
Guest editorial: Beyond traditional fieldwork: digital ethnography's role in understanding modern work(places)

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This special issue explores the evolving role of ethnography in organization and management studies, focusing particularly on the increasing prominence of digital methods in workplace research. Originating from anthropology and becoming the signature method through the Malinowskian paradigm of the 1930s (Clifford, 1986), ethnography refers to both a way of doing “fieldwork” (i.e. a long-term involvement with the people under study) and the product of such activities, namely ethnographic writing (Hirsch and Gellner, 2001). Organizational ethnography can be traced to the 1920 and 1930s when applied psychologists and industrial-organizational sociologists of the Chicago School conducted intervention-driven studies in workplaces that drew extensively on ethnographic methods (Zickar and Carter, 2010). Since, it has come to address the complexities of modern organizational environments, including digital and hybrid workplaces (Luff and Heath, 2019; Ritter, 2022). Workplace ethnographies have generated deep insights into work-life experiences, workplace cultures and power dynamics (Brannan *et al.*, 2007). The digital era, marked by global pandemics and technological advancements, has catalyzed the rise of digital ethnography, also dubbed as “virtual ethnography” or “netnography” (Domínguez *et al.*, 2007; Murthy, 2008; Góral ska, 2020). This method has been instrumental in understanding new work dynamics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as will be elaborated below (Manzo and Minello, 2020; Gera and Hasdell, 2021; Watson and Lupton, 2022).

With that in mind, this special issue aims to expand discussions on the practicalities and challenges of digital ethnography in workplace studies beyond the restrictive conditions dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Below, we provide an overview of the individual contributions to this special issue and wrap-up with key takeaways around the subject. Before we do so, however, we will outline the range of topics covered by these contributions, including new directions of and challenges to workplace ethnography, issues in writing workplace ethnographies and the role of ethnography in corporate strategy and intervention. In so doing, this special issue explores new fields and forms in workplace ethnography mediated by digitalization, such as the rise in hybrid workplaces (see the contribution by Reunamäki, 2025 and by Manrique, 2025 in this issue), the development of virtual immersive and enactive approaches (see the contributions by Shaw, 2025; Karhapää *et al.*, 2025; Zhang, 2025), ethical dimensions of researching the digital space (see Baljević *et al.*, 2025), the revisiting of visual technologies (see Galuppo *et al.*, 2025; Oechslen *et al.*, 2025) and, ultimately, the critique of digital approaches in this context.

The rise of digital ethnography

Ethnography has risen to great prominence in organization and management studies. Workplace ethnographies (see Orel, 2023) have generated deep insights into work-life experiences, including managerial and employee behavior and fissions between them, workplace conflicts, power struggles and workplace culture. However, the changing nature of employment and the demands placed upon employees in a post-bureaucratic and service-focused economy demanded a shift in focus to topics such as workplace identities and managerial practices of cultural control and its underlying technologies (Brannan *et al.*, 2007). Resonating with post-modern critique, organizational ethnography is currently defined as a



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reflective practice in which ethnographers critically assess their position vis-à-vis the organization studied (Hirsch and Gellner, 2001).

In the era of globalization, as our understanding of space has fundamentally shifted, compressing physical distance and intensifying interconnectedness, the interests of ethnographers have turned to new forms of organizing (such as social networks, transnational organizations, digital communities, or virtual workplaces). Conventional fieldwork, implying *in situ* participant observation, may no longer be adequate to capture the rise of emergent hybrid cultures and diverse landscapes. Ethnographic research responded to the re-conceptualization of space by creating multi-sited research designs (e.g. Marcus, 2013; Becker and Roessingh, 2024) or by re-imagining time, initiating multi-temporal research strategies (e.g. Dalsgaard and Nielsen, 2013). Known as “digitally enhanced ethnographies” (Duggan, 2017, p. 5; Kim *et al.*, 2023, p. 811), ethnographers have long combined digital technologies – such as voice recorders, digital cameras and computers – with jotting notes and keeping field journals. Since the 1990s, ethnographers have come to appreciate the significant potential of such technologies to support their data collection and collaboration within the academic workplace environment (Orel, 2022; Ritter, 2022; Trifan *et al.*, 2024). This process gained momentum as fieldwork under the duress of a global pandemic compelled researchers to trade their once territorially bounded field-site for a mobile and digital approach (Luff and Heath, 2019). Digital ethnography includes a rather wide range of methodological approaches that can be used to tackle the complexities of the research object or process, alongside the varying ways in which the object or process has been constructed (Domínguez *et al.*, 2007).

While digital ethnography has long been grounded in exploring online forums and virtual communities (Murthy, 2008), it raised more interest among scholars during the Covid-19 pandemic (Góral ska, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2023). The pandemic, “one of the most extensive economic and social upheavals in modern history” (Orel, 2024a, p. 19), profoundly impacted individual lives, social relations and workplace matters. To comply with the need for social distancing and to sidestep lockdowns, workplaces introduced telework for their employees. To understand what has been repeatedly addressed as the “great work-from-home experiment,” scholars used digital ethnography to explore the ensuing shift in gender relations (e.g. Manzo and Minello, 2020) and mental health-related challenges (e.g. Gera and Hasdell, 2021), in order to comprehend the sudden change to remote work and home-bound makeshift workplaces.

Amid the COVID-19 response, researchers have addressed means and methods of adjusting data collection strategies and shifted their research focus to the emerging “new normal” in workplaces. Some methods included standardized group or individual video calls, chat tools or map drawing techniques (Watson and Lupton, 2022). On the other hand, ethnographic research was severely affected as lockdowns and social distancing reduced opportunities for participant observation, a research strategy that distinguishes ethnography from other qualitative methodologies. With most in-person opportunities beyond reach, ethnographers turned to digital platforms to connect with their research sites, identify potential stakeholders and participants, conduct interviews and focus groups and engage in virtual worlds (Kim *et al.*, 2023). Others resumed to alternative methodological frameworks, such as collaborative autoethnography, to gather rich insights into digital platforms and networks and reflect upon their own role in generating these understandings (Kim *et al.*, 2023; Orel, 2023; Trifan *et al.*, 2024).

All in all, the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed played a critical role in the digital turn by transforming the ways in which people work, communicate and maintain connections. It has advanced the adoption and acceptance of virtual technologies and progressed improvements in user friendliness with these technologies. Digital ethnography, instead of regressing together with the COVID-19 infection to return to *in situ* studies, is here to stay (Kim *et al.*, 2023). Life in the digital space has become the “new normal” as more and more people conduct their social relations, build their networks, obtain their information and define their identities in this space.

This has prompted ethnographers to reevaluate existing approaches to fieldwork, ranging from technology use to entire methodological frameworks.

Undeniably, contemporary workplaces are changing and they are changing fast (Orel, 2024b). The human and the technological are deeply intertwined in current everyday practices, as Ritter (2022, p. 917) points out. With that in mind, this special issue seeks to expand the debate on the evolving application of digital ethnography within organizational studies and ponder novel methods that can be used to collect relevant data in either fully digitized or hybrid settings, particularly in the context of modern workplace dynamics. Various contributions to this special issue apply a critical perspective on the integration of digital and hybrid methodologies in ethnographic research, addressing the challenges and opportunities of studying contemporary work environments. This includes exploring the impact of remote work and technological advancements on organizational culture and power dynamics. This issue also innovates in discussing the use of new technologies (e.g. XR, etc.) in ethnography and assessing the role of ethnographic research in shaping corporate strategies and interventions in the digital era. This special issue addresses contemporary challenges and transformations, contributing to a deeper understanding of the evolving workplace and offering innovative methodologies for organizational research in a digitally interconnected world.

Overview of the special issue

In their article titled “The social dynamics of ethical decision-making in a corporate entity: espoused versus enacted practices”, Baljević *et al.* (2025) explore the impact of power dynamics upon espoused ethical decision-making within a defined corporate context. Based on an ethnographic research methodology offering an insider’s point-of-view, the study concludes that ethical decision-making in an organization requires an environment beyond enterprise structures, processes and procedures. In addition to being embedded in a supportive cultural context, ethical decision-making needs to be viewed as an indispensable value proposition. Against the background of the rise in artificial intelligence and related technologies, this research encourages enterprises to rethink the necessary organizational parameters, including values and political interests, that impact ethical decision-making and data’s responsible/ethical use. Demonstrating the strength and relevance of ethnography in organizational research, this contribution highlights the efficacy of an interpretative research methodology.

The article by Reunamäki (2025), titled “Living with and living like those we study: organizational hybrid ethnography as a research approach in organization studies”, advocates a hybrid approach in organizational ethnography – a combination of in-person and remote research strategies – resonating with the fundamentally changed nature of work as accelerated by advances in technology and the COVID-19 pandemic. As work is increasingly organized in a hybrid fashion, organizational hybrid ethnography enables the organizational ethnographer to provide a more authentic account of the lived work experience in contemporary organizational settings. As compared to purely remote or virtual observations, the hybrid ethnographer is better positioned to establish trust and rapport with participants when interacting with them at the office. Likewise, compared to purely on-site observations, the hybrid ethnographer gains a more authentic experience and more closely captures work dynamics by occasionally observing through videoconferencing.

The Internet offers many collaboration opportunities that are no longer limited by distance or even time. Increasingly popular open-source software (such as LINUX and Firefox) facilitates production communities that collaborate toward a common goal, creating code that is available for anyone to use, examine, or change. As Shaw (2025) argues, studying these communities can be extremely challenging due to the complex work undertaken in digital and often asynchronous environments. In her contribution, titled “Going crypto-native: enactive ethnography in online settings”, Shaw (2025) explores how enactive ethnography, a type of

immersive ethnography, enables the researcher to gain first-hand experience in online research settings, while actively engaging with the field and employing their body as a tool of research. By reflecting on her fieldwork by way of a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988), Shaw (2025) discusses both the constraints and benefits of such intense immersion, adding a much-needed empirical exploration of researcher's positionality in organization and management studies.

In their article, "Enhancing workplace research through a radically reflexive video-tour: insights from a coworking space case study," Galuppo *et al.* (2025) discuss the significance of video-based ethnography for studying coworking spaces. In particular, this contribution examines the unique characteristics, opportunities and challenges of the video-tour technique in exploring and transforming new coworking environments. Progressively seen as open and contested, these environments require reflexive dialogues engaging key stakeholders such as founders and co-workers, to foster a deeper understanding and shared experience of these spaces. Drawing on a socio-material perspective, this paper presents a case study that employs a "radically reflexive" approach to the video-tour technique. Characterized by its performative, participatory and transformative nature, this method enables a deep analysis of coworking spaces, highlighting how they are fashioned in everyday practices of their users.

Introducing the concept of phygital workplaces in which *physical* and *digital* environments intertwine, Karhapää *et al.* (2025) in their article entitled "Being an ethnographic researcher in a modern workplace: advantages and challenges of digital ethnography" offer an auto-ethnographic account of their experiences with the increasing digitalization of their workplace, including the research field and conducting fieldwork. Arguing that digital ethnography is a particularly suitable methodology for studying contemporary workplaces, the authors reflect on their experiences in doing digital ethnography to investigate the use of digital technology in informal learning processes in a knowledge work context. The authors describe how the emergent research field was construed in interaction with key stakeholders in the target organization and how versatile data was collected in the digital environments of the workplace. In particular, the authors reflect on the challenges encountered, concerning gaining access and considering ethical matters.

Based on an ethnographic study of an internet-based food delivery platform, Manriquez (2025) discusses a methodology that combines both traditional and digital approaches to study a digitally organized labor process. The article "Digital ethnography and the labor process in food delivery gig work: a methodological reflection" contributes to ongoing debates in organizational studies regarding digital ethnography's use to capture workplace lifeworlds. Organizations. Focusing on three key stages of the labor process – recruitment, management control and work cultures – multiple digital and traditional ethnographic strategies are employed to capture a comprehensive picture of how the labor process unfolds simultaneously in offline and online spaces. Beyond this particular case, the research strategies discussed in this article help transform ethnographic approaches to workplaces exhibiting multiple levels of virtuality.

In pointing out that contemporary workplaces are increasingly mediated by digital technologies blurring work's temporal and spatial boundaries, Oechslen *et al.* (2025) call for more innovative ethnographies to encompass on/offline work practices and workplaces. In their article titled "Studying digitally mediated sites of work through visual methods: the cases of coworking, gig working, and creative entrepreneurship", the authors emphasize the necessity and benefits of engaging with visuals in doing digital ethnography at workplaces with multiple on/offline sites and propose a multimodal research design to integrate visual, textual and verbal data sources. Drawing on three ethnographic case studies, the authors uncover subjective and affective dimensions of research, shed light on novel work practices in producing and curating images and draw attention to opportunities for collaborative knowledge production to better understand mediated work and workplaces digitally – not without reflecting critically on the labor of image production, in particular for platforms.

The final contribution to this special issue is an autobiographical and autoethnographic reflection on ways in which a researcher's digital self-presentation influences participant

recruitment and interviews. [Zhang's \(2025\)](#) article titled “Anchor identification – navigating the digital workplace as a novice ethnographer” demonstrates the power of “anchor identification” in understanding how a researcher’s digital self-presentation, in particular on social media, affects the research process. Grounded in asynchronous interactions via social media, anchor identification can facilitate access and rapport, but it may also skew the research by emphasizing specific aspects of participants’ lives. To carefully balance the positive and negative impacts of the researcher’s dynamic positionality on the research process, this study implies that refined methods, such as business-life-history approaches, are required to capture the complexity of digital workplaces fully.

Concluding remarks and implications for future research

With that being said, we would like to believe that this special issue demonstrates that digital ethnography has evolved from pandemic-era necessity into a sophisticated methodological framework that fundamentally challenges traditional ethnographic boundaries. The contributions collectively reveal a field experiencing unprecedented innovation while grappling with complex ethical and practical challenges that increasingly hybrid work environments pose. The transformation from emergency adaptation to strategic methodology reflects deeper changes in how work itself is conducted, with contemporary workplaces becoming inherently “phygital” spaces that integrate physical and digital elements in ways that require ethnographers to engage simultaneously with multiple platforms and environments ([Christin, 2020](#); [Proietti, 2025](#)).

The theoretical developments revealed throughout these contributions point toward three major trajectories reshaping organizational understanding. Sociomaterial frameworks have gained prominence, producing concepts like “organizational digitality” that understand organizations and digital technologies as co-constituted rather than separate entities. Practice theory integration offers frameworks for understanding digitalized workplaces while avoiding simplistic narratives of work becoming “virtual.” Meanwhile, enactive ethnography represents a novel theoretical contribution that challenges traditional observer/participant boundaries, particularly relevant for studying AI-mediated workplaces where understanding requires direct engagement with algorithmic systems. These theoretical advances demonstrate the field’s move toward post-digital frameworks that transcend online/offline dichotomies.

Ethical complexities represent the field’s most pressing challenges, as demonstrated by several contributions in this issue. The fundamental difficulty lies in determining what constitutes “public” versus “private” data in digital workplace environments where traditional spatial boundaries become meaningless. Current research reveals multiple ethical frameworks being applied – utilitarian, deontological, feminist ethics of care and virtue ethics – reflecting recognition that no single approach adequately addresses digital ethnography’s complexities. Informed consent presents unprecedented challenges due to scale issues, ongoing consent needs and contextual variations across platforms. The field is developing sophisticated consent models, including process approaches, staged consent and community consent frameworks, while also addressing researcher positioning challenges and the “lurker” problem of balancing transparency with data integrity.

Looking forward, several critical research frontiers emerge from this special issue’s contributions. AI-mediated workplaces represent the most significant opportunity, with substantial gaps in ethnographic studies of algorithmic management systems and their impact on worker experiences. Platform labor and gig economy organizational forms demand new ethnographic approaches for studying distributed, algorithmically-managed work relationships. Despite growing organizational focus on sustainable work practices, environmental and sustainability considerations in digital workplace ethnography remain underexplored. Additionally, decolonial perspectives in digital ethnographic theory require significant development, with current literature dominated by Global North frameworks. The field of digital organizational ethnography stands at a crucial juncture where traditional

ethnographic principles should evolve to address increasingly complex, hybrid and technologically mediated work environments. Future success depends on developing relevant theoretical frameworks, innovative methodological approaches and deeper integration with emerging technologies while preserving ethnography's core commitment to understanding human experience and cultural meaning-making in organizational contexts.

As the digital turn opens new horizons for organizational ethnography, a caveat is in place. Digital ethnography involves navigating the increasing complexity of online spaces where misinformation and disinformation can be prevalent, including fabricated content, manipulated media and conspiracy theories. Dealing with such perils requires researchers to carefully consider the potential impact on their fieldwork, the validity and reliability of their findings and the ethical implications for all stakeholders involved. Future reflections on the digital turn in organizational ethnography needs to address the pitfalls lurking in the digital realm and ways to mitigate their ramifications.

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