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Playful exploration and digital (field) sites: Understanding the sites in which we practice (digital) ethnography

As more people consider using digital research methods for qualitative fieldwork, including ethnography, we must be aware of what we do not know and understand about the sites in which we conduct research. How does visibility work? What data is stored? What happens when something is 'deleted' or 'censored'? Playfully exploring the field is one way to understand new field sites and to produce knowledge, writes **Carwyn Morris**

During multi-sited field work in Beijing's Tiantongyuan sub-district, I spent a lot of time tapping, poking, swiping and grasping my phone, often while sitting with interlocutors, including street vendors and restaurateurs. My multi-sited fieldwork took me to all over Beijing, visiting vendors and restaurateurs in streets across the city. I also travelled to villages, counties and cities across China. While my body and the vehicles I was travelling in were mobile, I felt relatively still in my other field sites, numerous Weixin[1] instant messaging groups, Weixin Moments, Weixin Public Accounts, Weibo hashtags, Weibo posts and Weibo direct messages. Be I on a bus in Yunnan, a high speed train from Fujian or taking the Metro in Beijing I was almost always a click away from one of my digital field sites; my mobility in physical space rarely affected my persistent presence in these sites. I was often drawn back into these sites by the vibrancy of my phone, and my main absences were due to phone failures (Bennett, 2009; Hall, 2020).



You may have a variety of companions while doing fieldwork in digital sites, there is constant feedback between physical and digital field sites. This photo I took on a Beijing street became a talking point in a street vending Weixin group. Photograph by author (2017).

My awareness of my persistence in digital sites was amplified due to demolitions and subsequent displacements of many of the restaurants and vendors I conducted research with. Within 24 hours, many of my interlocutors found that their only persistent sites for customer interaction and commerce were digital sites. These were not virtual, immaterial or temporary: Rather, digital sites were those that many of my interlocutors had been using the longest and were outliving the physical representations of their businesses.

When conducting ethnography, one generally limits the scope of one's research by selecting field sites, or, as Marcus (1995: 105) suggests, by following people, things, metaphors, plots, lives or conflicts, in ways that may produce "chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations". These limiting factors are necessary for many reasons, including the vastness of the world one is in. Just as one does not do an ethnography of China, Latina America or Africa, I was not doing an ethnography of the entirety of Weixin, a site with a billion monthly users.

All large-scale digital spaces – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Pornhub, Reddit, WhatsApp, Weixin, Weibo, Douyin etc. – are comprised of a huge number of places, both small and large. In acknowledging this complexity and vastness, my ethnography in Weixin took seriously the field

sites within it. It was an ethnography of several groups linked to foodscapes and sites of contentious politics in Beijing. Each of those groups had anywhere between three and 500 people in them. I treated these places as sites where stillness was produced, aiding the stay of people – often translocal migrants – in Beijing. Hanging out in Weixin groups and Weibo hashtags, I regularly saw how the local government’s attempts to displace translocal migrants were resisted.

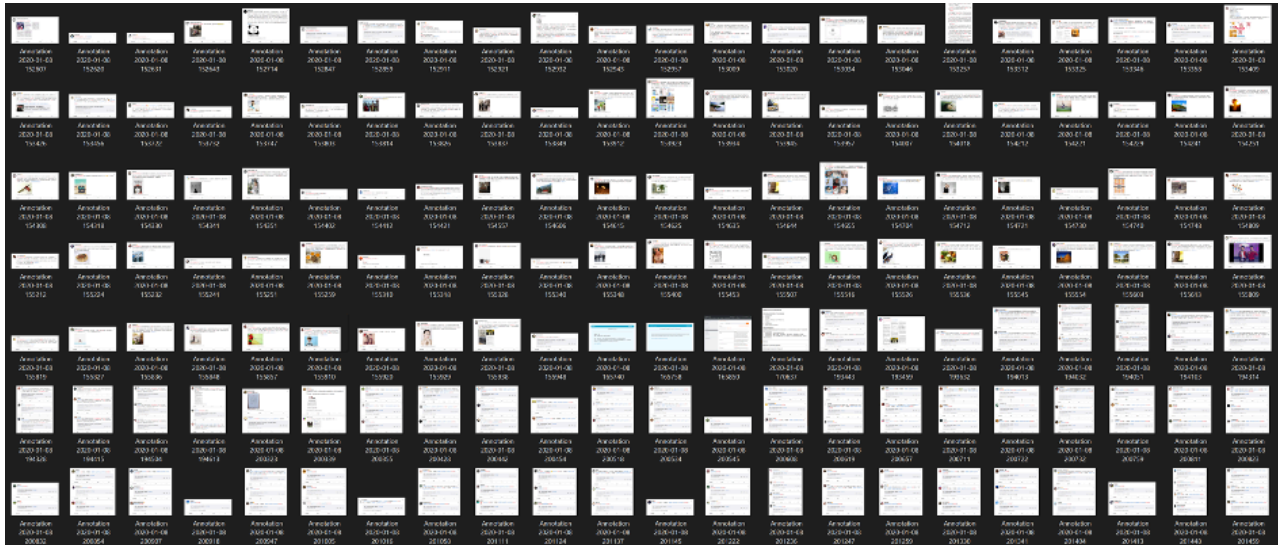
Not long into my research, I found it impossible to ignore that the geographies of Weixin, Weibo and other digital sites were having an impact on my interlocutors and how I conducted fieldwork. Methodologically, these sites were where I had interactions with interlocutors, corporations and the state. The construction of the sites was limiting what could and could not be said and what was visible between us. Dealing with this complexity meant taking seriously and understand the geographies of these sites.

Discussing the geography of Weixin, I do not just mean server locations, which legal jurisdiction corporate headquarters are in and where coders, architects or administrators are located, although these are important. I am concerned with how users of Weixin engage in mobility, sociality, see other users, are seen by other users and what places (such as instant messaging groups) they (re)produce. This also includes the micro-geographies within instant messaging groups and comment sections. The same is true of the other sites where I conducted research, including Weibo, where I followed the mobility of individuals and groups displaced from politically contentious hashtags and posts.

Taking digital sites seriously required an understanding of the rules of these environments, including, where one can move, what one can see, who could see oneself, what regimes of surveillance were enacted and where censorial intervention may occur. To understand this, I engaged in playful exploration of my environments. In Weibo, I playfully explored the censorship of two anti-eviction activist projects centred around hashtags. At first, I used Weibo’s search function, typing in queries related to the politically contentious hashtags, as well as phrases interlocutors told me had been censored. I then searched for incorrect spellings of the same words to find typos of the hashtag that hadn’t been censored, used private browsing sessions to see what changed between my accounts view of Weibo and a public view of Weibo, examined Weibo through third party search engines and manually changed the URL of pages that yielded results. I never knew what would work, but through playful exploratory practice relics of censored hashtags, posts and comments became visible to me; relics and fragments that were not supposed to exist. For me, playful exploration helped find cracks in systems of governance; some cracks make sense, others seem bizarre. Some cracks may be exploited for research or activism, others prove the existence of alterity and resistance, becoming memory artefacts of almost erased activism.

When searching for one hashtag, I was shown a standard error message, “Apologies, we have not found any content related to” the hashtag. One of the suggestions was to search “the whole internet”, which links to a Baidu search of the hashtag. The first option Baidu’s search provided were

results for the hashtag on Weibo. This provided 522 matches for a hashtag that I was told on Weibo did not exist; some were part of the original censored hashtag, while others were approximate versions of the hashtag. Searching for the hashtag without the # symbol yielded three new results. Following these results I found poetry lamenting evictions and a continuation of the discussion nine months after the initial censorship and eviction.



A screenshot of screenshots. A selection of screenshots of a bot-network attack on an activist hashtag, relics of a censored hashtag found through playful exploration. Image by the author (2020).

Below these three posts was a line in small font, “We also found 35 other results, some have been omitted for similarity, you can view the full results here”. This brought one to 25 pages of results with most pages having between 8 and 12 posts on them; standard pages have 20 posts displayed. Most pages only became accessible when manually manipulating the URL. Definitely more than “35 other results”. Of the displayed results, 118 discussed evictions or included the hashtag. I then searched for a partial hashtag, finding hundreds of visible posts. This playful search brought me evidence of a sustained bot network spam attack on the hashtag that took place over a two hour period. This was not what I was expecting, but with a spirit of playful enquiry I had found many censored artefacts and also found a better understanding of Weibo, where my field site was located.

Conducting fieldwork in digital sites does not require a reinvention of the wheel. As I argue here, fieldwork in digital sites requires a methodological approach that treats digital sites seriously, as socially produced spaces of which users (and researchers) know little. To conduct research in such sites requires one to reflect on what is unknown about the working of digital sites, to not make assumptions and to attempt to understand the structures of such sites. Playful exploration is one way through which the structures of digital sites can begin to be understood. Steinmüller (2019) argues that one can either “pin things down into inescapable and frustrating structures (this is the cul-de-sac of obsessive-compulsive disorder) or accept them and play with them [which]

means adapting to the constraints of things". Playing in and with digital environments is also what my interlocutors did to find spaces for alterity and resistance. It is why the "Grass Mud Horse" (*cǎo ni mǎ*) emerged as a way to say "Fuck Your Mum" (*cǎo nǐ mā*), and why the bling-bling river crab became a way to poke fun at corrupt government officials who called for harmony whilst engaging in corruption (de Seta, 2018; Meng, 2011; Zidani, 2018). Playing is about "the attention and care you bring to something, even stupid, seemingly boring activities" (Bogost, 2016: 87). With a playful spirit of enquiry, I better understood Weibo and Weixin, producing knowledge I used in interview questions and analysis. I also found evidence of activism on Weibo that many assumed had been erased, including relics of a hashtag project. Playful exploration of digital sites helps produce knowledge of the structures of digital sites, and I would encourage researchers to playfully explore the geographies of their (digital) field sites; you never know what you will find.

Notes

1. Sometimes known as WeChat. There are analytically significant differences between Weixin and WeChat which necessitate the use of Weixin in this context (Ruan et al., 2020)

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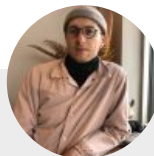
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About the research

Carwyn's research was conducted through mixed methods ethnography and fieldwork in Beijing, Weibo, Weixin and other sites. It explored how translocal migrants to Beijing stay in the municipality, how people engage in anti-eviction activism, and how both activities are governed by local and national governments. In doing this, he examines how space is the medium of control, in both physical and digital sites.

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About the author



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Carwyn Morris is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Manchester China Institute, University of Manchester. He is currently researching how surveillance is imagined amongst transnational communities. He completed a PhD in Human Geography and Urban Studies at the London School of Economics. Carwyn's use of digital research methods is influenced by the amount of time he spends playing online games, such as Dota 2 and Tabletop Simulator.

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