

**Media Anthropology Network
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E-Seminar 59

‘Being there’, phone in hand: Thick presence and ethnographic fieldwork with media

by

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Discussant Comments by

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It is difficult to make sense of the multiple impressions, feelings and thoughts that I had when I read Nina’s paper. I know I enjoyed it deeply. When I was reading the paper, line after line, my own ethnographic experience started to re-emerge. How many times I had ‘been there’, thanks to digital media, without physically being there? How many times I struggled with questions about non-interactive co-presence or thick presence? How meaningful are these questions in the study of activism and political participation where ‘being there’ also entails an expression of political commitment to the cause?

Perhaps because I could relate to Nina’s work so well, I really enjoyed this paper. And there is of course A LOT to like in it. The ethnographic context of the research is fascinating and has left me with the need to find out more. The discussion about thick-presence and especially the analysis of the relationship between digital media presence, technological affordances and temporality is particularly insightful, and original.

When I say that there is A LOT to like in the paper, I also intend to highlight the fact that, in its current version, the paper is dealing with a lot of different and overlapping themes. The author discusses the difference between co-location and co-presence by exploring a variety of issues such as the complex relationship between here and there, the ways in which technological affordances shape different perceptions of co-presence and temporality, the implications of researching at ‘a distance’ in the age of immediate communication, the meaning of thick research in the context of technological use and vice versa.

The reader is thus thrown into a whirlwind of interconnecting topics and themes and at times is forced to catch her breath. This is not surprising for a working paper, yet I think that the paper would greatly benefit from a more focused approach. Perhaps my comments and questions below

will somehow help the author in the process of sharpening the argument and strengthening the paper.

My comments and questions evolve mostly around four main points:

Ethnographic description – As mentioned above the ethnographic context is fascinating and has left me with the desire to find out more. The two main ethnographic anecdotes (the description of the Mosireen office and the demonstration outside the C28 military complex) could have been largely enriched. I would have liked to find out a bit more about the collective, its history, its members and its role in the revolution. I also would have liked to find out a bit more about the people Nina mentions, their role, their biographical narratives.

In the first anecdote, Nina describes how she felt as she had ‘arrived to the field. Yet this left me questioning what brought her there? How did she negotiate her access? Was she already present in the field at a distance? What were the implications of that type of ‘thin’ presence?

Thick Presence vs ‘Being There’ – It is clear from the paper that ‘being there’ can take multiple forms. Yet it is also clear that according to the author, within ethnographic practice, there is a complex relationship between ‘being there’ and ‘thick presence’. It seems to me that being present on the field, over a sustained period of time, equips the ethnographer with a ‘thick gaze’, an embodied, and thorough understanding of the research context and cultural processes. This is evident in the paper. Yet the paper also shows that thick presence is not only enabled through co-location, but also through online interaction. The example of the ethnographer sitting in the office of the Mosireen collective is insightful. In that context ‘thick presence’ could have not be achieved simply by physically ‘being there’ it could have only been achieved by both being there in the office and online. This I believe highlights the complexity of the relationship between multiple ways of ‘being there’ and ‘thick presence’, however in the current version of the paper, I find that this relationship is not fully explored. In particular, I am interested in finding out more about how this relationship is played out with reference to the triad mentioned in the paper (co-location; the presence of there here; and our presence there’) and I would encourage Nina to explore this theoretical triad by bringing in a concrete ethnographic example. Can she break down how and when she experienced the triad?

Technological Affordances and Temporality – Personally I believe that here lies the deep originality of the paper. A lot of understandings of co-presence, have been focused on the difference between technological affordances and different perception of co-presence (see lit review in Madianou, 2016). Skype, social media, email exchanges, mobile messaging enable very different feelings of co-presence, and as Madianou has shown they all create a form of ‘ambient co-presence’ that is a typical characteristic of polymedia environments. What I feel we are missing from these debates is a thorough exploration of the complex relationship between co-presence, technological affordance and temporality. This relationship emerges in the paper well and I believe the author should expand the analysis further. I am personally very much interested in the relationship between digital technologies and temporalizing practices (see Barassi, 2015) as problematised by Munn and in the anthropology of time. Much debates about co-presence focus on ‘space’ and focus on how we can be there from afar. Yet they should properly explore (and this paper shows that well) how our ‘being there is also’ about temporal commitment, and how the temporality of our being there is what shapes not only our engagement with the field at a distance, enabling interaction and reciprocity. As mentioned the paper highlights many of these interconnecting themes about the importance of the ‘temporal dimension’, my question to Nina would be whether she would consider enriching her observations with a theoretical discussion about ‘time’.

Being there and Political Participation: One element that is missing from the paper and that I believe would greatly benefit the analysis of co-presence in the particular ethnographic context of the research, is represented by the relationship between political participation and co-presence. Within the context of social movements 'being there' is often translated as a strong 'political statement', where the individual becomes an actor in the social movement, a way to participate to a given cause. The same applies to co-presence at a distance, social media interactions (liking, tweeting, re-tweeting, sharing, messaging, passing information etc.) are all acts of co-presence, which are also acts of political participation and engagement. I wonder whether this emerged also within Nina's fieldwork and whether she could elaborate a bit more on the way this has impacted on her understanding of co-presence.

As it can be seen from the comments above, I believe that this is a paper that could turn out to make a significant contribution to understandings of co-presence in media anthropology. It certainly has given me a lot of food for thought and I wish to thank Nina for sharing it with the list and for asking me to be a discussant.

I am looking forward to a lively discussion.

Veronica

Reference cited:

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