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Katherine L. Walters
University of Georgia, klw51525@uga.edu

Enid Truong
University of Georgia, etruong@uga.edu

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Abstract

Jeffery Lane explores the social worlds of youth in Harlem during the digital era through his unique approach, digital urban ethnography. Researchers use this ethnographic method to understand how social lives and meanings are co-constructed within digital and physical spaces. The digital and physical do not neatly represent each other but each provides specific ways to engage that both shape and are shaped by youth's social lives. As novice researchers, we read this work with an eye towards methodological choices and techniques. In particular, we hoped this work would provide us with an understanding of how to conduct research with youth on ways the physical and digital worlds interact to produce knowledge and meaning. This review discusses Lane's theoretical framework, three themes that highlight the potential of digital urban ethnography to construct unique findings, and the significance of Lane's work in terms of methodology and specific techniques/data construction methods.

Keywords

Digital Urban Ethnography, Digital Ethnography, Book Review

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Digital Urban Ethnography: A Book Review of *The Digital Street*

Katherine L. Walters and Enid Truong
University of Gerogia, Athens, Georgia, USA

Jeffery Lane explores the social worlds of youth in Harlem during the digital era through his unique approach, digital urban ethnography. Researchers use this ethnographic method to understand how social lives and meanings are co-constructed within digital and physical spaces. The digital and physical do not neatly represent each other but each provides specific ways to engage that both shape and are shaped by youth's social lives. As novice researchers, we read this work with an eye towards methodological choices and techniques. In particular, we hoped this work would provide us with an understanding of how to conduct research with youth on ways the physical and digital worlds interact to produce knowledge and meaning. This review discusses Lane's theoretical framework, three themes that highlight the potential of digital urban ethnography to construct unique findings, and the significance of Lane's work in terms of methodology and specific techniques/data construction methods. Keywords: Digital Urban Ethnography, Digital Ethnography, Book Review

Jeffery Lane explores the social worlds of youth in Harlem during the digital era through a new approach—digital urban ethnography. Digital urban ethnography does not simply add the "digital" to urban ethnography or "physical" to digital ethnography. Instead, this approach seeks to understand how social lives and meanings are co-constructed within digital and physical spaces. The digital and physical do not neatly represent each other but provide specific ways to engage that both shape and are shaped by youth's social lives. In particular, Lane is interested in how violence is promoted or prohibited through both realms.

As two novice researchers in educational technology, we are interested in how youth engage with digital spaces to better understand the lives of students and prepare educators with potential interventions. We read Lane's ethnographic work with an eye towards his methodological choices and techniques. In particular, we hoped his work would provide us with an understanding on how to conduct research with youth on ways the physical and digital worlds interact to produce knowledge and meaning.

Adding the "Digital" to "Urban Ethnography:" Theoretical Implications

Lane situates his work within the current urban ethnography literature and explores what it means to add observations on the "digital street" to traditional, "physical street" ethnographic approaches. Digital media (i.e., social networking sites) was a big part of his participant's lives, even when his study began in 2009. The physical and digital street both served to socially mediate the lives of the youth Lane studied. Each street allowed for the construction and curation of knowledge in different ways, utilized by the youth and adults he studied. The knowledge constructed on these streets also intersected in generative ways to produce opportunities and risks for youth, including violence. Lane layered the digital realm onto the physical to provide a unique look into the lives of his participants. Through this he provides a new way to understand how youth violence emerges and does not emerge, as well as, more broadly, a way to conduct ethnographies on youth with an online presence.

Lane's work prompts epistemic questions related to where and how knowledge is produced. Digital media, particularly video and image, carries with it an epistemic weight different from first- and second-hand (i.e., physical) accounts. The visual is often prioritized as a (closer) representation of truth. By viewing an image or video, anyone can become a first-hand observer. However, digitally-produced content may exist in a decontextualized, de-temporalized way. The context, including what happened before and after the video and what is outside the frame, is removed through a decision-making process of the author rarely if ever acknowledged, much less explicated. The digital content represents a single moment, however, online it will exist as potentially permanently-re-playable. An image or video may be used to construct an identity, for example, by a potential employer or state prosecutor. This potential has significant impact for Harlem youth, who must navigate the physical and digital streets within already stigmatized identities.

Accessing and Representing the Digital and Physical Streets

Lane moved to Central Harlem to be closer to Columbia University, where his wife attended as a graduate student. Lane attended a Harlem community meeting held by a local street pastor, referred to in the research as simply "Pastor." Lane's journey into his ethnography began when he opted in for Pastor's text message group. The text message group provided information to the adults in the neighborhood about violence in the area and intervention opportunities. Pastor and his associate, "Chief," introduced Lane to the community. Lane recognizes his introduction success was due to the routine Pastor and Chief had built years prior.

Lane expanded his outreach work throughout the study. Through his connections, Lane provided technological hardware to help Pastor build "the Lab," a hang-out space for youths equipped with computers, printers, and internet capabilities, which he then frequented to observe the youth's interaction with the digital realm. Lane worked in other outreach operations, interrupted confrontations, facilitated peace talks after violence, and lead workshops for summer employment programs (2019, p. 17-18). Outside of his outreach identity dependent on Pastor, Lane built his own identity by providing occasional car rides, conversing with young and adult community members, and playing basketball in a group nicknamed, "The Basketball Crashers" by one of the young players (2019, p. 19). As much as Lane involved himself in the community, he acknowledged his presence and different background.

Lane and his wife are both white, educated individuals who attended prestigious universities as graduate students. He acknowledged and identified himself as part of the "gentrification wave" slowly taking over Central Harlem (2019, p. 14). Through Pastor's reputation, Lane was placed in a better position to earn community trust. In one incident, a turning point in his experience, Lane was within close range of a violent incident involving firearms. Lane recounted a youth at the scene made the remark, "…this white boy got his cherry popped" (2019, p. 107). Pastor explained to Lane the remark was made in friendly jest. Later, Lane shared a laugh with the teen. Although this interaction acknowledged Lane's position as an outsider, it simultaneously illustrated Lane's role and acceptance in the community.

Data Collection and Analysis

Lane accessed youth's digital media presence in multiple ways including following or "friending" youth he met through his outreach work with Pastor and observing their activity in "The Lab." During his time online, he took screenshots of posts he wanted to follow-up with in-person. These screenshots were used as elicitation devices during interviews, allowing Lane to compare participant's words and actions on- and off-line. He requested access to non-public

spaces on social media, such as direct-messages, from youths with which he had developed rapport. Lane was interested in seeing how adults intervened in the youth's social lives and gained access to Pastor's cellphone—including contact lists, text messages, and group memberships.

Lane traced concepts originating in the physical neighborhoods, such as "street code" and analyzed the ways these played out on the "digital street." Importantly, Lane's data collection deliberately crossed the boundaries of digital and physical space. He followed up on events occurring in digital space in person and followed up on face-to-face interactions by asking participants to share how this interaction continued/changed online. Working between digital and physical spaces mirrored the ways his participants lived their lives.

Despite the multi-modal data Lane worked with, he chose to represent most of his data narratively, using direct quotes and posts. He engages with current literature and the data in an ongoing dialogue to frame and interpret his findings. Below we discuss how Lane collected, represented, and analyzed his data under three themes: gender, construction of identity, and risks and consequences. Although other themes are discussed in his work, we chose the three we found most compelling to represent the potential of his digital urban ethnographic method.

Gender

In his discussion of the relationship between the physical street and the digital street life of youths, Lane called attention to the unique influences of gender. He analyzed the romantic relationships and roles between boys and girls, as seen in the case of JayVon and Denelle. Lane observed a boy-dominated communication when JayVon approached Denelle with romantic interest in person. At one point, JayVon grabbed Denelle's arm to gain her attention. However, in the private space of online messages, Denelle sought JayVon's social media profile, added him as a friend, and sent him a private message. In the privacy afforded by the Facebook inbox, JayVon admitted to behaving differently than the "thugman" Denelle called him. The works of Best (2006) and Miller (2008) explain the dominating, tough male behavior from JayVon when in the physical streets as well as the unique ability of Denelle to control private communication channels with JayVon.

Girls faced a different dynamic than their male counterparts. Girls were nodes that connected the multiple neighborhoods that make up Central Harlem. Lane's analysis of Olivia's Facebook account showed Olivia had thousands of friends, most of them male and from varying neighborhood groups. Lane invited Olivia to an interview where he viewed her inbox and asked about her communication strategies with boys. Lane interpreted Olivia's decision to ignore inbox messages but respond to public wall postings as parallel to the public, physical, street displays and the power and control over digital conversation exerted by Olivia. By conversing with Harlem youths about their romantic interactions online and offline, Lane was able to discover a layer of female control in romantic interactions, which may not have been observable outside the digital realm.

Construction of Identity

Lane explores how both the digital and physical streets supported the construction of the youth's identities. By observing the digital and physical presences of his participants, Lane saw how "street culture flowed in schools, scholastic culture flowed onto the street" (2019, p. 78). Participants posted their own scholastic-accomplishments online and sent encouraging words to each other. This pro-scholastic behavior was not observed in previous, physically-based, ethnographies of urban youth engaged in violence (Anderson, 1999). Lane's participants also posted and verbally delivered taunts and threats of violence. Through interviews prompted

by screenshots, as well as observations, he found the youth he studied do not possess a single identity, but curate multiple identities and reputations on- and off-line, known as code switching. Youth described the work they did to manage their on- and off-line identities, focusing on the differing expectations for themselves over time and with different groups of people. For example, multiple participants explained how Facebook, accessible to adults, had to be handled differently than Twitter or, prior to both, Myspace, which did not have adult membership. In 2010, Facebook was not a place to "beef" because your family/adults shared this space. Layering the digital street over the physical street provided a new insight into the code-switching practices of urban youth.

Risks and Opportunities

Digital spaces offered instant communication for the Central Harlem youths. From finding romantic partners to receiving support for academic achievements, digital social platforms served to instantly connect the community. Lane observed the Pastor keeping up to date with potential youth violence and disseminating the information to supporting adult community members through texting, in-person conversations, and social media platforms (2019, p. 93). Lane recognized Pastor's use of digital platforms uniquely placed him between institutional roles, as depicted in Canada's work with the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) and "the old heads," as depicted in Anderson's work (1999). As Pastor and community adults used digital spaces to stay visible in the lives of the youths, those outside the community had similar access.

Lane showed the consequences of easily-accessible digital platforms through his analysis of prosecution case documents against Harlem youths. Lane uncovered how law enforcement collected, edited, and portrayed social media content leading to the arrest of many Central Harlem youths. Lane shared the story of Akil, a boy arrested with indictments that claimed Akil's "likes" "characterized him as a gang member from 129th street" (2019, p. 156). Lane used the story of Akil, and the arrest of other young boys, to illustrate how law enforcement engaged with social platforms, pulled elements out away from their contexts, and recreated these elements to construct arrestable offences. After the multiple arrests of young males around 129th street, many of Central Harlem youths became suspicious of surveillance lurking within digital social platforms and altered their use of social platforms citing fear and caution.

Significance to the Field

Throughout the book, Lane was clear about where he obtains information and how he uses it to make meaning. Additionally, he described his approach, digital urban ethnography, in detail in his appendix. Lane introduced us to a way of combining digital and physical ethnographic work, taking the lead from the digital and physical connection in participants lives. Lane described his approach as merging "…three ways of being and moving through the field. It integrates fieldwork on the ground and in the feeds and networks of a single set of subjects to see and compare more of what subjects say and do" (2019, p. 186). The layering of these modes requires comparing and contrasting information found in each, allowing for stronger conclusions (2019, p. 186). This methodology is increasingly relevant to youth researchers who, in 2020, are unlikely to have research participants without an online presence. Several methods Lane described may be particularly useful to youth researchers. First, using screenshots as an interview elicitation technique allows the researcher to make the youth aware their online presence is being observed, as well as prompt them to discuss in their own words the connections between off- and on-line actions. Secondly, following interactions and

events from on- to off-line and vice versa is critical to compare the youth's in-person actions and words to their digital counterparts. The comparison has the potential to uncover new understandings of youth's social lives. Additionally, there are three modes to consider: on the ground, online feeds, and networks. Personal networks exist both on- and off-line. Building an understanding of participants' social lives necessitates a fleshing out of their personal networks and their boundaries.

Finally, managing participant privacy and anonymity in digital urban ethnography can be difficult. Lane decided to use the actual name of the neighborhood where he completed his research because he argued the specific locality of his research was critical. However, he used pseudonyms for his participants. To check that participants could not be located based on the information provided in the book (i.e., Facebook posts, names of streets, neighborhood references) he used Google. He combined search terms to determine whether he had removed enough identifying information and made changes as needed. Despite this precaution, it only addresses one space—the digital. Securing privacy for participants on the ground while engaging so deeply with their lives on- and off-line remains a challenge.

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Author Note

Both authors are doctoral students in the Learning, Design, and Technology program at the University of Georgia. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Katherine L. Walters at klw51525@uga.edu and correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: Enid Truong at etruong@uga.edu.

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