



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:  
The 25th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers**  
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

## **AGENCY PERSPECTIVES ON INDUSTRY DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

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Feedback

### **Introduction**

Channel ecosystem changes and evolving internet literacy have publics the world over constantly adapting their online behaviors. Data on digital footprints is hoarded by industry stakeholders as the market for them grows. However, despite the saturation of analytic models at their disposal to digest and leverage this data, even with the breakthrough of LLMs, industry leadership often lives in a dissonant world – disjointed from not only their consumer publics but also other industry stakeholders. More behaviorally holistic comprehension is vitally needed within these leadership silos that are lost in the bias of their own hype cycles and echo chambers.

To meet this need, the application of ethnography expands beyond traditional scholarly anthropological and sociological settings into industry spaces. Feedback is one such player; our methodology is deeply rooted in applied digital ethnography. Our work has positioned us as a bridge between leadership with their publics and industry stakeholders.

It is our vital function to inform and provide value to these leaders; however, that value stems from an authentic connection to the experiences, wants, and needs of their audiences – hard truths included. Since our work also centers on doing public good, we often find ourselves in a place of tension between the realities of our subjects and the often dissonant perspectives of siloed leadership shaping their lives.

We also encounter some of the same methodological tensions between research techniques as our listening to public discourse can often provide a richer, more raw set of behaviors than a typical corporate reliance on internally-conducted surveys.

Leveraging Feedback's over 15 years of experiences and unique perspectives as a market ethnographic research agency, this paper aims to articulate the ways in which our work builds on multidisciplinary scholarly theory and ethnographic practice, and, as an olive branch toward more active collaboration and discussion, share some insight

Suggested Citation (APA): Tibert, D. (2024, October). *Agency Perspectives on Industry Digital Ethnography*. Paper presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

from our own applied practice with academic practitioner programs and communities (like AoIR).

## **Ethnographic Methodology in Industry**

Feedback's research design philosophy, an adaptive mix of methodologies, aligns with Karen O'Reilly's definition of ethnographic analysis – not as a stage in a linear process, but an iterative phase in a spiral where progress is steadily made from data collection to making some sense of it all for others (O'Reilly, 2009).

Our practice is, foremost, rooted in manual online fieldwork, listening to the stories being told in fully public informal discussion spaces. Using informal conversations has advantages and disadvantages, but we agree with the argument that benefits far outweigh the possible limitations – that these conversations reflect more realistic or naturalistic data with less performativity (Swain & King, 2022).

The ethical considerations of studying public informal discussion data are of vital importance to our practice - especially since we are so often in the position of advocating for vulnerable audiences. To this end, we agree with Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan's assertion that many internet users do not want their information to be private so much as they want it to only be used publicly in ways they find acceptable, and focus on each person's relationship to their information in a given context when making ethical considerations – consistently posing ethical questions and reflecting on research process in alignment with the *Internet Specific Ethical Questions* table they recommend in their chapter of *The Datafied Society* (Markham & Buchanan, 2017).

Expanding on this root method, we qualitatively and quantitatively code this informal discussion data in a relational database where we run our own content analysis. We additionally consider a wide spectrum of other information sources provided by clients, agency partners, and collaborating subject matter experts alike - bringing in multidisciplinary perspectives, and considering other analytic models and aggregated statistics weighed accordingly by bias and method. The important characterization of our research practices lies in the mix of methodologies and sources, anchored by ethnography.

We aim for multidimensionality through triangulation: using multiple methods, data sources, or perspectives to address a research question, mitigating any potential research biases (Bhandari, 2023). Our analysis is complicated by multiple channel sources; meaning we consider as many unique channels as possible within each study. We triangulate between different researcher perspectives on data, different theoretical frameworks necessary for synthesizing our data, and across qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Our research teams are comprised of scholars across the humanities and social sciences, while also drawing talent from diverse fields like computer science, healthcare, education, marketing, art/design, etc.

Ethnography serves as the central synthesis engine ensuring that direct listening to our subjects is prioritized in our analysis. It uniquely equips us to solve for bias across all

sources while establishing an internal ethical center that informs how data is collected, weighed, and communicated – enabling swift action without the cumbersome oversight of, say, an IRB.

The speed of research operations combined with our multimodal approach enables adaptability that is essential for producing insights on a timeline where they are most useful in-industry. Our competitive industry value lies in answering specific client questions, contextualizing existing datasets, and monitoring topics or issues with insights that are timely/varied/flexible enough not to break down when internet trends change.

## **B2B Applications and Impacts**

While the most obvious examples would feature insights around consumer behavior in order to cater products and services, it is the business to business application of this technique where we have the opportunity to show its nimbleness and reveal how discrete audience behavior can inform decision-making

For X industry client wanting to understand how fluid engineers make specification decisions on pipes we found fascinating conversations between new (just out of school) engineers and retired ones mentoring; we also helped illustrate those decision journeys as well as add where procurement intersects and the often opposing forces at work between ideal spec and final ordered product

In a project examining the value of a particular piece of CAD software for electronic appliance designers we uncovered it wasn't the CAD ability that was important but rather the software's ability to read and export files from a variety of programs - thereby changing the use case for loss-leader software provided by a parts distributor

Maybe most importantly in many B2B projects we were told by at least one corporate leader that "their audiences don't use social media" only to find them in droves among peers in discreet channels; this has happened in such varying stakeholders and industries such as physicians, insurance adjustors, facilities managers of sports arenas, teachers and school administrators, security consultants, site selectors, and more.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In conclusion, we assert that digital ethnography creates a fertile ground for multidisciplinary collaboration in both industry and scholarly research, and that each mode of ethnography has a lot to gain by collaborating and discussing methodology with each other.

Industry research, like Feedback's, has roots and sustaining connections in scholarly ethnography, and continues to carry forward that theoretical complexity as well as the centeredness on data ethics and public good. Industry research experience offers insight into how industry might be studied in kind. Likewise, it is vital to facilitate spaces,

like AoIR, for industry researchers to loop back into scholarly discourse, to mutually enrich the practices in both spaces.

## References

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