The Ethics of Agile Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe methods for evaluating the ethics of agile ethnographic research. The large variety of how the term ethnography is used and a lack of a clear scope of associated activities limits the capacity for communication design researchers to accurately and ethically conduct ethnographic field research in various settings. This paper discusses possible ways to conduct ethical ethnography by providing a common definition and case studies to support an agile, rich, iterative, contextual research process.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.5.3 [Group and Organizational Interfaces]: Computer supported cooperative work, evaluation/methodology, organizational design

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Ethnography, Design Research, Agile, Workplace Research, Field Research, Internet Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is a “strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily, observational and interview data” [1]. Now a popular method in experience design, ethnography can be a problematic term due to the variety of definitions attributed to it. The term ethnography evokes an image of the lone anthropologist surrounded by natives learning about foreign cultures and immersing themselves in the natives’ day-to-day lives.

Yet, today ethnography is used to represent many different types of communication design work and research. Some researchers practice it as a large-scale, time-intensive observational and contextual research, while others are using contextual inquiry and diarying in short research/design cycles. The large variety of uses for the term and a lack of a clear definition has limited the capacity for design researchers to accurately conduct ethnography and has limited the field. Critical to these discussions is the necessity of ethical practice guidelines; however, in order to come up with an inclusive ethical framework to consider methodological decisions, it is first important to identify the conceptual horizon within which ethnographic decisions take place. As Fetterman reminds us, “ethics guide the first and last steps of an ethnography” [2]. If a designer wants to take surer first steps, and knows when to close the final steps of research more confidently, understanding the possible range of ethnographic definitions, settings, potential benefits, and probable pitfalls can create a more effective design research program.

In this paper, we discuss possible ways to conduct ethnography by providing a common and detailed definition to support a rich, iterative, contextual process to inform communication design that foregrounds ethically-aware research practices. The complexity of this research method means that any ethical decisions must be made situationally [3]. First, we will provide a landscape review of ethnography from an anthropological perspective, reminding experience designers of its anthropological roots. Then, we will trace the use of the term tracking its evolution conceptually and practically; for example, today the term is used to represent the methods used in contextual research rather than the body of written work. By historicizing the term, we will then be able to best define a common definition. In conclusion, addressing a call to action from Potts & Bartocci [4] to find an umbrella under which we can place the plethora of contextual design research methods, we will outline the role of ethnography in experience design.

2. DEFINING ETHNOGRAPHY

We will start by summarizing the landscape of traditional ethnography and its anthropological roots. In anthropology, ethnography is represented by the written body of work that arises from years of anthropological fieldwork, an exercise often much too long for typical industry projects. While initially focusing on what Michael Agar defines as a “community approach” versus a “problem approach,” anthropologists used to create a detailed recording of any and all aspects of native life. Yet, many of these previously unknown cultures have now been documented, and the discipline has shifted to towards the “problem approach” by adapting their earlier methods to a more agile-style process. This “problem approach” has opened the research process to include the subjects of the research as participants. Such adaptations of ethnography by anthropologists and other social scientists have opened the door for its application to experience design.

“Classical” ethnography traditionally requires “6 months to 2 years or more” in the field [2]. Despite a dominant characterization of ethnography as a long, field-centered, endeavor, there is a millennia-long tradition of alternative ethnography practices from which researchers can draw lessons. Ethnography, which dates back to the third century B.C. and Heroditus’ History, can be easily divided into four main waves: a first wave of documentation to facilitate colonial conquest; a second wave of ethnography designed to help the cultures being eradicated by colonization; a third wave associated with the postmodern discovery of the power of language; and a final,
contemporary wave associated with postcolonial awareness of how identity can be subsumed into damaging power structures [5].

Each wave provides a design researcher a set of tools and lenses with which to view the work facilitated by the tools. The first wave’s interest in collecting artifacts and stories from outside cultures still informs how contextual design does its primary work. The second wave’s interest in mitigating harm, third wave’s interest in the power of language and metaphor, and fourth wave’s interest in identity all can provide ways of approaching and re-approaching the use of ethnography in design research. The broader notion of ethnography we base our definition upon centers upon systematized observation of authentically motivated activity performed with locally available materials through locally meaningful symbolic activity. Although our use of ethnography involves qualities from each of the four waves of ethnography as outlined by Claire [5], our discussion of ethics in regards to these practices involves the strategic choice of conducting systematic observation in short cycles, with opportunities to share and correct build into each iterative cycle.

3. AGILITY

Although agile ethnography draws lessons from the long ethnographic history we detail, its origins as a practice also has roots in experience design. Today some researchers practice ethnography as a large-scale, time-intensive observational and contextual research, while others are use contextual inquiry and diarizing in short research/design cycles.

This variety of uses of ethnography makes the term hard to define, and limits the capacity for design researchers to apply ethnographic principles that could benefit their projects. Instead of providing an exhaustive definition (something that seems unwise, considering the history of large-scale shifts in associated practices), we instead want to focus on how a process akin to agile programming might attune the researcher to a wider range of strategies in conducting ethnographic research.

Agile programming, which altered the process of programming away from a creating polished product with minimal bugs and full features, and instead toward more compressed cycles of failure and overcoming failure, informs our switch away from a definitive sense of boundary marking for ethnography. Instead, we advocate for an agile ethnographic method that embeds ethical evaluation throughout the process so that course corrections can be integrated at moments of inevitable breakdown and failure. By viewing failure and breakdown as useful, agile ethnography can help design researchers integrate local knowledge into an iterative design practice. Also, by extracting the most salient aspects of ethnography, such as rich field observation and careful micro-methods, researchers can extract lessons and discern best practices. These best practices will support an agile and iterative ethnography more suited to an agile design process.

4. ETHICS AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Ethnography is already a complicated activity, dependent upon “the location where the participant accomplishes whichever tasks need to be studied. Such locations can include offices, schools, hospitals, homes, and shopping malls. In such locations, it is the job of the researcher to understand the context in which this work is taking place. Researchers are encouraged to “co-design the system with users”” [4]. Researchers, by their very presence become part of the work scene they are observing. Responsible researchers acknowledge that their presence ultimately shifts the organization, workplace, or network they are observing, and align their work with the ethical goals and imperatives of these aggregations of people and purposes. Towards this end, researchers implement protocols that alert their collaborators to possible benefits and potential pitfalls of the research, and enjoins those being observed to clarify their activities and the meaning of those activities. Each step of the research process should be shared as openly as possible, so that the data set is rich, open, and accurate. In the end, the researcher is hoping to gather the best data, understand the most useful lenses through which these data might be interpreted, and to alter or create new processes that authentically help users.

4.1 Ethical Principles

When conducting agile ethnography, the lean and iterative nature of the process makes ethical concerns both important and difficult. There are many chances to make mistakes, a positive development for ferreting out task breakdowns; however, each possible mistake is also a chance to erode the trust necessary to carry out research that is both useful and authentic. In order to capture necessary lessons and to rapidly rebuild trust that may erode with each mistake, the researcher must place the concerns of any collaborators front and center. Clay Spinuzzi, in his workplace ethnography text Topsight [6] formulates ethics around the concept of permission (p. 55) and reciprocity (p. 37). Spinuzzi builds the process of gaining (and earning) permission upon particular written genres that capture the intentions of the researcher in a way that members of the researched organization can understand—a research proposal, a consent form, a site letter, and interim report, and a recommendation report (p. 37). While these are all document genres that may be clear to professional and business communicators, they only scratch the surface of possible communication genres that an ethnographer might use to convey the risks and the benefits of cooperation with a researcher. In order to better map out the potential and the peril of these interactions, an ethnographer should map the ethical dimensions of a situation by tracking the three Cs of ethnography during each iteration of an ethnographic research project—consent, context and contribution.

4.2 Consent genres

Spinuzzi provides a case study example of how he as an ethnographic researcher negotiated ethical ground rules in an algorithm-optimizing SEO company through preliminary relationship building, advocate cultivation, and documentation of agreements. In order to negotiate these ground rules, Spinuzzi had to first understand the context of a small company he was studying, which he negotiated with the use of document genres that are common in United States technical companies. If he were operating in other environments with less-stable genres or more widely-varied interpretations of genres were commonplace, the negotiation of ethnographic consent would have to be transacted differently. Key in ascertaining consent is context. Contexts that we are suggesting in our cases involve a wide range varied demands, possible dangers, and potential benefits. Online spaces, transcultural organizations, and multinational workplace settings all involve a range of histories, power, structures, and agencies that need to be accounted for in order to both gain permission, and to outline the potential benefits to everyone.

Rather than using the term “permission,” we use the term consent as something that must be constantly maintained. While permission can be both granted and rescinded, once it is granted, there is an assumption that it is given for the duration of the work—something that must be explicitly worked out before a
project cycle begins anew (another reason for a shorter project iteration). The final term, contribution, emerges from a sense of reciprocity in the project. The ways that research and the researcher might help those being researched should be front and center during the entire process.

5. SPACES AND CASES
In order to describe how ethical concerns might differ, and how the ethnographer might address these concerns in different ways, the authors will describe three different cases, the ethical constraints, and how they overcame constraints in particular settings. The first site, multinational corporate settings, creates challenges when discovering of worker inefficiencies might imperil a worker’s status or self perception. The second site, transcultural international organizations, poses problems with gaining consent because of the layers of cultural context that are hidden beneath a more simplified organizational identity. The final site, digital spaces, constitutes its ethical challenges around the difficulty of characterizing the significance of online activities. By describing the individual challenges in conducting ethnographic research in each of these settings, we hope to locate the role of ethics as the beginning and end points of agile ethnography cycles.

5.1 Multinational Corporate Settings
Design and agile ethnography conducted in multinational corporate settings consists of day-to-day observation of work patterns to document and solve the specific design problem being addressed. The end goal is to provide a picture of the landscape and design requirements to improve and make that work more efficient through technology to support the end users—employees. But transcultural corporate settings, as ethnographic sites, are riddled with complex social and power relationships that are not only reflective of a top-down hierarchical business structure but also reflective of acquired “power” across the organization due to knowledge gathering and bartering. These complex relationships make it hard to build trust in agile ethnographic exercises because the researchers are dropped into these complex relationships by contributors to that relationship (stakeholders).

Agile ethnographers researching in the multinational corporate settings are faced with a multitude of ethical challenges. First and foremost, our primary obligation “is to do no harm” [7]. Yet, when we say do no harm, we must do no harm to any all that we are working with. It represents a set of layers - the participant, the participant’s work circle, project stakeholders, and the corporation, and any external properties potentially affected by the work [8].

We must also consider the constraints put on us as researchers in the multinational corporate setting due to the project parameters and agreement with our client (the transcultural corporation) [8]. Baba reminds us that it clear through Warner’s work “that understanding of what is going on in a formal organization requires an intellectual scope that transcends the organization per se, something that is difficult to do if one is too closely aligned with or reigned-in by an organization and its requirements and constraints (e.g., funding contracts, nondisclosure agreements, access negotiations)” [8].

One of the strengths of consulting for transcultural corporations is that we, as outsiders, have an outside perspective and can sidestep some of the organizations’ complex power relationships. Yet, this opportunity presents an ethical challenge. When our goal is to not do harm, we, as outsiders, are not always immediately aware of the ways in which we can do harm. It is in this exact situation that an agile ethnographic approach is vital to the ethical success of the project. We must constantly assess and re-assess our knowledge of the organizational dynamics to ensure that our research stays focused on the goals at hand and does no harm.

We do not set out to hurt people; our job is to solve their projects and make their work lives better and easier. But our insertion into their world and our need to document and report on what we have learned has the potential to do harm to participants, their circle, and the organization as a whole. The opportunities to unintentionally hurt people stem from the collection tool and documentation required from the research. As researchers, we want to collect as much information as possible—work samples, recordings, pictures, videos - to ensure we have as much data as possible. But, we are not fully aware of other political exercises going on around us and the hidden agendas of particular employees. The information collected and shared could end up being used or interpreted in a different way.

For example, in the multinational corporate setting, an agile ethnographic team wants to see how employees really work, what tools/objects/ references they use to do their job and expect these to be outside of the company process. In fact, researchers want to see these workaroundings because they represent tactical problem solving, which can help researchers define root causes to the problem. Yet, because project stakeholders are part of the workplace power structure, they may want to further their own agendas by reporting behaviors or feel obliged to report these “workarounds” or unhappiness/ issues as something subversive to the current power structure. For example, on one project, we spoke with an individual that was very concerned about showing us a spreadsheet he created on the side to complete part of the work he needed to complete in another spreadsheet. It took time to get him comfortable with sharing that with us but even then we could not get a copy of the spreadsheet he created. As members of a design team, his spreadsheet represented ingenuity and showed us how he processed information and did his job. Yet, it was outside of the currently established process and could have potentially caused him organizational problems since he was not following that process to the letter. As outsiders, corporate ethnographers are limited in our understanding of these internal power dynamics and the underlying goals for each individual so we need to assume that anything could potentially cause harm to an individual.

Ethical multinational corporation ethnography means that researchers need to consider ethics throughout the process from research design through reporting. And this ethical landscape must include all those that could potentially interact with/touch the information collected and reported. We must also address our own perspective as researchers that have been hired by the organization to address this problem. We are constrained by particular things—like contracts—that will ensure we protect the organization but could also limit our collection and reporting abilities.

For project stakeholders within the multinational organization, the researchers need to clearly articulate to stakeholders the goals for the research and the expected outputs ensuring that clients understand that the goal is not to report on employee effectiveness but to determine how to best solve a larger problem. Researchers must also maintain all control of the research assets that could potentially identify a specific participant (e.g. notes, recordings). “Dissemination and sharing of research data should not be at the expense of protecting confidentiality” [7]. In fact, specifically in
these corporate settings, we do not conduct the sessions with our project stakeholders and request that only the consulting research team observe the sessions. The addition of client stakeholders in sessions with participants ensures that current power dynamics will limit interactions and keep participants from being more honest about how they work and it provides the stakeholder an opportunity to use what is reported against that employee. Through the data collection and analysis phase, the research team needs to also temper their knowledge of the participant’s work and reported behavior in the observed knowledge about the power dynamics. Most importantly, when reporting findings, information must be abstracted enough such that it could not be traced back to any one participant, even if it means you do not use a quote to punctuate a point. This is a complex negotiation process that must be ongoing and clear to project stakeholder and participants [7].

For participants, the most important way to build trust with your participant (the employee) is to be as transparent as possible throughout the process. The 2012 American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethics states “[a]nthropologists should be clear and open regarding the purpose, methods, outcomes, and sponsors of their work. Anthropologists must also be prepared to acknowledge and disclose to participants and collaborators all tangible and intangible interests that have, or may reasonably be perceived to have, an impact on their work” [7]. We must be clear also about the collection tools being used by a participant so they understand what data could potentially be available. They should always have an opportunity to no to certain collection methods not only at the start of the session but at any point throughout the session. In fact, we as researchers should pay attention to their level of comfort and use our understanding of their behavior (e.g. nervous twitching, eyes straying to a recorder) and offer again as needed to stop that form of data collection.

Agile ethnographic lends itself well to a very appropriate ethical approach. This agility, ability to move on the fly and constantly be transparent to our position to our participants and clients; stakeholders). And the next step is to ensure that we are always aware of our position to our participants and clients; “[t]ransparency, like informed consent, is a process that involves both making principled decisions prior to beginning the research and encouraging participation, engagement, and open debate throughout its course” [7]. Once you marry the concept of a reflective transparency into the agile ethnographic approach when considering the ethics of your work, you have the opportunity to ensure that you operating with the highest potential for an ethically successful project.

5.2 Transcultural International Organizations

Transcultural and transnational work sites can challenge some of the assumptions in ethnographic research because of the nature of the international networks created in these organizations. The networks that traverse national boundaries can both create and alleviate problems, depending upon the perspective taken. Ethnographic methods need to account for the ways that cultural expectations and subjectivity in these culture-spanning workplaces complicate ethnographer assumptions. What may seem like a straightforward transaction in one national culture, can take on an entirely different hue in an adjoining national culture. Despite these differences, networks between nationalities and cultures persist because of their usefulness. Arjun Appadurai [9] characterizes the contemporary assemblage of ethnicities and roles into a single setting as an “ethnoscape.” The assemblage can consist of a surprising variety of roles and cultures that bear both the markers of this difference and deploy this difference in a way helps create distinctiveness. Appadurai defines ethnoscapes as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world.” [p. 33] Transcultural international organizations succeed insofar as they can negotiate these networks in productive ways that create surprising reciprocities.

In order to deal with some of the vagaries and multiplicities of international ethnography, UNESCO advocated for “ethnographic action research” [10] in order to model how to ethically employ ethnographic research in a way that foregrounds consent and contribution in a contextually sensitive way. The UNESCO report compiles some of the ethnographic methods that have been most useful in international settings (including participant-observer, questionnaires, interviews, and diaries). This compilation acknowledges both the changing nature of international agencies, and some of the useful groundwork that has been laid with contemporary ethnographic research. The emphasis in this document is on elevating all participants to a more egalitarian level with that of the researcher. Ethnographic action research involves a kind of radical transparency that not only involves participants in planning the research, but sharing giving researcher reflections and other preliminary insights with other participants to help guide the research process. This kind of radical transparency helps the researcher ask more targeted questions, but also allows for a more thorough inquiry into the effectiveness of the design research as the process is unfolding.

Ethnographic research on the Green Belt Movement in Kenya involved several of the techniques interacting with a social media coordinator from San Francisco who was preparing both an international social media campaign called “The Size of Wales” and the first ever “Wangari Maathai Day” with a Kenyan and Ugandan staff (itself made up of many different tribes, or what Dr. Maathai called “micronations”). An American interlocutor cautioned me during my investigation of their methods of doing work, as the Green Belt Movement’s history involved periods of political conflict and imprisonment that hinged on notions of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and colonial positioning.

The founder of The Green Belt Movement, Wangari Maathai, who eventually received a Nobel Peace Prize for her work in this organization, began the organization as a way of ameliorating the environmental and gender damage that occurred with development and industrialization of the Kenyan nation. Even though Kenya eventually won independence from an English government that created a series of concentration camps for the Kikuyu fighters (Maathai’s ethnically-identified group), Maathai still had to struggle to establish her organization because of gender, interpersonal, and regional conflict that was sown during the colonial period. She was thrown in prison for her environmental work and was denounced by the President of Kenya because of the threat she posed to established gender, economic, and political hierarchies. Through a long and difficult history, the Green Belt Movement transitioned from being viewed as an interloping force for outside meddling with development to one which was advocating for a vital and central environmental program (Dr. Maathai, before her passing in 2011, eventually
served in Parliament and was the Assistant Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources for President Kibaki [11].

These historical complications, still far from settled, reflect an organization that connects outside political influences (the West, China, other African countries, multinational corporations, etc.) with a national plurality made up of 42 ethnic micronations. Finding a comprehensive set of rules as an ethical framework is both unworkable and unrealistic. Instead, ethics in this setting involves formulating your ethnographic research as part of the scene that you are surveying, and involves seeing research as an activity that willingly must reciprocate the trust that is being invested into the researcher. Appadurai admonish to view only outsiders (tourists, refugees, and even ethnographers) as providing important roles of how things function in the scene should guide the work of the ethnographer. Conducting an ethnographic study of the work of the Green Belt Movement meant understanding how the local work of employing Kenyan women in the tree nurseries and planting in-country—work proceeded from the oral and performative genres of the seminar given in local dialects—differed from the internationally-focused work of social media. Both kinds of work happened under the auspices of the same organization, but each activity needed different cycles of research, different methods to tease out where communication could be improved, and different ways of gaining consent and reciprocation.

Like most workplace ethnography, a researcher in an international transcultural setting must both control her/his assets and consider the implications of deploying these assets. Efficiency may not be a primary, or even desirable, goal for a social and environmental justice group. Instead, the researcher should proceed carefully in what my co-researcher and I playful called “soccer logic.” Soccer, which is characterized by short bursts of speed punctuating longer back-and-forth flows, can inform how research proceeds in these complex organizations. The ethical principles that must infuse the research process must account for both long and unstructured as well as short-and-intense sessions. Like other workplace contextual inquiry, the key to ethical ethnography in complex transcultural organizations is to first adopt a position of humility, with the aim to make your research useful to the community you are studying. The problems you are solving are part of the tactics of communities that connect through a particular organization. There are good reasons that these tactics are being used. Because most of this work is so situational and tactical, it is impossible to fully get permission (either through Memoranda of Understanding or through an Institutional Review Board) to document what one might find. Instead, the ethnographer must build trust incrementally. The phase which we encountered during our Kenyan research, “TIA” (This is Africa), which roughly translates to “you aren’t in control,” applies generally to transcultural organizations. The ethnographer can suggest, but must be very willing to hear no as an answer, even if it is implied.

Consent evolves in a transcultural organization, so the researcher needs to schedule a lot of unstructured time to ascertain where harm and contribution can occur. Using a multiplicity of ethnographic tools mentioned in the UNESCO report, the ethnographer must maintain assets within clear view of the collaborative subjects, and should share reflections where possible, to help participants understand the implications of their participation from the situated perspective of the researcher. Like the corporate researcher that Spinuzzi [12] describes, building trust can be tedious and arduous, but can ultimately lead to more optimal solutions to persistent, and often invisible problems.

### 5.3 Digital Spaces

Digital spaces can be especially challenging, with regards to ethics. There is a wealth of data on the internet on any number of topics across any number of spaces. Given the availability of data, the ease of collecting it, and the need to understand the context in which these conversations take place. While researchers can easily fall into looking at social networking sites as Big Data repositories, it is important to understand these digital locations as cultures or even a collection of subcultures. Once we can see them as cultural spaces, we can then understand how we can, as researchers, be involved in these cultures in order to understand the participants, interfaces, and systems.

In online ethnography work, we are thankfully past the stage of pioneering [13]. There are several resources available to us to navigate ethical issues in these spaces, including a set of ethics recommendations from the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) that can help guide their research. This document, written by Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, with contributions from the AOIR Ethics Working committee, is freely available online [14]. It is a major update from the earlier ethics guidelines from AOIR, released in 2010. Taking into consideration new devices, the increase in global participation on the internet, and the growth in research into ethical issues, this update serves as a useful resource.

The authors of this document acknowledge how quickly technologies change, and do not espouse a set of rules so much as present a document that is designed to “emphasize processes for decision-making and questions that can be applied to ever-changing technological contexts” [14]. In doing so, AOIR’s document lists six fundamental principles to guide the ethics of internet research. These fundamental principles include understanding “harm” as something that is contextual, human subjects research issues, balancing the needs of research with the rights of subjects, and the deliberative process of ethical decision-making. Each of these principles should be consulted in depth and adopted when conducting research in digital spaces and offline spaces. What makes this document different from other statements on ethnographic research is its focus on public/private content, personhood, and other internet-specific ethical questions.

As with any other kind of ethnographic research, it is critical to understand the communities in which we conduct our research. While many of us practice the “researcher as lurker” technique [15], it is critical to be knowledgeable of the spaces in which we study phenomenon. To gain such an understanding, we need to be participant-researchers. Becoming a participant-researcher online means that researchers must strive to “become immersed in the social situation being studied and should use that experience to try to learn how life is lived there, rather than coming in with a particular pre-formed research question or assumptions about the issues that will be of interest” [16]. Here, too, we must be aware of how our behaviors can alter the ways in which the culture we are studying continues their activities. While it is true that “the only real way to learn to be a researcher is by experience” [13], it is critical that our learnings is not causing harms to the participants we are studying.

So what constitutes harm online? Unfortunately, much like offline ethnography, there are many ways to cause harm. Not announcing yourself as a researcher can be a form of harm if this information would somehow alter the communication between yourself and the participant. Taking on other identities in an attempt to obtain information from participants is also highly unethical. Not taking
into account different viewpoints and even dismissing those perspectives that do not match up with your own can also cause harm. Taking in all viewpoints as legitimate can also cause issues. Instead, focusing on “dialogical processes” that can help sort through these views and understand shared norms is important to representing these communities accurately and ethically [17].

It is important to note that the same rules of offline ethnography apply to online ethnography. While some Institutional Review Board (IRB) are now better at understanding internet research, other IRBs are still unclear about how and when to ask for informed consent. If you are going to conduct interviews with participants, you must consult IRB just as you would with offline interviewing. If your work includes accessing privately held content, you need to consult IRB. To be clear, this means that if you are accessing content that requires you to have a password to see it or special access to acquire it, you need to discuss the project with IRB. That said, if the data is publicly available, you could very well find yourself in an ethical dilemma regardless of IRB oversight. As it is noted in AOIR’s ethics document, “people may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy” [14]. Such binaries of public/private are no longer enough to guide us ethically. This issue is yet another reason why it is of critical importance that researchers understand the cultures in which they are researching.

Publishing information can also create ethical dilemmas. How you will anonymize content to protect your research subjects can be particularly tricky, as search engines can often easily pull up quoted material and connect that material to your otherwise anonymous participant. These “outings” can be dangerous, even for publicly-available data. If your work touches on hacktivism, activism, terrorism, or disaster, publishing identifying information can put your participants at risk. It is important to “recognize that members of a studied group may have mixed feelings about reports published on their activities” [15]. There are some simple questions to ask yourself before publishing any identifiable information:

- Will publishing this piece of information add to the argument?
- Will publishing this identifying piece of information upset or risk my participant?

Considering the proliferation of mobile devices, creating boundaries around what is offline and online is not simple. In an early text on the internet and ethnography, Hine points out that we need to study both: to combine the two requires a rethinking of the relationship between ethnography and space, to take account of the Internet as both culture and cultural artefact” [18].

6. CONCLUSION
Returning to Fetterman’s admonition that “Ethics guide the first and the last steps of an ethnography” can help tie the loop between project cycle. By seeking consent first through contextually communicating the possible promise and pitfalls of ethnographic research, the researcher can better collaborate and contribute to the workplace that she or he is studying. Whether it is a multinational corporation, an informal online workplace, or an international environmental justice organization, each setting contains its own challenges. Workplaces have intensely-contested economic, juridical, and national interests in play, and creating a process that ties the work of the researcher to the researched individuals and cultures through tight, iterative cycle can serve as a way of keeping the dangers and the promises in full view.

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