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ARTICLES



Approaches to digital methods in studies of digital religion

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews digital methodologies in the context of digital religion. We offer a tripod model for approaching digital methods: (a) defining research within digital *environments*, (b) the utilization of digital *tools*, and (c) applying unique digital *frames*. Through a critical review of multiple research projects, we explore three dominant research methods employed within the study of digital religion, namely, the use of textual analysis, interviews, and ethnography. Thus, we highlight the opportunities and challenges of using digital methods.

KEYWORDS

Digital methods; digital religion; ethnography; interviews; textual analysis

As digital technology becomes part of our everyday lives, communication scholars increasingly study communicative contexts that intersect with digital technologies and cultures. This article discusses existing scholarly approaches to research employing digital methods, offers a refined definition, and considers how the study of digital religion specifically, and digital studies generally, can benefit from this reconsideration of the term “digital methods.” The rise of digital communication has informed not only the new phenomena we study, but also how we conduct our research. This has created an emerging methodological context known as “digital research methods,” where researchers have sought to define the best practices for studies of digital spaces and consider how digital research tools can transform traditional research practices. Although several books and essays have been written on strategies related to implementing digital research methods (i.e., Boellstorf, 2013; Hine, 2000; McKee & Porter, 2009; Miller & Horst, 2012), this remains an evolving and rapidly changing field of inquiry. In this field, a diversity of understandings and opinions exists about what constitutes a *digital method* and how the digital shapes research practices within the discipline of communication.

This article seeks to contribute to current discussions in defining and conceptualizing digital research methods by exploring and problematizing common assumptions and approaches to digital methods. Similar to what

Rogers (2015) asserted, we see the need to expand current notions of what constitutes digital methods for communication researchers, moving beyond Internet studies' focus on studying the digitized and digital humanities' focus on born-digital tools. We begin by outlining several common approaches to digital methods—seeing them primarily in terms of tools, frames, or environments—that demonstrate the diversity of understandings that exist when the term “digital methods” is used. In order to focus our discussion and critical reflection on the differing perspectives regarding digital methods, we offer a systematic overview of three commonly employed methods—textual analysis, interviews, and ethnography—as they have been engaged within a specific area of research, that of digital religion studies. We suggest that investigating digital methods in light of digital religion helps spotlight the challenges faced by scholars as they seek to describe and define this emerging area of methodological work. Furthermore, this enables us to map and compare how digital methods are understood from distinctive points of view, while at the same time spotlighting core trends in the application and contextualization of digital methods within broader disciplinary contexts. We seek to address the ways in which future research in media and communication studies as a whole, and digital religion studies in particular, can benefit from the exploration of digital methods.

Defining digital methods

Imagine an ethnographer sitting in a coffee shop attempting to study the communication practices of individuals in that setting, specifically the kind of language customers use when they talk to a barista (e.g., are male baristas addressed differently than female baristas?). The ethnographer is taking field notes using a tablet and an electronic pen, which save all of the collected data to a cloud-based computer server. Is this online research, off-line research, or some hybrid form of research? Does this research utilize digital methods or approaches? The challenge in answering these questions is the lack of a standard or agreed-upon response. When addressing these questions, scholars' answers might rely on how they theorize the digital, and what they understand as the context for the research. For instance, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012) would likely respond that this is not a prime example of ethnography of the virtual, as such ethnographies are conducted in a virtual world, and the ethnographer in the described case does not explore that type of environment or use an avatar to conduct her study. In contrast, Murthy (2008, 2011) would probably define this research as a digital ethnography, because he understands digital methods to be defined by the use of digitized or online tools, regardless of the studied environment. How one understands the researcher's use of a tablet, an electronic pen, and a

cloud server to collect and document data points to the different scholarly underpinnings of the term *digital methods*.

From this brief scenario, we see that a variety of opinions exist regarding what constitutes a digital method and how digital methods can be conceptualized. This article unpacks different perspectives of how digital methods can be understood and conducted. We suggest that before a working definition of digital methods can be introduced, a review of the dominant approaches to this methodological issue must be presented. We offer an overview of key scholarship in communication studies during the last few decades, highlighting dominant and unique understandings of what constitutes digital methods among media and Internet studies. In this review, we draw on scholars and researchers working within these fields, as well as in digital religion studies, acknowledging the fact that their approaches often represent a specific disciplinary perspective rather than an all-inclusive approach to digital methods. This article reveals, through a critical review of current literature, the fact that digital methods are often understood through one of the following perspectives: (a) focusing on the *environment* in which the research takes place, (b) highlighting the special set of research *tools* available, and (c) defining digital research in terms of the unique *frame* in which research is conducted. Markham ([in press](#)) points to a similar distinction of medium/venue/way of being. Whereas Markham focuses on ethnography, we hope to expand this tripod understanding to digital methods at large. We begin by offering a synopsis of each of these perspectives and a discussion of how they influence the nature of digital research.

Digital methods as studying environments

Focusing on the digital *environment* in relation to digital methods means placing primary focus on where the study takes place; in other words, paying close attention to the platform or space in which the research data has originated and social interaction takes place (Scheifinger, 2016). When addressing the *environment* of digital methods research, the main question becomes, are we studying data generated and existing in an online environment, an off-line environment, or a combination of the two? If a researcher is working within an online environment (such as a virtual world), attention is given to the method for exploring the digital environment or the phenomena that take place in an online context. Hine (2000) illustrated this approach. According to Hine, placing attention on the environment does not mean the researcher only focuses on a location, but on data within it, such as relations between users in a specific news group. For Hine, the studied phenomena might be situated within the Internet (i.e., virtual or online) or in a physical, off-line realm. Thus, Hine emphasized the origin of the data collected and analyzed as the environment, not as the study of the “location” itself. Thus,

we stress that a researcher should start by asking where the environment researched fits on the online/off-line continuum. Here we do not argue for either “online” or “off-line,” but draw on Miller and Slater’s (2000) understanding that “We need to treat internet media as continuous and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cybernian apartness” (p. 5).

Digital methods as using tools

Another focus within digital methods is on the digital *tools* used to study a variety of both online and off-line cases. By *tools*, we mean the instruments by which the researcher collects and analyzes data. These may include an online database for recording data or an app used to capture digital recordings of interviews. When discussing *tools*, a distinction is often made concerning the origin of the tools. Rogers (2010) explained this as the difference between digitized tools and natively digital tools. According to Rogers, digitized tools are tools originating off-line and migrated online for Internet research. Online surveys are a prime example of this category. Although surveys were used long before the digital age, researchers now readily use online surveys. Taylor (2000) pointed out the many affordances, such as online surveys and questionnaires, digital research tools allow scholars. Online surveys capture the unedited voice of the participant; replies to online open-ended questions are richer, longer, and more revealing. Online surveys might also be more effective in addressing sensitive issues. According to Taylor, adult respondents are more willing to share information about their experiences with sensitive conditions in online questionnaires.

It is important to note at this point that whereas we focus on the tools used by researchers, others have addressed the tools utilized by users online in this context. Hine (2015), for example, stressed that different technological tools shape users’ experiences and interactions, a central concern in digital studies. Moreover, Hine added the importance of understanding users’ tools (such as archives) in order to extend academic explorations beyond real-time interactions. Thus, digital methods that expand the use of off-line tools into online settings exemplify greater abilities, but also raise ethical and epistemic considerations for today’s scholars (Hooley & Weller, 2016).

Returning to Roger’s (2010) distinction, natively digital tools are those emerging from and applied online. Such tools build on already existing Internet affordances to collect and analyze online data, such as hyperlinks, archives, and hashtags. An interesting example of applying natively digital tools in a study is Teusner’s (2013) use of Technorati for analyzing religious authority online. Technorati is a search engine that collects information from blogs. It ranks blog posts by popularity based on the number of

citations (or permalinks, to put it in blogosphere terms) a certain blog received from other bloggers. This online tool allowed Teusner to study blogs as online conversational spaces and classify religious authority through Technorati rankings. Thus, a study emphasizing digital tools should consider the origin of the tools (online/off-line) and the unique ethical questions they pose to a researcher.

Digital methods as a frame of research

Alongside assessing digital methods in terms of the environments or the tools of digital research, another focal point is that of the episteme, the system of knowledge, the approach, or framework of the study. Focusing on digital methods as a *frame* highlights the fact that the digital brings with it a distinct set of understandings that inform the study of a given subject. A frame of meaning has to do with the ways in which we organize information and can imply ways the digital might reframe our research. That is, frame has to do with how the researcher understands their research, the theory, world assumptions, the digital itself, and the goals of the research. For example, a scholar who utilizes the Social Shaping of Technology frame and a scholar using psychological approaches such as the Third Person Perspective will not address the same issue through the same lenses. The way they understand human agency would influence the way in which they understand technology, and, as a result, how they approach digital methods. At the same time, some scholars have also understood the digital itself as a framework, a way to view that world, and as a result have constructed theories and models of the world as informed by the digital (think of, for example, Cyber Feminism [Plant, 1993]).

Various studies explore a similar environment (e.g., virtual games) and use the same tools (such as ethnography of the virtual [Boellstorff et al., 2012], which includes creating an avatar and playing the game), but ask different questions and thus arrive at different reflections on the digital. Consider Campbell and Grieves' (2014) exploration of religious feelings and practices and religion in popular culture as represented in virtual games. Their theoretical focus on religion characterized their exploration of the digital as a space where the mundane and the sacred interact. Rachel Wagner's work (2012) approached the digital as a frame by using concepts from video games to explore religion. For example, the gaming notion of "world building" was used to rethink how religious traditions build their myths about the cosmos. We argue that methodological, theoretical, and epistemic approaches are the frames with which the researcher conceptualizes and understands the digital and, as a result, digital methods. In other words, *frame* is how one conceptualizes and approaches the digital, as well as how one constructs knowledge from it. *Frame* can be likened to the *Torah* of the digital, the prior teachings that one carries about (or carries apart from) the digital, that then inform

one's attitude toward the digital. That is, a frame is not a method, rather it informs the researcher's worldview, and thus one's methodological approach.

Redefining digital methods

From this review, we note that communication scholars have often understood digital methods in various ways, sometimes not clearly defining the term. Therefore, we suggest the need to clarify or redefine the term, in order to expand the awareness that digital methods used to research in digital contexts include multiple perspectives and facets.

Returning to our initial example of the ethnographer studying the use of language in coffee shops, we can now show how different contexts might lead to different understandings of their research. In this hypothetical case, researchers focused on the environment to define digital methods would argue that the ethnographer is not doing digital research because she is studying an off-line environment. In direct contrast, scholars who see digital methods as utilizing digital tools would argue that her use of digital tools—the tablet, the pen, and the cloud—places her work in the realm of the digital. Last, researchers focused on digital methods as an approach or frame would argue that her focus on casual language has little to do with the digital, unless she focuses on how the digital might influence off-line language. From this example, we see digital methods can be understood using multiple perspectives. It also shows how emphasizing one perspective above others determines how a particular researcher understands digital methods. We suggest that communication scholars should be aware of how their background shapes their approach to digital methods, and we urge them to consider how a broader understanding that integrates one or more perspectives might aid their work. Therefore, we suggest the following definition of digital methods: digital methods are the digitally native or digitized tools, environments, and/or frames of knowledge used by scholars to collect, analyze, or theorize about either off-line or online information.

Digital methods in digital religion studies

As stated in the introduction, this article looks at the evolution of digital methods through the perspective of digital religion studies. Digital religion explores the intersection of new media, religion, and digital culture. Although the concept of religion can be defined in numerous ways, for our purposes religion is understood as described by Geertz (1993): a cultural system of symbols that explains the general order of existence, which in turn formulates distinctive moods and motivations. In short, religion is seen as a system of meaning supported by symbols and concepts presenting a distinctive understanding of reality. This understanding of religion influenced much

of the early work within digital religion studies, wherein scholars sought to unpack how the Internet serves as an environment, tool, or frame/meaning system sharing users' understandings of spirituality and religious practice (Campbell, 2005; Helland, 2005).

The origins of digital religion studies can be traced to the mid-1990s, when scholars began to document the ways religious groups imported religious practice onto the Internet through forming religious communities and houses of worship, and conducting religious rituals online. Over the past three decades, scholars have sought to analyze how religious groups and users imported their spiritual activities online, and the extent to which digital platforms and technologies enabled them to mirror, or required them to transform, traditional religious practices. Today, digital religion is a term used to describe the ways in which online and off-line religious contexts become blended and linked within digital culture. Campbell (2013) described digital religion studies as a subfield of Internet studies that critically investigates the way online religious practices and spaces are connected to and extended into off-line religious contexts, and vice versa.

Digital religion research is described in terms of four waves (Campbell & Lovheim, 2011), each corresponding to distinct popular and scholarly visions of the Internet and characterized by distinct methodological approaches. In wave one—the descriptive era—scholars sought to describe new phenomena happening online, while evaluating utopian and dystopian discourses about the impact of the Internet on society. Most research focused on ethnographies and textual analysis of online religious activities, documenting new, emerging forms of community and ritual. In wave two—the time of categorization—scholars created categories and typologies of common religious Internet practices, using ethnography with online and/or face-to-face interviews along with questionnaires to explore these issues. In wave three—known as the theoretical turn—scholars turned attention to developing theoretical frameworks for analyzing and assessing off-line religious communities' negotiation patterns with new media, with data-gathering often focused on interview. Currently, wave four scholarship focuses on how religious actors negotiate relationships between multiple spheres of their online and off-line lives.

Scholars of digital religion have recognized certain methods as more suited for studying specific theoretical questions, drawing on and adapting approaches taken in previous studies of mass media and religion to digital religion research. Namely, the methods most used are online and off-line ethnography, off-line and online interviews, and online textual analysis. Hence, this article focuses on these specific methods, and considers how each method has been conducted within digital religion studies, as a way to describe and access how digital methods are understood and have been applied. In what follows, we review three methods: textual analysis,

interviews, and ethnography. We examine how these methods are applied in digital research, in order to ground our subsequent review of digital religion research in a concrete body of scholarly thought. We specifically focus the discussion of digital methods on tools, environments, and frames as focal points utilized by scholars in the field. Finally, we suggest future directions for media and communication studies as a whole, and digital religion in particular.

Textual analysis online

Defining textual analysis

Given the importance of text as a tool for preserving information and social meanings, scholars came up with various methods for extracting meanings from texts. The ability to capture and preserve speech, to read and reread the thoughts of others distant in space and time, eventually gave rise to a variety of tools for analyzing text. Textual analysis includes (but is not limited to) hermeneutics, rhetorical and critical analysis, and qualitative content analysis. Hermeneutical frames focus on the interpretation of meaning intended in or extracted from a specific text. This approach requires close readings of the text and the consideration of both the symbol-sets being used (careful examination of each word) and a macroscopic view of the context (What is the entire text about? Who is the author?). Rhetorical and critical analyses also examine texts closely, but these methods are more interested in the rhetorical tools used by the author, the soundness of their arguments, or in the case of critical analysis, examining the subtext as well as the social and political meanings and influence of the text. Qualitative content analysis takes a more thematic approach to texts, focusing on the repetition of words and illuminating themes that emerge from the text. This method is used to analyze printed texts as well as transcribed interviews, helping scholars see through the repetitions to the systematic meaning-making underlined in the text.

Textual analysis in digital environments

Each of these traditional methods of understanding and using texts has been employed in analyses of online “text.” In its early stages, the Internet was a predominantly typed medium. Although audio, images, and video have quickly become intertwined with the written word online, many internet platforms—websites, blogs, forums, chats, and social networking websites—still carry typed words, or a combination of typed words and audio/video/images. Therefore, Internet scholars can use textual analysis methods to make sense of online phenomena. Using textual analysis can help us

understand both meaning-making and community building online, as argued by Shields and Shields (1996): “One can talk of a virtual social world, or virtual interaction and a sense of a virtual self even within the context of what exists now: mostly text-based electronic mail and bulletin board postings” (p. 6).

One can also use textual analysis to understand single-authored websites and blogs and consider them as an online environment called “the blogosphere.” For example, Agarwal, Lim, and Wigand (2011) collected posts from 150 blogs from 17 countries and used content analysis to arrive at three themes, showing how individual writers can, through the medium of the Internet, create “cyber-collective movements” that take place in a digital environment. These examples show how textual analysis methods can be used to investigate *environments* where online communications take place.

Textual analysis with digital tools

The prime model of digital textual analysis as a tool is digital content analysis. The computational abilities enabled by digital technology have revolutionized the ways in which texts are visualized, counted, and understood. This includes using access to large databases (big data) and the computerized ability to “read” texts and retrieve information concerning word repetitions, themes, and citations, creating graphic maps of information and displaying other statistical relationships within the text (see, i.e., websites and software such as Tapor.ca [Rockwell et al., 2016], wordle.net [Feinberg, 2014], and Coder KH [Koichi, 2016]). Such programs are used to make sense of online and off-line texts. For example, Muralidharan and Hearst (2012) used content analysis tools to explore the writings of Shakespeare. Their work highlighted the abilities of such meaning-making software that provides “capabilities by analyzing language-use differences between male and female characters in Shakespeare’s plays,” in order identify major plot points—for example, “the language Shakespeare uses to refer to women becomes more physical, and the language referring to men becomes more sentimental” (p. 1).

Digitalizing information and network abilities of Internet-based media have given birth to new ways of using and understanding written text, and, as a result, innovations in textual analysis are developing. In these cases, textual analysis is a digital *tool* that can help researchers interact with texts in more systematic or completely new ways.

Textual analysis with digital approach/frame

Computers’ increased capability to store and organize information has also led to changes in the ways textual analysis is thought of within its frame of research.

Online, “text” might also refer to images, icons, video, and audio associated with websites, blogs, mobile applications, or other digital platforms. Thus, a combination of visual rhetoric alongside film and music analysis can be useful when approaching digital text. Such interdisciplinary novelty can be found in Shifman’s (2012, 2013) work. She explored Internet memes by examining their symbolic meaning as well as intertextuality and the wider context of Internet culture. Similarly, when analyzing Internet resistance in China, Tang and Bhattacharya (2011) collected information from online encyclopedias, newspapers, and web searches to identify a series of pictures that circulated online around 2008. By combining intertextual overview, context, and semiotic analysis of the pictures and texts, they showed how “the internet helps to push the symbolic power of satire to a higher level” (p. 1).

When using textual analysis online, additional consideration should be given to the unique construction of online texts. The hypertext abilities of online texts, as well as their impermanency, intertextuality, and nonlinearity have led scholars to reexamine their methodological resources. Mitra and Cohen (1998), for example, warned researchers not to simply import traditional methods of textual analysis, but rather to “consider how the methods themselves can be modified to address the emerging textual form” (p. 199). An online environment allows for a more collaborative text, such as that seen in multiauthored blogs and websites. Analysis of platforms such as forums, chats, discussion boards, or comments sections demands a new approach to analyzing “the author’s persona” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 20). Certain rhetorical scholars (Warnick & Heineman, 2012) have considered this “interactivity” as “a means of activating user response and as a mode of address [that] can influence users and can itself be rhetorical in its effects” (p. 53).

We have seen how textual analysis, one of the oldest methods for unpacking texts, has migrated into the digital. Using our tripod definition of digital methods, we examined how scholars used textual analysis to explore digital environments, as a digital tool to visualize and understand text, and as a new approach to text enabled by the digital frame. Certain innovations were considered, and we responded to the challenges and opportunities offered by online texts, as mentioned above. Still, in McKee’s work (2003), online texts were thought of as similar to printed text. In fact, they were listed alongside other texts: “Producing your own texts—online, in community media, as fanzines or letters to the editor, or artworks” (p. 54). Without clear guidelines concerning how to conduct textual analysis online, we might be missing the uniqueness of the online textual meaning-making process. In the next section, we will briefly discuss how textual analysis has been useful in the field of digital religion.

Approaches to textual analysis in digital religion studies

Religious studies have traditionally been text based, emerging as a field of biblical studies. A prime example of textual analysis online in the field of digital religion is Christopher Helland's (2000) work. Helland examined online texts related to religion in bulletin board systems (BBS), chat rooms, and websites. Analyzing the textual content of this sample, he argued for a distinction between religion online and online religion. Online religion refers to active, collaborative, participatory online environments. Religion online is found in online environments where information is controlled by religious organizations or leaders, and users can only passively accept or reject this information. Helland arrived at this conclusion by examining the way texts online are produced. Through this critical analysis, Helland helped us understand the status of religious participation online by conceptualizing digital religion through reading the texts and asking: How are these texts constructed? Who wrote them? Are they collaborative or single-author? Do they challenge traditional religious authority or enforce it? Examining the texts available in online environments using textual analysis methods helped Helland, and helps other scholars of digital religion, unpack the various meanings of texts and bring textual evidence regarding trends and phenomena into their analyses of the relationship between religion and digital technologies.

Scholars of the digital in general, and digital religion in particular, would benefit from rethinking textual analysis as a digital method. They can consider the various tools the digital supplies for conducting textual analysis and how digital text can create an environment. The frames of textual analysis can also be rethought, as one considers how the digital might help us rethink *text*, the importance of text for religious communities specifically, and constructions of narratives at large.

Interviews online

Defining interviews

Interviews are one of the most popular research methods used not only in communication studies, but also in the social sciences at large. We broadly define *interview* as a meeting in which one side questions or converses with the other and documents that conversation for information gathering. Data can be collected using question–answer conversations, or guided conversations between two or more people, about specific or general topics of interest. The effectiveness of an interview depends primarily on the interviewer's communication skills.

Tracy (2013) suggested that we can categorize interviews as structured, semistructured, or unstructured. The former are interviews in which the

researcher follows a rigid list of questions; these are advisable when the researcher wants to compare and contrast data across a large sample of cases. Semistructured interviews, as the name suggests, have a more flexible list of questions, which the interviewer can use as a general guideline. Finally, unstructured interviews are the most flexible and resemble a conversation rather than a guided interaction; thus, attention to facial cues and other nonverbal communication signs are highly important elements.

Researchers can use any of these interview approaches, depending on the goals of the research, the participants' abilities to share information, and the possibilities made available by the environment. For example, *informant interviews* usually involve participants who are experienced and well situated in the studied field and are open to providing information. Here, for example, a more conversational interview will be more suitable than a structured one. *Respondent interviews*, in comparison, are useful for understanding similarities and differences within a specific social group (e.g., a specific community, volunteers, professionals). The comparative nature of this approach calls for a more structured interview, one that will yield contrastable data. *Narrative interviews* and *life-story* interviews are unstructured interviews that encourage the participant to tell stories (either multiple or event-specific ones) rather than just answer questions. Last, *discursive interviews* pay attention to large structures of power that construct and constrain knowledge and myths.

These different types of interviews all play an important role in conducting communication research in the digital context, too, even if they traditionally take place in person—and in the case of semistructured and unstructured interviews, in-person contact is considered vital. How then, can these kinds of interviews take place online, where communication is always mediated and somewhat limited by digital devices? These questions have captured the attention of researchers since the early stages of Internet research. Markham (1998), for example, reflecting on her first online interview, talked about the difficulties involved in online typed interviewing—for example, the lag time between question and response and the possibility of misunderstanding the meaning of typed text. She also discussed surprising advantages, like the fact that she could have several windows open at once, allowing her to interview while writing her field notes so the entire interview was immediately “transcribed.” Markham concluded that the experience was successful not only for the interview, but for the relationship she created with her participant (1998).

The last few decades of digital research have shown that the different types of interviews described above can be adapted to digital contexts. The effectiveness of an online interview depends not just on the communication skills of the researcher, but also on the tools employed to achieve the interview's aim. Moreover, before starting research in the digital context, researchers must clearly state whether they want to investigate entirely online/

technologically mediated phenomena, a combination of online and off-line phenomena, or solely off-line aspects of the phenomena. Consequently, the traditional and digital methods of data collection—in this case, interviews—could be adapted for use in the digital context.

Interviews as a method in digital research should take into account that (a) interviewers cannot directly/fully observe their respondents, and (b) digital tools, interactivity, and environment change data collection methods and the data's nature by giving prevalence to textual and visual material rather than physical human interaction. At the same time, digital interviews also open new methodological possibilities.

Interviews in digital environments

The different types of interviews reflect the levels of flexibility experienced in the research process. Many semistructured or unstructured interviews allow a free conversation addressing new and different topics as they arise during the interview. How, then, do these features change when we perform interviews in the digital environment? The answer to this question depends on the level of social “reality” we grant virtual environments, how “authentic” we deem the interactions between online users to be, and, at times, the ability of the researcher to validate collected data by making the participants interact in one way or another with the off-line “physical” world.

There are many platforms where online interviews can be conducted. Digital environments include social networking sites such as Facebook, virtual reality platforms such as Second Life, Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG), audio-based VoIP such as Skype, or online communities that may create a distinct social space online. Even if these environments give the researcher an opportunity to interact directly with participants, they can easily conceal or dissimulate their identity. The way we address these issues of identity and reliability depends on our research questions—chiefly on whether the research validity needs effective off-line feedback, or if it strives to represent online dynamics. Scholars such as Markham (1998) or Taylor (1999) argued that if we confine our research to studying the virtual environment, we do not need correspondences with the off-line sphere. Taylor (1999) investigated digital embodiment (how participants in virtual worlds create visual representations of their characters and interact with them), by using a “researcher” avatar and forming online conversations and relationships with other avatars. Although these interactions were mostly text-based, researchers have to keep in mind the several opportunities contained in the digital to interview and observe people in different situations: open an interview chat room, interview using the game chat function in MMORPG, interact with avatars in virtual reality, etc. For example, in their study of Trinidadians, Miller and Slater (2000) went “on a

chat line for the 8 hours that informants will remain on-line, or [participated] in a room full of people playing networked Quake” (p. 22). The digital environment can also inspire new research on the creative ways to utilize the Internet as a productive background for interviewees.

Interviewing with digital tools

Various digital tools can be used for interviewing, from the typed-based e-mail interview through a more synchronous chat to verbal, audio-based VoIP interviews. A large part of online interviewing is done via asynchronous typed-based modes—for example, by e-mail—that allow the respondents to choose whether to reply right away or delay their response. This delay, however, could be somewhat of a problem for specific research topics in which the simultaneity of interactions—that is, interviews wherein researchers need to evaluate the instant reactions of participants (Salmon, 2010)—is essential. In these cases, synchronous modes of computer-mediated communication—such as video call, instant messaging, or “quasi-synchronous” modes such as chat—might become viable (Piela, 2015). The digital tools themselves may offer a variety of options for communication. Furthermore, the researcher can utilize the digital tools for further reflection and clearer communication. As James and Busher (2006) suggested, digital interviews “seem to have provoked a richness of reflection among the participants... . The iterative discussions on the developing texts of the interviews also allowed us to interrogate the authenticity of the participants’ voice” (p. 416).

In Williams and Copes’ (2005) study of “straight edge” youth culture, all of their interviews took place online using Instant Messaging platforms and/or Internet Relay Chat program (IRC). Because these formats offer anonymity, interviewees may be less concerned with the impressions they are making and sometimes can easily dissimulate their emotions. For this very reason, online interviews may balance power between interviewer and interviewee, as interviewees may feel freer to challenge researchers than they would in a face-to-face interview (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). Although concerns about the possibility of deceptive behavior in online environments remain a consideration, this method is still a valuable approach for researchers using digital tools.

Interviewing with digital approach/frame

People can lie or tell the truth in both online and off-line contexts, via Skype, or in an in-person interview. The validity of the interview depends on the researcher recognizing and fulfilling their responsibility to develop trustful relationships with their informants, both off-line and online, building a foundation for frank and open interaction. Awareness of this responsibility should facilitate the selection of reliable informants and

motivate them to be forthcoming and generous in sharing perspectives and knowledge. In her work, Markham (1998) felt it necessary to establish an open relationship with her participants by not only observing their activities on screen, but also by conducting direct interaction and offering an honest declaration of her purposes. At the same time, she altered the names, locations, and other identifying markers of all the participants to protect their anonymity in the online context. Piela (2015), investigating Muslim women's understanding of their *niqab* wearing, earned the confidence of her respondents by building a trustworthy and friendly relationship before, during, and after the Skype interviews—sharing her research interest, agreeing on the most comfortable conditions for carrying out the interviews, and ensuring privacy and intimacy during the conversations.

Several other issues are likely to influence the overall frame of an online interview—the absence of nonverbal cues, artificial conversational rhythms due to repeated pauses, the interviewee's ability to edit their answers in typed form, new geographical opportunities broadening the scope of global research, and balancing the power between interviewers and interviewees, to name a few.

Interviewing in digital religion studies

This section reviews one empirical case study from digital religion studies and explores how interviews are used in digital research. In *Exploring Religious Community Online*, Campbell (2005) identified and observed fourteen online Christian religious communities, three of which were selected for the study because of their level of group participation. Campbell conducted four years of research about the beliefs and the practices of these groups via multiple digital methods, including e-mail questionnaires sent to the communities and in-person interviews with selected members. As Campbell (2005) states:

Interviews were conducted in each community member's home and whenever possible included observation of internet use, interviews with family members about their internet habits, and visits to their local church... . The intent was not only to verify data collected online about members but also to observe more fully how the internet shaped their engagement with their offline community. (p. 78)

By conducting both off-line and online interviews, Campbell was able to construct a picture of the community's relations, structure, and belief systems. The digital interviews and interactions played a significant role in establishing her connection to the communities, as well as in extracting vital information about the communities.

This example shows how traditional interview methods could be applied to the study of the digital environment, using digital research tools (such as e-mail interviews), or how approaches to interviews can be integrated into virtual research. These new approaches to using interviews show how a proper integration of traditional research methods in the digital environment can answer some critical issues about the completeness of online research, helping in the integration, comparison, and verification of the validity of off-line/online data collection.

Ethnography online

Defining ethnography

Ethnographic research seeks to provide a qualitative-interpretive, in-depth analysis of social interactions. It emphasizes the participation of a researcher in the studied community through participant-observation and relies on the researcher's ability to observe, collect, interpret, and analyze the data based on both the researcher's and the studied community's points of view. The early-mid 1990s represented an expansion of off-line ethnography from the physical field of work to online ethnography in the virtual field of work (Markham, 1998; Wittel, 2000). Online ethnography added digital interaction to an ethnographer's off-line communication with the community, with a single informant, or with the interactions studied (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009). By adding this element, online ethnography stresses the validity of online spaces as spheres of investigation in and of themselves, but also values the triangulation of data collected both off-line and online. Here, online phenomena are viewed as real and authentic, continuous to off-line communication rather than distinct from it (Horst & Miller, 2013). Rather than studying phenomena that occur only online or off-line, many scholars focus their ethnographic processes nowadays on the way culture, identity, community, relationships, etc. are carried between and within different online and off-line spheres (Miller & Slater, 2000).

The integration of data originated, collected, or analyzed in these two spheres depends on the studied context. We can see examples of studies that combined the data gathered in off-line and online spheres into one set of observations, while others pursued their studies only in the online sphere. Orgad (2008), who studied the meanings of online engagements for women with breast cancer, argued that for the community she studied, participation online and the use of the Internet are embedded in the participants' everyday experience of illness. According to her, in order to understand these participants' online contexts, some knowledge about their off-line contexts—the day-to-day aspects of their coping with breast cancer—had to be collected. Donath (1999), in comparison, examined identity depiction in Usenet

newsgroups and addressed data that originated solely online. In this context she focused only on the use of online environments for identity formulation, asking questions about the components and features of these environments and the identity formulated in them (names and visual representation, for example). Donath did not, however, focus on their connection or correlation with off-line environments. Such focus does not require data collected in the off-line sphere and enables an ethnographic work carried out exclusively in online platforms.

Within the discussion of digital methods, online ethnography is perceived as written product gained by applying a set of methods and tools (such as interviews, surveys, archival work, and field notes), with participant-observation being its distinct feature (Boellstorff, 2013). It is a necessarily partial analysis *in, of, and through* virtual tools and environments (Hine, 2000) that documents and analyzes everyday life as it is being lived, constructed, and interpreted by groups online and off-line (Boellstorff et al., 2012). In this article, we use the term “online ethnography,” since all approaches reviewed in this section involved, in one way or another, the online sphere. This is, however, not the term most studies used. As Domínguez et al. (2007) argued, this methodological approach “has been broadened and reformulated through new proposals such as digital ethnography, ethnography on/of/through the internet, connective ethnography, networked ethnography or cyberethnography. Each of these maintains its own dialogue with the established tradition of ethnography ... in different ways” (p. 1). Taking into account almost 20 years of discussions on ethnographic research related to the digital context, we offer “online ethnography” as an umbrella term for a set of different tools, methods, and perspectives on ethnographic work related to online environments.

Ethnography in digital environments

Virtual ethnography is an approach that emphasizes the sphere within which the ethnographic work is conducted. Conceptualizations of virtual ethnography highlight the active engagement and immersion of the scholar in Internet-mediated environments (Hine, 2008a). Kendall’s (2002) study of Multi Users Domain (MUD, an online social forum) is an example of such virtual ethnography. For 2 years, Kendall conducted an online participant observation supplemented by face-to-face interviews with participants. Kendall investigated the online interaction itself and the meanings it holds for the participants, rather than mediating the study of off-line interactions via digital tools. Thus, Kendall emphasized the sphere within which the study was carried out and its meanings in users’ lives, rather than the tools used to study it.

In this context, Boellstorff et al. (2012) distinguished between studying virtual worlds and other online environments. They differentiated between “ethnography of the virtual” (applied when studying virtual worlds) and “virtual ethnography” (for other online environments). Their emphasis was on the characteristics of the studied environment. A virtual world, according to them, is a multiuser platform that creates a sense of “worldness” and continues to exist in some form even if the users log off. This environment allows participants to embody themselves in the virtual via an avatar. Based on this definition, Boellstorff et al. considered social networks, chat rooms, forums, and some online games as environments that can be studied by virtual ethnography, but not by ethnography of the virtual. They constructed a continuum of embodiment for online environments that should be studied through different ethnographic perspectives.

Ethnography with digital tools

Within discussions of digital methods, some scholars emphasize the tools through which research is conducted. Digital ethnography is an approach emphasizing the use of new media technologies within the ethnographic work, referencing the tools used by the researchers, rather than the environment in which the study is conducted. This is seen in Ducheneaut, Yee, and Bellotti (2010) and Murthy’s (2008, 2011) writing about tools that might be included in such research—online questionnaires, digital videos, social networking websites, blogs, digital pens, wikis, embedded cyborg technologies, and visualization tools and software. According to this view, digital ethnography can be conducted either solely off-line, through digital, online-shared collection and analysis of data materials, or solely online, but the combination of the two spheres “can increase data validity through triangulation” (Murthy, 2011, p. 171).

Gallagher, Wessels, and Ntelioglou’s (2013) study is an example of using digital tools for ethnographic research. They conducted a multisite digital ethnography, studying schooling experiences of marginalized youth in Canada, India, Taiwan, and the United States. The digital portion of their ethnography included the use of Adobe Connect software to facilitate cross-site, synchronous research meetings between all researchers involved in their study in the different geographical locations. Moreover, they used a wiki site to allow researchers in different physical sites to post examples of digital work (such as digital videos) gathered through research. Finally, the study added a third data-sharing platform, that is, a research blog that allowed the researchers and the studied community to respond to one another’s data and analyses presented online. Thus, most of the studied phenomena related to off-line

activities carried out by students in off-line schools, yet digital tool use enabled a cross-site, multidimensional ethnographic work across geographical borders.

Ethnography with digital approach/frame

Although differences exist between “digital ethnography” and “virtual ethnography,” a common ground between the two stresses the existence of the studied phenomenon prior to the ethnographer’s arrival on site and refers, to some extent, to the involvement of the online sphere in the study of human interactions. In this context, online ethnography raises important and unique ethical questions not necessarily relevant to studying the off-line (McKee & Porter, 2009). These pertain to the blurring lines between public and private information, specifically, the extent to which online platforms (e.g., social media profiles) are perceived as a public domain. Online ethnographers are confronted with questions about utilizing data that is not necessarily shared with them directly, or at the time they’re conducting their research. Moreover, these ethical questions relate to the extent to which participants’ personal information and identifiers shared via an online platform can or should be used by online ethnographers without users’ consent.

Thus, researchers conducting studies in digital contexts will benefit from using digital tools to evaluate the place of participant-observation online. Because online spheres allow scholars to conduct real-time interactions, researchers are obliged to acknowledge the framework they employ when deciding what data to collect—utilizing information shared outside of this real-time interaction verses information that was shared while the researcher was absent from the field, for example. Moreover, researchers must have a clear sense of the ways in which they approach the digital field in terms of the public/private arena, that is, from whom do we ask permission and why. These considerations inform our frame of the digital, how we perceive its essence as a public sphere, and where we draw the line in terms of participation and observation.

Online ethnography in digital religion studies

Tim Hutchings’s work is a noteworthy example of the use of online ethnography in the field of digital religion. His ethnographic studies focused on the flexible, multilayered relationship between online and off-line environments in the religious context. Through a 4-year ethnographic study of five “online churches,” Hutchings demonstrated key features of online ethnographic work. According to Hutchings (2011), online churches are an “example of a new kind of loosely networked religious practice that blends local and online resources, practices and connections, offering digital forms of education, spiritual experience and social ties that generally complement local

church membership rather than replacing it” (p. 1118). Thus, he presented in his study an ethnographic work that further developed the notions of networked spheres, societies, and individuals.

Hutchings also acknowledged the need for analysis of both the off-line and the online existence of said churches in order to comprehend how religion is carried through both. Here he echoed the ethnographic understanding that the online is not a mere reflection of the off-line (Boellstorff et al., 2012), but a sphere worth studying on its own. Thus, Hutchings presented the triangulation of tools and methods, both off-line and online, for data collection, using online interviews and discussions in the online churches, telephone interviews, off-line in-person interviews, chats through the Second Life platform, as well as in off-line gatherings, and survey data published by the churches (Hutchings, 2011, 2013).

Via this multilayered ethnographic work, Hutchings analyzed and presented the ways in which religious communities are formulated, conduct worship, preach, build friendships, offer mutual support, and proselytize to outsiders both online and off-line. Hutchings’ ethnography enabled a sensitive engagement with issues of community building (Hutchings, 2011, 2013), questions of authority, control, and participation in religious contexts, and evaluation of the relationship between the off-line and online spheres, which have been described as points of interest by other online ethnographers (Hine, 2000, 2008b; Markham, 1998; Miller & Horst, 2012). Similarly, scholars engaging in ethnographic work, both in digital religion and in other fields, should consider how to critically utilize the digital for their research.

Conclusions

What constitutes a digital method? Throughout this article, we have argued that *digital methods* is an elusive term that needs to be considered in relation to a trio of perspectives including environment, tool, and frame. Scholars in media and Internet studies have often implicitly focused their attention on aspects of digital environments and frames. Yet we maintain that awareness of and explicit engagement with all three of these perspectives is needed for fruitful academic discourse on digital research methods. These three contexts, we argue, exist in different variations in every research study related to the digital, yet their prominence or focus will vary. In order to define digital methods as an overall methodological approach, we must first acknowledge and appreciate possible variations and utilizations of digital tools, environments, and frames within research.

In this article, we have discussed different scholarly approaches to digital methods. These three include defining digital methods in terms of research within specific digital environments, the utilization of digital tools to assist in research, or applying unique digital frames of data-gathering or analysis. These

distinctions help outline the methodological biases held by various researchers related to their preferred focus when speaking about what constitutes digital methods. It is important to note that each of these focuses might yield different forms of analysis and conclusions when applied. However, we argue that all three areas should be considered and engaged in research projects studying both online/digital and off-line contexts. This is not an “either/or” distinction between environments, tools, and frames. This approach asks researchers to reflect upon all three. We suggest that scholars need to clarify and more concretely state what they mean by “digital research methods” when undertaking and evaluating research within the digital context.

This clarification is made especially necessary as the variety of digital research methods continues to expand to include not only traditional methods being adapted to digital contexts, but also new methods emerging out of the affordances offered by digital spaces and frames. Social media data scraping, data visualization frames, and other forms of big-data analysis methods create new methodological possibilities and challenges for researchers, redefining boundaries of the digital and contextualization of methods. Indeed, even digital religion studies have moved beyond the focused set of approaches spotlighted here (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Shakkour, 2015). For example, recent works employed visual discourse analysis via YouTube gaming of Let’s Plays (Radde-Antewler & Zeilier, 2015), online crowdsourcing methods of user testing via MTurk forums (Springer, Martini, & Richardson, 2016), and conducting online surveys using new big-data collection and analysis tools (Singh, 2016).

In this article, we have discussed some of the most common scholarly methods used within digital religion research to highlight typical strategies researchers employ in defining how the digital is viewed. By focusing on digital religion research, we demonstrated more concretely how scholars invested in studying digital media and contexts have often employed similar methods in very different ways. This, in turn, enabled us to highlight the complexity of defining and describing the field of digital research methods, as it comes with a set of varying assumptions about what constitutes the digital and what, specifically, is being connected or bridged between online and off-line contexts when digital methods are employed.

As digital methods continue to evolve, and as communication researchers continue to engage with digital contexts in their work, conversations such as these need to continue. The rise of digital methods does not mean scholars will or should abandon off-line methods or spheres, nor does it mean that questions we are able to ask in online studies can or should replace the kinds of questions we ask off-line. However, this article highlights the need to consider how off-line methods translate into digital ones. It also reflects on how online and off-line methods and contexts intersect within research. Most important, we have shown that the discussion of digital methods must

be active and reflective and should include questions about the environment, the tool, and the frame.

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