Engagement and Ethics for Digital Ethnography: Reflections from (online) Indonesia in times of COVID-19

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Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought out a number of urgent issues for ethnographers and other scholars working across online and offline spaces. Whereas the massive recourse to social media platforms and other digital means of communication led to a surge in popularity and credibility afforded to online research methods, the ethical challenges that accompany such a move have only begun to be explored. This paper draws on my experiences of conducting research with queer Indonesians between 2017 and 2022 to suggest an approach to ethics and engagement that takes seriously the blurring of the divide between private and public online data, the sensitivity of social media data beyond "terms and conditions", and the material dimensions and intersectional hierarchies that suffuse online spaces and access to them. I argue for integrating "do no harm" approaches, such as cultivating an attitude of "intentional paranoia" towards the risks and dangers of storing and using online data of vulnerable groups, with active ethical strategies such as pursuing unusual research methods, speculation and applied engagement.

Keywords: Indonesia, digital ethnography, ethics, social media, COVID-19, critical action research

It is the 18th of May 2020, and all around the world queer communities are hosting events to mark the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Lesbophobia and Transphobia. Unlike previous years, most of these events take place online due to the COVID-19 related restrictions on in-person gatherings. I am attending a live Zoom webinar on queer religion in Southeast Asia, a collaboration between an Indonesian NGO and a transnational interfaith organisation. Over a hundred online participants have come to hear key figures from the world of queer religious activism speak today, among them the "Lady Imam" Amina Wadud and Dede Oetomo, queer Indonesian scholar and founder of GAYa NUSANTARA. After a short introduction by the moderator and a video of a queer Malaysian poet is streamed, the discussion takes off, peppered with everything from theoretical reflections on queer theology to anecdotes and reminiscences. Meanwhile, I am frantically typing in an attempt to note down as much of the

event as possible. Apart from capturing important quotes from the conversation and coming up with short summaries, I try to record all the references to people, publications, songs, movies and poetry that are mentioned, as well as write a "thick description" including everything from the audio quality, the tone of the speakers, the atmosphere, responses from the audience, the number of people with their video on, and so on. After half an hour, my fingers ache and my head is spinning from switching between different screens and tabs. I feel a mounting frustration at not being able to catch some of the proper names that are being mentioned – when I try to Google an activist organisation in the US mentioned by one of the speakers, I miss everything being said in the meantime, causing me even more confusion when I try to get back into the conversation. I lean back and glimpse at my voice-recorder, at the moment turned off but tempting me with its promise of two hours of captured audio, there for me to listen back, transcribe and analyse at my leisure. It takes a strong appeal from my conscience to stop me from taking up the device and pressing that little red button: after all, although many among the participants know me and my research, not everyone does, and I have not asked for permission to record.

On the one hand, many elements from the field journal excerpt above might have been familiar to any pre-COVID-19 anthropologist doing traditional, in-person fieldwork. Ambiguous informed consent requirements, the temptation to take excessive notes in an attempt to capture everything, and missing or mishearing crucial pieces of information are all part of an ethnographer's daily experience. In an offline setting, however, the researcher is usually more visible as an "outsider" to the group, and it is therefore harder to attend special closed events unnoticed, or without at least the most important participants providing consent. In addition, as offline events do not end abruptly but are often part of a larger context that does not cease to exist once the event is over, it is usually possible to talk informally to participants before or afterwards, with plenty of opportunities to acquire more context information and to correct misunderstandings. It also feels more natural not to always be fully "on", or maximally attentive, as the fieldwork is long and one or two moments of distraction are unlikely to greatly affect understanding. Because online interactions are often more action-packed, shorter and more purpose-driven, a lag in attention on part of the ethnographer can be more consequential.

These examples not only indicate the novel challenges that occurred for many researchers, especially anthropologists, when pandemic-related restrictions forced social and public life across the globe largely onto online platforms, but also hint at some of the ethical concerns that accompanied this development. Although lockdowns and other restrictions on in-person events have lifted since the first draft of this article, one of the most notable shifts since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in our experience of social life and mobility has been the persisting prominence of online platforms. This has raised some important questions about how we do research, how online and offline worlds relate to each other and where their boundaries are, and what kind of new attitudes and strategies are necessary in order to maintain or cultivate an ethical and engaged research strategy.

The current article builds on my experiences doing fieldwork with and among queer Indonesians before and during the pandemic-related restrictions (2017–2022) and reflects on these questions, suggesting a number of considerations for ethical and engaged (digital) ethnography beyond this particular time of crisis. I will first offer some reflections on the existing literature on these topics. In section two, I briefly describe the research context and some of the challenges for the queer community in Indonesia after the onset of the pandemic as well as some unexpected possibilities and positive developments that it brought about. In section three, I discuss the impact of these developments on my methodological and ethical approach. In section four, I bring together these different observations to offer some practical suggestions in the context of online or digital ethnography.

Digital ethnography

On the one hand, scholarship on how the pandemic has changed the field of anthropology and its ethical engagements is only just emerging (Góralska 2020, Horton 2021, Rivera-González et al. 2022). On the other hand, the field of digital ethnography – or, depending on your preference, cyberethnography, virtual ethnography, online anthropology or netnography (see Chitwood 2019 for an overview of the terminology) – has long sought to address the question of how online spaces and the devices that facilitate them figure into our lives and our research, as well as the ethical challenges unique to them. This body of scholarship has brought attention to the need for researchers to engage with the enormous relevance of the internet to our daily lives and to acknowledge the blurred boundaries between online and offline worlds (Hine 2015, Pink et al. 2016).

This literature has contributed to the acknowledgement of rich social worlds online and the relevance of traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviewing (Boellstorf et al. 2012). At the same time, several authors have emphasised the messy, chaotic and expansive nature of the internet and its entanglements with everyday life, and hence the need for digital ethnography to be flexible and adaptable (Postill / Pink 2012, Abidin / Seta 2020). The unbounded nature of social media networks has furthermore cast new light on existing questions of how terms like "field" and "community" are to be defined and approached (Garcia et al. 2009, Caliandro 2017). Furthermore, the value of careful ethnographic engagement with social media, as opposed to the use of quantitative methods, as well as particular scepticism toward a reliance on Big Data, has been well documented in the case of politically volatile contexts (Käihkö 2020, Di Wang / Liu 2021), social justice movements (Bonilla / Rosa 2015, Byrd et al. 2017) and marginalised groups (Nemer 2015, Boyd 2016,

Luka / Millette 2018). My usage of the term digital ethnography in this paper is meant to capture not only the importance of online spaces for contemporary anthropologists, but also their intertwinement with material conditions and embodied practices.

The rich and still developing body of work on ethnographic methods in and across online spaces notwithstanding, discussions on researcher positionality and ethical dimensions require greater engagement. Especially the forms of emotional and political involvement that social media platforms offer demand "social-media specific ethical considerations" (Castillo 2021: 148). In the current article, I will discuss and contribute to existing debates on the ethics of online research and make a number of suggestions along the lines of "do no harm" and active ethical approaches. These contributions stem from reflections on online (2017–2022) and in-person (2017–2020) ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with and among queer Indonesian groups and individuals in urban centres in Java and Bali. During this time, I participated in community events, activist gatherings, religious meetings and informal group meetings both on- and offline. As not all of my interlocutors were (regularly) involved in community activities, I also spent a lot of one-on-one time with people in cafes, restaurants, at their homes or on the beach. I conducted over 80 in-depth interviews with activists, religious leaders and other members of the queer community. While most of these were conducted in Indonesia in person, a few were conducted over Zoom or WhatsApp video calls when I was in Berlin. Many of the relationships I established during the fieldwork continued and deepened through online communication on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms. Before going into my main arguments in detail, I will briefly introduce below the research context and the ethical issues at stake.

Queer Indonesia in (post-)pandemic times

The last decade has witnessed unprecedented attention for LGBTQ+ issues in Indonesia. Whereas centuries of Dutch colonial rule, the spread of European scientific ideas and the increasing influence of political Islam have helped establish heteronormative structures around sexuality and gender (Blackwood 2005, Peletz 2009), explicit opposition to specific identities and relationships has been a recent development. Alongside the rising popularity of identity terms like "gay" and "lesbi" since the 1980s (Boellstorff 2005) and subsequently the term "LGBT" and activist organisation around these terms (Khanis 2013, Wijaya 2020), state and religious opposition has grown exponentially as well (Blackwood 2010). Examples like the contested anti-pornography law (Allen 2007, Bellows 2011, Brenner 2011), anti-LGBT fatwas (Jakarta Globe 2015), regu-

lations curtailing "LGBT" presence in the media (Mendos 2019) and on campus (Tang 2016), and a range of anti-LGBT violent attacks (Syuflana / Niniek 2017, Aqil 2018, Thajib 2022) demonstrate the increasing awareness of and anxiety around non-heteronormative relationships and identities. This trend culminated in the passing of a new criminal code in 2022, which, among many other controversial provisions, introduced measures to criminalise sex outside of marriage (Human Rights Watch 2022) – effectively banning same-sex sexual relationships. The effects of these legal changes on the lives of not only queer Indonesians, but other people in non-normative relationships and lifestyles, remains to be seen, as the law only takes effect in 2025.

Within this turbulent landscape, queer activist organisations and groups have also been dealing with the changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Johns Hopkins University's COVID-19 dashboard, Indonesia has been hit worse than any other Southeast Asian country since the beginning of 2020 (John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center 2023). Aside from high death tolls, the pandemic led to increased poverty and unemployment, especially for those living in rural areas and for women (World Bank Group 2020). Research by Sayoni and the ASEAN Feminist LBQ network has demonstrated that the pandemic has exacerbated existing patterns of discrimination and violence towards lesbian, bisexual and queer persons in Southeast Asia (Sayoni / ASEAN LBQ Network 2020). The global travel restrictions also hit hard those employed in tourist-heavy areas (Pham / Nugroho 2022), as well as others relying on daily wage labour or unofficial employment – categories that many of my interlocutors, due to the stigmatisation and job market discrimination that queer Indonesians face, were disproportionally represented in. For trans*women (*transpuan*) and *waria*[1] working, for example, in beauty salons in places like Bali, the waiters and drag queens employed at the island's gay bars, and sex workers, their already marginal job security worsened further. At another level, many queer activists who, just before the pandemic hit, had been planning to study or work overseas – often as a way to develop their queer scholarship or activism in another environment – suddenly saw their plans postponed indefinitely.

Additionally, closures of schools, workplaces and public spaces popular for socialising, such as malls and cafes, meant an increase in family time for many Indonesians, whether that was the family of origin or a spouse and/or children. A consequence of this development was that those who were used to performing heteronormativity among family – the majority among my interlocutors – found their opportunities for queer self-expression and interaction curtailed drastically. This often led to increased tensions in the home, especially for

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1   The term *waria* denotes a diverse and contested category of gender transgressive individuals who were assigned male at birth. For an introduction to the debate on the term and its meanings, see: https://www.insideindonesia.org/defining-waria.

gender non-conforming individuals, who were more likely to be subject to family scrutiny and pressure to change.

Aside from the inaccessibility of informal meeting and socialising spaces, such as mall cafes, Starbucks branches and cinemas, more explicitly queer (activist) spaces and events, already not very common outside of particular urban spaces, disappeared almost completely during the worst stretches of the pandemic. While some meetups continued in outdoor venues with social distancing, not everyone felt comfortable or able to participate in those. Finally, certain groups of the population were especially affected in the context of medical care, as HIV/AIDS clinics and prevention centres, which often doubled as counselling and support points, faced severe restrictions.

On the other hand, the new situation also induced a number of positive, though unevenly distributed, effects. The global explosive popularity of video call platforms such as Zoom for conducting meetings of all sizes and forms facilitated community and activist networks among queer Indonesians to an unprecedented extent. Access to official activist gatherings, usually organised in specific safe private spaces (or, conversely, crowded cafes that offered anonymity) by well-known LGBTQ+ organisations such as GAYa NUSANTARA and its local branches, were no longer restricted to those living in urban activist hotspots such as Jakarta or Jogjakarta, but instead expanded to include anyone in (and beyond) Indonesia with a stable internet connection on either their phone or computer. Though in principle these meetings could often be accessed by anyone who was willing to fill out their name and email address on an online form, it would, in a way, be misleading to describe them as publicly accessible. Sensitive events, including those focusing on queer or feminist topics, would often be circulated through what I have previously labelled "semi-insider networks" (Jansen 2025): networks of activists, community members and allies that were generally relied upon to circulate the invitations only to those they trusted – a strategy that was (given the chaotic and unpredictable quality of the internet) often surprisingly successful in keeping out unwanted or hostile attendees. As I will explore in more detail below, reliance on semi-insider networks as a strategy is one illustration of the blurred boundaries between private and public online spaces.

Aside from the increased reach of existing activities that were moved online, a large number of new one-off events was organised starting from early 2020 onwards that dealt with a variety of issues, ranging from queer theology and discussions on so-called "conversion therapy" (*ruqya*) to health-related issues and SOGIESC education (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sexual characteristics). The low barrier to participation increased the popularity of such online gatherings, which spread thanks to their low cost-intensity (aside from a Zoom subscription and possible speaker fees) and relatively quick and easy organisation and management. In comparison to offline meetings, further-

more, these mediated events could be broken up instantly and without physical risk in the event of any backlash or unwanted exposure. In the latter case, it is also much easier to expel a disruptive or offensive attendee from a Zoom meeting than it is to expel an interloper at an in-person event. In the face of possible hostile attention, the option to keep one's webcam switched off and use a pseudonym provided welcome anonymity and confidentiality for participants. In addition to such events, a number of new initiatives that fostered communication and support within queer communities were set up between 2020 and 2022. Examples include the community-led educational Instagram account Kamus Bahasa Queer Indonesia (@kamusqueer), the web shop KWIIR (@kwiir), the queer inclusive theology podcast Ngaji Diri (Alfikar 2021), the online queer Muslim collective IQAMAH (@iqamah.id) and the website Queer Indonesia Archive.

Other avenues to community building and the increased circulation of queer knowledge and meaning making were provided by international organisations. Attendance at large-scale events organised by globally active gender and sexual diversity-focused platforms or national organisations with a global reach has, in the Indonesian context, usually been limited to a few highly mobile, highly visible groups of full-time queer activists. Although, as discussed below, language and socioeconomic status continue to mediate access to such platforms, the pandemic restrictions opened them up to an online audience and facilitated unprecedented transnational encounters and exchanges. These transnational networks were also vital to the success of a sizeable number of online fundraisers that were organised by different groups of queer Indonesians for the benefit of those who had been most affected by the pandemic, such as trans*-gender women and *waria*. I have argued elsewhere that these new connections and the solidarity they inspired contributed to an unprecedented sense of a queer "us" or queer identity that transcended national borders (Jansen 2021).

However, it would be naive to describe these developments as events that positively affected the lives of all non-heteronormative Indonesians in an evenly distributed way. The increased accessibility of online spaces notwithstanding, the events and networks mentioned still required internet access as well as a private space to connect from (without unwanted interference from unwitting friends or family), both resources that varied, depending on rural or urban location and socioeconomic status. In addition, it is unlikely that these new online initiatives met the most pressing needs of those who suffered losses in terms of basic necessities such as food, health or shelter a result of the pandemic. In the case of international events, moreover, participation was nearly always limited to those who had sufficient English language skills. Furthermore, as critical scholarship into digitisation has demonstrated, it is important not to overestimate the role of online networks in the empowerment of previously marginalised groups, as "digital cultures both challenge and reproduce unequal

power structures and are thus very much connected to the offline material realms" (Vuyst et al. 2022: 3). In this context, a distinction should also be drawn between those who passively sit in on online lectures, discussions and performances or "lurk" within online communities on the one hand, and those who exercise agency in shaping and leading these events and their content, language and form in the first place.

Lastly, it remains to be seen to what extent the positive effects described above will carry over to post-pandemic times. Although the number of online events organised by and for queer Indonesians has remained high compared to before 2019, the vast majority have returned to in-person formats as social restrictions have eased – a development that is likely to continue. While the partly temporary "Zoomification" of different societies as a result of the pandemic restrictions might have given rise to new ways of collective self-identification and new avenues for (transnational) community building and networks, it is vital for ethnographers "to consider how online spaces render certain bodies and experiences more visible and political than others, who may indeed remain completely invisible and silenced" (Morrow et al. 2015: 531).

Digital ethnography in flux: New ethical challenges

Many of the changes described in the previous sections drastically altered the way I conducted my research. Although officially, my main fieldwork period had ended by the time global lockdowns came into effect, the sudden flood of invitations from friends and interlocutors to online events made it hard to draw such clear distinctions. Soon, I experienced the kind of fatigue described by many researchers working with online sources (Chitwood 2019, Castillo 2021) – a phenomenon that became known among my ethnographer friends as fieldwork FOMO or the "fear of missing out" on important meetings or events. In my case, this data overload meant that I had to make a more artificial cut-off period for the end of my fieldwork in order not to keep incorporating new insights and new developments. In practice, this meant that I had to quite suddenly stop attending meetings and sometimes drastically reduce my participation in online conversations, which again reduced the commitment and involvement I could offer.

On the one hand, this kind of withdrawal from the field during the writing process occurs to some extent in most ethnographic projects, especially those for which the fieldwork is carried out far from the location of the researcher's home institution. However, whereas in the case of in-person fieldwork this kind of departure from a physical location might be anticipated and to some degree understood by all involved, a sudden drop in online presence might be inter-

preted and experienced quite differently – for example as a lack of interest or solidarity (Ghosh 2020). Although I continued to be involved in a number of projects with interlocutors after the fieldwork period and remained in touch with those I had been closest to, there were also instances where I lost contact with certain individuals and groups. My lack of engagement on social media might in these cases have been interpreted or valued negatively, a consequence emphasised by the important role of the internet in maintaining social relationships during the pandemic.

Another aspect, related to the ease of access to new online events and spaces and accompanying challenges, was the sudden abundance of various data and ways of collecting them. As demonstrated by the vignette at the start of this article, encounters in online spaces often give rise to the temptation to collect and store all kinds of data, from social media posts and website screenshots to recordings or transcripts of online events and entire WhatsApp or Telegram conversations. Aside from the issue of data overload, this proliferation of new possibilities produced a range of ethical challenges.

Several scholars have pointed out the difficulty of differentiating between "public" and "private" spheres in general, and, more specifically, when it comes to deciding which spaces ethnographers can ethically access and at what stage informed consent becomes mandatory. As Michael Angrosino has pointed out, for example, even obviously public spaces such as malls or market squares contain "private zones", such as public bathrooms or the imagined spaces created by conversations between people (Angrosino 2007: 63). In the context of the internet, and especially social media, the demarcation between public and private data (requiring informed consent) becomes even more blurry, as Boyd and Crawford point out:

> It may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet, but it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data are accessible. Just because content is publicly accessible does not mean that it was meant to be consumed by just anyone. (Boyd / Crawford 2012: 672)

Questions about public and private online data thus have to take into consideration "reasonable expectations" (Boyd / Crawford 2012: 673) on the part of the social media user in terms of privacy and what their data would be used for.

Several guides have been written in order to ensure ethical compliance in online environments (Markman / Buchanan 2012, Townsend / Wallace 2016, GSR 2016), which will be discussed in greater detail below. Although such guidelines, as well as other standardised (institutional) procedures concerning research ethics, provide crucial minimal ethical requirements, they do not constitute a comprehensive approach to the "real and messy mix of ethical and political issues rising in the field" (Sökefeld et al. 2022: 523).

An illustrative example in the context of my fieldwork relates to the previously described "semi-insider networks" that people rely on to share online data and

event invitations. In 2020, I was asked by a close friend to contribute to an online conference on queer theology – an annual event that I had attended in person the year before. On both occasions, I was struck by the unrestricted nature of the conversations and presentations during the event, with seemingly little fear of any backlash from hostile outsiders. As I presented my own research during the online conference in 2020, and with the event being attended by over 200 people, most of whom had not personally been invited, I could have treated the whole event as public and taken anything that was said – including many helpful and interesting responses to the presentation of my own findings – as data to be used in my research, at least after anonymisation. Such an approach would most likely have passed any online research ethics checklist as well as an ethics review board evaluation. In reality, however, the seemingly public (in the sense of open to anyone) nature of the event and its resemblance to other, non-sensitive and purely academic public conferences were deceptive.

The goals of this particular conference, though attended by academics from universities all over the world and consisting of mostly academic presentations, were strongly intertwined with those of the many activists and religious leaders who also attended. In many cases, these goals relied on the mostly covert work of the latter to create safe spaces and dialogue among queer Indonesians. Therefore, not only the names and faces of participants and attendees had to be considered as confidential, but also the very existence of the conference itself and the topics under discussion. Although a few months later an Indonesian journalist published an article on the conference in an English-language newspaper, its contents were carefully curated and discussed with the conference organisers in order not to reveal too much about the people who were involved as well as some of the more controversial aspects of the event. Even given these developments, as someone who could (and did) eventually withdraw from the political and social context and its stigmatisation of queer individuals, I felt that visibilising the conference through writing about its contents and dynamics explicitly would have been irresponsible on my part, even if permission to do so was officially granted. I therefore decided to omit most of the discussion that had followed my presentation from both my data and eventual write-up altogether. This example highlights the importance of engagement with material and embodied conditions as part of "context-specificity", especially when researching in online "informal spaces that users often perceive as private but may strictly speaking be publicly accessible" (Franzke et al. 2020: 69).

There were many other such cases where ethical decisions were highly contextual and delicate, and for which a purely online ethnographic research approach would not have sufficed. In this case, had I not attended the previous in-person conference the year before, I would most likely have missed out on the subtleties – gained through physical fieldwork and sustained interactions – that eventually forced me to rethink my own positionality and how I dealt with

my data. Especially after the revision of the Indonesian Criminal Code in 2022, which outlaws consensual sex outside of marriage and therefore targets LGBTQ+ individuals for persecution (Human Rights Watch 2022), an explicit and traceable publication on the conference and its attendees on my part might have brought much unwanted attention to the organising institution and the individuals involved.

More generally, crises such as the ones related to the COVID-19 pandemic force researchers to rethink issues such as positionality and research relevancy, both on a personal level as well as on the level of academic knowledge production and its complicities in global structures of inequality. The dramatic global inequities in vaccine distribution – with only about thirty per cent of people in low-income countries receiving full vaccinations, compared to around seventy per cent in high-income countries (Ferranna 2024) – are just one example of how the pandemic aggravated already existing inequalities. Many other disparities also came to the fore, such as unequal access to health care and green spaces during lockdowns, and the exacerbation of instances of poverty, racism, gendered discrimination, forced mobility and food security (Simet et al. 2021).

In the context of my research and positionality, these dynamics became poignantly clear as the pandemic progressed. My PhD grant was extended by three months due to the pandemic, shielding me from a truly precarious situation. I also had access to my own apartment in Germany, with a working laptop and internet connection during the entirety of the pandemic, where I could work on my research safely (minimising the risk of infection) and without disturbance. I received all the recommended vaccines and booster doses in a reasonable amount of time. I also had access to all basic necessities, such as food and medical supplies, throughout the worst months of the pandemic.

All these safeties stood in stark contrast to the conditions I described above that affected some of my interlocutors in Indonesia during the same period – conditions that most likely were more urgent for those outside of my (mostly urban-based) circles. These perhaps seemingly banal comparisons serve to highlight the material conditions on which academic scholarship is built, and the deeply hierarchical relations that set the stage for any kind of ostensibly mutual or collaborative approach to research. In other words, whereas the aforementioned critique of extractivist research and the tendency of ethnographers to withdraw from marginalised communities after ending their fieldwork period becomes even more crucial during crises, it is vital to make explicit the structures that shape the relationships between the ethnographer and other parties involved in the research context before embarking on collaborative efforts (cf. Nagar / Swarr 2010a). I come back to this issue in the next section.

The concerns outlined above call for a reconsideration of applied anthropology and its relevancy in times of crisis. The structures that allow for academic scholarship – PhD programmes, research funding criteria, semester periods, pub-

lication and career-related requirements – usually do not facilitate or value flexibility. Even though the priorities, or at least the emphasis on certain priorities, among many of the people I worked with changed – from queer activism or social media presence to health struggles, family care or financial difficulties – it was not possible for me to make the same shift in my research focus or analysis beyond an exploration of the intersections of these topics with "queerness" in an introductory chapter to my dissertation. The few interventions I was able to engage in that actually related to my interlocutors' pressing concerns during the pandemic, which I describe in more detail below, were conducted outside of what was considered my main research time. Due to the time and publication pressures associated with a scholarly (early) career trajectory and the sunk investment into certain lenses or theories applied to my data, it was impossible to shift my priorities to the new situation in any significant way. This example calls into question the existing structures of academia, with its fixities, delays and competition and the ways in which these hinder flexible, relevant and engaged research (Nicholas 2020, Rivera- González et al. 2022).

Possible approaches to engaged, ethical (online) research beyond times of crises

In the context of feminist research in social media spaces, Mary Luka and Mélanie Milette have argued for a "reframing of action, speculation, and ethics of care [that] asks researchers to conduct any research as if it was critical action-research meant to contribute to a better, more equitable world" (2018: 7). Extending similar concerns to a (post-)pandemic anthropological ethics, Rivera-González et al. advocate for the importance of "flexible, care-driven research methods that forefront local expertise and collaborations and relational ethics" (2022: 291). I suggest a response to such calls in the form of a two-pronged approach to critical action research in the context of digital ethnography that takes "doing no harm" as its foundational condition, and that utilises three active approaches: unusual research methods, speculation and applied engagement in the face of rapidly changing conditions.

To a certain extent, "doing no harm" can be approached through existing guides to ethical research and the handling of online data and, depending on where your academic institution is located, mandatory ethics board reviews. These practices have brought attention to important issues specific to doing research in online environments. The Social Media Annex to the Government Social Research (GSR) Ethics Guidance (2016), for example, points to the importance of adherence to the terms and conditions of social media platforms, the question of consent in cases where online data is removed by the user, the

problem of anonymity with raw social media data and a consideration of bar-
riers to participation in social media research design.

Others have pinpointed best practices, such as identifying reasonable ex-
pectations about data usage by social media users (Harte 2023), transparency
about the researcher's presence in online group settings and the provision of
opt-out options for group members (Townsend / Wallace 2016). These and
similar guidelines usually mention that special consideration should be given
to questions of confidentiality, risk and anonymity when the research involves
vulnerable individuals or communities or sensitive information.

In order to add to and make more concrete the latter point, an example from
my own research process might be helpful. For many of the individuals that
participated in my research, exposure to family members, colleagues or even
the government, as gay, lesbian or transgender, or even as a feminist activist,
was a major, everyday concern. It was therefore especially crucial to consider
issues of confidentiality and avoidance of harm. Hence, I relied on a strategy
that could perhaps best be described as "intentional paranoia". For example,
throughout my fieldwork, I only very rarely talked to anyone outside of the
queer community about my research, posing instead as a tourist during casual
conversations. While this was a strategy that sometimes resulted in feelings of
isolation, I feared that befriending "outsiders" would threaten my ability to
manage the risk of exposure for my interlocutors and myself. For similar rea-
sons, I used a paid, encrypted cloud storage service that allowed me to make
all my data disappear from my physical laptop whenever I was on the move,
going through immigration or in any situation where I was not attending to it
directly. Aside from the usual precautions of anonymising people's names and
other personal details in my data files, I also stored phone numbers under ini-
tials rather than full names (a strategy that once led me to invite the wrong
person for a coffee). Additionally, I rarely stored data from personal social
media accounts, but rather rephrased and coded them as I received them.

Although I engaged extensively with people through social media platforms
such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Line, and conducted observation on plat-
forms such as Instagram or Facebook, I rarely used my social media accounts
to post anything related to my research or what I was doing while in Indonesia,
for fear of exposing others by their association with me. The downside of this
approach was that I often could not apply the "thickening strategies" (Latzko-
Toth / Bonneau /Milette 2017) that are so valuable in digital ethnography, such
as contributing to social media debates or public scholarship, the value of which
I argue for in the next section. Instead, I saved discussion of social media events
and practices that I observed for private conversations and interviews with the
people involved.

The strategies above are just a few examples of measures under the banner
of "intentional paranoia" that could be taken in an effort to "do no harm" in

sensitive contexts. Importantly, the conditions for doing no harm depend on the research context in question and the specific risks and vulnerabilities it contains. Perhaps most important of all is the recognition that the researcher is not always the party that has either the most knowledge or the final say in what counts as "harm" – rather, this should be established and constantly revisited in consultation with individuals from the community. As Rosa Castillo and Andrea Fleschenberg have pointed out, "cultivating ethical behaviour and decision-making is […] an ongoing negotiation and continuous process of thinking, acting and reflecting on our research and professional conduct" (Fleschenberg / Castillo 2022: 495).

Such collective thinking and reflecting also makes it possible to strike a balance between avoiding risks at all costs and the adverse effects of not addressing important findings in the context of systemic harmful socio-political conditions. For example, while I have often been very worried about prompting a backlash against some of the activists I write about – especially those who, because of their public work in other areas, are more easily identifiable – those activists themselves often place greater emphasis on the potential social or political progress from exposure through scholarship than on any potential risks. The decision about whether scholarship counts as "do no harm" in these cases rests with the individual at risk rather than with the scholar. This at times means dismissing personal discomfort or doubts in favour of the judgement of the community or individual in question.

In other cases, however, the risk or assessment of harm is more complicated. Different individuals within a community always have varying stakes in research outcomes and they experience and assess acceptable levels of harm differently. The visibility that my writings or public lectures potentially bring to a YouTube channel showcasing drag performances in a gay bar in Bali, for example, might be welcomed as empowering by the performer working at that bar, but be rejected as dangerous or harmful by a patron visiting from Jakarta who fears losing her office job when recognised in one of the videos. In such situations, there is no one "community" that can be consulted, and the final decision, as well as the responsibility for that decision, does and should lie with the researcher.

I explore these inter-community differences and the ethical strategies necessary to address them in more detail below. The point I seek to make here is that such a sensitive and complicated process of negotiation of "do no harm" and ethical ethnographic practice across online and offline worlds demands a level of contextualisation and engagement that purely online ethnographic work is rarely able to provide. Doing no harm as part of an ethical approach, therefore, necessarily includes an integration of both digital and in-person ethnographic approaches.

Active approaches for ethical and engaged digital ethnography

As previously discussed, neither "do no harm" strategies nor adherence to ethics checklists, though foundational, should be taken as sufficient for addressing dynamics of power, privilege and marginalisation. Several researchers have pointed out how online spaces are shaped along the exclusionary intersections of, among others, gender, race, age and ability (Bryson et al. 2006, Moores 2012, McGlotten 2013). This is in part a question of who and what becomes visible online and who can use political spaces to their advantage. In my research, too, it became crucial to "question the political possibilities offered by online spaces that allow for the 'personal' to be made 'political,' yet exclude certain bodies and voices" (Morrow / Hawkins / Kern 2015: 527). Above I touched upon how access to shaping and attending online "queer spaces", such as workshops, lectures, conferences and community events, was regulated based on factors such as socioeconomic status and age (for example, having private internet access, English language skills and the know-how to navigate the internet). In a similar vein, the in/visibility of certain groups and individuals over others in my research in general (experiences from people living in rural areas were largely absent, as were those of elderly people) extended into my online interactions.

One of the strategies I suggest to counter such imbalances is the use of unusual research methods in order to identify possibly marginalised perspectives. An example, again taken from my own research context, is the use of (LGBTQ+) dating apps – which are used more widely and across class and gender divides in Indonesia compared to attendance at activist events – in order to meet new people who would be willing to share their perspectives with me. In order to ensure an ethical approach and not mislead other users of the app, my profile on the app clearly identified me as a researcher, although for security purposes I did not use a recognisable picture. Immediately after a conversation was initiated, I sent a standard message to the person explaining more about my research and my reasons for using the app. In this way, I met some of my closest friends and interlocutors who identified as female or non-binary, as well as people who were more isolated from existing queer communities and networks.

This experience also reminded me of the crucial nature of reflection on my positionality within the field beyond questions of access. Luka and Milette propose, building on Haraway's notion of situated knowledges (1988) and the work of Asberg, Thiele and van der Tuin (2015), the value of "speculation": a conscious method and attitude on part of the researcher that helps "shift the centre of gravity in research" by establishing "the researcher's stance as one among many" or, in other words, acknowledge the partiality and situatedness of academic knowledge production (Luka / Millette 2018: 5). To achieve this, they argue for "activating research *with* others rather than conducting it *upon*

others" (ibid., emphasis in original) as a strategy of collective meaning-making. Finding meaning in data together with interlocutors becomes especially crucial when selecting and analysing large amounts of data from social media sources, which can often be misleading and highlight certain perspectives over others without contextualisation.

Within the context of my own research, the adoption of an attitude of speculation had two consequences. First, recognising my own "locus of enunciation" (Mignolo 2003: 2011) encouraged me to consider my data in light of the institutions and structures that supported and framed my research endeavours: the disciplinary fields of gender and queer studies, Southeast Asian studies, anthropology, transnational activist discourse and practice, as well as queer tourism. Attentive to the ways in which these structures framed the lives of my interlocutors and our common experiences in the framework of my fieldwork, my arguments ended up being about the exclusions and elisions that frame "proper" queer knowledge and activism on a global level rather than about any "truth" about the lives or culture of my interlocutors. In a similar vein, the specific workings of social media across the axes of gender, location and class (examples of which I have touched upon above) in the context of Indonesia as well as on a global level became key to my methodology and analysis.

Although the concept of speculation helped me develop my thoughts and arguments in conversation and through feedback loops with interlocutors, I wish to be cautious in applying the label "collaborative" to any part of my research. Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr (2010b), in the introduction to their edited volume on transnational feminist praxis, have pointed out the overuse of this term and its indistinctness – both in terms of risks of romanticisation of the research process (collaboration does not in any way guarantee the removal of power dynamics) as well as its vagueness in terms of application (collaboration with whom, in what way and serving whose agenda?). The aforementioned strategy of activating research with interlocutors in the context of speculation was often something that happened more informally for me, for example through bringing up my ideas in conversations and reflecting on them together. I generally felt that this worked better than sending lengthy written works to people and asking them for feedback, although I did that too in some cases. Especially during the fieldwork I conducted for my MA thesis, which focused on the experiences of queer Muslims in Indonesia, I received written feedback from several activists and NGO leaders. This was especially helpful in approaching and framing the research I conducted afterwards, which involved many of the same individuals. As my research progressed, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable with constantly requesting feedback on written texts without being able to offer compensation for the time investment, especially after the onset of the pandemic. With many engaged in urgent health and income-related struggles, it felt absurd to ask for comments on a piece I had written on pre-pandemic experiences.

Relating questions of research relevance to ethics, I would argue for the crucial nature of applied engagement in critical action research beyond checking boxes of collaboration. From this vantage point, social media and online research methods in general offer novel opportunities for this kind of engagement. While the pandemic restrictions did not allow for any physical presence or material aid, queer communities in Indonesia quickly and efficiently set up online networks of mutual support as well as numerous fundraisers. With the help of social media, I was able to contribute to setting up one of these fundraisers for affected members of the community, an initiative started by two close friends and informants, using my (online) networks to gather donations and awareness.

On another occasion during the pandemic, I was invited to be a part of the committee behind Kamusqueer, an online initiative set up to create and raise awareness of queer knowledge and experiences in Indonesia. I initially did participate and contributed findings from my research to the platform, which was constructed collaboratively mostly through WhatsApp and other online channels. In the end, however, I chose to withdraw as a contributor due to the discomfort I felt at the invisibility of my positionality as a contributor. As the Kamusqueer team was not identified on the Instagram account due to safety concerns, I had no way of making known my particular positionality as a researcher and, in many respects, as an outsider to the community. In conversation with the other team members, I ended up engaging with their valuable work in a different way, by writing an online, open access article (Jansen 2021) about the platform that was subsequently translated into Indonesian. In this way, I was able to help promote the platform without specifically shaping its content.

I have included these two examples in order to emphasise what I see as the responsibility for material and applied engagement among anthropologists when working with marginalised communities. However, these examples also serve to highlight both the inherent and external constraints on such commitments. First, the decision to engage in this way is also always a decision to visibilise and support certain individuals and groups over others. The fundraiser I was involved in, for example, focused on members of a particular transgender community in Flores who lost their income as beauty salon employees, cooks, wedding organisers and tailors because of social distancing rules. Part of the reason they were able to mobilise others for raising funds was their connection to a well-known and visible activist who came from that region. In turn, my involvement in the project stemmed from my friendship with two activists who were in the same network. In addition, the success of the fundraiser to a large extent depended on the portrayal – through pictures and videos – of the individuals who would receive the donations as well as of the actual distribution process of the funds. These conditions of (online) visibility and connectedness were more realistic for some communities than for others (such as trans*men

or those living with HIV/AIDS), who were perhaps equally affected by the pandemic. Without diminishing the genuine benefits of the fundraiser or in any way calling into question its necessity, I mention this in order to point out that any effort towards applied engagement, whether activist or academic in nature, has to deal with the hierarchies of visibility and representation. It is a reminder to continue "interrogating our positionalities and lived experiences, and remaining critical of the exclusions that the privileging of any one onto-logical category can inspire" (Ellawala 2019: 103).

Other, more practical, challenges to applied engagement include time pressures – especially within PhD or postdoc projects that depend on limited funding – and lack of official support for and recognition of such engagement within academic institutions. In my case, my resources in terms of both time and material possibilities were restricted in this sense. Approaching the end of my three-year doctoral grant with no immediate follow-up funding in sight, I felt compelled to finish my dissertation rather than to engage further, for example by helping to set up more fundraisers or to write newspaper or blog articles to join the ongoing effort to draw attention to the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. In general, initiatives to collaborate with key figures from the queer Indonesian community, such as within teaching and publishing, depended en-tirely on my own resources (for example, compensating people for guest lec-tures or for translating scholarly work to Indonesian) and effort. One experience was helpful and hopeful in this regard. Under the leader- and editorship of Nadja-Christina Schneider and Maitrayee Chaudhuri, I was fortunate enough to be a part of a group of early career scholars who contributed to a collection of ar-ticles on solidarity on the community publishing platform PubPub in a timely, collaborative and cost-free manner.[2] I was also able to pay for and upload without problems the translation of my own article into Indonesian in order to increase accessibility, furthering the goal of raising awareness of the new platform Kamusqueer. Such novel approaches to academic knowledge produc-tion have substantial benefits over the traditional bureaucratic, competitive and slow avenues of publication. They allow for collaboration (through easy and dynamic peer review by both academic and non-academic parties), com-plete open access and easy findability, and free and quick publication of valuable writings. The latter aspect is especially crucial to allow scholars to respond in

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2   The community publishing platform PubPub offers scholars a way to work on publications simultaneously and collaboratively as an alternative to the traditional peer-review process. The mentioned project consisted of several stages where the involved authors would review and comment on our articles both during and after the process of writing, followed by a feedback round by the editors. Moreover, the articles remained open to comments and feedback after publication. This process not only encouraged a more dynamic and collaborative revision process in which scholars working on similar issues could learn from each other while producing scholarship, but also the involvement of non-academic interlocutors. For example, it offered me the possibility to share my writings with some queer Indonesian activists and open it up for their feedback while I was working on it. Also, because the articles in the collection were not copyrighted, I was able to have mine translated into Indonesian and published on PubPub without any complications.

a timely and helpful manner to shifting situations and priorities, such as unexpected crises in given research contexts.

Concluding remarks

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought out a number of urgent issues for ethnographers and other scholars working across online and offline spaces. Whereas the massive recourse to online platforms and means of communication led to a surge in popularity and credibility afforded to online research methods, the ethical challenges accompanying such a move have only begun to be explored. Taking seriously the blurring of the divide between private and public online data, the sensitivity of social media material beyond "terms and conditions", and the material dimensions and intersectional hierarchies that suffuse online spaces and access to them is crucial to addressing such challenges. I have argued in this article for a combination of "do no harm" approaches, such as cultivating an attitude of "intentional paranoia" towards the risks and dangers of storing and using online data of vulnerable groups, with active ethical strategies such as pursuing unusual research methods, speculation and applied engagement. Crucial to these strategies is a deep understanding of and engagement with the research context and the individuals involved – in other words, a call for the integration of online *and* in-person ethnographic methods and to "resist the lure of Big Data" (Di Wang / Liu 2021: 978).

The aforementioned challenges notwithstanding, the pandemic and its aftermath have also highlighted the potential of online channels in terms of both methods and ethics. Innovative online publishing platforms contain the promise of better, collaborative and multilingual works across academic and non-academic boundaries that are able to respond to urgent events as they unfold. Social media allow researchers who work with groups far removed from their home institutions to stay in touch and contribute rather than simply collect data and leave. Furthermore, the conversation that is taking place about ethical and "proper" ethnographic use of online data might, optimistically speaking, lead to a wider debate about the value and potential of anthropology to engage with the most pressing problems of our time. Finally, the integration of digital ethnography represents a way for scholars to engage in such real-world problems, including the rarely discussed role of social science researchers in climate change: with the possibility of making online research methods part and parcel of research instead of uncritically prioritising multiple in-person fieldwork trips, and the encouragement of continuing academic exchange online rather than flying out for every conference, we might even be able to reduce the carbon footprint of academia.

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