global in the global pandemic?**

Especially in the context of a global pandemic, the wide geographic reach of digital media allows for an articulation of imaginaries across places and opens possibilities for shared worlding. As anthropologists based in the US, our “global” pandemic includes our fieldsites in Bolivia, India, and Uganda. Our long term engagements with food systems, forms of governance, and communities actively resisting state intervention in these contexts heighten our concerns over how this pandemic may intensify already divisive politics and unequal access to resources of many kinds.

Friends, family, and colleagues in other countries (including our fieldsites and beyond) have contacted us via digital platforms. Knowing that our country is home to the largest number of Covid-19 cases and deaths, and seeing reports of our government's stumbles and missteps (to put it mildly), they wonder whether we are safe. Comparing notes, frustration soon follows: "we know more about what is happening in America than in our own country." We commiserate over the still-widespread lack of information, inconsistent or inappropriate government responses, and the politicization of pandemic relief efforts. We find that our fears about the pandemic more deeply entrenching the power of authoritarian leaders and exacerbating widespread economic distress and deprivation are not only our own.

But even while the Covid-19 pandemic opens opportunities for connections across geographic space, it also foregrounds the "local," and the material, embodied experiences of locality. The spread of the virus requires physical encounter. These encounters link human lives not only with each other, but also with the more-than-human, including microorganisms, bats, pangolins, and our shared, non-living mediums of existence, like air, water, and surfaces. The importance of locality is also reflected in representations of lived experience. Epidemiological data, for example, focuses attention on state- and county-level case and death numbers, and government advisories and recommendations. Images shared on social media underscore unfamiliar experiences of familiar environments (like streets, monuments, and mountain ranges) seen through newly clean air, and absent of people.

As environmental anthropologists, our attention is drawn to a particular, emerging "global" imaginary: the parallels, connections, and equivalences assembling around the pandemic and climate change. Like climate change, observers in the sciences broadly agree that the pandemic is a force that will be slowed only by collective actions of global scope; and as with climate change, this call to global action provokes a wide range of responses, from zealous compliance to utter rejection (complete with speculation that the coronavirus is a hoax). Climate discussions in the context of the pandemic often emphasize equivalences, both moral and economic, and draw linkages between the individual- and government-level actions currently being taken to stall the spread of Covid-19, and those which would be necessary to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. There is much to observe in these intersecting phenomena.

The convergences between Covid-19 and climate change foreground the contributions ethnographers make when we examine global phenomena through the lens of situated knowledges and the densely concentrated relations that converge around locality. As Keleman Saxena argues elsewhere, this underscores the importance of considering a "material



phenomenology” of these events.<sup>[15]</sup> Ethnographers can provide accounts that start from first-person experiences of otherwise-global phenomena, like changing rainfall patterns and frequent, high-intensity wildfires, and demonstrate how these layer into other lived encounters with sociality and infrastructure, like supply-chain ruptures, ventilator shortages, vaccine distribution, and digital contact tracing.

Digital technologies, including physical devices, apps, and social media platforms are already playing a role in how these events are developing, and in how they are communicated, interpreted, and enrolled in other projects. This role may not be entirely negative; indeed, if used well, these platforms may enable more just and effective public health interventions, widen the reach of social safety nets, or amplify voices of protest. Even in this moment when the classic research designs and methodologies of ethnography are disrupted, we have the opportunity to track new phenomena as they emerge by turning our ethnographic attention to these digital platforms and their intersections with lives offline. Such a shift may be vital for the survival of our scholarship, and enable us to make crucial contributions to the new worlds already unfolding within and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

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