Chapter 14
Exploring Lived Experience through Ambient Research Methods

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ABSTRACT
The daily realities of lived experience are increasingly mediated by interactions with ambient data—the granular, almost atmospheric mists of media that surround us and enrich our lives. Ambient data is often experienced and generated through literate action—through non-obvious writing work in social software applications, and through composing and sharing images and videos via mobile devices. Contemporary ethnography may attempt to explore lived experience by tracing and accounting for the literate practices of participants across private, semi-public, and public networks. This chapter details methods for researching the ambient data of lived experience within the broader context of ethnographic methodology, offering case histories detailing ambient research methods in both industry and academe.

INTRODUCTION
As Hine (2009) and others have argued, ethnography focuses on “being true to lived experience and on how mundane realities come to be” (p. 3). Increasingly, the mundane realities of everyday work, learning, and play are experienced and enacted in a variety of hybrid spaces and mediated through a variety of sociotechnical networks, in and through a variety of devices and applications. Contemporary ethnography, whether virtual, in situ, or, ideally, a combination of both, must attend to the collection and analysis of participants’ interactions within social network sites—the “likes,” retweets, and shared photos that comprise small but meaningful daily pivots of interaction.

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These mundane realities of contemporary lived experience are often generated through literate action—through non-obvious writing work that takes place in applications such as Facebook and Twitter, and by composing and sharing images and videos taken with mobile devices. This literate action is not obvious to participants because their writing and composing practices are often transparent means to an end (see McNely, 2011a).

However, the responsible ethnographer may attempt to explore lived experience in part by tracing and accounting for the literate practices of participants across private, semi-public, and public networks. But what are appropriate methods for doing so? How may qualitative researchers practically collect and store such data and meaningfully place these forms of literate action within broader fieldwork contexts? In this chapter, I describe methods for surfacing and tracing what Spinuzzi (2009) and Thompson (2008) have described as ambient data—the seemingly ephemeral, often informal moments of literate action that stretch across social network sites. By deploying systematic and rigorous methods for collecting and triangulating these ubiquitous forms of data—what I am calling ambient research methods—ethnographers and qualitative case study researchers may better understand their research participants and sites, in workplace settings and in academe, where organizational and individual social software practices are often blended and blurred (McNely, 2011b).

I begin this chapter by detailing some of the more influential contemporary approaches in ethnographic research, focusing in particular on the challenges of collecting and analyzing qualitative data in digital spaces. I argue that by identifying, collecting, and progressively analyzing the non-obvious writing work of participants qualitative researchers may develop richer profiles of contemporary lived experience. Ambient research methods may help such researchers capture human interactions that were largely ephemeral—and thus dependent on in situ fieldwork—before the widespread adoption of social software and the forms of literate action it affords. I discuss, therefore, practical methods for collecting, storing, and analyzing ambient data, and more importantly, for using such data as a triangulation measure among more traditional forms of fieldwork. Finally, I explore ambient research methods in practice by detailing the approach in two different ethnographic studies—one in a prominent U.S. media research firm, and another in academe. This chapter concludes with some implications and future directions for ambient research methods, arguing that they represent meaningful opportunities for what Bowker and Star (1999) have termed “infrastructural inversions”—methods for making the familiar strange and making what is often taken-for-granted more visible.

BACKGROUND

Human beings now write more than ever. We write in dedicated text editors, on sticky notes and slips of paper, in mobile device messaging applications, in markup languages, in online forums, in product reviews, on blogs, in comments on blog posts, and in social software applications, to name just a few common genres. That these statements about writing are obvious and self-evident does not diminish their profundity. Written communication is a protean tool (Russell, 1995) that distributes meaning across genres, across networks, and across lived experience. And as we write, we leave traces. How else might we explain the interest that the U.S. Library of Congress has in archiving every public tweet? Indeed, as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) remind us, “the act of writing constructs meaning and knowledge” (p. 213), and even seemingly insignificant acts of writing—even 140 characters—may shape lived experience, especially in aggregate. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) suggest that ethnographers maintain a “heightened consciousness about writing” in their own fieldnotes (p. 212), but in this chapter I argue...