

# ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE FIELD IN MEDIA(TED) STUDIES: A PRACTICE THEORY APPROACH

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**The aim of this article is to reflect upon the concept of field when doing ethnographies related to digital technologies of communication in everyday life.** Using the example of ethnographic fieldwork carried out by one of the authors with a group of highly mediated photographers in Barcelona, we reflect on the conceptualization of fieldwork in digital ethnographies and discuss how 'Practice Theory' could be useful as a basis for media and digital ethnographies.

## KEYWORDS

Digital culture, ethnography, media, practice theory

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In the first section of the article we try to bridge digital and media ethnography, two separate approaches that are increasingly mixed up due to current media convergence. Next, we will briefly outline the changing conceptualization of 'field' in digital ethnographic work. We propose that 'field' has been constituted in relation to the objects of study as the empirical instance of research, thus usually conceptualized as the place or the site (online or offline) where fieldwork is actually being carried out. Nevertheless, following different proposals to dislocate the field, conceptualizing it as a network (Burrell, 2009) or as the summing up of the connections that the ethnographer traces between people, objects and places (Hine, 2007), we suggest the use of the concept of practices as an organizing vector for fieldwork.

The 'Practice Theory'<sup>1</sup> (see Schatzki et al., 2001) approach has proved to be helpful to grasp the mobility, connectivity and use of technologies involved in media and digital ethnographies. We propose that a practices approach might not only be understood or employed as a theoretical approach, but also as a methodological tool to define the specific empirical instance of ethnographic fieldwork. Finally, using Gómez Cruz's ethnographic fieldwork on digital photography practices, we present an empirical example of how a highly mediated fieldwork was carried out, suggesting that 'field', 'object', 'data' and 'technique' are interwoven in complex ways that have methodological, ethical and theoretical implications.

## **Media and Digital Ethnography, Some Common Grounds**

The complex relationship of media, society and culture has been a major subject of inquiry for several decades in the social sciences and the humanities. However, it was not until the 1980s that the ethnographic method was introduced to media studies, mainly in relation to audience and reception studies (Spitulnik, 1993). Although there were existing connections between ethnographic work and media studies<sup>2</sup> (Nightingale, 2012) the influence of anthropology in media studies had been poorly recognized by both sides. For example, theorists like Marshall McLuhan used ethnographic data from non-western societies to understand human communication and media technologies (Prins and Bishop, 2001), while the influence of the pioneering work of Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux (2000 [1953]), with their analysis of media texts of contemporary western cultures, and even the Hollywood ethnography of Hortense Powdermaker (1950) were underestimated.

It was with the works such as those of Lull (1980), Ang (1985) and Morley (1992) that ethnographic methods were widely accepted in media studies, becoming a fruitful terrain for interdisciplinary research in convergence with an emergent field under the name of media anthropology (Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005). However, these first attempts at media ethnographic fieldwork usually looked into the appropriation of media by

different social groups based on sociological variables like age, sex, class and ethnicity. Therefore, these studies were carried out mainly in participants' households, since the reception of media mostly occurred there. Other research aims related to questions of power relations, the production, circulation and representation of cultural identities, and the relation of media to consumer practices in the capitalist mode of production. Overall, audience studies had used the ethnographic method to gain a broader understanding of how media is integrated in everyday life and how media content becomes meaningful to people. Thus, in media studies, ethnography had been traditionally related to reception studies and an orientation towards cultural studies.

Digital ethnography owes its beginnings to the ethnographic studies of the internet and has had a different trajectory and evolution from media ethnography. Most of the pioneering studies were developed in the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC), whose main concerns were related to how human communication was possible through digital technologies if social cues became blurred through anonymity, and how identity formation and social order could emerge in 'virtual communities' that seemed so detached from the social context of the 'real' world (Baym, 1998; Reid, 1991). Later, with the anthropological approach of authors like Miller and Slater (2000) or the social-shaping-of-technology perspective of Christine Hine (2000), the dichotomy between the online and the offline worlds was dissolved to give way to more holistic and wider research questions that sought to describe how the internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in general, were integrated and shaped in everyday life. Field sites moved from 'on-screen ethnographies' to ethnographic work that integrated both online and offline realms. In short, while reception and audience studies were focused on the interpretation of media text or the appropriation of media in everyday life, internet studies were primarily interested in how socialization occurred in 'virtual spaces'.

Nowadays, both media and internet studies seem to melt together in a digital media milieu, as the result of various movements. First, most traditional mass media content can also be found, remixed or transformed online. Second, the traditional relationship between 'audiences' and media producers is changing; leading academics talk about user-generated content and the emergence of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) coining neologisms like *produsage* (Bruns, 2008). Third, the current convergence of mobile and internet technologies makes this new media ecology even more complex: digitization is not only a technological change but also a deeper and wider socio-technical transformation (Hand, 2008). Finally, as media are increasingly based on digital technologies, media ethnography must encompass digital tools and queries about the digital as part of the ethnographic method.

It seems almost impossible, these days, to do ethnographic research on media without taking into account digital technologies and, at the same time, ethnographic approaches to the internet need to recognize the importance of it, not only as media but

as a technology of mediation (Kember and Zylińska, 2012). Both approaches seem to converge in a 'more concerted effort to understand not media use, nor the deployment of media in spaces people use, but communication itself' (Nightingale, 2012: 96).

To summarize, digital ethnographies have evolved from a 'virtual ethnography', carried out solely on the screen, to more integrated and complex multi-sited, multi-level and multi-platform arrangements, while media ethnographies have moved towards a more holistic understanding of mediation phenomena and towards replacing communication studies' dependence on transmission with a wider contextualization of media production and consumption in everyday life (Nightingale, 2012: 99). Thus, complementary to reception studies and closely related to cultural studies and domestication approaches (Haddon, 2005; Silverstone et al., 1992), there are some other theoretical perspectives that have enriched the discussion on media and internet ethnographies, especially when related to everyday life, such as Social Studies of Technology (STS)<sup>3</sup> (Bijker and Law, 1994; Bijker et al., 1989) and Actor-Network Theory.

These approaches have three elements in common that seem necessary for a more holistic vision of media and internet ethnographies: (a) they account for the material infrastructure that supports media and communication, especially with the social shaping of technologies and the symmetry principles, (b) they seek to avoid the deterministic affirmation (unfortunately common in some branches of media studies) that technological innovations can change society in a linear way, and finally, (c) they propose alternatives to traditional communication research on text and media effects. These approaches have challenged some of the implicit assumptions of cultural studies, the main theoretical standpoint for audience ethnographies, which seemed to have failed to recognize the importance of the materiality and the agency of technologies in their studies (Bassett, 2007; Lister, 2003). But while the domestication approach centres attention on the consumption of media in everyday life, the social shaping approach focuses on the innovation process.

If ethnographic research on media and digital technologies is to be situated in a broader scope than 'reception', 'domestication' or 'innovation', this implies the need for a theoretical framework which accounts for a more complex relationship between people, technologies and content. Our purpose is to reframe the study of media in everyday life through Practice Theory, as a way to understand people's motivations and engagements with (and within) media, but also the importance of technologies' agency. As we shall see, this theoretical framework is fundamental in setting the field of our ethnographic inquiry.

### **Media Ethnography: Focusing on Practices**

The concept of practices could be useful to digital or media ethnography and seems to be increasing its importance in communication and media research (Bräuchler and Postill, 2010). 'Practices', as a theoretical concept, is proposed here as a more integrated

and holistic approach to a social understanding of media and technologies. Following Nick Couldry (2004, 2012) we propose to understand (digital) media by focusing on practices. This implies a change of paradigm in media studies, as it changes the focus of media research from semiotic analysis of text content to what people actually do and say – which is more appropriate for an ethnographic view. We define media practices, broadly, as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media. Media practices may be understood, then, as a wider set of practices – most of them with, around and through digital technologies – related to creative processes carried out by individuals or collectives with different goals and purposes.

The relevance of the ‘shift towards practices’ in the social sciences (see Schatzki et al., 2001) is that it allows the adoption of a point of view that is not dependent on presumptions about the primacy of individual choice, whether of the rational action type or of expression of personal identity. Schatzki (1996) argues that social theory has always moved between two standpoints: that of the whole and the individual. From a philosophical discussion based on Wittgenstein’s thinking, and in dialogue with ideas like those of Giddens or Bourdieu, Schatzki criticizes this dichotomy and proposes an alternative praxeological approach. However, Schatzki recognizes that there is no unified and clear ‘Practice Theory’, since it is more of a family of concepts. For example Lynch, following ethnomethodology, affirms that Practice Theory is a matter of:

treating these topics not as ontological entities, foundational processes, parts of society, social structures, cultural systems, behavioural mechanisms, or cognitive faculties, but as situated accomplishments by the parties whose local practices ‘assemble’ the recurrent scenes of action that make up a stable society. (2001: 140)

Situating ‘practices’ at the core of the ethnographic fieldwork implies that there is no need for a prior understanding of what ‘audiences’ or ‘producers’ or ‘media’ are. Specific categorizations of agents, events and processes have to be derived from fieldwork and not the other way around. In short:

a practice approach to media frames its questions by reference, not to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act. (Couldry, 2012: 35)

This approach allows us to focus on digital and media practices while recognizing the technological infrastructures and material conditions intimately intermeshed with the social, since ‘performing a practice usually requires using various material artefacts,

such as equipment, tools, materials, and infrastructures' (Røpke, 2009: 2490). This approach integrates, in a seamless way, the material, technological, implied and emotional actions and expressions. Therefore agency is always shared between people, infrastructure, discourses and contexts of use. Following Actor-Network Theory, Practice Theory understands 'media', 'content', 'reception', 'technology', etc. as stabilizations of the complex relation between human and non-human actors. Nevertheless, within the Practice Theory approach, some other elements like 'texts', 'identity' and 'cultural forms' are acknowledged as also being important outputs of these stabilizations.

In summary, practices can be considered as recognizable entities across time and space, and thus pre-suppose some degree of regularity and repetition that can be observed and analysed ethnographically. Therefore, Practice Theory could become a bridge between theoretical conceptualization and empirical data, allowing us to extend our ethnographic account of mediation processes by including in our analysis a wider scope of relationships between uses, meanings, routines and technologies. The locus of this analysis, following Couldry's proposal, would be to understand, ethnographically, what people are doing and saying. How, then, can Practice Theory be translated to methodological decisions? What can we learn from conducting ethnography, of media practices, people and technologies about the construction of the field when using the ethnographic method? The emphasis on practices poses methodological challenges to ethnographic endeavours that are related to the delimitation of the field site, the conceptualization of social relationships with and within the field, and the contextualization of the object of study.

The equation of the field site with a bounded space has been largely questioned by different authors, most notoriously Marcus (1995). From a Practice Theory standpoint, the field is not conceptualized as a stationary point, nor as a place the ethnographer enters and inhabits; rather, the ethnographer's movements and trajectories define it. Lee and Ingold's image of the pedestrian ethnographer may help us in explaining that 'to participate is not to walk into but to walk with – where "with" implies not a face-to-face confrontation but heading the same way, sharing the same vistas, and perhaps retreating from the same threats behind' (Lee and Ingold, 2006: 67). These authors claim that the ethnographic co-presence goes along with the practices of walking, embodiment and forms of sociability. Co-presence is still at the very centre of the ethnographic experience but it does not refer to immersion; rather, it refers to an active engagement with the environment. The ethnographer's movements create the ethnographic field; there is no point of 'entry' but a movement of engagement.

If the field emerges throughout fieldwork, when, how and where to start becomes a methodological decision that depends on the movements of the ethnographer, which also implies the on-going definition of the object of study from the initial research questions. We suggest that the Practice Theory approach redefines the holistic perspective of ethnography: it is no longer the description of a whole culture but rather the cultural

understanding of interrelated practices. These cultural understandings are part of the ethnographic project, situating and embodying knowledge about how meanings and values emerge from practices and events. Following Anderson and Harrison, we propose that 'the meaning of things comes less from their place in a structuring symbolic order and more from their enactment in contingent practical context' (2010: 7). It is from a productive and continual weaving of relationships that the field emerges and the object of study takes its form. The ethnographer becomes part of the web she is weaving herself and the field is the wrap over which particular things, events, subjects and connections show up and take on significance. The field refers to both the experience of the ethnographer, that is, her perceptions of the relationships she is involved in, and the contexts which are highlighted by her concerns. The ethnographer's descriptions are the result of her becoming part of the world her subjects inhabit, of her training to be aware of these different worlds, positions and juxtapositions, and of sharing its rhythms, dispositions and expectations.

The term 'media' also refers to the object of study of 'media ethnography'. It usually indicates that we are focused on the exploration of 'media in everyday life' or that we study 'practices around or related to media'. Likewise, we usually talk about digital ethnography as a way to refer to the study of digital technologies and how people are engaged with digital technologies in their everyday practices of working, playing, socializing, etc. However, considering the practice theories approach, we cannot stick to our definitions of 'media' to define what 'media practices' are. The same holds true for the term 'digital' and even 'social', or whatever conceptual framework we may have in mind.

As with the categorization of 'social', concepts related to 'media' and 'digital' may lead us to incorrect assumptions about the nature of the topics we are dealing with. Thus, following our concern with practices, our object of study is not the relationship of people with technology as separated entities but rather the embodied practices and 'the performative efficacy of different relations and different relational configurations' (Anderson and Harrison, 2010: 16). In short, Practice Theory, applied to the ethnographic method, implies that we mainly focus on our fieldwork and not a theoretical framework. At the same time, this movement opens the concept of the field and the object of study, in ethnographic fieldwork, to indeterminacy. From a Practice Theory perspective, the ethnographic field is constructed by the actions and expressions of the people we study and by the ethnographer's decisions about the connections s/he follows and forms; the field constantly evolves as the fieldwork progresses, as we will show in the next section where we present Gómez Cruz's fieldwork as an example of ethnographic research oriented by Practice Theory.



## **An Ethnography of Digital Photography Practices**

Gómez Cruz's ethnographic fieldwork on digital photography is presented as an empirical example of the former discussion. The author's fieldwork was conducted between September 2008 and March 2010 and was focused on (but not limited to) a group of amateur photographers called SortidazZ, based on the photo-sharing platform Flickr. We will begin by describing some of the decisions focusing on 'field construction' (Amit, 2000) or 'field weaving', arguing that this process entails moving between several 'field sites' and that there are no ontological differences between online and offline ethnographies, but different environments and modes of social co-presence.

### **Locating an Onlife<sup>4</sup> Field**

Following Martin Hand's notions on the study of digital photography, Gómez Cruz's ethnographic goal was to understand 'the more subtle and precise ways in which digitization relates to a variety of image-making practices and technological devices' (Hand, 2008: 4), especially since this agenda seems a 'compelling territory for understanding the dynamics of digital media and society' (2008: 4). The first decision, then, was to begin to conduct online fieldwork by carrying out participant observation on flickr.com (at the time, this was the most important online site for digital photography sharing). After a few months of socialization through the site, uploading photos, commenting and participating in different groups, he found a group, geographically based in Barcelona, that was very active and organized many physical encounters and photowalks (gatherings to take pictures in a particular location).

As Burrell states: 'the meanings and uses of a machine or system are not predetermined by the form alone but come to be understood in distinctive ways by different user populations and other relevant groups' (2012: 21). SortidazZ was chosen by the ethnographer for three specific reasons: the group was very active, not only via meetings and photowalks but also through Flickr (using the forums, uploading photos, commenting each other's photos, etc.). The group also had the largest number of members, at that time, for a group based in Barcelona.<sup>5</sup> And, finally, it was not a 'professional' group, and this was important since the focus of the study was to understand how 'vernacular photography' (see Bourdieu, 1996; Chalfen, 1987) was shaped in digital culture.

During the period in which fieldwork was carried out, the number of participants grew, from 380 to almost 600 at the end of the study. However, many members signed up only to show their pictures and were not actively engaged in the group. We identified a 'core group' formed by participants who actively engaged with each other and formed the base of the group's 'identity'. In a survey that Gómez Cruz carried out at the time, 25% of respondents were between 26 and 30 years, 65% men and 21% working on computer and telecommunications related issues. Ninety percent considered themselves to be amateur photographers (although 21% had sold photographs).

When ready and self-confident enough about the use of the site and photography, Edgar decided to send his first message to the group, introducing himself and explaining the research he was trying to carry out. The group welcomed him with jokes ('Are we so weird that somebody wants to study us?') and warm messages. Soon it was clear that the group's communication was not confined to Flickr but was actively open and experimenting with all possible platforms. Therefore, the ethnographer decided to follow and trace those connections, which took him to Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, SMS, phone calls, Skype, etc., although in the initial research design involvement in social networks like Facebook or Twitter was not contemplated. Following the connections and traces of the group's socialization on different social networks turned out to be very useful, not only to keep track of the group's activities while sustaining permanent contact with them, but also as 'sites' to engage with activity and observe it. The 'site of the fieldwork' was expanded while following those connections. This participation in all the platforms was a key element to grasp the subtlety of the group's formation since participants attuned their interactions according to the different affordances provided by these platforms. For example, the group's core members (administrator and moderators) used different, private and closed groups or forms of communication (mobile phone, Skype meetings, email) to make decisions and organize open and public gatherings posted on Flickr. This active participation in 'multi-social-network-sites' was fundamental for Gómez Cruz's data gathering activity.

In other digital ethnographies, there is often a similar methodological turn from studying 'virtual communities', as detached virtual spaces, to more integrated and complex multi-sited, multi-level and multi-platform arrangements. Leander and McKim (2003), for example, pointed out that the online/offline dichotomy cannot be presumed by the ethnographer but that a detailed description should be given of how participants' practices create, bond and articulate different social spaces. Again, the conceptual shift is to identify the productive social practices of 'siting', instead of identifying 'sites' as pre-existing places for doing fieldwork. This 'disconnection' of the ethnographic practice from location (physical or virtual) does not suggest that location does not matter any more but rather that it cannot be used as a self-evident boundary for delimiting our field site (Leander and McKim 2003: 214).

For the reasons outlined above, Gómez Cruz decided to explore the group's offline activity, participating in gatherings, photo trips, reunions and collective photographic walks, and to meet up with some members of the group at least once each week, as part of his fieldwork. During the entire period of the fieldwork he was himself taking pictures, editing, uploading, learning, asking questions, taking notes and looking at thousands of photographs with the group. In this way, Gómez Cruz carried out hours and hours of participant observation of the way group members spoke, thought about and practised photography in their everyday lives and, finally, conducted several interviews, whether

in members' houses or in cafés, or through hours of informal chatting during the photo walks, gatherings, lunches and dinners they organized.

This non-spatial notion of the ethnographic field is in accord with other methodological challenges coming from the anthropology of global issues, as well as from digital ethnographic research. From an anthropology of global issues, Hastrup and Olwig, for example, have argued that instead of viewing the field as a 'site' – a usually distant place to go to carry out fieldwork in – it is better to understand it as a set of relations, focusing on the connections between multiple locations where actors engage in activity: 'ethnography in this strategy becomes as much a process of following connections as it is a period of inhabitation' (Hastrup and Olwig 1997: 8). Other authors, such as Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 13–37), have pointed out the need to review the tropes of entry and exit, which are implicit in the notion of field site as a distant geographical location, proposing instead to focus on the interconnections of multiple socio-political sites and locations. The field was instantiated in different locations and through various devices. For example, the smartphone became, at the same time, field, data gathering tool and a constant connective device with informants – at the same time part of the researcher's identity and the field. When the 'online' is constantly carried in the 'offline' pocket, to talk about the 'onlife' field starts to make more sense.

By way of example, to clarify this argument, on one occasion, one of the group's participants sent an email to Gómez Cruz, inviting him to go for a drink along with other members. Someone submitted a last minute invitation to the Flickr group but few seemed to acknowledge it, so those in the know began to call others, to pass the invitation on. He arrived at the bar to find four members outside, all sending SMS, emails or calling other members. The five present went into the bar and ordered drinks while they talked about photography and the Flickr group. Soon, others started to arrive, some because they had seen the message posted online, others because they had received a call or SMS. At one point, a group of three people arrived together – it turned out that one had received an SMS while shopping in a nearby store, where he happened to run into a couple of other members who were also shopping. The latter pair, therefore, received the invitation in person and decided to join in.

Geography and serendipity were as important for the gathering as the digital tools of mediation. After spending a couple of hours together the group dispersed and went home. Many continued online the conversations they had begun in the bar, some uploaded photos of the gathering, while others updated their Twitter profile with comments about the good time they'd had together. It is very common for members of SortidazZ to shoot, process and show each other's photos, videos or webpages, and to make comments on several sites, while they are physically together. All of this could easily happen while members of the group were drinking beers together on a Barcelona terrace. Despite the increasing digital mediation of communication, the group still consists of people who

enjoy meeting up in person; the online practices shape the group as an entity.

### **Locating the Ethnographer in the Field**

Vered Amit, in *Constructing the Field* (2000), insists on applying the social constructivist approach to the ethnographic practice itself, stating that the field does not exist 'out there' but is actively constructed by the ethnographer, in his/her choice of contextualization, in his/her decisions about what constitutes a relationship and which elements to follow and describe. The 'reconstruction' of social relationships becomes more subtle and it is not always visible when studying interactions only online or only with physical encounters. To give an example: a common event during the period of fieldwork was to observe a picture (online) that had been taken at a gathering (offline) but that had a reference to a comment in the group or another picture (online). People later often spoke about the pictures at a bar table, or in a phone conversation or a chat. It would not be possible to understand the relevance of what was happening without taking into consideration these several spaces of communication and how photography was (re) negotiated by the group.

Gómez Cruz's profiles in all social media sites had a permanent link to his blog where, during the fieldwork, he wrote several reflections on photography, his life as a PhD student and his daily experiences with the research process. The blog was but one of many devices (Twitter, Flickr, Facebook) used to build up a constant 'presence in the field' (with frequent annotations, comments, links, news, etc.). Initially, the blog was only intended to be the 'public face' for his work and not understood as a research tool (see Saka, 2008). However, to his surprise, group members began to leave comments on the posts, send him links or comment on the content of the blog, either in the blog itself or in other electronic forums. Two things were achieved as a consequence of this complementary performance: acceptance by the group was confirmed and the group fully welcomed him as one of their own while, at the same time, his position as ethnographer with a research goal was utterly clear.

In this way, Gómez Cruz was not only actively creating the field, but also even weaving himself into it. These interactions became useful, not only to earn the trust of informants by portraying himself as a serious researcher, but also as a way to receive direct feedback on specific thoughts and thereby test some intuitions about the group with his respondents. Along with Flickr, Facebook and Twitter accounts, the blog served as a form of personal exposure, a way of openly presenting himself as a 'Tesista' (roughly translated as PhD candidate), while he was also becoming an active 'practitioner' of digital photography, as part of a group. In Gómez Cruz's fieldwork, his ethical standpoint was the result of two clear and conscious actions. On the one hand, his 'exposure' was the same as that of any group member (his photos, comments, interactions and images of him are still online and can be traced). On the other, and from the very beginning, he openly described

his intentions as a researcher and the fact that he was writing a thesis. For many of the group's members, it became a common joke to photograph him while he was taking field notes and to make fun of this while, at the same time, reminding him about the fact that they knew he was a researcher.

Following Sarah Strauss, who advocates for an ethnography that historically frames transnational dispersed practices, to include a broad range of field locations, both grounded and virtual, without presupposing temporal, spatial or material boundaries (Strauss, 2000, p.165), Edgar decided to extend the field to Flickr as a whole, to explore differences and similarities with other people's practices. Trying to take advantage of one of the main socialization methods in Flickr (through open discussions in different groups) he opened a group called 'My thesis', which at the end of the fieldwork had 165 members enrolled. In that group, several discussions relating to the research arose, regarding issues such as privacy, socialization norms, camera usage, computer skills, etc. It was an open group and anyone with a Flickr account who knew the URL address could participate. It was also 'promoted' to other groups and individuals (by sending personal and open invitations etc.). This proved to be useful as a way to contact new respondents and receive feedback, comments, links and thoughts on the topics that have been developed. People participated spontaneously and gladly to the open questions (since this was the 'natural' way to discuss things in Flickr). Some threads of conversation could almost be seen as a *sui generis* version of a focus group, in view of their depth, breadth and scope.<sup>6</sup> The keys to the success of this dynamic were the proposed themes and moderation without too much restriction and interaction, so as to keep the conversation relevant to the research while giving participants the freedom to explore their own interests. The use of a platform such as Flickr's affordances and resources (i.e. use of forums, comments, etc.) seemed an effective way to generate ethnographic data on the field, in the field and from the field. In the case just mentioned, the field of observation (Flickr) is, at the same time, the instrument of data gathering (by collecting the comments and interactions through the group the researcher set up) and the connection between the researcher and the people observed.

One of the goals of the study was to describe, theoretically but based on an empirical analysis, how socialization took place within a very digitally mediated group of photographers, and how meanings of photography were negotiated through different kinds of practice. With this intention in mind, photographic practices may include all those routines of preparation, production, use and sharing of photographic images. The meaning of these practices for a given social group is particularly related to the manner in which these practices are integrated (and thus also shaped) in their everyday life (cf. Gómez Cruz and Ardévol, 2012). As with the yoga practices studied by Strauss (2000), SortidazZ exists and is sustained by intertwined connections – some physical, some material, mostly digital. In brief: by its practices. If we add the issue of mobile technology,

the result is a group that bodily, emotionally, cognitively and socially builds its own territory as the sum of their connections. As Hawk and Rieder (2008: ix) posit: 'The next wave of new media studies will need to examine the ecological interrelationships among the virtual space of the Internet, the enclosed space of the installation, and the open space of everyday life.'

### Final Remarks

In Gómez Cruz's case, the 'opening point' of his field was Flickr. While a part of the field was on Flickr, it was not limited to Flickr. By emphasizing only the affordances of singular platforms, their characteristics and capabilities, we risk upholding outmoded referential concepts such as 'virtual community'. By adopting the notion of 'practices', we are able to grasp the complexity within groups that share community elements but are born, formed and sustained by their onlife connections. Therefore, it becomes impossible to think of them as being formed within or confined to a single platform. Sortidazz was born before the invention of Flickr (the administrator and some of the first members knew each other for a long time as participants in computer gatherings and Lan Parties) and it was never confined to it. Complementary to this, it becomes necessary to reflect on the fact that, when conducting social research with practices related to digital technologies, this can rarely be reduced to a single social networking platform (such as Flickr, Facebook, Skype, etc.). Madianou and Miller (2012), for instance, introduce the concept of 'polymedia' to describe the assembly and use of various platforms for different purposes at different times. We suggest that everyday life is a continuum shaped by the juxtaposition of different kinds of social spaces, and we consider that the concept of 'Mediaspace' (see Couldry and McCarthy, 2004) could also be a useful way of understanding this.

To conclude, a final remark on the separation between the online and offline in fieldwork seems relevant. During the two or more decades of ethnographic inquiries into the internet, some authors have discussed 'virtual ethnographies' (Hine, 2000), cyber-ethnographies (Ward, 1999) or cyborg-anthropologies.<sup>7</sup> Although this critique is not of those particular works, which are extremely useful, our concern revolves around the use of off-shoot methods to describe a concept that is, itself, as complex as ethnography. In the fieldwork described, there are countless examples that show how nonsensical the distinction between online and offline is. Following Slater (2002), it seems clear that we have to acknowledge that separation only to the extent that our informants do so (see Slater, 2002). In the case of Sortidazz (and generally with Flickr groups that are constituted around geographical bases) it seems very clear that there is not a dichotomous distinction. Digitally mediated communication enhances the possibility of physical meeting, which in return reinforces mediated participation in a seamless set of communicative and socialized 'onlife' practices.

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1.

Although more than a single theory or group of theories, 'Practice Theory' stands as an approach to the study of the social. For an in-depth introduction see Warde (2005) and Reckwitz (2002).

2.

For an overview of ethnographic method and media studies see Murphy (2011)

3.

For a discussion of the common points between communication studies and STS see Boczkowski and Lievrouw (2008).

4.

The concept 'onlife' was coined by Luciano Floridi to describe the Web 6.0, that is: 'the Web Onlife, which erases the threshold between here (off-line, analogue, carbon-base), and there (online, digital, silicon-based)' (2009: 12). Although Gómez-Cruz uses it in a slightly different way, we also intend to 'erase the threshold between online and offline' in academic thinking.

5.

It is important to note that some other groups, for example the group 'Barcelona' did have more members, but a large number of them were not actually based in Barcelona but had taken photos of the city while on holiday, meaning that they didn't share any commitment to the group, one of the things that was important for the fieldwork's design.

6.

While the comparison is risky, some authors have suggested the possibility of 'online focus groups' (Rezabek, 2000; Stewart and Williams, 2005).

7.

See: <http://www.cyborganthropology.com/>

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