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Memory, body, and the online researcher:

Following Russian street demonstrations via social media

ABSTRACT

The Moscow street demonstrations of 2011–12 were the largest public gatherings in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were also the largest-ever gathering of Russians on social media. While using the Internet to follow such large-scale social movements remotely, researchers experience social media as a context in which anthropology happens. They may think about “being there” in new ways that shift their focus to their own processes of memory making and sense of bodily presence. Experiencing and remembering social media in the body challenges the distinctions we might otherwise make between virtual and physical encounters. [*body memory, protest, social media, digital anthropology, online research, Moscow, Russia*]

Московские уличные демонстрации 2011–12 стали наиболее многочисленными в России со времен распада Советского Союза. Они также объединили наибольшее число россиян в социальных сетях. Используя Интернет для изучения крупномасштабных социальных движений в удаленном доступе, исследователи одновременно рассматривают онлайн пространство социальных сетей как новое поле антропологии. Новые способы «присутствия» побуждают исследователей обратиться к своему собственному процессу производства памяти и собственному чувству телесности. Особые опыт и память телесности в социальных средствах коммуникации заставляют нас пересмотреть границы виртуального и физического опыта. [*память тела, протест, социальные медиа, цифровая антропология, онлайн исследования, Москва, Россия*]

It is a crisp winter day in Moscow: brilliant blue sky, bright sunlight, dazzling white snow shoveled into piles along the streets. We are driving along the Garden Ring, the circular road that belts the city of Moscow. Normally on a Sunday this road would be relatively empty and quiet—certainly free of the gridlock that paralyzes the city on any given weekday. But on this sunny Sunday in January, the road is full of Muscovite cars of all imaginable makes circling the city, making one full turn of the Garden Ring, then another, round and round as they are joined by more and more cars. It is easy to spot whom you are looking for, because their white emblems are displayed as visibly as possible on their vehicles: flowing white ribbons, white balloons, a white umbrella sticking through a sun roof, someone’s white blouse fluttering out a window, a white stuffed rabbit strapped to a side-view mirror. One car is tiled with pieces of white paper, and another’s roof is simply piled high with snow. This last example is the most literal emblem, because this has been dubbed the Snow Revolution, Russia’s contribution to the so-called color revolutions.

Here and there, along the roadside or on the overpasses, small gatherings of pedestrians smile and wave their own makeshift emblems: a white scarf, a white tissue. Every few seconds a mobile phone in our car buzzes with incoming texts, bringing reports of what is happening at other points along the Garden Ring; we learn that the famous anticorruption activist and popular blogger Aleksei Navalny has been spotted in the parking lot of the RosGosStrakh (Russian State Insurance) building, and we veer off the ring to catch up with him.¹ Sure enough, we find him there sitting in his car, and we walk over to him. He steps out to face our camera and chat with our UStream viewers for a few moments, cracking jokes, then poses for photos with the little gathering of excited drivers who cannot resist gravitating toward the charismatic figure.

We move away to make a tour of the other cars that have taken a break from circling the ring and are parked nearby. We stroll leisurely from car to car, admiring their creative, opposition-themed decor, pausing the

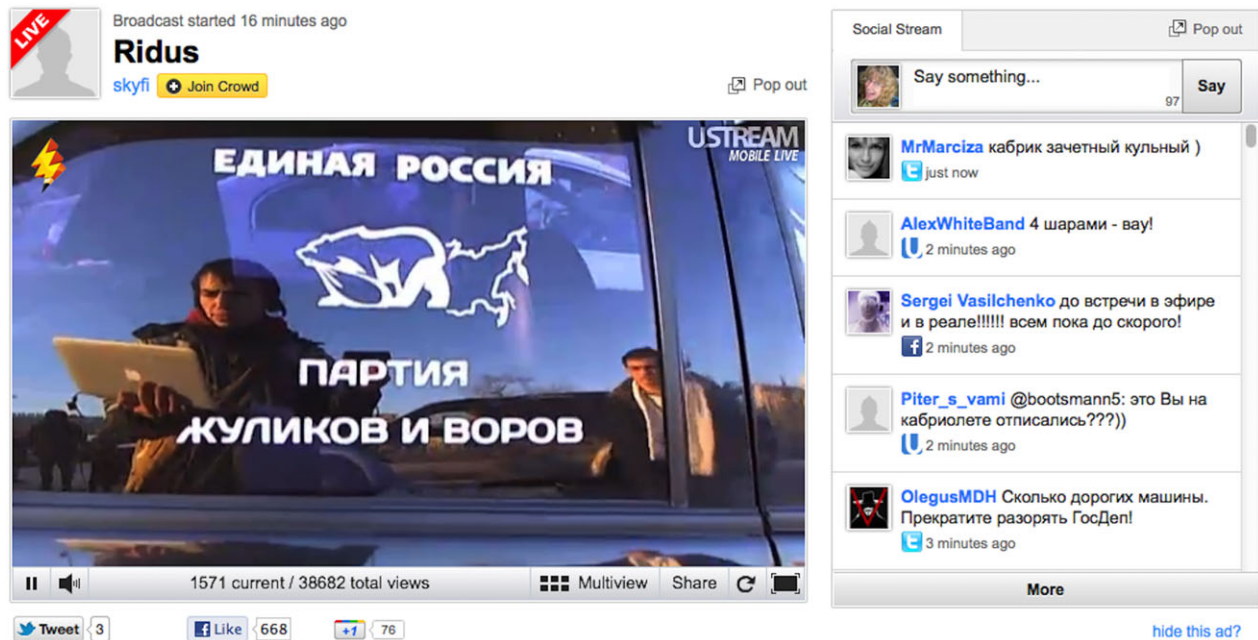


Figure 1. Screenshot from a live UStream broadcast by Ridus, a Russian news agency, at the *avtoprobeg* (car rally) around Moscow's Garden Ring, January 29, 2012.

camera on each one for the benefit of our viewers, until we come to rest on one that sports the slogan made famous by Navalny himself, denouncing the political party of Russian president Vladimir Putin: "United Russia: Party of Swindlers and Thieves." We suddenly find ourselves and our camera reflected in the sparkling glass of the car's window; our viewers can now see *us*, as well as what we see (see Figure 1).

I take my eyes off the automotive carnival and glance at the instrument panel beneath the UStream frame on my computer screen. There are currently over 1,500 viewers with me, and there have been over 38,000 total views of the live-stream video broadcast I have been watching. My wooden chair creaks as I sit up to take a sip of by-now-cold coffee and stretch my back, looking up for the first time in perhaps an hour. The sky here in Ireland is dull gray, and a chill wind rattles the foliage on the garden hedge outside my window. The cat wants attention, and I realize that he has been asking for food for several minutes now. I am *not* in Moscow; I am in Dublin, but it *felt* like I was in Moscow, and I want to go back. I feed the cat, give him a scratch behind the ears, then return to Moscow: I settle in my chair and lean in, past the instrument panel on my computer screen, through the UStream portal, peering once again out of the car window to seek out the smiling faces of the riders in the other circling cars.

On not being there

The moment described in this vignette occurred during Russia's unprecedented season of demonstrations starting

in December 2011, when I began to follow the events through social media, starting with the aftermath of the Duma elections on December 4, 2011. As mainstream media began reporting that United Russia had swept the election with a clear majority, Muscovites who were monitoring the polling places began to report widespread election fraud, and a previously planned opposition rally on Chistoprudny Boulevard grew to a much larger size than expected as frustrated citizens spilled into the streets (Gromov 2012; Makarychev 2013; Sokolova, Golovina, and Semirkhanova 2012; Volkov 2012; see also de Vogel 2013 for an excellent forensic analysis of how activists orchestrated the initial demonstration). A pro-Kremlin counter-opposition movement started up concurrently, with countertweets and blog postings appearing even as the opposition rally was unfolding. Some protesters who left the organized rally to march spontaneously to the Central Election Commission were detained by police overnight, including Navalny and the popular activist Ilya Yashin, and this inspired a call for another rally the next day at Triumphal Square in support of the detained (Prusenkova et al. 2011). At that rally, a pro-Kremlin contingent turned out, and this was the first of many face-offs between the two sides (Zotova et al. 2011).

These street protests unfolded moment by moment over several forms of social media in a way that had never been seen before in Russia.² Once I began to follow the first one, I became hooked for the next several months; like many devotees of Russian current events, I dropped everything to follow each new protest as the action unfolded from start to finish, spending hours at each sitting.

Since Moscow is only three hours ahead of Dublin, I could do this in real time over the course of my day. I kept this up for almost 10 months, through several phases of street demonstrations.

There were two more rallies in December, one on Bolotnaya Square on December 10 (known as the Rally for Honest Elections) and one on Sakharov Avenue on December 24, while a small pro-Kremlin rally was held the same day on Sparrow Hills, above the Moscow River. Each rally drew a larger crowd than the one before; the level of artistry and humor, irony and satire reached a crescendo in the home-made placards that protesters carried on Sakharov Avenue, evidence that this was as much a creative process as a political one (cf. Alekseevsky 2012; Moroz 2012). Several more rallies occurred over the next several months, but these were interspersed with manifestations of a different sort, more playful ones, such as the car rally described above (January 29); the Big White Ring, in which Muscovites tried to rally enough people to form a human chain around the Garden Ring (February 26); a brief Occupy movement in the warming days of May (Occupy Abai, named for a statue of a Kazakh poet on Chistoprudny Boulevard that became a focal point for gatherings); the Test Walk, led by Russian writers and poets who said they wanted to make sure Muscovites were still free to walk the streets without being arrested (May 13); a bike rally, undertaken in a spirit less of protest than of civic solidarity (May 20); and periodic flash mobs, not the least of which was carried out by the punk-feminist group Pussy Riot in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, which led to the arrest and trial of three of their members.

I finally stopped following the movement in Russia so intensely after the event in September 2012 called the March of Millions (the third march by that name)—I simply could not keep it up any longer, and sometime later when I was musing to some of my colleagues about this, one of them said, only half jokingly, “Yeah, we were a little worried about you there for a while.” For me, the experience was exhilarating and often great fun, but also grueling; it was like a fieldwork season.³

Here is the question: Can I *do* anthropology this way? Part of what I am asking is, am I *allowed* to do anthropology this way, through social media? Can this be considered a legitimate form of participant observation, “real” fieldwork? Or is it cheating because the “being there” part is missing? But in another way, what I am asking is whether this virtual presence allows me to “be there”—if not physically, then perhaps temporally (“being then”)—in such a way that I actually can investigate this phenomenon anthropologically. If so, what are the caveats? This pushes beyond Arjun Appadurai's queries about “the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world” (1991, 196), and plays with Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's observation that “the idea of ‘the field’ helps to define and

patrol the boundaries of what is often knowingly referred to as ‘real anthropology’” (1997, 4).

Grappling with how online researchers might use the concept of *Dasein* (German: *da*, “there”; *Sein*, “being”), Martin Varisco urges anthropologists to approach their own online participation “with an ethnographic mindset” (Varisco 2007). I embrace this call by reflecting on what one experiences while carrying out research over social media, focusing on the researcher's memory and body. Social media is experienced—and remembered—in *the body* in ways that challenge the distinctions we might otherwise make between virtual and physical encounters. Such online research experiences will become increasingly inescapable, and anthropologists must find ways to incorporate them into their repertoires.

Anthropological following

This is not a research project that I took up with foresight, and one should notice that the title of my article speaks not of “researching Russian street demonstrations” but of “following” them. I think “following” is an appropriate word for what it is that anthropologists do, in any case: we follow people, wherever they go. If we are standing next to anthropological subjects who are holding digital devices and venturing into social media, the only thing to do is grab a device and go there with them. We may not be physically standing next to them, but we can still meet them in the places of online social media.

This is, in effect, what I did to follow the Moscow demonstrations. I initially followed these events using Twitter, and I later jokingly referred to what I had done as “EthnoTwitterography” (see Nikoporets-Takigawa 2013 for an analysis of tweets during three Moscow protests). But this was just the jumping-off point—I discovered that Twitter functioned as something like a “wormhole” that I could virtually crawl through and end up on many other diverse platforms: social networking sites, from Facebook to the (far more popular) Russian sites V Kontakte (In Contact) and Odnoklassniki (Classmates); live video-streaming platforms such as UStream, as well as the video-archiving sites Vimeo and YouTube; blogging sites, especially the one preferred by most Russian bloggers, LiveJournal; and nonstate news sites such as *Novaya gazeta* (*New gazette*, a newspaper), *Slon* (*Elephant*, a magazine), Ekho Moskvy (Echo of Moscow, a radio station), and Telekanal Dozhd (TV Rain, a television station), among others.⁴

I eventually had nearly all these platforms running simultaneously on multiple devices that I surrounded myself with: my smartphone, my laptop, my desktop computer, as well as my husband's tablet, multiple platforms and windows open on each, with me tacking back and forth between them. I was not consciously doing research—it was not planned, and in the beginning it could not

have been planned, because even the protesters themselves did not know they would come out onto the street for that first mass demonstration starting on December 5, 2011, until the moment when they found themselves there, blinking at one another and discovering that there were thousands upon thousands of others like themselves.

In fact, even if I had been free to jump on a plane at the first sign of activity and spend the next several weeks in Moscow researching this phenomenon firsthand, it would have been risky. As a US citizen, I am a lightning rod for negative attention from Russian authorities—as I have learned from my past fieldwork in Russia—and could have carried out research only by flying well below the radar. In the 1990s, when I was researching far less sensitive political issues in locations distant from Moscow (in Chukotka and Magadan), local authorities relentlessly treated me as a spy—and indeed, the behavior of an ethnographer would be identical to that of a spy if it were not done so openly (I was told more than once that I was a particularly clever spy for acting so innocently). I was also embraced and supported by many local people, but it was not until years later that some of them admitted they had been visited periodically by Federal Security Service agents asking about me, revealing that the peril was not limited to me (Gray 2006).

These kinds of issues would be only more difficult in the 2010s. So I found that following at a distance through social media was liberating and even preferable to being present in body. If I had physically been present at the Moscow demonstrations, I might have cautiously sat in my apartment and followed the same way I did sitting in my house in Ireland, perhaps *following up* by discreetly seeking out participants whom I could personally interview after the fact. Not that such research would be impossible for an American; it has been done successfully (e.g., Mason 2015). It just would not have been done by me.

I started out by following people on Twitter: high-profile opposition activists (Aleksei Navalny, Ilya Yashin, and Sergei Udaltsov), lower-profile activists (Tatiana Romanova and Danila Lindele), independent reporters (Tikhon Dzyadko and Evgeny Feldman), foreign reporters on the scene (Julia Ioffe and Miriam Elder), photographer-bloggers (Rustem Adagamov and Ilya Varlamov), pop culture celebrities (the television personality Ksenia Sobchak and the poet-musician Oblomov [Vasily Goncharov]), politicians (Grigory Yavlinski and Dmitrii Gudkov), and a variety of others. My sample is neither exhaustive nor randomly representative; I chose to follow a few participants closely and added more using the Twitter version of the snowball method, that is, following others whom I encountered through retweets by those I was already following. In other words, I behaved like any other user of social media.

While following these and other participants as they went into both the streets and online places, some kind of ethnographic instinct in me kicked in, and I began to collect. Because I did not consciously consider what I was doing to be research, I did not make any effort to seek out participants and interview them, not even via online means. But I impulsively filed away thousands of items—1.3 gigabytes' worth—that had been shared online by those involved with the protests: tweets, blog posts, Facebook pages, social media pages, photos, videos, maps, documents, all kinds of media reports—anything I came across online, although far from everything.

One of the most memorable images from the first street demonstration in December 2011 was tweeted by Navalny from inside a police van, just after we had witnessed him being detained on video along with several other demonstrators following a dramatic face-off with riot police.⁵ The tweet read, “Sizhu s patsanami v omonovskom avtobuse. Oni vsem peredayut privet” (I’m sitting with the guys in the riot police bus. They say hi to everyone), and the accompanying photo on Instagram depicted a cluster of smiling faces and some hands flashing the victory sign.⁶ The tweet and the image are now in my digital archive of that event, so I can refer to them at any time. But there is no replicating the real-time adrenaline kick of the (being-then) moment when that tweet appeared in my Twitter feed and I read the words, not at all expecting that when I pulled up the image on Instagram I would see what resembled a moment of giddy *communitas* rather than an experience of repressive police detainment. Both those present in body and those present remotely experienced the Navalny tweet and Instagram photo as an *online* manifestation; even those present in body could not have seen inside the police van any other way. Having experienced that moment in real time also framed how I interpreted many subsequent moments of evolving cultural practice around police detainment during the street demonstrations.

The Navalny tweet illustrates Paolo Gerbaudo’s (2012) argument that tweets during street actions provide suggestions for how to behave, and that some activist tweeters play a choreographing role. “Influential Facebook admins and activist tweeps,” Gerbaudo writes, “become ‘soft leaders’ or choreographers, involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (5). The practices that developed around police-van detainment are a good example of this. Once the image was out, it suggested a general mode of behavior during street demonstrations, and defiantly giddy police-van assemblies became a trope of the early protests. They served as a generative reservoir of humor as people joked about using police detainment as a taxi service and competed with one another over the number of times in one day they had been detained. At the June 2012 March of Millions, someone printed up faux tickets for the

police vans, which looked exactly like real Moscow bus tickets; in a documentary film by Pavel Kosomarov, Aleksandr Rastorguev, and Aleksei Pivovarov, one young man was filmed as he walked the streets distributing these tickets, calling to passersby in the style of the barkers who recruit passengers for tour buses.⁷ The video segment was quickly edited and tweeted, and thus fed back into the generative reservoir.

Surrounding myself with my digital devices tuned to the various platforms following the demonstrations, I found I could achieve a kind of presence in the moment with a far more global view of the events than I would have had on the ground. If I had been there in body, I would have been limited to being in only one location at any given time, while the demonstrations were spatially dispersed over a wide area. So while I could have been on the street closely experiencing whatever was happening in the particular location I happened to be, able to interact with and talk to the people immediately surrounding me, I would have been pretty much blind to what was going on elsewhere—except to the extent that I followed it *as everyone else did*, that is, using whatever handheld device they were carrying. Either way I would be following the overall action of the street demonstration remotely.

Jessica Mason (2015), an anthropologist who *was* present in body during the Moscow street demonstrations of 2012, contends that even among those participating in body there was a shifting relationship of bodily presence and absence, as tweeters on the streets sought to locate one another and shared news about active nodes of protest that were spread across multiple city blocks. In-body participants who shared photos and tweets were communicating not only with audiences around the world but also with fellow activists who were out of earshot. Thus social media networks and news sites were sometimes the primary sources of information about the event itself, further blurring the boundaries between remote and in-body participation in coalescing street events.⁸

Zeynep Tufekci (2014) echoes this when she writes of her in-body experience during the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. There, she had little sense of what was going on elsewhere in the park. “I didn’t have the bird’s eye view that comes from continuously following an event on Twitter. Friends from abroad would tweet questions—‘What do you think of Prime Minister Erdogan’s latest statement?’—and I’d have no response. ‘I’m in the park, not on Twitter,’ I’d reply” (2014). John Postill similarly writes of his research in Malaysia,

Interestingly, during several breaks from “the field” back in England, I was often actually able to be a more active participant with a broader range of residents via the lively Web forum than when I was physically in Subang Jaya. . . . Oddly enough, I felt closer to the local

residents when I was 6,500 miles away than whilst physically “being there.” (2015)

Unlike Mason, Tufekci, and Postill, I was never physically present during protest events in Moscow, but following them online—at home, using multiple devices—enabled me to be virtually in several Moscow locations at once, depending on my capacity for splitting my attention between the various platforms. It gave me a unique experience, one that is not a substitute for in-body presence but an ethnographic experience in its own right. If this is where anthropological following takes us, then our ideas of what constitutes legitimate, “real” fieldwork need to follow as well.

Bodily participation online

From the perspective of anthropological methodology, I certainly engaged in observation. But what was the nature of my participation? Although I was not on the streets of Moscow, I nevertheless participated and even maintained copresence (which is implicit in the term *participant observation*). I was tweeting, retweeting, and replying to tweets, and thus participated in creating trends (cf. Gerbaudo 2012); I was contributing to the chats accompanying live-stream video broadcasts; I was posting photos, videos, and links on Facebook, and writing accompanying translations. I was *involved*, and I found that I experienced the events in a sensual, bodily way, through my own emotional reactions to what I was witnessing. When I later sought other ethnographic accounts of protest, I came upon Postill’s description of his own reactions during his in-body participation on the streets of Barcelona during Spain’s antiausterity protest of May 15, 2011:

Many participants later reported a range of psychosomatic reactions such as goose bumps (*carne de gallina*) or tears of joy. I felt as if a switch had been turned on, a gestalt switch, and I had now awakened to a new political reality. I was no longer merely a participant observer of the movement, *I was the movement*. (2014, 60)

I was surprised when I read this to realize that, even though I was witnessing the Moscow protests remotely, I had had a similar kind of sensual experience: the goose bumps, the tears, the adrenaline. I was witnessing something extremely compelling that I wanted to document, and I desperately wanted to be present, “be *there*,” even if only virtually. Although I could not be physically in the space of Moscow’s streets, my virtual presence was actually satisfying in a bodily way.

In all the foregoing, I have been deploying several concepts that need to be unpacked: *virtual*, *actual*, *physical*, *remoteness*, *presence*, *witnessing*. What is virtual in my scenario? Not the field site—there is nothing here akin to doing fieldwork in an online virtual world like Second Life or

role-playing game like World of Warcraft. Although I was not physically present in Moscow during the street demonstrations, the physical space of Moscow was indeed my target field site. Postill (2015) similarly grapples with what ethnographic “being there” means in the age of “telematic media,” and makes some headway by parsing out “at least four fundamental ways of being in the field”: “physically,” “remotely,” “virtually,” and “imaginatively.” I would parse this in a slightly different way, focusing on a distinction in the nature of the field sites themselves. Both a virtual field site and a physical one can be studied ethnographically via online means, but the researcher can be physically present (in body) only in the latter. While a researcher can directly access a virtual world via online means, a physical field site can be accessed only remotely by the online researcher. Remote anthropology is, of course, not new, and its early manifestations were not without problems.⁹ But the temporal dimension *is* new: through social media, remote access can be instantaneous.

In Tom Boellstorff’s (2008) ethnography of Second Life, inhabitants of that virtual world often referred to their offline lives as “real.” Arguing that life inside Second Life was no less real than life outside it, Boellstorff develops the concept of “actual world” to denote “places of human culture not realized by computer programs through the Internet” (2008, 21). In contrasting “actual” with “virtual,” Boellstorff follows the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of *virtual* as something “that is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually,” and argues that *virtual* “connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*” (19). According to Boellstorff’s logic, it was my own presence in Moscow that was virtual, while my participation, although remote, was actual.

What happens when we apply these insights to my opening vignette of the car rally on Moscow’s Ring Road? I am *virtually* riding in the car, but the car itself is *physical*, and my participation in the live UStream video event is *actual*. I am a ghost rider in the car—the driver and passenger do not see me, and I do not know them. But I am not entirely invisible to them: they see my grinning face on my online avatar whenever I send them a message via the chat function. And I am not the only ghost rider: the UStream interface reveals that the car is virtually stuffed with passengers, over 1,500 of us, in fact. The UStream chat box invites me to “say something,” and to send my chat, I have to push a button marked Say—this is the virtual approximation of turning to the guy in the passenger seat and speaking in his ear. The chat stream flows by at breakneck speed as all the virtual passengers chatter excitedly at once. My screenshot of the UStream interface captured one of these chat utterances; echoing Boellstorff’s Second Life inhabitants, it reads: “Until we meet online or in reality!!!!!!”

What about the act of witnessing? A *witness* (noun) is a person who sees an event happening, and I did *witness*

(verb) these events as they were unfolding. I also shared copresence with other witnesses. Through sending and receiving tweets, or by contributing to chats that accompanied live-stream video broadcasts, I shared with others the sense of excitement and anticipation as each event reached its climax; this was a human connection in the moment that would not have been actualized had I been merely trawling through online archives of the events after the fact. What matters here is the *temporal* copresence. When I go back and review the materials I collected, or when I discover new materials from past demonstrations, the quality of the after-the-fact experience bears no resemblance to that of experiencing them in real time. Thus, “being there” reveals itself as more of a temporal condition than a geographic one.¹⁰ As one anonymous reviewer suggested, “being then” becomes more important than “being there” in certain cases.

Anthropology vs. ethnography

Earlier I asked whether virtual presence sufficiently constitutes “being there” such that one can actually (not “legitimately” but actually) use online means to investigate “actual-world” phenomena anthropologically (cf. Varisco 2007). I am deliberately using the word “anthropologically” rather than “ethnographically.” I know that one can do ethnography this way, in and through social media—digital ethnography has long since come of age and been normalized as an area of inquiry, as attested by a large and growing literature (e.g., Boellstorff 2008; Coleman 2010; Hine 2000; Kozinets 2010; Wilson and Peterson 2002), some of which focuses on the role of social media in protest movements (Juris 2012; Postill 2014). But there are two caveats to this.

I pose the first caveat as a question: What if I am not interested in doing ethnography of digital media per se? My area of inquiry is not the media proper, but rather realms of human activity that happen to sometimes involve social media. What I did was not an ethnography of digital places; it was an ethnography of action unfolding in physical spaces, and the online technology brought me virtually into those physical spaces and the physical activity of the street protests. People come to social media from radically different starting points and for quite different reasons, and these do not always lead to an interest in digital-media studies.

I came to use social media with great reluctance, and in fact resisted it for a long time. I considered using Twitter only when a protest movement started in Madison, Wisconsin, against the newly elected Tea Party governor, Scott Walker, who was systematically attacking the state’s long progressive tradition by dismantling collective-bargaining rights (Collins 2012). People were incensed and began to occupy Madison’s state capitol—marking the first Occupy movement, in fact—and as a former Wisconsinite, I wished that I could be there. A friend in Madison told me how

I could follow events as they unfolded via Twitter. The medium of Twitter itself meant nothing to me; I had no professional, anthropological interest in researching Twitter or any other social media, nor any interest in reading other people's research about it; even after that experience, I still developed no interest.

The second caveat is that ethnography is *not* anthropology, to invert Tim Ingold's (2008) argument. Ethnography is an increasingly standard component of qualitative methodology across an ever-widening spectrum of disciplines; the use of ethnographic methodology does not make something anthropology. Ingold argues that "anthropology and ethnography are endeavors of quite different kinds"; neither is better than the other, nor worse—they are merely different (2008, 69). Digital ethnography is a growing multidisciplinary conversation that is fascinating for many, but I am interested in a different conversation, one within anthropology that coincidentally touches on digital media in some ways. Looking at it this way helps me to understand my own relative indifference to the reams of published literature on digital media—to the extent that it is not asking anthropological questions, it has little to do with my interests, even though my own interests have taken me so deeply into the world of social media.

Postill (2009), one of the few digital ethnographers who is engaging in a conversation about anthropology, similarly uses Ingold's work in a 2009 debate in the pages of *Social Anthropology* about media anthropology. Postill's debating partner, Mark Allen Peterson, makes the point that "a growing amount of 'media anthropology' is being written by anthropologists who are not particularly interested in the media" (2009, 338). We end up writing about the media, he says, only because "increasingly our informants themselves are engaged in media practices and talking about them in every aspect of their lives" (338). This is precisely my point; for me, digital ethnography focuses *on the digital media*, and I am glad that it does—we need critical analyses of what these media are and what they do. I leave that to the experts, whose work I will gratefully draw on. But as an anthropologist (and not even a "media anthropologist"), I focus on *people*, not media. If people are using social media, or if social media bring me to the people I am interested in, then social media suddenly become relevant for me. They become a context in which anthropology happens. This is perhaps a way of saying that, sooner or later, most if not all anthropologists are going to have to grapple with online phenomena of one kind or another, just to get on with the work of anthropology.

Memory and body

There is another layer to the way I experienced the Moscow street demonstrations as I followed them online: the role played by memory. In many respects, I remember the

demonstrations *as if* I had experienced them firsthand, as if I *had been* there in body. Confusing firsthand experience and online experience calls for caution, to avoid making false claims to bodily presence, and calls for thinking about processes of memory making, especially as they function in anthropological research.¹¹ Any anthropology of phenomena unfolding via social media necessarily entails thoughtful consideration of individual memory-making processes, especially among researchers.

Simon Ottenberg (1990) points out that memory plays tricks with our field notes—here I am thinking specifically of his concept of "headnotes," that is, the details that we think we wrote down in our field notes but were in fact stored only in our heads and that are transformed over time through the multitudinous processes by which all memory is transformed. "My written notes repressed important aspects of field research," Ottenberg writes. "But my headnotes are also subject to distortion, forgetting, elaboration, and I have developed stereotypes of the people I study as a consequence of using this mental material over the years" (1990, 144).

I have often (half jokingly) warned students in my research methodology courses not to sleep before recording their field notes, since they will wake up having forgotten the richest details. In saying this, I am inspired by evidence that such overnight forgetting is a physical process. Neurobiological studies show that sleep consolidates memories (Inostroza and Born 2013) but also downscales or "prunes" synapses. What is being gotten rid of may be "random experiences that fill the brain every day and need to be dissipated to make room for the learning and memories that are truly significant" (Smith 2009; see also Gilestro, Tononi, and Cirelli 2009). This research has been carried out on fruit flies, so extrapolations to humans should be made with caution. But if the same process happens in human brains during sleep, the "random" experiences being "pruned" could be precisely the details in fieldwork that may be insignificant for the researcher personally but that make for a rich account when recorded in field notes. Unrecorded field notes—headnotes—become, in effect, memories, and memories, even from a purely neurophysiological standpoint, are continually updated and made relevant to one's contemporary context.

In my questions about the doing of anthropology through social media, I am exploring the quality of experience and the role of social media in forming memories of experience. In one sense, we might distinctively characterize experience through social media as nonembodied: the place of action is remote from the online observer. I would counter that such experience is remembered by the remote observer *in the body*, and thus the experience is no less embodied. I draw inspiration here from the philosopher Edward S. Casey's concept of "body memory," which he defines as "memory that is intrinsic to the body, to its own

ways of remembering: how we remember in and by and through the body" (1987, 147). Casey argues that it is not merely possible to remember through the body, but that "the lived body" is "an internal and necessary ingredient in all remembering" (176). Casey connects this closely to place: "My body not only takes me into places; it habituates me to their peculiarities and helps me to remember them vividly" (180).

If this is true, then my body is intrinsic to remembering even experiences of places where my body was not physically present. In other words, even though I was *not there* at the Moscow protests, I nevertheless experienced them through my body while I witnessed them online (my online witnessing of them was a bodily experience), and I remember them through my body (the goose bumps, the tears, the adrenaline all play a role here). Take, for example, the countless small "street moments" that I experienced through the brief Internet videos I stumbled on, shared by participants who were attending the Moscow demonstrations in body. I am remembering one now, only 30 seconds long: a police van is being filled with detained protesters while we look on from the rear of the bus. While people shout "Shame! Shame!," a bystander realizes that the police van has a back door; he nonchalantly sidles toward the door handle and unlatches it, and the door flies open. The detainees spill out of the van and scatter in all directions, egged on by shouts of "Run! Run!" Laughter can be heard from the bystanders and seen on the faces of the escapees, and in the final frames there is a general cheer from the crowd.¹²

What I retained from videos like this is about what I would have retained if I had been there in body and stumbled on these moments personally; they are stored as episodic memories (Tulving 2002), impressions of the atmosphere of the demonstrations. But beyond this a layering effect takes hold: I pair them with my older personal memories of Moscow, memories of the sensual qualities of that city's streets—smells, sounds, color, movement. There is a blurring or a merging of my online and offline (in-body) memories of Moscow, which contributes to my sensation of *being there* during the street demonstrations. As I watched the demonstrations remotely in the present, I experienced concurrently my body memory of my previous experiences walking the streets of Moscow; as Casey puts it, I experienced "*being in the situation itself again and feeling it through [my] body*" (1987, 147, emphasis in original). These layers merge or fuse, so that my future memories of the demonstrations I watched online become my own body memories of the demonstration.¹³

Indeed, although I followed the 2011–12 demonstrations remotely, it is not as if I never *was there* in Moscow—I have been often, on those very same streets where the Moscow protests unfolded. I have been spending time in Moscow fairly regularly since 1993, visiting every couple of years or so. I know the spaces of the city well, since every

time I am there, I spend a good amount of time walking the streets, whether to run errands and meet with people or for the pure enjoyment of exploring the city. So as I was following the Moscow demonstrations, I could draw on very specific embodied knowledge; for example, when someone would mention in a tweet a location where some action was occurring, I could immediately place myself in that location, picturing the metro stop entrances along with a variety of small details that facilitated my understanding of what was happening on the ground. I had last visited Moscow just a few months before everything began in December 2011, and I made another trip in the summer of 2013, just before one of the final acts in this season of street protest, so I had experienced in body the general atmosphere surrounding it.

On the one hand, I could argue that the kind of online-mediated anthropology I am describing can be accomplished successfully only when the anthropologist has already spent time in the physical spaces where the action is unfolding and is already very familiar with the local context—as I am with Moscow. Even without this prior experience, one may feel a sense of solidarity and emotion just as strongly, but the intensity of the feeling is not the main aim. It can give rise to vivid ethnographic descriptions, but without the ground-truthing of prior direct experience, naive interpretations are more likely.

On the other hand, having both online and in-body familiarity with a context is a volatile mix fraught with the danger of blurred memory formation, of the same shaky reliability as Ottenberg's "headnotes." If I do not carefully document my pathway of following through social media, the transformations of my memory might eventually deceive me into believing that I physically witnessed this or that detail when I actually did not, thus threatening the validity of an ethnographic account.

In fact, careful documentation is what Postill and Sarah Pink advocate, while at the same time warning against "a tendency towards data accumulation at the expense of diary writing and reflection" (2012, 130). Characterizing the Internet as "a messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and offline worlds and is connected and constituted through the ethnographer's narrative" (126), they propose systematizing such research through what they call "five overlapping sub-practices or routines" (128): catching up, sharing of digital content, exploring (I relate this to my above description of Twitter as a "wormhole" that led me to content on other platforms), interacting with other participants, and archiving. They base this on Postill's in-body experience of studying the use of social media in the anti-austerity movement in Barcelona, and I recognize these routines as the same activities that characterized my season of following the Moscow protests online, even if I did not consciously systematize and document that work, as I might have had I been carrying out planned research.

Meeting in the temporal space of copresence

Humans are creative tool-users; they will express themselves and connect with one another using any means at their disposal. When they want to connect with other humans, it does not necessarily matter if their interlocutors are present in the flesh, if they are looking at each other across a Skype screen, or if they are flinging their “nanostories” into Twitter (Postill 2014, 57)—they can make the connection and achieve copresence. Not all humans are equally adept at these different platforms, but being able to adapt to them is a human quality. These different platforms might seem disjointed, but it is humans—with their bodies—who make them fluid. And far from being disembodied, purely technical phenomena, social media have an embodied, sensual quality (cf. Postill and Pink 2012, 128).

I witnessed this in the Moscow street demonstrations in the most fundamental sense: people held their devices in their hands and used them even as they were engaged in other in-body activities: walking in a march, chanting slogans, holding placards that they had drawn by hand and brought to the march, getting detained by police (recall Navalny’s tweeted photo from inside a police van). One of the most vivid impressions I have of the season of protest in Moscow is the image of dozens of arms raised above the heads of a mass of people, and in each set of hands there is a smartphone or a tablet being used to record the scene. People shared videos and photos online of what they were seeing from their own points of view, each turning his or her very body into a platform, mapping out the space of Moscow and the movement of their own bodies through that space. Even as they were walking, they were tweeting, posting updates on Facebook, or uploading them onto dynamic webpages that carried photographic chronologies of events as they unfolded. These became instant archives of each event as soon as it ended.

We need to constantly rethink what is meant by *embodiment*, think beyond *face-to-face* as physical copresence, and recognize the ways our bodies extend themselves in temporal copresence through the technologies we use. Perhaps what I am calling “temporal copresence” is similar to what Gerbaudo means by “proximity” when he stresses “how social media use must be understood as complementing existing forms of face-to-face gatherings (rather than substituting for them), but also as a vehicle for the creation of new forms of proximity and face-to-face interaction” (2012, 13). And while it is beyond the scope of this article, I would not be the first to suggest this is a very old dynamic: from stone tools to telephones to online devices, human bodies have always creatively grasped technology (cf. Boellstorff 2008, 32–33; Tufekci 2012, 33–34).

Remote, online “being-then” research of events like street demonstrations is certainly a valid anthropological research methodology that yields worthy results—the

results are different from what you would get by being present in body at a demonstration, but my approach did produce data that can be analyzed and used to address anthropological questions. Still, in anthropology, nothing can truly substitute for having one’s body there on the ground, at least part of the time. But in a moment when that was impossible, social media enabled me to follow at a distance and even socially interact with Muscovites who were participating in the most unprecedented street demonstrations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. I could *see* through their photos and videos, I could *perceive* through their descriptions, and I could triangulate among their tweets to get depth perception around the action as it unfolded. And beyond this, I obtained an assemblage of interpretations that are culturally informed, rich testimonies to the creative ways that Russians use irony and humor, literary and historical allusion. I gained greater insight into the humanness of Russians by studying the ways they engaged in protest and used social media in the process, and I learned what was specifically Russian about their ways of protesting.

Notes

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1. No pseudonyms are used in this article.
2. According to one survey by Russia’s most reputable independent sociological research and opinion polling organization, Levada Center (Volkov and Goncharov 2014), daily or weekly Internet use in Russia rose from below 5 percent of the population in 2001 to almost 60 percent in 2014. Only among those 55 and older were there fewer users than nonusers, while more than 90 percent of those 39 and younger were online. The results were similar when people were asked about their use of “social networks.”
3. I later found kinship with Gabriella Coleman, who wrote of one particularly intense phase of her research on the “hacktivist” group Anonymous: “While my family members went hiking . . . I huddled over my laptop. I was engrossed, dumbfounded, mystified, and addicted to the wild energy and excitement coursing through the channels. I’m pretty sure my family thought I was being purposely antisocial” (2014, 129).
4. See the article by Darya Radchenko, Dina Pisarevskaya, and Irina Ksenofontova (2012) for a good discussion of the Russian

blogosphere. Blogging in Russia has long been an extremely popular form of mass media, as well as a pathway to celebrity. Mainstream news media often cite blogs as news sources; for example, the radio station Kommersant-FM for years had a regular feature called “Blogosphere,” in which a radio personality would read excerpts from the previous day’s posts of notable bloggers. In the 2010s, the most popular blogger has been Aleksei Navalny (<https://navalny.com>), but many others have achieved minor celebrity status, such as the social activist Danila Lindele, who during the 2011–12 protest season maintained a blog titled *Zhurnal cheloveka, kotoryy khochet zhit' v normal'noi strane* (Journal of a person who just wants to live in a normal country); accessed September 25, 2012, <http://d-lindele.livejournal.com>.

5. My use of the pronoun “we” here reflects my lingering sensation of having coexperienced that moment with other Twitter users who were also watching it unfold and reacting to it in their own tweets.

6. The tweet can be found at the following URL, accessed April 26, 2016: <https://instagram.com/p/XhTGt>.

7. The clip can be viewed here, accessed April 26, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiO85lrGepI>. This clip was one of hundreds of segments that the filmmakers regularly shared and that were eventually compiled into the documentary film *Срок/The Term*, released in June 2014 (Rothrock 2012).

8. Jessica Mason, ongoing personal communication, 2012–15.

9. The Research in Contemporary Cultures project, headed first by Ruth Benedict and later by Margaret Mead, expressly developed a method for studying culture at a distance (Beeman 2000; Mead and Métraux 2000; Peterson 2003). It was a special-purpose method designed for a time (the 1940s) when desired field sites in Europe and Asia were inaccessible.

10. I am indebted to Gabriella Coleman and Jessica Mason for conversations that helped to crystalize these observations.

11. Memory has been studied from a great many perspectives: social, cultural, psychological, neurophysiological. Some studies emphasize memory as a social process, as in collective memory and commemoration (Connerton 1989; Kansteiner 2002; Khazanov and Payne 2009), while others emphasize individual memory (Kandel 2009; Kaplonski 2009; Tulving 2002). Anthropology tends to gravitate toward considerations of collective memory among research subjects (Berliner 2005).

12. This clip can be viewed here, accessed April 26, 2016: http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/video/pobeg_iz_avtozaka.shtml.

13. Postill similarly notes that “all modes of digitally mediated presence/absence entail a trade-off. Digital ethnographers will typically switch and mix among these modalities in the course of their ethnographic research—often without having the time to pause on the process as it unfolds, let alone catalogue and analyze all such instances in the post-fieldwork phase” (2015).

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