CHAPTER 7

'BEING ~~THERE~~ WHERE?' DESIGNING DIGITAL-VISUAL METHODS FOR MOVING

WITH/IN IRAN

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Introduction: Anthropological (im)mobilities

The anthropological notion that 'being there' in a fixed, physical dwelling confers the

ability to produce 'authentic' social research has long been debunked by multi-sited

approaches in the discipline (Gupta and Fergueson 1992; Marcus 1995; Clifford

1997). However, physical presence in multi-sited fields remains a hallmark virtue of

bona fide ethnography (Watson 1999). More recently, technological advances have

expanded the anthropologist's capacity for mobility, allowing researcher and

participant to be co-present in multi-sited fields (spatial and social) and multi-

temporal frameworks, simultaneously. These produce affective and atmospheric

feelings of place (Sheller 2010), rely on experiential and sensory qualities (Pink

2011), and open up new avenues for social enquiry into particularly mobile cultures

and/or ways of life. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), the founding father of

ethnographic fieldwork, established the view that anthropologists need to be

physically present with the peoples they study in order to understand and legitimately

represent them. In this regard, fieldwork was posited as an authenticating measure,

conceived of as a kind of 'antidote' to the activities of earlier 'armchair

anthropologists', who Malinowski and his successors accused of producing imagined,

ethnological portraits, and of being physically removed from the peoples and places about which they wrote.[1] Today however, thanks to the convergence of established and emerging theoretical and methodological trends in the social sciences with developing digital technologies, we are perhaps in a position to reconsider the Malinowskian imperative concerning physical presence. Is 'boots-on-the-ground'[2] presence the necessary basis for proving the 'authenticity' of research, and should it always be the researcher's first prerogative? Moreover, if a particular physical field site is (for political reasons or otherwise) 'besieged,' rendering the researcher physically 'immobile', do we modify or abandon our research questions, or should we attempt to approach its various landscapes differently?

In this chapter, I address a central issue raised in the Introduction to this volume concerning how research problems should guide methodological choices rather than the other way around. I explore the potential problems of restricted physical access and presence with regards to my own research in Iran, showing how such 'problems' can inform the development of specific methodological choices and trajectories. Digital and visual methods, I suggest, provide relevant 'solutions' to the quandaries of access and presence. I argue this case through the lens of my ethnographic study with Iranian photobloggers living inside and outside the country, and their online and offline social practices carried out in different geographical settings. I conceptualise my research methodology as a mobile and material ethnographic approach, insofar as it relies on physical and digital movements rooted in the practices, flows and circulations of Iranian digital photography. To unpack this mobile/material method and its specific affordances, in my discussion I address, along different axes and scales, the varied mobilities I encountered in my work. These include (1) my own mobility/immobility as a social anthropologist *and* digital

ethnographer of Iran, (2) the various mobilities (physical and digital) of my informants and of their photoblogs (material, digital) in online and offline fields, and (3) the range of mobile methodologies, and methodological mobilities, I employed and designed in order to undertake a digital-ethnographic study largely online from outside the country. I begin my discussion by introducing two methodological quandaries, deeply rooted in questions of mobility, immobility, and their politics: the issue of restricted access to Iran for non-'native' researchers, which is perceived to present a 'professional dilemma' (Hegland 2009) for anthropologists, and the mobile challenges posed by Iranian photoblogging as a dynamic field of research. I proceed to link these potential research problems to a 'call to (digital-visual) arms', predicated on the *digital* mobility afforded by digital-ethnographic research methods. I conclude by suggesting that methodological potentials in digital and visual anthropology in general, and in the development of a digital photography exhibition in particular, offer alternative ways of virtually moving with/in field sites and building proximity to subjects from a physically remote or 'immobile' position. I show how these strategies met the specific demands of my study of Iranian photobloggers, but also suggest their more general applicability in studying physically and digitally dispersed, but variously networked, people and objects.

Locating Iran (online): the subject of access and access to subjects
Difficult and limited access to Iran for fieldwork-based research presents what Hegland (2009:53) calls a 'professional dilemma' for non-native anthropologists.[3] The revolution of 1979 and onset of the Islamic Republic unravelled the close ties with the West existing under the Shah, affecting the ability of foreign researchers to conduct long-term research inside the country.[4] Ideological architects of the new

regime argued that cross-cultural associations belonged to the decadence of the former regime, which they claimed was responsible for ushering in a so-called 'plague' of corruptive, western cultural influence to Iran. Locally known as 'westoxification' (Al-i Ahmad 1962) and, subsequently, 'occidentosis' (Al-i Ahmad 1984), cultural associations with the west, according to Islamic revolutionary leaders, needed to be purged. The ensuing war with Iraq (1980-1988) and its catastrophic effects on Iranian society only exacerbated the predicament of anthropological research inside the country. In addition to these events, politically saturated national and international 'mediascapes' (Appadurai 2002) in the post-revolutionary era (1979-present) have also crudely presented Iran in binary 'black-and-white' and 'East/West' terms (Dabashi 2008). Amidst this fraught political backdrop, younger generations of foreign researchers have became dissuaded from pursuing research inside the country (Bromberger 2009). Although diplomatic relations with the US and Europe have begun to thaw somewhat following the election of a politically 'moderate' President Hassan Rouhani in August 2013, the Iranian government remains unsympathetic to western researchers and international journalists being 'on the ground' in Iran. Both categories of knowledge-seekers have and continue to be negatively associated with espionage, following a complex history of twentieth-century foreign involvement in Iranian political affairs (Sreberny and Torfeh 2014).

At the beginning of my fieldwork with Iranian photobloggers in October 2012, I was faced with one such 'professional dilemma' Hegland speaks of. Access to Iran for British citizens had become increasingly difficult than in previous years following a violent attack against the British embassy in Tehran on 29 November 2011.[5] Both respective embassies in Tehran and London were closed as a result, and those requiring a visa to travel to Iran from the UK had to do so via alternative consulates

such as ones in Dublin, Paris or Hamburg. During this period, preference for visa approval was also given to those with Iranian family connections. In the middle of this frenzied climate, understandings about everyday life in Iran 'from below' seemed increasingly part of the 'besieged' knowledge I was aiming to pursue in my research with Iranian photobloggers. Despite the official advice of the British Foreign Office warning against British citizens' travel to Iran at the time, I applied and obtained a tourist visa from the Iranian consulate in Paris, a process no doubt facilitated by my status as a half-Iranian British passport holder. I spent one month in Iran between October and November 2012.[6] Dividing my time between the capital city Tehran and Esfahan (another major city some 200 miles south), I was able to meet with local photographers I had connected with online from the UK, and undertook some rudimentary fieldwork activities. I conducted interviews, visited emerging gallery spaces and participated on what are popularly known as 'photo tours' (*safarhāyeh akāsi*): social occasions linked to photography, wherein groups of young men and women travel to various provinces of the country in order to collectively develop their craft including the sharing of technical skills (see Figure 1).[7] However, since I was unable as a sole British passport holder to remain in the country for a sustained period of time, physically being in the country clearly could not constitute the substantive component of my fieldwork.

As Hegland (2009) outlines, the solutions to the 'professional dilemma' anthropologists of Iran have sought, have included abandoning research on the country altogether, use of research conducted prior to 1979, as well as turning to the study of the Iranian diaspora – in the Internet era in particular, many studies by social scientists have focused on the connections between the diaspora and Iran (Khosravi 2000; McAuliffe 2007; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Alinejad 2011; Shakhsari

2011). Following this latter trend, and faced with the 'professional dilemma' of not being able to remain in Iran to conduct long-term fieldwork, I also decided to carry out ethnographic research amongst the Iranian diaspora in the UK. I studied with Iranian photographers, artists, curators and journalists based in London, many of whom had either left Iran during or shortly after the revolution of 1979, or belonged to the second and third generation of émigrés born in Europe and America. However, I did not see a turn to diaspora studies as the only possible response to limited *physical* access to Iran. What I suggest here is another option for (but not limited to) the anthropology of Iran, one that builds on the idea I introduced at the beginning of the chapter, namely that long-term fieldwork *can* be conducted with/in a country, community or society from a location that is physically distant, without compromising ethical and methodological rigour. This assertion is predicated on two key notions explored throughout this chapter: (a) that physical presence is not necessarily a yardstick for defining and/or measuring the 'authenticity' of ethnographic research, and (b) that digital-visual methods can position technologies and imaginaries on an ethico-methodological plane in order to reconceptualize notions of access and presence. I suggest that such methods provide methodological antidotes to cases, such as my own, of what Salazar, Elliot and Norum call in the Introduction to this volume 'involuntary immobility'.

Studying moving fields: Iranian photobloggers' physical, digital and epistemological im(mobilities)

It is not just my own physical (im)mobility as an anthropologist of contemporary Iran during a politically fraught climate that reveals peculiar facets of the relationship between mobility and methodology. Themes of (im)mobility and method emerge in

crucial ways also by tracing the experience of my Iranian photobloggers interlocutors themselves. These are physical, digital and epistemological in nature. In one sense, photobloggers are physically mobile. Those of the diaspora and those in Iran travel to and across the country taking photographs of scenes from everyday life in Iran with mobile phone and digital SLR cameras (see Figure 1). They then exhibit and disseminate their images on photoblogs and social networks such as Facebook, Flickr and Instagram.

[place figure 7.1 here]

Figure 7.1: Iranian photobloggers at *Kaboudwal w*aterfall, near *Aliabād-e Katul, Golestān* province, northeast Iran in November 2009. Used with permission.

At the same time, photobloggers' practices are also characterized by different forms of 'immobility', confirming how studying mobility invariably requires a critical consideration of 'immobility' (Adey 2006; Salazar and Smart 2011). Some photobloggers, as is the case with young people in Iran more generally, cannot afford to travel outside its borders. International sanctions have impacted upon Iran's domestic economy and have corroded the living standards of many. Photographers I spoke with in Iran had multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. Like many Iranians across the country, they want their country to move beyond economic and diplomatic isolation and become part of global communities and economies. In this sense, many Iranians feel they are being kept 'immobile' by socioeconomic conditions on the ground. This climate of stagnation directly affects how photobloggers see the Internet as affording 'movement'. One of my research participants explained this link between physical immobility and visual/epistemological mobility as follows:

The Internet has changed our world. Without the Internet and

the images everyone shares, how can one know or see the world

so much, especially if we don't or can't travel? Wait for the new

issue of 'Time Magazine'?[8]

In light of these offline conditions, the online context takes on heightened social and

political salience, as acknowledged by a number of studies on the Internet in Iran

(Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Akhavan 2013). At the same time, official restrictions

on communications in Iran aim to maintain a state of 'immobility' as a method of

governmentality (Foucault 1991), based on attempts by government hardliners to

consciously isolate the nation from global flows and 'scapes' (Appadurai 2002). The

Iranian government monitors Internet usage in Iran through the Supreme Council of

Cyberspace (SCC) in connection with the regime's efforts to uphold its specific

political and cultural values and norms of modesty. Social media sites such as

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Instagram are officially banned and

connection speeds are notoriously slow. Internet cafés, (or *cafenet* as they are locally

known) are periodically raided and shut down and their owners and users have been

arrested in recent years for alleged 'moral misbehaviour' (Sreberny and Khiabany

2010:78). These measures purport to protect a pristine Iranian, Shiite-Islamic cultural

identity from what Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, calls a 'cultural

invasion' from 'the West.'[9]

Despite these official conditions, the thirty per cent of the population who use

the Internet in Iran effectively do so on their own terms. Blocks and filters are

routinely circumvented via the use of VPN (Virtual Private Network) connections,

which simulate Internet connections from a location outside of Iran as well as 'anonymity networks' such as TOR (The Online Router), a free software programme that conceals users' locations and protects them from traffic analysis.[10] Indeed, photoblogging can be considered part of a flourishing Iranian digital landscape since the early 2000s, more broadly indicative of a salvaged digital mobility 'from below' amongst Iranian Internet users. Photoblogs also serve as alternative free or low-cost exhibition venues for showcasing Iranian photography, beyond official galleries and public museums inside and outside of Iran, while also enabling photographers to circumvent the Iranian government's various politics, policies and restrictions to which they would otherwise officially be subject. Figure 2 shows an example of one of my research participant's photoblog, entitled 'Life Goes on in Tehran'.

[place figure 7.2 here]

Figure 7.2: Life Goes on in Tehran photoblog home page. Source: http://lifegoesonintehran.com, screen shot captured by the author (10/05/15).

Beyond digital movement, Iranian photobloggers also engage in what could be termed 'epistemological mobility'. This can be seen in the concerted ways in which photoblogs are used to change how Iran is portrayed (and viewed) in national and international mediascapes. As previously mentioned, these mainstream media discourses often present static portraits of Islamic-Iranian identity, conceived of by hard-line members of government and various international media discourses alike in socially, culturally and politically monolithic terms (Varzi 2006). Digital photographs disseminated and displayed on photoblogs are taken and even 'galleried' (Miller 2001) on the photoblog in order to aesthetically posit soft, political points about what

has historically been 'left out of the frame' in Iran's international media imaginary: namely, the mundane and the ordinary aspects of lived experience under the Islamic Republic. One example of photobloggers' visual play can be found in how they visually juxtapose photographs of Tehran with images of other cities around the world on their photoblogs ostensibly 'about' Iran (see Figure 3). They do this as a way of combatting Iran's political isolation with an aesthetic proposition of cross-cultural similarity that intends to move towards a more inclusive acceptance of the country in international communities. Through these kinds of practices, photobloggers visually articulate a cross-generational desire to renegotiate the image of Iran by constructing digital-visual spaces that 'move' it beyond its dominant narrative-epistemic parameters. One female research participant eloquently summarized this sentiment: 'The media can change views about a whole nation. These new online photo sharing systems (photoblogs) are the same, but this time, they provide *us* with the opportunity to show who we really are'.[11] As with non photography-specific blogging, photoblogging is therefore both a hobby and a visual form of 'politics by other means' (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). As I proceed to illustrate below, the various (im)mobilities I have briefly sketched here – physical, digital, epistemological, political – directly influenced how and where I studied photobloggers and their practices.

[place figure 7.3 here]

Figure 7.3: Photographs of Berlin, Vienna and Tehran on the Life Goes on in Tehran photoblog.
Source: http://lifegoesonintehran.com/30_September_2009.html Retrieved by the author (15/03/14). Used with permission.

Digital-visual ethnography with/in Iran

My principal research participants in my study on Iranian photoblogging were eight individuals who were born and grew up in Iran, and had either stayed or migrated to pursue higher education abroad. At the time of my study, they were based in six countries: Iran, the UK, the US, Australia, Italy and Germany (see Figure 4)[12]. In order to access and study Iranian photobloggers, I conducted digital-ethnographic research in physical and digital places. I outline here some of these methods in light of their relationship with on- and offline mobility, before moving to focus, in the latter sections of the chapter, on one specific mobile digital-visual method: the collaborative organisation of a digital photography exhibition.

First, a few introductory words on digital/virtual ethnography are due. Digital/virtual ethnography is a cross-disciplinary approach to conducting qualitative enquiry on the Internet.[13] In anthropology, it is the methodological *modus operandi* of digital anthropology, a nascent 'subfield' (Horst and Miller 2012) in the discipline premised on an 'ethnographic approach' (Miller and Slater 2000) to studying the Internet. For anthropologists, online environments and virtual worlds are seen as generative of ethnographic knowledge through the participatory practices studied and contributed to by the researcher (Boellstorff *et al.* 2012). This can be carried out purely online, as shown in Boellstoff's (2008) pioneering work on Second Life.[14] Alternatively, as in the case of my own research, digital landscapes can be explored selectively if and when technologically mediated interactions form integral components of participants' lifeworlds (Horst and Miller 2012). Digital ethnography involves tracing networks and flows of communication, or 'communicative travel' (Larsen *et al.* 2006). In this sense, it is a multi-sited methodology insofar as the

researcher attends to the 'circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space' (Marcus 1995:96). It does this in and across the various physical and social spaces of the Internet. Field sites in the digital landscape are therefore both *physical* (the geographical location where the Internet is being used) and *social* places (the online environments where people form social relationships). On this basis, the methodological apparatus of digital ethnography needs to foster ways for the researcher to be *virtually* mobile and present online in order to study participants' physical and digital movements.

Belonging to an early cohort of fully-fledged digital ethnographers when I began my fieldwork in 2012, I relied on emerging digital-ethnographic methods, as well as on my own innovative strategies, developed in direct conversation with my research participants. While I was travelling in Iran, I set up a research photoblog in order to anchor contact with research participants. Once back in the UK, I had to devise ways to maintain presence and connection with the contacts established in Iran. In order to 'be there' in the Iranian photoblogosphere, I carried out online participant observation of Iranian photoblogging for twelve months, during which I became a 'consequential social actor in online space' (Boellstorff *et al.* 2012)[15]. With permission, I took hand written notes and recorded video and audio calls on Skype using a relevant software application. I also printed and physically archived e-mails, chat correspondence and interview transcripts.[16] Following my decision to trace photobloggers's mobility, and always with their permission, I digitally shadowed a number of my research participants on the move in real time. Invariably, individuals would move discretely between digital platforms, social networks and mobile devices. The intersection of these different spaces formed part of the overall 'mobility' of my digital field site, wherein I situated myself in what Monterde and Postill call (2014)

'mobile ensembles': the intersection of various digital media, participants and issues found in certain instances of mobile-technology-facilitated social praxis. This is not dissimilar to the notion of 'personal media assemblages' (Day Good 2012) formulated in relation to social networks, conceptualized as a shifting and interactive environment of posted photographs, videos, links, comments and applications. As with other forms of mobility, I suggest that digital movements to and within these spaces can be equally 'infused with meaning' (Salazar and Smart 2011:ii). However, the complexity and ethnographic salience of Iranian photoblogging led me to search for more specific ways to study the practice. As part of this pursuit, I co-constructed a unique methodological apparatus with my research participants, in direct conversation with my thematic focus and mobile sites of research: a digital photography exhibition.

[place here figure 7.4]

Fig. 7.4 Map showing research participants based in six countries

Designing a digital photography exhibition for ethnographic research

After nine months of ethnographic fieldwork researching Iranian popular photographic practices in Iran, the UK, and online, I discussed with my principal research participants the idea of co-curating a digital photography exhibition of their work (see Figure 5). The resulting exhibition presents an example of a site-specific methodology, whereby the form of research (a digital exhibition of digital photographs/photoblogs) is constructed in specific relation to the field site (online environments) (see Figure 6).[17] The idea to develop the exhibition stemmed directly from the decidedly digital and visual ways I had established relationships with my research participants. Through the setting up of the exhibition, geographically

dispersed research participants were introduced to each other, their work and networks, and were able to build a sense of collective identity: they became active and creatively involved participants in the project, rather than just being (or being seen to be) isolated bodies in the digital landscape with whom I conducted research.[18] The concept of the exhibition shares affinity with Varzi's (2006) (offline) ethnographic methodology of the *dowreh* (circle or salon), used in her study of Iranian youth in Tehran, which similarly sought to actively involve individuals in the process of research. While conducting research in Iran, Varzi put together a *dowreh* of college students in the hope of establishing a 'comfortable environment (as opposed to an environment whereby the subject simply answers questions…)' (ibid:14). This collaborative space aimed to move beyond a focus group governed by her research questions, and towards a more collective project that, as Varzi puts it, 'became their project' of examining their own lives, as they thought about how they consume their public space and public culture (ibid:14).

[place here figure 7.5]

Figure 7.5: Cover page of the digital exhibition <u>www.photoblogsiran.com</u>

The exhibition methodology presented here extends these principles to the digital and transnational Iranian context. Through the exhibition, I was able to generate and extrapolate ethnographic texture by obtaining first hand experience of what it takes to design, curate, maintain and monitor a photoblog, including 'behind the scenes' details of the process that the presented photoblogs themselves do not share with the general viewing public. Through the exhibition I carried out *digital* photo elicitation: a digital form of the established visual method of photo elicitation (Collier and Collier

14

1986), which uses images to elicit discourse with participants and which informs the researcher's analysis. This digitally realizes Pink's (2011:96) argument that 'sharing photographs can become a way of doing ethnography,' whereby participants help to shape the ethnographic process in an active and participatory manner.

Importantly, the digital exhibition also re-conceptualizes notions of travel in ethnographic research. It reconfigures the physical movement of an exhibition as *digital* travel, whilst modifying the role of the anthropologist from photographer to co-curator. Photographs shown in the digital exhibition were not generated by myself as visual anthropologist (photoethnography), nor by participants for the research process (photovoice). Rather, they pre-existed in primary locations (participants' own photoblogs and related digital places) and moved, as digital copies, to join the digital exhibition without altogether leaving the photoblog from which they came[19].

One of my main research activities as researcher/co-curator involved sharing online the site's URL to relevant viewing publics for research purposes. I presented the exhibition to photographers, Iranians in Iran and in the UK, as well as gallery curators, artists and journalists in Tehran and London who were contributing to the wider ethnography. This broadened the potential sample base of participating subjects by allowing easier access (virtual and economical) than that traditionally afforded by visiting a physical exhibition. This is particularly salient in relation to Iran, where restricted official economic and cultural support for independent artists and initiatives are seeing the growing popularity and credibility of online environments for exhibiting Iranian art and photography. Digital exhibitions of this kind (and the specific kind of transnational mobility they afford) thus lend themselves to accessing, convening and studying other groups similarly bound by the confines of wider, offline sociopolitical and economic conditions and/or aesthetic frameworks.

Studying viewership is an important aspect for understanding photoblogging as a dialogical social/media practice of digital photography, rather than merely a one-way, flat or finished representation (Crang 2007; Larsen 2008). Utilising the digital exhibition as research method allowed me to explore viewer practices and patterns, on- and offline, amongst Iranians and non-Iranians both inside Iran and in the UK. In my digital research, notions of identity and belonging were similarly explored. I was able to investigate different (but fluid) categories of viewer 'types' based on physical location and individuals' senses of proximity (cultural, political, affective) to Iran, as elicited by acts of viewing digital photographs. I captured these responses at the particular historical juncture in which the digital exhibition was co-constructed and viewed. The exhibition itself fostered novel forms of virtual and imaginative 'travelling' to Iran amongst those I shared it with. Pink (2011) has suggested that images do not (just) take people back (as in playing 'back' a video), but entail a process of moving forwards within the environments in which they are a part. Indeed, diasporic or exiled Iranian viewers of the exhibition virtually travel (back) to Iran through the site and connect themselves (and their nostalgia) to the forward-moving circumstances of the present. Here, the exhibition becomes, in effect, a contemporary anthropological archive, forming a digital 'cabinet of curiosity' for viewers. The exhibition is made interactive, or what McQuire (2013) terms 'operational', through the social engagement it engenders. And, in turn, this process generates relevant ethnographic material to be critically studied by the researcher.

[place here figure 7.6]

Figure 7.6: Home page of the digital exhibition

Methodological implications for studies of mobility and beyond

The digital exhibition I co-designed during my study of Iranian photobloggers complements studies of mobility by directly addressing three key overall concerns, also outlined in the Introduction to this volume. These involve the researcher's ability to (a) collaborate, (b) assemble and (c) explore the lifeworlds of subjects in multi-sited and multifaceted mobile research environments. First and foremost, *collaboration*. The exhibition constitutes an interesting form of collaborative digital and visual participatory method, broadly situated in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework (Wadsworth 1998). PAR, originally developed in a non-digital context, seeks to establish collaborative relationships in which community actors take an active role in exploring 'local' issues alongside a researcher, developing broader strategies for change (Gubrium and Harper 2013:30). PAR complements the carrying out of 'glocal ethnography' (Salazar 2010) in a range of digital and non-digital settings by recognising the beneficial affordances of collaborative and interdisciplinary research methods in complex contemporary fieldwork *loci.* In the case of the digital exhibition discussed here, this global-local interface is explored digitally and visually by tracing how disparately located individuals collectively negotiate the historically layered image of Iran through socio-aesthetic practices of de/re-construction on the Internet.

Secondly, the issue of *assembling*. Assembling moving participants is a prominent methodological concern in mobilities research. As Bruner (2008:228) notes in his studies of tourism and tourist photography, 'a key difficulty in studying tourists is methodological — tourists move so fast through sites that it is hard to keep up with them'. As Christian Vium's chapter in this volume shows, however, photography as an anthropological method of mobility helps us to 'fixate' people and places in 'a vast

and intricate web of flows and connections'. Along these same lines, it can be argued

that the digital exhibition responds to various methodological challenges precisely by

providing a useful 'net' – of and for ethnographic enquiry and carved out from within

the broader digital landscape – with which to 'trap'[20] (Miller 2001) and engage

moving subjects. This has the effect of creating a 'home space' for the research; a

virtual headquarters of consciously constructed digital 'immobility' or stasis, where

participants and researcher can convene, explore, reflect upon the research theme

within the safe confines of a co-curated platform. In co-constructing a field site for the

research to take place with/in, the exhibition demonstrates Clifford's (1997:8) earlier

concept of fieldwork as travel practice, one that involves the movement of the

researcher to match the mobility of the objects and subjects of study. Socio-

technological potentials engrained in the digital exhibition further contribute to the

researcher's ethnographic perspective by enabling, at once, dual capacities: the

experience of 'being there together' online (Schroeder 2010), and the ability to revisit

the material *after* the 'event' of live contact. Here, we may consider the relevance of

Urry's (2004:35) statement about web 2.0 platforms more generally, which enable, he

argues, people and networks to "be connected to, or to be at home with "sites" across

the world.' Providing a point of on-going collaborative contact or 'contact zone'

(Clifford 1997), the digital exhibition establishes a suitable basis for nurturing social

relations throughout the research process. As I quickly discovered with my own

research, this can be a useful way of illuminating latent aspects of the research

process, aspects that are more difficult to obtain through more direct strategies of

soliciting, or following (physically or digitally), subjects.

      Thirdly, there comes the issue of *exploration*. A digital exhibition such as the

one outlined in this chapter can offer a suitably mobile platform to explore dynamic

and elusive social fields such as those of identities and imaginaries. Given that my field-site pertained as much to social and cultural imaginaries (Taylor 2004; Salazar 2012) as it did to the geographical place of Iran, it seemed, at the outset of my research, even more necessary to explore novel ways of entering Iran's various 'virtual' domains. Salazar (2012:866) suggests that imaginaries may be studied, anthropologically, by attending to the 'multiple conduits through which they pass and become visible in the form of images and discourses'.

Putting Iran's social imaginaries and digital environments on a methodological plane, my challenge was to co-construct a relevant image/imaginary-based environment of and for the research. Non-digital exhibitions have often been associated with these kinds of explorations of image-based identity politics. Karp (1991:15) identifies a fundamental relationship between exhibitions and self-representation: 'Exhibitions represent identity, either directly through assertion, or indirectly by implication. They are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and "other"'. Digital exhibitions are not altogether distinct from these observations, and, as I discovered in my own research, can play an equally important role in larger anthropological questions of identity and subjective experience. At the same time, digital exhibitions are not uniform, nor do they necessarily share intentions or outcomes. Exhibitions vary according to the research rubric, researcher, participants and the social, cultural and aesthetic frameworks from which the material is drawn and feeds back into. Given the wider indexical conditions in which the making, viewing and distributing of images from Iran are enmeshed, sharing an ethos of collective visual storytelling with my participants helped us to explore a range of existing and emerging social imaginaries in a distilled, world *re-creating* environment. The exhibition, as is the case with participants' own photoblogs, is

therefore in this sense an explicit site of re-construction. It asks viewers to reflexively consider ontological, socio-political and cultural questions about, in this case, Iran, and to critically engage with their own situated practices of viewing. Arguably then, this methodological move does make a peculiarly 'local' intervention on the 'global' image of Iran in visual and media imaginaries.

Lastly, a wider point on the ethics and politics of such a 'methodology of mobility'. With the capacity to store and display hundreds or even thousands of digital photographs, the digital exhibition is able to replicate photobloggers' own practices of showing varied image 'types' on their photoblogs. Therefore, given the relevant curatorial ethos, the exhibition has the potential to overcome the representational limits of offline physical exhibitions. Mercer's (2008:62) reflections on this quandary (posited in relation to the work of Black British artists) provides an important theoretical precursor to the digital exhibition as an anthropological research method, and also points to its broader political implications:

> If, after many years of struggle, you arrive at the threshold of
> enunciation
> and are 'given' the right to speak and a limited space in which
> to tell your
> story, is it not the case that there will be an overwhelming
> pressure to try and
> tell the whole story all at once?[21]

The digital exhibition attends to this potential epistemological predicament by resisting any dominant narrative. Instead, it collates a digital repository of images,

cultural experiences, memories and aspirations that provide a fertile environment for digital-visual cultural storytelling, with viewers as interactive co-narrators. As a befitting model for anthropological research *and* representation therefore, the digital exhibition lends itself to other studies of image and imaginary-based mobilities, wherein issues of identity and visual and political representations are intrinsic to social research questions being asked.

Overall, the digital exhibition was, for my own research on Iranian photobloggggers, a crucial method through which my research themes emerged, developed and were communicated to relevant publics. It aided my analytical capacity to construct what Pink (2011:96) calls the 'ethnographic place', in which description and theory come together to create a representational rendering of the ethnography. In developing the method, I made use of what Gubrium and Harper (2013:173) suggest to be the primary goal of placing exhibitions online in the form of online web 2.0 platforms, namely 'to make materials available to a wider public'.[22] The method's public and accessible nature serves as a useful pedagogical tool for disseminating anthropological research within and beyond the academy. Both reflecting and contributing to mobile field sites, the digital exhibition thus advances ways in which anthropologists might carry out 'visual interventions' (Pink 2009) with participants in a range of research contexts involving (im)mobilities.

Conclusion: engaging (with) digital and visual methods of mobility

In this chapter, I have discussed intersecting layers of ethnographic *and* methodological (im)mobilities, suggesting a direct relationship between the two that offers important insights for studies of mobility in the social sciences. Through the 'double lens' of my digital-ethnographic investigation of Iranian photobloggers,

involving a 'frame within a frame' analysis of using methods drawn *from* the field (digital photography on the Internet) to conduct my study *with/in* the field, I have discussed one innovative digital-visual method in particular (a digital photography exhibition), and briefly outlined a range of other relevant digital and visual methods of mobility (online participant observation, shadowing and interviewing), tracing the types of mobility such methods both capture and afford. I showed how contemporary ethnographers have the possibility of dialogically developing site-specific methods such as digital exhibitions that allow them to physically and metaphorically 'move' with/in 'intangible' field sites such as the Internet, as well as with/in historical and visual-cultural imaginaries. Such methods, I suggest, lend themselves to studies of (im)mobility within and beyond online environments and photography – to research, for example, on migration and tourism, as well as to investigations pursued in/of places to which the researcher has limited physical access. In presenting these methods, I have argued that these are not a priori strategies, nor are they always applicable, but can be effectively applied, moulded, and developed to complement key social research questions – or even help raise new ones.

In the case of Iran, a largely 'besieged' zone for long-term socio-scientific research when it comes to non-native researchers, I have argued how lack or limited physical access for the foreign/non-resident researcher presents less a predicament of 'immobility' than an opportunity for methodological innovation. As I have shown, researchers can, for example, become 'mobile' in a *digital* sense in an otherwise potential state of 'immobility'. Relevant research strategies such as the digital photography exhibition, can allow the researcher to legitimately 'be with' participants online, and to participate in this way in the natural ebbs and flows of their everyday lives, in live and non-live forms. Through mobile methods such as the digital

exhibition, I contend that digital anthropology on the one hand and mobility studies on the other can be productively brought to bear on one another and nurture other innovative methodologies of mobility. The digital exhibition specifically illustrates the need to conceive of 'the field' in mobility research as a potentially vast arena of moving images, people, histories and experiences. I showed how this can be practically realized using the digital and epistemological parameters of an online exhibition space, co-created with geographically dispersed research subjects.

Having conducted my ethnographic research on Iranian photobloggers using digital and visual methods such as the digital exhibition, the overarching issue I raised in the introduction to this chapter, concerning the Malinowskian fieldwork imperative of physically 'being there', becomes of crucial importance. My contention is that this geo-spatial imperative need not remain the definitive marker of social scientific 'authenticity'. Such a paradigm can be recast by rethinking two conventional 'virtues' of ethnographic research: physical movement in and out of physical places, and physical co-presence with subjects. Rethinking these virtues, involves recognizing that the contemporary researcher need not be physically *extra* mobile or *hyper* nomadic to 'follow the thing' or 'be there' with research participants in relevant field sites. Rather, by (re-)emphasising the mediated basis of social life and research pursuits, I argue that physically remote enquiry *is* an ethically responsible and methodologically rigorous methodology of mobility in itself, enabling 'travel', co-presence and connection. I suggest then, that paradigms of social scientific methodology themselves need to be sufficiently mobilized to recognize burgeoning methods of studying mobility.

To conclude, I propose, and not without a grain of irony, that the contemporary ethnographer may in fact, if and when she needs to, return to the

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proverbial *and* physical 'armchair' to conduct ethnographic research with/in dynamic

research loci.[23] The researcher's capacity for fostering movement in this manner

recalls the historical anecdote concerning Xavier de Maistre presented by Salazar,

Elliot and Norum as a befitting Introduction to this volume. Conceiving 'mobility' as

'room travel' allows one to look beyond physical motion and toward imaginative

participation in different kinds and forms of journeys. Incidentally, for reasons I have

detailed in this chapter, it was in my room that much of my own ethnographic

'travelling' took place. Whilst this need not be considered (and it has not been

presented here) as necessarily a 'new way' of doing ethnography, it is my contention

that digital and visual approaches such as digital photography exhibitions open up a

crucial range of methodological avenues and theoretical possibilities for future studies

of physically dispersed people, objects and social imaginaries in flux.

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[1] 'Armchair anthropology' is a phrase denoting 19th-century ethnology, whereby scholars studied cultural 'others' remotely, through mediated forms such as travelogues and colonial and missionary reports. For a critical discussion of this, see Willerslev (2011).

[2] I use this military terminology knowingly in order to infer the ethical implications of instances of critically unexamined 'being there' for research purposes. A notable recent example can be seen in initiatives such as the Human Terrain System (HTS) in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[3] For useful genealogies of the social anthropology of Iran, see Fazeli (2006), Nadjmabadi (2009).

[4] I use the complex term 'the West' consciously throughout this article since the category is of direct relevance to my Iranian interlocutors. In the national, historical and rhetorical context of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran, 'the West' (mostly pertaining to America and the UK) forms one part of a binary held in place by the ideological architects of the Islamic regime between Iran and what it presents as its ultimate other: 'the West'. For further insights see Dabashi (2008).

[5] The incident is thought to have been instigated by the paramilitary *Basij* (a volunteer militia established in 1979 by the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini) in response to UK-imposed sanctions on Iran regarding the latter's nuclear programme.

[6] Brief research trips to Iran (sometimes on tourist visas) are not uncommon for Iranian and non-Iranian researchers. In these cases, as with my own, the rationale of doing 'quick ethnography' or 'zip in and zip out fieldwork' Hegland (2004) in Iran is a pragmatic antidote to travel injunctions, outweighing ideals of 'being there' for sustained periods of time.

[7] 'Photo tours' (*safarhāyeh akāsi*) are an important (offline) aspect of photoblogging as a mobile social practice. These take place via a range of means, from state-funded/associated photography organizations and competitions, which are today also facilitated online, to more informal, independent groups which emerge though online networks and communities.

[8] Online interview, 25 January 2013.

[9] http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2627

[10] On the history, development and uses of the Internet in Iran see Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) and Akhavan (2013).

[11] Online interview, 27 April 2013.

[12] My research sample reflects strongholds of the Iranian diaspora, the largest being in the US (Los Angeles), with sizeable communities across various parts of the UK, Australia and Germany.

[13] The 'digital'/'virtual' distinction reflects disciplines' semantic choices. Whilst anthropologists (Horst and Miller 2012) tend to use the former (since for them, virtuality implies non-real and non-material), sociologists such as Hine (2015) comfortably employ the latter.

[14] Boellstorff (2008) monograph on Second Life was one of the first to show how ethnography can be conducted exclusively within virtual worlds. This has encouraged anthropologists to take more seriously the prospect of 'cybersociality'. See also Boellstorff (2012).

[15] I coined the term the 'photoblogosphere' in my PhD dissertation. It conceptualizes the multiple spaces, on and offline, in and outside Iran, where photobloggggers and viewers partake in the practice.

[16] For a relevant discussion on producing 'live fieldnotes' using digital applications see Tricia Wang's (2012) report: http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/

[17] www.photoblogsiran.com.

[18] See also my discussion of the digital exhibition on the 'Material World' blog: http://www.materialworldblog.com/2014/12/exploring-digital-visual-anthropological-research-methods-www-photoblogiran-com/

[19] For explanation and relevant examples of these visual anthropological terms in digital contexts see Gubrium and Harper (2013).

[20] Miller makes the case for 'websites as traps' (borrowing from Gell's (1996) theory of artworks as 'traps') in the digital landscape which draw surfers in to discursive fields of engagement. He shows how this can happen by members of a given culture, as in the case of Trinidadian personal websites.

[21] Mercer (2008:62).

[22] For a relevant discussion on the ethics of making digital research material public, see Gubrium and Harper (2013). Pp.45-69.

[23] For a similar analogy to the point I make here about 'armchair anthropology', see Willerslev (2011).