## *Digital Anthropology in the time of Corona:* **1.5 meter social distancing & the mediated** *gap in between.*

Blake Paul Kendall, Leandro Goddinho, Urte Undine Frömming

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*Digital Anthropology* is a discipline that is often hard to define as the rate of development across technologic innovation, is paralleled with a changing face of usership and application. For a relatively recent sub-discipline, these challenges of delving into the ever-changing modes in which humans engage with the digital, is often grounded with the need of innovating the methods of ethnographic research in digital or virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2012, Pink 2015, Frömming 2017) to accommodate for these new modes of human behavior and experience. It is however, with the emergence of the COVID-19 and SARS-COV20 viruses, and the resulting phenomena socially and politically referred as a *global pandemic*, that many aspects of Digital Anthropology take on a new wave of significance. Whereby many of the aspects and methods of research that were developed within the sub-discipline, have helped paved the way in which many anthropologists now grapple with the question, how do we conduct ethnographic research beyond the limitations of the material world engagement? With border closures, lockdowns, and social distancing, the very premise of long-term ethnographic fieldwork has been challenged, and for many, whether they like it or not, Anthropology as well as many aspects of life, are #NOW Digital. 2020 — the year of CARE / the_future_is_here.

*Global Pandemic*, *threat to life*, *conspiracy theory* or *social experiment*, whatever spectrum of interpretation that may be made to describe this unique moment in time, one of the aspects that can be ascertained has been the shift of many processes of life into mediated engagement. Governments across the globe have prompted citizens to employ smart-phone apps as a mode of tracking rates of infection. Many restaurants have transitioned away from material menus into QR codes to avoid contamination or started selling their flood online as take away or delivery meals. And vast examples of workplaces who have been able to withstand the financial hardship, have transitioned into staff working from home. Amongst the thick gluttony of examples, if there was any doubt of the significance of digital technology's omnipresent role in the world, in this unique moment in time, it

is reaffirmed with "contagious bodies" (Agamben 2020) being held at bay, whilst digital mediation inserts itself in the *gap in between* .

In the case of universities, whilst the vast majority of facilities transition off campus into online classes, the Master program of Visual and Media Anthropology at HKMW takes an interesting position of having had twelve years experience in developing distance learning formats. In October 2019, the twelfth generation of students commenced their Master's degree with an introductory course to *Digital Anthropology*. The course was structured between Webinars via video-conferencing, LMS online resources and occasional visits of the student's avatars to the HKMW institute's virtual environment. What becomes quickly apparent, is that the online classes have a distinctly different character to meeting in the flesh. A symptom of 1.5 meter social distancing, is disembodiment from ourselves and each other. It opens the question of how we research, dialogue and learn. Online learning is not like being on campus. However, rather than seeing this as a limitation of an imposed rule, we see it as something to celebrate. At the very heart of the MA program at HKMW, the students come from and are based around the globe, and enter the program from a wide variety of disciplines and practices. The nature of global diversity and interdisciplinary experience embeds unique insights within the nature of fields of research and epistemological interpretation. In the academic pursuits of anthropology, this trademark characteristic of variance of perspective is reflected within the classroom and proves as invaluable.

When we do attempt to define the role of the digital in our hyper-digitised worlds, a helpful starting point is to reflect on the promise of utopias, and the fear of dystopic counter-parts. For every new technology introduced by innovators and adopted by users, we seem to symptomatically stumble to articulate the fears of change, and the hope of better tomorrows. Historically, such a framework has been repeatedly exposed with the emergence of the printing press, televisions and the internet. And even amongst the film buffs, the very moment a train emerged on the screen of the Lumière brother's first moving images, audiences were sent running out of the cinema with the fear of being trampled. New technologies characteristically emerge with a looming question of *how does this change our lives?* However, perhaps we are now living out the anomaly? Whereby a viral infection has shifted our material world engagement on such an unprecedented level of global *synchronicity*, leaving digital technology and infrastructure to insert themselves within the fabric of our everyday *solutions* of trying to *survive*. Even reflexively, where once the brainstorming and working processes of creating such a journal issue would be held around the round table together sipping on cups of tea, even in this case we adopted *yet again (more)* video calls, as our only mode of engagement.

Even long before the pandemic, the language of digital content's circulation has been one of *going viral.* This articulation of how digital networks enable the *spread, contamination* and *virality* in non-linear formats, again highlights the parallels of digitisation with the way in which we understand the pandemic. And this reminder poses a unique bridge of visual and digital anthropologies' interest in the non-textual modalities of research dissemination. This journal issue is comprised of examples of polyphonic research dissemination predominantly presented in the form of Machinimas (screen-cast films). It was after many contributing researchers were conducting their own ethnographic research that *Corona* entered the social and political lexicon as a mode of defining this moment in time. The significance of tracking the lineage within which the global pandemic is inserted within the featured

research is to acknowledge that this publication is not *about COVID-19,* but rather *gestures* to the phenomena. This journal issue acts as an example to showcase how the methods and methodology of Digital Anthropology enabled a unique toolkit for conducting ethnographic research even when we are all asked to #StayatHome.

As editors attempting to introduce this journal issue and articulate the pandemic's 'before and after' relationship with digital engagement, we feel clumsy. We stumble on the words. It's like being in the middle of the storm. It feels like we are all living through a historic moment, and yet the drama and scale of emotions becomes muddied by a characteristic everyday routine. One term we are exploring amongst our team is *anthro-synchronicity*. This notion of human parallels, gestures to the nature of global reach via the factor of *time*, whilst accommodating for the diversity of experience. *Anthro-synchronicity* as a concept pays homage to Jean Rouch's "path" that researchers and "those whom they study" share, as a "shared anthropology" (2003 : 101). Although to acknowledge the turn in multi-species anthropology (van Doreen 2016; Tsing et al, 2017), perhaps we must go even further, and acknowledge a more accurate term as *multi-species-synchronicity*. This accommodates the human species and a second species of the virus, that have a unique connection, and their shared path that mutually determines the fate of both species. These Corona times, are times that we are sharing and they affect all of us. Our experiences as researchers, are blurred as living through the phenomena we are researching. We feel that somehow things are all connected and a *grand narrative* would describe COVID-19 and SARS-COV-20 as far reaching and expansive, and yet the asymmetrical experiences of power dynamics and ethno-diversity, is not like a single algorithm. But that is the essence of anthropology. Every experience is unique, and rippled with the cultural imprints of *contaminated histories* and the *specific*. The virtue of qualitative research moves away from the broad contexts of the *everybody* and instead enters worlds and contexts with an acute sensitivity to the specific context. In this issue we present eight films and one textual article representing diverse fields of research and unique perspectives from across the *virtual* globe.

*Are you alright?* by Maria Papadouli, explores the experience of health anxiety and the role of online self-diagnosis. The humble google search is held to question, as Papadouli follows the stories of participants' anxieties and fears developing from their research of symptoms. Emerging to reflect on participants' experiences with COVID-19, this research holds a deep significance of unravelling a dynamic of the *patient* with the search engine. Fears, anxieties and vulnerabilities are reflected upon, with a cross section of experiences — with or without professional medical advice. Amplifying the sensorium of hyperlinks and pop-up windows (one after the other), Papadouli lets the Youtube archive of pre-internet animation host a rhetorical question, of what it was like before the internet? This short film is for all of the hypochondriacs out there, for as expressed by several featured accounts, there's value in sharing our health concerns with each other, rather than just *Doctor Google.*

*Excerpts from 'Chronicle of a Digital Funeral'* by Sophia Harb, is a tender portrait of a young man grappling with the passing of his father, and the consequences of not being able to return home due to border closures. With the funeral live-streamed from Palestine and watched by friends and relatives globally, this research explores the complex nuances of how digital infrastructure has been amalgamated within the traditions of burial and grief practices. This research offers a tender insight into the allegoric and literal complexions of death from a distance presented in the form of excepts

from the live-streamed funeral as well as intimate conversations with those unable to physically attend.

*Dare2Date* by Anna Ivanova, is a film not to *swipe past.* Ivanova presents an *intimate portrait of intimacy* during the Corona pandemic with this research on online dating. With a sense of humor, the film takes the viewer into the very dates of the researcher as she meets with her next *potential match.* Contextualising the phenomena, the global lockdown brought with it a boom in online dating apps, and the film highlights the significance of the personal when trying to understand global phenomena. In the two screen dialogue, the commonly associated 'hygiene mask' is re-appropriated with Ivanova and her dates obscured by pixelated accessories and avatars, acting as both an *ice-breaker* as well as a unique visuality to anthropology's pursuit of research participant's anonymity.

*ISSUES: Housing in Berlin* by Yağmur İpek Cıngıllıoğlu, is an ethnographic enquiry into the #HousingCrisis in Berlin, Germany. This materially oriented research, highlights the tension between structural issues of gentrification and rising rent prices, with lease holders, sub-letters and those left searching for a place to call home. Cıngıllıoğlu delves into a series of interviews with a wide demographic, exposing questions of racism, xenophobia, gender inequality and power imbalances as participants grapple with their search for a fundamental human right. Initiated from the researcher's own experiences with the phenomenon, the film artificially houses participants' response within a virtual room, that visualises the dilemma between a long-term placeless-ness in the material word, in contrast to an immediacy and urgency of the digital search.

*Digital Eye - Blind and Visually Impaired in the Digital Age* by Satoru Niwa, is a digital ethnography exploring the engagement of visually impaired participants with digital technology. Niwa takes us through a multi-sited exploration of the apps 'Be my Eyes,' 'Tap Tap See' and 'Google Maps,' and explores the concept of *ability* by the assistance of digital technology. With several of the other contributions often holding a skepticism to the role of the digital in their participant's lives, Niwa's research highlights the empowerment and enabling practicalities of technology. Presented with excepts from live demonstrations, Youtube clips and sensorial simulations, Niwa invites viewers to move beyond *visuality,* and allows us to re-appreciate the role of digital technology and infrastructure for these participants from across the globe.

*A Technology of Consciousness* by Lara Ansell, is an experimental feast for the senses. Paying homage to British artist Roy Ascott's practice of cybernetic and telematic art, Ansell explores an aesthetic impulse of the human and the more-than-human digital extension, morphing, adapting and amalgamating into a 'humanisation of technology'. Ansell presents an evocative journey where the 'self' is fractured and multiplied within the virtual worlds, journeying between the spiritual and material limits of what it means to be human.

*Are you a bot?* by Cihan Kücük is a visual essay that delves into a non/fiction world of sci-fi speculative futures… or maybe the past, or maybe just out contingent now? In a world of #FakeNews and AI-chat-bots, Kücük reinterpret's Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) by reinvigorating the 'Voight-Kampff Test' in a political framework to explore the US presidential elections. Presented in the form of philosophical musings, this personal reflection accounts for a symptomatic question that

haunts online engagement, of *what is real? Who can we trust? Who is a human? And who is not?* Holding up a (pixelated) spotlight to right-wing populist ideology and questioning the role of big-tech companies, Kücük highlights a dystopia that perhaps has already emerged.

*The Myth of White Genocide* by Joni Els, is an ethnographic enquiry into the media landscape of #WhiteGenocide in South Africa. Els takes us into a compelling field site, exploring the nature of fake news on social media and the news cycles of "echo chambers". For this research, Els interviews the journalists often invisible behind the headlines, and offers unique insights into the context within which their news stories are produced and received. The resulting screen-cast film is a unique reflection on reportage, on the media we consume, the stories we tell, and the fake news we're told.

*A New Art Form Emerging in Google Street View: Secondary Use of Digital Content and Fair Use* by Satoru Niwa, acts as a footnote to this edition. In his article and second contribution to the journal, Niwa explores some of the legal questions of secondary use digital content. By focusing on case studies within United States and Japan, Niwa attempts to bridge the gap between the framework of *copyright* and *creative license* with artistic practice. Holding deep pertinence to a journal that celebrates the screencast and all the content held within a screen, this article offers an attempt to make sense of the grey zone and murky waters.

By engaging with these unique fields of contributed research, perhaps we may slowly grapple with the role of digital technology within this time of Corona. Many things in life have changed. They continue to change, and *life as we know it, is not how we knew it*. And as researchers we find ourselves compelled to explore what that actually means. Although many aspects of anthropology have shifted, Digital Anthropology as a discipline which was once defined by the inertia of shift, now holds a temperament of providing the framework within which we may all learn to engage with a socially-distant world. And perhaps we will see more and more material world anthropologists are turning to Digital Anthropology for the methods of "studying culture from afar " (Postill 2017).

Whether from the comfort of our own home-office, or simply held in the palm of our sanitised hand, our more-than-human digital extension inserts the screen into our lives in this moment. When Henry Lowood (2011) described the process of screen-casting virtual gaming worlds, he said the machinima becomes something of a "historical documentation" of a "player's view" (2011:4). And in this game of life now we are all players, with a screen filling the *gap in between*. Perhaps the *distance* to be able to reflect on this moment moves beyond geography, and moves beyond virtual and material worlds, with *time* as the only marker of clarity. Today we are in the storm. And we don't exactly know how to describe it. But perhaps this journal can act as a marker of time. A digital trace, of material moments.

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