

Investigative Digital Ethnography: Methods for Environmental Modeling | Media Manipulation Casebook

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Investigative Digital Ethnography combines elements of investigative journalism with ethnographic observation in a practice useful for academic researchers, policy makers, and the press. It is a particularly useful method for understanding disinformation campaigns. By taking the long-form approach of an investigation, this method may follow breaking news, or be used to analyze a specific case after the immediate event is over. The researcher is ideally tracking one central topic or case and may discover additional components as the investigation progresses. At some point, the gathering of information must end and the ethnographer must move on to analysis.

The ethnographic method situates people in spaces marked by distinct rituals, beliefs, and cultural production. An ethnographer engages with the subjects to varying degrees, and in the case of digital ethnography, with the traces they leave behind. Observing online communities properly takes time, and the ethnographic process requires a commitment to observation during breaking news events and also during the downtime in between.

This investigative ethnographic method merges the pointed search for specific information that defines journalistic and legal investigation, with the long-term observation that defines ethnography. While an individual investigation may lead to one output in the form of an article, a long-term ethnography composed of many investigations can reveal valuable hidden details that may not have been significant to a single investigation.

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