# Anonymizing in digitalized fieldwork
## An art-based blurring approach

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Embarking upon ethnographic research on social networking sites introduces unique challenges, particularly in safeguarding participant identities and grappling with consent-related dilemmas. As artificial intelligence (AI) evolves in sophistication, with search algorithms increasingly fine-tuned to unearth personal information, maintaining participant anonymity has become more complex. This is especially true given AI's advanced capabilities in deciphering linguistic irregularities and images.

In this article, I seek to confront and navigate longstanding and emergent ethical dilemmas encountered by anthropologists conducting fieldwork in increasingly digitalized milieus, focusing on collecting digital imagery such as social media posts. The challenges addressed include (1) the mitigation or prevention of harm to participants belonging to vulnerable communities; and (2) adherence to the GDPR (see below) while safeguarding the privacy of third parties featured in social media research, from whom informed consent might not have been procured.

## GPDR

In 2018, a significant development occurred in the sphere of data protection. The European Union (EU) instituted the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has come to be regarded as the most stringent privacy and security legislation globally. Its purpose is to shield EU citizens from commercial exploitation of their data, which is particularly relevant in an era where sharing personal information over the internet has become the norm.

However, this regulation has attracted criticism within academic circles. According to Herzfeld (2023: 3), the GDPR has come to exercise what might be considered an 'inappropriately inquisitorial presence' within academia. Indeed, as Engebrigtsen et al. (2020) note, anthropologists have found complying with this legislation challenging. This brings into sharp relief the balance that must be struck between rigorous research requirements and the necessary protection of personal data in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

While there has been an increase in guidelines addressing qualitative research and GDPR compliance within the European digital sphere (Herzfeld 2023; Yuill 2018), the procedural landscape of handling digital images and protecting identities remains under development (Góralska 2020). This article delves into my innovative exploration of an art-based approach during fieldwork among a culturally diverse Norwegian populace, sharing reflections on navigating challenges arising from conducting research on sensitive topics via social media and the inclusion of third parties.

While undertaking a research study centred on digital sociality within the Norwegian context in 2021, I was a novice to digital algorithms and metadata. However, in the process of securing the necessary permissions from the Norwegian National Centre and Archive for Research Data (NSD) to initiate fieldwork, it swiftly became evident that the blurred boundaries between private and public spheres in digital environments often obfuscate the determination of when to seek consent (Taylor et al. 2023), a conundrum that constitutes a point of contention in its own right (Góralska 2020: 49). Guidance remains sparse on handling data originating from screenshots of posts shared by research participants or third parties.

The GDPR mandates that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, unambiguous and acquired prior to data collection. Nevertheless, as Rysst (2020) underscores, there are instances in which the inclusion of third parties, from whom the anthropologist has not been able to secure informed consent, becomes necessary. This is often due to fieldwork's dynamic, enduring and unpredictable nature or because these third parties have participated in significant events that hold valuable insights for the researcher. Such events could catalyse the generation of novel understandings and knowledge, particularly in sensitive and taboo research areas (Rysst 2020: 191).

Therefore, the correct handling of screenshots emerges as a pivotal concern for adhering to the GDPR and ensuring harm reduction, as underlined by Eubanks (2017). During a nine-month ethnographic study within the arts and cultural sector in Norway, my research immersed itself in narratives of racism, discrimination, alienation, trauma, abuse, migration and war. This exploration unfolded within polarized debates around immigration and racism in Norway (Alghasi et al. 2020; Døving 2022; Naveen 2022; Salinas 2024a).

### Identifiability in Norway

Given the relatively small population of Norway and Oslo as a limited urban expanse, the sector of culturally diverse Norwegians within the arts and culture is notably restricted. Consequently, a central challenge that emerged was the protection of participant identities while collecting, storing and publishing screengrabs of their social media engagements on platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Another layer of complexity arose when posts shared by participants included posts from third-party individuals. While I acquired consent from each participant to track their online activities and capture screenshots of their posts and procured administrative approval to observe a closed Facebook group, these permissions did not fully address the conundrum of identity protection, particularly in the context of individuals victimized by cyberbullying, racism and harassment.

Most participants chose to be anonymized without explicitly mentioning the threat of harassment concerning my research. However, I took it upon myself to anticipate and mitigate any potential harm that my research activities could inadvertently inflict upon them. Only two participants expressed their disregard for anonymity, citing their pre-existing victimization by harassment and cyberbullying. This reinforces that consent in research collecting digital imprints is delicate and warrants continual re-evaluation throughout the fieldwork, writing and publishing processes.

It is imperative to remember that harm is contextually defined; hence, safeguarding participant welfare must be evaluated within each unique context. This ensures that the adherence to research ethics does not devolve into a mere procedural exercise or become disregarded altogether.

McKee and Porter (in Elgesem 2016) list some critical factors and their potential combinations that should be evaluated when considering the need for consent in digital research. These are (1) public versus private; (2) the sensitivity of the information; (3) the degree of interaction with the research participants; and (4) the vulnerability of the research participants. Therefore, it is impossible to have one general rule about obtaining consent, even if it might seem straightforward to deter-

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mine whether it is public or part of the digital commons. A rule of thumb when assessing this question relates to whether it is reasonable that the subject expects full publicity in their interaction (posting and sharing on the internet) or if they expect it to be limited (taking part in public discussion but in closed social media groups, for example). boyd (2014) highlights that communication on the internet differs from analogue communication in public spaces in terms of its persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability. The internet functions as an open archive. Postings and information on the internet are stored. They can be spread without the subject knowing who is involved in the resharing or who the new audience is: 'The context of the communication does not restrict the intended audience' (Elgesem 2016: 17). In addition, screen captures make personal information even more accessible since the person with access to given information can capture and reshare it. In this manner, personal information entrusted to internet sites, even where access is restricted, can be dug out and used for different purposes than the poster intended.

Venturing into ethnographic research within digital environments, I found myself navigating the uncharted territory of potential pitfalls, devoid of prior experience or concrete guidance. This led me to experiment with pseudo-anonymization strategies for participants' digital content. My goal is not to achieve total anonymity – which is virtually impossible with online data – but to curtail the traceability of the online information.

At the outset, I grappled with the challenge of purging images of all metadata, details that could facilitate participants' re-identification should the original content be unearthed through online searches. I soon discovered that the screenshots I captured preserved data such as the date and time of capture, the time zone, the type of smartphone employed and the geographical location of the image. To tackle this, I transferred the images to art and photo editing software, applying edits to pseudo-anonymize the screenshot images.

While removing metadata and image blurring could counteract searchability, the evolving sophistication of AI offers no guarantee of continued non-identifiability. Hence, when dealing with sensitive topics in digital realms and collecting digital traces, it becomes vital to judiciously assess each image's usability – even when blurred or altered.

### Artistic blurring

In the first month of my fieldwork, I commenced my exploration of editing software and blurring techniques, aiming to erase personally identifiable markers that could single out research participants. This led me to edit screen captures, blurring the background, covering faces and text with geometric shapes – sometimes blending these techniques with background blurring and removing individuals, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Owing to my background in oil painting, I found myself gradually applying my artistic skill set to the editing of screen captures and photographs taken of research participants. My initial experimentation involved using blurring techniques and painting with editing software. However, this process eventually led to the creation of entirely original imagery, which materialized into a travelling exhibition (Salinas 2024b) (Fig. 2). I shared these artistically edited photos with the research participants, elucidating my intentions regarding their usage.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the analytical and methodological potential of experimenting with images in addition to protecting the identity of research participants (see Salinas 2024b). However, the reader has to keep in mind that there are many possibilities (Salinas 2020). When experimenting with covering bodies with geometrical forms, softening and changing features or erasing features altogether, I quickly discovered that I wanted to retain and convey the power of the images in the posts shared by the participants without worrying about whether they could be searched for. So I experimented with altering the images by digitally painting over them.

Navigating the fine line between fully anonymizing an image and retaining its scientific relevance is a delicate balancing act. The potency of an ethnographic account often resides in its specificity and precision, the granular details lending textual meaning. Image blurring can obfuscate the unique 'texture' of human faces, objects and interactions, which are integral components of the image in question. In pursuing an artistic approach to image re-creation, I endeavoured to approximate the gestalt, or unified whole, of the original images shared by the research participants (Figs 3-5).

My de-identification process eschewed traditional filtering and pre-packaged editing techniques in software like Adobe Photoshop, such as pixel alteration (Tiidenberg 2018; Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda 2017). Instead, I embraced digital pencils and brushes, painting over the images. This allowed me to convey patterns and amalgamations of physical, biological, psychological or symbolic elements whose interrelationships construct a comprehensive image that transcends the sum of its parts (as illustrated in Fig. 3).

As my fieldwork unfolded, I collected fewer posts, focusing more on recording the visual postings in written form than through saving screenshots. Most posts I archived were ephemeral stories (no longer accessible after 24 hours) and public posts not regarded as limited access. I collected only a few screenshots featuring photos of the research participants alone or with friends. However, the critical reflection on the necessity of developing protective techniques for research in digital spaces, particularly for participants belonging to vulnerable groups, remained a constant. By 'vulnerable', I refer to a 'category of oppressed people who [are] susceptible to various structural harms' (Norsted 2021: 37; see also Bailey 2015).

### Conclusion

Employing an art-based approach can ensure an anthropologist's ethical responsibilities, and it should be emphasized that a researcher need not possess artistic prowess to apply such inventive techniques. The task can be accomplished using traditional methods such as drawing on paper with a pen or pencil (for examples see Taussig 2011) or creating collages using periodicals. The objective here is not to perfectly duplicate screen captures but rather to communicate the essence of posts, navigate ethical predicaments and align more closely with GDPR mandates.

In our rapidly digitalizing world, marked by swiftly evolving AI and potential legislative complexities of the GDPR, the future progression of data programs, as highlighted by Taylor et al. (2023), is challenging to anticipate. These programs may advance visual analysis capabilities, making identifying personal signs easier. If the development of identification protection or erasure techniques does not match this growth, researchers tasked with anonymizing visual data may encounter significant ethical hurdles. Consequently, ethnography focusing on sensitive topics, particularly those involving images or image-infused social interactions (Jaynes 2020), demands innovative ways of representing images within research. ●

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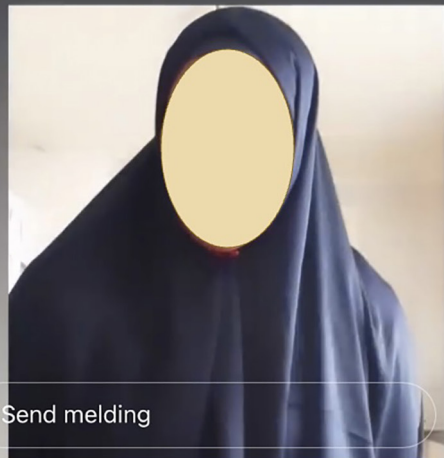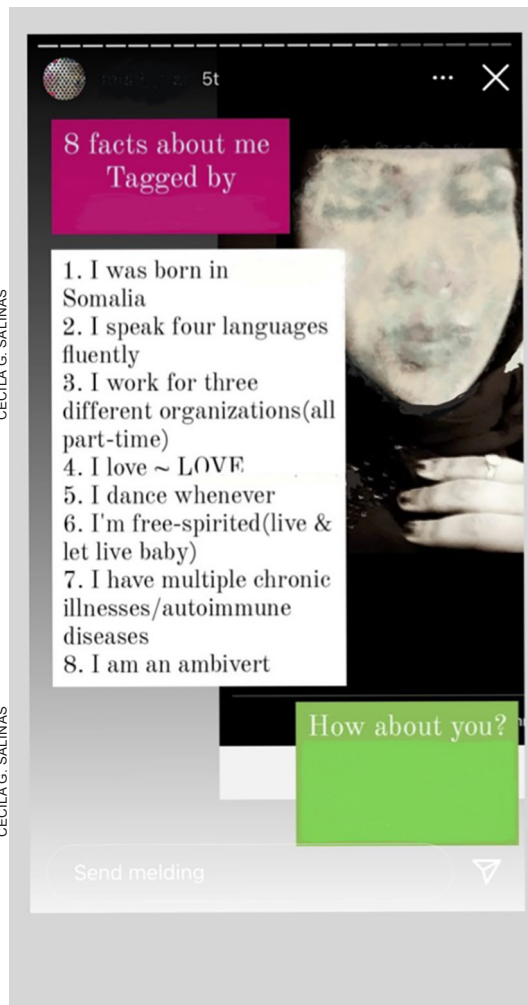

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**From top to bottom, left to right.**

**Fig. 1.** *A screenshot of an Instagram post made by a female research participant. A beige oval overlay veils her face. She dons a dark blue hijab and gazes directly at the camera. The text accompanying the image reads, 'I was beefing with whomever Karpe [a Norwegian rap duo] is beefing with' – followed by a pair of emoticons: a yellow face showcasing open eyes and clenched teeth, and an orange face expressing discontent, its eyes and eyebrows furrowed in displeasure. The subsequent text reads, 'and then she comes in', accompanied by two laughing yellow faces shedding tears of mirth. The image is set against a light, intentionally blurred background.*

**Fig. 2.** *This image presents a piece from the ARTivisme series, featuring a teenager – modelled after my son – seated on the floor, leaning against a wall emblazoned with the text pacos de mierda (fucking cops). He is engaged in recording the viewer through his phone. Dominating the centre of the image is a telescopic sight, its point of aim directed towards the teenager, engendering a disconcerting overlay across the entirety of the visual.*

**Fig. 3.** *A screenshot from an Instagram post featuring a research participant and a friend. The framing captures only half of each individual sitting at a table filled with various items. Among them are three plates, several glasses, a vase blooming with roses and an assortment of small dishes, each brimming with various foods.*
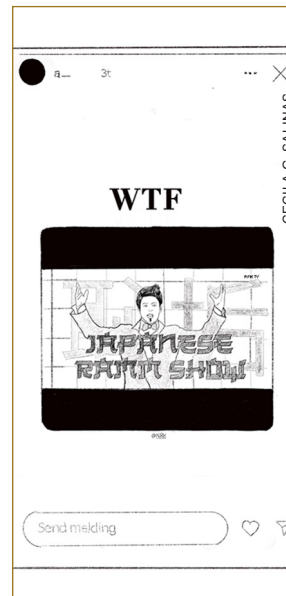
**Fig. 4.** *An artistically altered photograph featuring a female research participant's face, right arm and partial torso. She appears seated, with her gaze directed towards the camera, her right hand poised on her forehead. The original photograph has undergone significant transformation through art software; the colour of her hair and attire have been modified, and her face and body are adorned with intricate patterns. These alterations effectively obscure the specific details of her face, rendering recognition virtually impossible.*

**Fig. 5.** *A screenshot of an Instagram story post, the subject's identity carefully concealed using digital pencils. The image presents the research participant with her eyes closed, her left hand delicately poised over her chest, fingers splayed. Adjacent to this, there are three textual boxes, each carrying personal information that has been anonymized. The narrative provides eight insights about the subject, including her linguistic proficiency, the organizations she collaborates with, her outlook on love, her inclination towards dance and her health conditions. The researcher has deleted some of the information to maintain anonymity.*

**Figs 6 & 7.** *Two drawings emulating Instagram posts and stories, illustrating examples of widely shared public posts. The first showcases the portrait of a woman, identified as a Norwegian politician, with the accompanying text proclaiming, 'Online hate speech has to end.' The second drawing presents a man, arms aloft, with the caption reading 'Japanese Ramm Show'. These serve as visual exemplars of the public posts that form part of this study.*