

# Ethnography and Ethnographic Sensibilities in Political Science

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**Abstract:** In an era where artificial intelligence and chatbots make it enticing to interface with an entirely digital fieldsite, immersive ethnographic practices and sensibilities remain indispensable. Honing an ethnographic sensibility increases the fidelity of our theories to the real world, improves researchers' sensitivity to the ethical, emotional and moral stakes of research, and sparks creativity. As more researchers in Political Science adopt an ethnographic sensibility, they are increasingly engaging in *ethnography-plus* research, which may include other qualitative or quantitative methods. To assess the promise of these approaches, we consider new directions in digital research methods, especially for difficult-to-access research settings in authoritarian regimes that involve navigating the thorny ethics of state surveillance. Digital research with an ethnographic sensibility could benefit from an ontological and epistemological examination of what ethnography can and cannot deliver on. The emerging generation of researchers looking to embrace an ethnographic sensibility should practice participant observation, embrace reflexivity, and attune to the body and sensations.

**Keywords:** political ethnography; ethnographic sensibility; digital ethnography, mixed-method research; artificial intelligence; authoritarianism

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In a time when methods of remote data collection and analysis are ubiquitous in Political Science, ethnography can feel like a method apart. After all, these remote methods allow scholars to evaluate experimental interventions at scale, comb through unstructured “big data,” and organize these vast quantities of information with statistical models, increasingly with models deemed “artificial intelligence.” The COVID-19 pandemic curtailed fieldwork, and at least some researchers pivoted to more “experience-distant” research (Krause et al. 2021). How could they not, when prevented from being where they had hoped? And with a global resurgence of authoritarianism, the prospects remain dim for accessing many important sites.

Even as the perils of such risky fieldwork make desktop research more attractive, and sometimes necessary, we argue that immersive ethnographic practices and sensibilities are urgently needed. Honing an ethnographic sensibility (a) sparks creativity, invites play, and generates joy in research, (b) increases the fidelity of our theories to the real world by aiding researchers in discovery and justification, and (c) improves researchers’ sensitivity to the ethical, emotional and moral stakes of research.

We review recent trends in ethnographic work in Political Science, with a focus on the spread of ethnographic sensibilities. As more researchers adopt an ethnographic sensibility, they are increasingly engaging in what we call *ethnography-plus* research, which may include a variety of other methods. To assess the promise of these approaches, we consider new directions in digital research methods, especially for the study of difficult-to-visit research sites, that could represent emerging manifestations of an ethnographic sensibility even though they are not self-consciously framed as such. Researchers engaging the digital with an ethnographic sensibility could benefit from reviewing debates about the ontological and epistemological claims underpinning ethnography to expand their research practices. In return, traditional ethnography might benefit from engagement with digital forms.

We consider three sets of questions: First, how have ethnographic sensibilities taken root in the discipline? Second, what does such a sensibility mean in the digital era, as fieldwork increasingly entails viewing tweets in addition to, or instead of, interacting face-to-face? What are the pitfalls of digital ethnography conducted in surveillance states in an increasingly authoritarian world? Third, how is having an ethnographic sensibility compatible with other methods, especially those from a positivist tradition? Finally, we offer practical guidelines for developing such a sensibility, including practicing participant observation, embracing reflexivity, and attuning to sensations and other embodied aspects of research.

## **ADOPTING AND ADAPTING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SENSIBILITY**

Traditionally, ethnography is equated with the technique of participant observation, in which scholars immerse themselves in the social context and life-worlds of the people whom they study. This approach privileges proximity, with ethnographers seeking the “nearest possible vantage-point” (Schatz 2009, p. 307) to the phenomenon of interest, with embodied participation being crucial. As Bloch (1964) put it, “Mere passive observation, even supposing such a thing were possible, has never contributed anything productive to any science” (p. 65). Participant-observers thus engage actively with their interlocutors; they neither pretend nor aspire to be “invisible” (Pachirat 2009).

However, ethnography can also be a sensibility that informs a range of research methods and techniques (Pader 2006, Schatz 2009). A researcher with such a sensibility “cares—with the possible emotional engagement that implies—to glean the meanings that *the people under study* attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2009, p. 5, italics added). Thus, an ethnographic sensibility can inform interview techniques (Schaffer 2014, Fujii 2017, Hammersley 2017), focus groups (Cramer 2016), discourse analysis (Pader 2006), and other methods.

While Schatz’s discussion emphasizes “the people under study” (2009, p. 5), an ethnographic sensibility may be scaled beyond the individual. In fact, a wealth of scholars have applied it to the study of the state (Scott 1998, 2009, Wedeen 1999), representative democracy (Fenno 1977, Feldman 1989), international organizations (Weaver 2008, Adler & Pouliot 2011), and social movements (Beissinger 2002, Simmons 2016, Fu 2018), among other phenomena. Likewise, it can rely on close observation of people *in situ*, or it can use evidence such as government categories (Thompson 2016), human testimony through interviews (Fujii 201), and indeed any body of human artifacts. Finally, an ethnographic sensibility can inform multi-sited (Marcus 1995), comparative (Simmons & Smith 2019), patchwork (Günel & Watanabe 2024), and digital research strategies (Kozinets 2002, Hine 2015).

Schatz’s articulation of an ethnographic sensibility does not prescribe a specific way of doing research. Rather, it encourages those who scale their research differently, who approach case selection and site selection based on criteria other than representativeness, and who mine atypical sources of evidence to see themselves as potentially engaging in mutually intelligible conversations.

Have such scholarly conversations occurred? We reviewed over 125 works that explicitly adopt, adapt, or discuss an ethnographic sensibility, following introductions of the term by Pader (2006) and Schatz (2009).<sup>4</sup> Our systematic review shows that early uses ranged widely, invoking a general intellectual stance of openness (van Hulst 2008) and a “commitment...to chronicle aspects of lived experience” (Wedeen 2010, p. 257). Subsequently, the applied literature has coalesced around a shared understanding of what an ethnographic sensibility entails. From Pader, researchers emphasize the open and affective stance of an ethnographic sensibility, which helps cultivate “a feeling, an excitement, and a deep appreciation, maybe even a bit of awe, that human groups create the intricate, rich, and dynamic structures of living we call culture” (Pader 2006, p. 172). From Schatz (2009), they frequently cite the invitation to “glean...meanings” (p. 5), which in practice means interpretation, defined as “humans making meaning out of the meaning making of other humans” (Pachirat 2006, p. 374). This can entail “see[ing] the world through the eyes of...interlocutors” (Fu & Simmons 2021, p. 1696), to make oneself “sensitive to the everyday lived realities of people under study in order to shed light on

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<sup>4</sup> We attempted to comprehensively identify works in Political Science, broadly defined, that explicitly used the term “ethnographic sensibility.” We identified 128 articles and books that fit these criteria by exhaustively combing through Google Scholar search results for this term and its variants, and additionally checking through all of the work citing Pader (2006) or Schatz (2009). Not all work that fit our criteria adopted an ethnographic sensibility to the same degree. We also review other work that adopts an ethnographic sensibility without using the term, but we couldn’t systematically search in the same way.

wider social and political practices, relationships, and webs of meaning” (Geddes 2024, p. 451). Bishara (2021) invokes her ethnographic sensibility “to understand how actors made sense of their experiences” (p. 1728), and Moncada (2021) relates that “an ethnographic sensibility enabled me to better grasp the fluid nature of the relationships among different actors in the field, how they perceive its different dimensions across space and time, and how actors then reason from their experiences” (p. 52). Researchers adopting an ethnographic sensibility will want to engage both aspects of this concept, working to glean meanings on one hand, and adopt a stance of wonder and curiosity on the other. Both aspects highlight the embodiment of research, as an ethnographic sensibility is alive to possibilities, attuned to sensations in the body, and even playful (Taylor 2022).

Not all researcher efforts to “glean the meanings” of people under study must be self-consciously interpretive, but interpretive practices are what most of these authors describe, even if not by name. A unifying feature of the ethnographic sensibilities that researchers have embraced is attention to “banal, everyday patterns rather than exceptional moments” (Parkinson 2022, p. 429). Or in Krause (2021)’s words, “knowledge gained from ethnographic sensibility and (limited) immersion – noticing, observing, and overhearing mundane aspects of everyday life – allows for grasping the complexity of social life as encountered rather than as expected” (p. 331). The task of drawing insight out of unexceptional moments may be enhanced by an interpretive approach, as suggested by Pachirat’s invocation for researchers to see the world in a grain of sand (2006).

Among the many reasons that a researcher might adopt an ethnographic sensibility, the emerging literature suggests that three are paramount: encouraging creative, even playful, generation of new knowledge; improving the fidelity of theory to the world; and sensitizing researchers to ethical, moral, and emotional aspects of their work.

First, an ethnographic sensibility can spark creative approaches to research design, data collection, interpretation, and writing. Cramer (2016) has become an important touchstone in American politics and beyond, as she combines an ethnographic sensibility – what she calls a “method of listening” – with focus groups and survey data to explore how rural consciousness in Wisconsin leads to behavior that defies the predictions of standard economic voting models. She conducted her focus groups in diners, coffee shops, and gas-stations with more immersion than the typical focus group study. Importantly, she highlighted this approach in her book’s methodological chapter, which detailed her manner of dressing, the car she drove, and the University of Wisconsin-branded tchotchkes she gave as tokens of appreciation, all important details for contextualizing her findings. Other works that are influential for their creativity include Scott (2017), who brings an ethnographic sensibility to long-run patterns of development. Likewise, Wedeen’s (1999) interpretations of spectacle, confabulations, and humor in Syria render strategies of authoritarianism more legible and Wood’s (2003) insights from ethnographic observations of map-making exercises enabled her to theorize about how the pleasure of asserting agency motivates costly collective action in civil war. Creativity extends beyond research design and analysis to writing as well, as Pachirat (2017) memorably couches methodological arguments about ethnography in the genre of a play.

Second, insights from an ethnographic sensibility can increase the fidelity of social science theories to the social world. An ethnographic sensibility most directly informs inferences from traditional fieldwork (Fujii 2015). Yet, even in subfields where fieldwork is not common and participant observation is difficult, an ethnographic sensibility can improve theoretical fidelity, lead to new insights, and open new research possibilities (Nair 2021). For example, Pouliot (2016) is not able to participant-observe within international organizations because of access restrictions. Instead, he brings an ethnographic sensibility to interviews and documents to show that practices of international diplomacy produce an international “pecking order” of inequality (pp. 275-76). Likewise, Mourad & Norman (2019) use their close vantage point based on a combined three years of fieldwork to illuminate how states are attempting to shift the international institutions designed for refugee resettlement by reclassifying individuals seeking refugee status as economic migrants.

A related trend is the self-conscious adoption of ethnographic sensibilities by normative political theorists. Herzog and Zacka (2019) argue that ethnographic work can help theorists understand what people value, diagnose obstacles actors face when making choices to better understand moral responsibility, and evaluate the moral value of unspoken social practices. Zacka et al. (2021: 386) argue that theorists in this tradition “anchor their theoretical reflection within closely textured, ‘thick’ descriptions of the social world” and let “phenomena breathe on the page before putting order into them.” Zacka (2017) applies this to develop theory regarding the moral choices faced by street-level bureaucrats. Longo (2018) extends the political philosophy of borders with arguments derived from close attention to the United States.

Political theory about the politics of sight also builds on ethnographic work. In a reinterpretation of Pachirat’s (2011) ethnographic “politics of sight,” English & Zacka (2022) argue that making distasteful acts visible does not necessarily mobilize opposition to them. Castelló (2025) extends the debate, arguing that both have missed important impediments to a politics of sight because Western language does not self-evidently conceptualize animals as beings that can experience violence. As the discipline has debated how ethnography engages with evolving standards of transparency and data access (Elman & Kapiszewski 2014, Jacobs et al. 2021), this exchange by normative theorists revisiting Pachirat’s extensive ethnographic material illustrates how theorists with an ethnographic sensibility can engage in reinterpretation and critique, while exposing new avenues of moral concern (Longo and Zacka, 2019).

Third, an ethnographic sensibility can sensitize researchers to the moral and ethical aspects of their work, which are particularly thorny for scholars working on political violence and social movements. Researching political violence and contentious politics is difficult using any approach; there can be life-and-death stakes. Often, researchers cannot safely learn even the descriptive facts that would make researching the causes and consequences of violence possible. Ethnographers would seem to be particularly disadvantaged because immersion in violent contexts places interlocutors, researchers, and others at risk. Yet, an ethnographic sensibility holds the promise of developing and justifying theories of political violence by helping researchers learn from immersion when possible, while gleaning insights even when it is not. Wood (2003) offers new insights about the “pleasure in agency” in motivating civil war participation. Observing the pride of El Salvadorean *campesinos* as they drew maps of their accomplishments challenged rational-actor models with evidence that could only be collected

at close range. For Shesterinina (2016, 2021), distance-near observation generates the insight that when individuals are deciding whether and how to mobilize in conflict, the meanings they give the conflict are crucial. Parkinson (2023) theorizes how pre-existing quotidian networks shape the mobilization that sustains conflict far from the front lines, and how these networks are in turn transformed during conflict. Knowing when not to get closer is important too. In studying dangerous phenomena such as kidnapping by armed groups in Latin America, it is impossible and irresponsible to try to directly observe the violent action as it unfolds, so the closest near-vantage point may instead be conducting interviews with the actors most directly involved. For example, in a recent study of cooperation between armed groups in kidnapping, Gilbert (2025) combines onsite with offsite interviews of Colombian kidnappers and hostage recovery personnel to better understand the context that shapes the conditions under which armed groups work together.

In the social movement space, ethnographic research can be especially advantageous in uncovering hidden mobilization tactics. For example, Hassan (2024) collects data from Sudan to revise theories of political communication and protest coordination, showing that protesters in 2018-2019 responded to regime repression by planning parallel protests far from the sites announced on social media (“jittering”) and planning contingent protests to distract security forces if crackdowns against main protests became severe (“lightening” or in Arabic, *takhfif*). Hassan argues that it is necessary to “learn from in-depth, real-time engagement from dissidents themselves about their subversive mobilization tactics” (p. 165). Likewise, Fu (2018) follows labor activists in China for eighteen months, allowing her to theorize “disguised collective action” (2017), a form of unconventional mobilization that straddles traditional collective action and individualized contention. In her methods appendix, Fu (2017) argues that without such long term and immersive participant observation among labor activists, she would have only been able to glean their “public transcripts” (Scott 1990) which were sanitized versions of how they actually mobilized.

This literature also makes a powerful argument for why an ethnographic sensibility remains useful even when full immersion is impossible. Krause (2021) argues for the benefits of “uneven immersion,” as an “ethnographic sensibility and ethnographic methods need not be limited to researchers who spend long periods of time in the field” (p. 338). And where the lies, deceptions, and silences of interlocutors challenge the uncritical treatment of informant interviews as “raw data” about conflict, Fujii (2010) shows how an ethnographic sensibility can help researchers draw inferences through attention to “meta data.” Rumors, fabrications, denials, evasions, and silences can be observations in their own right, rather than merely inconvenient causes of missing or misleading data. When the threat of violence precludes traditional ethnography, adopting an ethnographic sensibility can be essential for learning how politics operates while attending to the moral responsibility of keeping ones’ interlocutors safe.

## **WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHIC SENSIBILITY IN THE DIGITAL AND AI ERA?**

Having made the general case for an ethnographic sensibility, we turn to ethnography in the digital and AI era, when human beings increasingly create knowledge with the aid of artificial

intelligence. Does AI-enabled research hamper one's abilities to adopt an ethnographic sensibility? Is it possible to interpret data generated by machine learning through an ethnographer's lens? Is there value in treating a chatbot as a feeling, sensing interlocutor, as one might in any interview or conversation setting? What is gained and lost when the engagement with one's interlocutors is devoid of many contextual cues such as the physical setting, the people that surround them, and other auditory or visual pressures that may affect how they relate to the researcher?

An apparent lacunae in the literature on digital ethnography in the discipline means that there are no clear answers to these questions yet. This invites scholars to grapple with how it is possible in practice to adopt an ethnographic sensibility when one's research is ensconced in the world of chatbots, who also can even seem to communicate their "emotions" to interlocutors. The paucity of literature on digital ethnography in Political Science is notable, especially relative to cognate disciplines such as sociology, surveillance studies, and anthropology. In these adjacent fields, digital ethnography is known as "netnography" (Kozinets 2002) or "cyber-ethnography" (Ward 1999), which treats the internet as an "embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon" that is fused with offline lives (Hine 2015). Such digital ethnography requires long-term immersion in the online sites to make sense not only of the public product—the tweet, emoji, photo, or video—but also of how people *make meaning* of the tweets, emojis, photos, or videos that are being posted, the *norms* governing particular online communities, as well as the culture, visual, and affective *contexts* of their digital behavior. Immersion means "living online, living onsite" so that the researcher isn't simply collecting large troves of tweets or blogs but inhabits the virtual world, treating chatrooms like neighborhoods (Wang & Liu 2021). As a practice, digital ethnography is broadly marked by five principles, including multiplicity, non-digital centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy (Pink et al. 2016).

To be sure, political scientists have long studied the digital world and used digital technologies to interview, survey, or conduct experiments. Yet, studies of online political behaviors such as censorship and state-fabricated social media content (e.g. King et al. 2017), networked societies (e.g. Castells 2012), social movements (e.g. Munger & Phillips 2022) or those using crowd-sourced data (e.g. Benoit et al. 2016) are not engaged in digital ethnography. Although these studies analyze digital data such as government-fabricated social media content, their goal is to capture large amounts of such posts in order to both quantify volume bursts and descriptively categorize the content of such posts (King et al. 2017). Even qualitative coding of online content may not be ethnographic if the goal is to classify such content into pre-existing coding categories, as in a recent study on how Wikipedia's content changed over time to produce anti-fringe content (Steinssen 2024).

Adopting an ethnographic approach to study the digital world in practice may require researchers to combine analyzing tweets with asking people how they make meaning of the tweets or how they might interpret their revolutionary actions being described as a "Twitter revolution" (e.g. Tufekci 2017). Short of direct participant observation or interaction with participants, researchers may also glean meanings from combining a close reading of the discourse of online expressions, tweets, or visual/auditory data. Doing so arguably constitutes a non-immersive ethnographic sensibility *when paired with deep contextual knowledge* of the

political and digital environment. For example, in analyzing the discursive frames that Chinese bloggers use when tweeting about police brutality, Fu & Göbel (2024) combine a word-embedding model with a close reading of a sub-sample of such tweets to generate a typology of narratives used by protestors in a heavily censored digital environment where interviews and participant observation with these bloggers is impossible. Their ethnographic knowledge of protestors in China is critical to interpret what kinds of people these bloggers were, infer their class background from their written language, and to understand the environment of surveillance.

Alternatively, Krafft & Donovan (2020) ethnographically trace a particular rumor originating on the website 4chan to show how misinformation narratives develop and spread across the Internet despite skepticism. Calasanti & Gerrits (2023) analyze social media posts to understand racialized responses to women leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their ethnographic sensibilities lead them to laboriously read each conversation approximately in real time and collect screenshots, rather than “scraping” the data *en masse* post-facto. This allows them to be “in” the public square as much as possible to better understand the back-and-forth responses and “cultivated a close proximity to the Twitter engagement” that had them “returning regularly to each of the women’s feeds throughout data collection” (6).

While many practical considerations for conducting digital ethnography are similar to those found with offline ethnography, the virtual field site invites new considerations. With respect to reflexivity and positionality, broadly defined as self-awareness of one’s own power and assumptions in relation to subjects, the virtual world allows or even obligates the researcher to adopt “avatars” of themselves, “which shapes not only our identity but our social life inworld” (Boellstorff et al 2012, p. 75). Whereas the ethnographer in the physical world is almost always playing themselves embedded in the field, the digital ethnographer researching gaming behavior, for example, is required to choose an avatar or a character, the choice of which influences their positionality vis a vis other participants.

### *Ethnography and Digital Authoritarianism*

Digital ethnography becomes more appealing as vanishing research grants, travel restrictions, and democratic backsliding make in-person ethnographic research harder. In authoritarian regimes, or even mature democracies like the United States undergoing authoritarian “shocks” under the second Trump administration, offline ethnography on politically sensitive subjects can be a risky endeavor. Digital ethnography offers an alternative not only to gain access to otherwise hard to reach sites but also to “avoid the field goggles” of long-term physical immersion, thereby minimizing some forms of bias (Kapiszewski et al. 2024). Yet even for offline ethnography, the rise of digital authoritarianism prompts new considerations.

Since the work of the ethnographer begins well before entering the field, digitization makes enormous bodies of information available in advance. Scholars can now digitally scope out topics that would have been hard to conceive of studying before (Böcū 2024). Today’s authoritarianism does not block connections with the outside world; to the contrary, it is “networked” (MacKinnon 2011), promising (though not necessarily delivering) some degree of



access for the ethnographer. By itself, this is a welcome development, but the scholar embarking on an ethnographic study should be wise to new risks.

In the past, ethnographers studying amongst ordinary people might have felt safely distanced from the regime and its power. Toiling in obscurity, they might have gone unnoticed by those outside the community of study (Stroup & Goode 2023). Today, digitization brings visibility which can expose scholars to direct and intense scrutiny if an authoritarian bureaucrat, an anti-intellectual elected representative, or a concerned social activist decides to target them, justified or not (Knott 2019). This may be true in authoritarian context: a national regime, a regional or local government, a social movement organization, a multinational corporation, and so on.

Given the surface resemblance between ethnography and spycraft (Driscoll & Schuster 2018), ethnographic work contains the ongoing potential for an irruptive visibility that can endanger the researcher and informants alike. Few care about the work of the ethnographer until suddenly they do. Even in the past, no ethnographer should have expected to be ignored by powerful actors, but today, such hubris would be reckless, and researchers should prepare for hostile encounters (Schwedler & Clarke 2018, Driscoll 2021). This has implications for topics selected and publication choices made, but also for the research process itself. Ethnographers can engage in crucial digital “hygiene,” but they cannot encrypt their faces or fully hide their movements. And while they typically enjoy the privilege of leaving the field when their work is done, their interlocutors usually do not enjoy the same luxury.

Ethnographers working in authoritarian contexts should therefore assume that their public behavior and private communications are being monitored carefully and effectively; digital authoritarian regimes treat anyone in their sights as worthy of monitoring (Schlumberger et al. 2024). What this means varies by topic, as well as by the ethnographers’ behavioral and communicative choices. Unlike Argentina’s “bureaucratic authoritarianism” in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which sought to create predictability (O’Donnell 1988), today’s authoritarian practices are dynamic and unpredictable. If an ethnographer participates in an opposition rally by holding a sign with an anti-regime slogan and shouting through a megaphone, they likely have crossed a line. But what if the ethnographer attends the rally, silently taking notes or making mental notes to write down later? What if the ethnographer attends an art exhibit critical of the regime? Would it help if the ethnographer also attended pro-regime events? And most crucially: who decides if the ethnographer has done something objectionable?

There are few truly red lines in today’s digital authoritarianism. Instead, there are shifting sands, as what is acceptable today could become unacceptable tomorrow. What today is tolerable for a bureaucrat in Ministry A might be viewed as unacceptable and actionable by a bureaucrat in Ministry B; tomorrow it could be the reverse. This has become true even in longstanding democracies like the United States that have begun to deploy digital authoritarian practices, such as accessing sensitive personal data through the Department of Government Efficiency and eliminating government oversight of AI. In 2025, an ethnographer studying undocumented migrants or student activists in the United States could scarcely go unnoticed by the Trump regime. Given how saturated society has become with digital tools, such an ethnographer would inevitably leave digital traces on social media or other platforms that render them vulnerable to state repression.

At a high level of abstraction, the ethnographer working in digital authoritarian contexts has the same task as ever—to produce socially embedded research. But what that means is different than in the pre-digital era, and we accordingly should adjust our ontology of the social. In the contemporary era, ethnographers might consider asking interlocutors to “walk through” their feeds, explaining how they navigate the digital landscapes they encounter. Ethnographers should also learn as much as possible about the algorithms that shape the digital settings in which individuals find themselves (Christin 2020), just as ethnographers in the past would prepare themselves for the field by learning the historical and cultural context of a people they were about to embed with.

The social settings in which ethnographic researchers embed themselves can seem like what Allina-Pisano (2009, p. 64) elsewhere calls a “kaleidoscope of fabulae.” The reason is simple: with digital authoritarianism, the regime has extraordinary tools for rendering citizens legible. Under China’s social credit system, for example, individuals acquire a “data self” that is not coterminous with their “bio-self,” and their citizenship behaviors are digitally scored by the degree of “trustworthiness” (Cheung & Chen 2022). All the more reason for citizens to “lie low” and reveal information only when it is absolutely necessary. To embed oneself ethnographically in such contexts is to view how performances advance themselves as truths; how commitments are half-made and half-unmade; how nagging suspicions haunt the information that feeds the public sphere; and how rumors and half-baked heuristics pervade everyday life (Brown 2023).

In such contexts, the liberal assumptions that often undergird research on politics become problematic. Choice, transparency, and information—all social goods in liberal environments—can become something more sinister under digital authoritarianism. Imagine stumbling upon a corruption scheme orchestrated by a local regime official. What kinds of vulnerabilities emerge when something the regime wanted to keep hidden has now been spotted? Ethnographers are generally expert at identifying and interpreting silences. They need to be especially good at this task when they work in digital authoritarian contexts.

A virtual ethnographer may be shielded from rubber bullets, revolutionary chaos, or kidnappings, but they and their interlocutors still risk being surveilled and digitally attacked by state and non-state actors alike. Consider a researcher conducting participant observations of online self-censorship behaviors, digital espionage, and “surveillance culture/society” (Lyon 2018). They must assume that their digital interactions are being monitored by a third party—a corporation and/or a government that has a record of their digital footprints. In authoritarian contexts where self-censorship online is the norm, an ethnographer must consider whether to post publicly in support of a cause at the request of their participants (Wang & Liu 2021). Moreover, without having access to the physical or audio-visual cues of a respondent’s surroundings, it can be especially difficult to effectively manage the risks that participants may face (Kapiszewski et al. 2024). Ethical decisions continue after the research is completed, such as whether and how to “exit” digital communities, especially when digital research dissemination can elicit real-time responses from participants (Reich 2015).

### *Ethnography and Large Language Models*

Having considered embracing ethnographic sensibility in the digital era, we must also consider how this squares with the trend toward AI. Political scientists are increasingly embracing large-language models (LLMs) as a frontier of computer-aided research methods, often deemed “artificial intelligence.” The field is moving fast and the capabilities of LLMs are changing, but they generally generate responses to user queries based on massive (and sometimes illegally harvested) training datasets. These models are useful for improving more traditional models in quantitative research (Halterman 2025). However, some researchers have gone further, proposing that “silicone samples” from LLMs “can be treated as effective proxies for specific human subpopulations” (Argyle et al. 2023, p. 337). As survey costs increase, and response rates have declined, it is easy to understand why prompting an LLM to answer questions from a certain research subject perspective might be an enticing option.

However, Bisbee et al. (2024) reject this optimism, showing that while LLMs can recover averages of survey responses, these “synthetic data” are “not reliable for statistical inference” because there is less variability in LLM “responses” to survey questions than humans. Not surprisingly, qualitative scholars are also skeptical that LLMs can substitute for directly interacting with participants, or for the work that researchers do in textual analysis. In fact, recent research by Ashwin et al. (2025) shows that LLMs make significant, non-random errors when coding interview transcripts of Rohingya refugees, who are not well-represented in the training data. They conclude that “using large language models for qualitative analysis can introduce serious bias.” Even the more optimistic researchers suggest that LLMs will need to be benchmarked against human subjects (Kozlowski & Evans 2025), so why avoid human subjects in the first place?

For those with a self-consciously honed ethnographic sensibility, treating chatbots or LLMs as a substitute for human interaction instinctively feels irresponsible. Even if models were to become accurate at predicting responses from social groups, or even specific individuals, we could never know this without triangulating with research directly interacting with human subjects, either offline or online. Moreover, much of what makes ethnography insightful is the attention to “metadata” (Fujii 2015) around an interaction, or particularly surprising words and actions by interlocutors that cannot be captured with a model statistically predicting what someone might say or do. Such unexpected responses are “hallucinations” from an LLM, but data from a person. The primacy that ethnography places on embodied research experiences, especially participant observation, suggests that ethnographers and researchers cultivating an ethnographic sensibility will find little use for querying chatbots, no matter how limited access to field sites becomes. It is precisely the variable, the emotional, the human, that is core to these methods. Replacing data from interactions in the field with predictive text from a giant model of conditional averages hardly seems like a fair trade.

## **HOW AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SENSIBILITY EXPANDS OPPORTUNITIES FOR “ETHNOGRAPHY-PLUS” RESEARCH**

As the concept of an ethnographic sensibility diffuses, it invites non-ethnographers to take inspiration from the ethnographic tradition as they conduct their research. Taking a “big tent”

approach, we consider these scholars to be doing *ethnography-plus* research. Recognizing the risk of being too inclusive and diluting the essence of ethnography, however, we follow Schatz (2009) who cautions that “[i]t seems unlikely that a scholar could operate with an ethnographic sensibility without having at some point conducted participant observation...” (p. 6). Complicating matters, ethnography-plus work occurs in professional environments where particular labels, like “ethnographer,” acquire particular meanings. Some might claim the label for themselves, even when the fit is questionable. Others may demur, even when the descriptor is apt (Schatz 2009, pp. 8-9).

Given the time, immersion, vulnerability, and commitment required of ethnographers, what are the prospects for “mixed methods” approaches that combine ethnography with non-ethnography? How far can an ethnographic sensibility extend? Some examples illustrate the possibilities for using surveys, experiments, statistical text analysis and other experience-distant methods with an ethnographic sensibility.

### *Research Design*

An ethnographic sensibility can improve the internal and external validity of otherwise non-ethnographic research by shaping the questions researchers ask and change how they conceptualize and measure phenomena as “variables.” It can also refine survey sampling strategies with more sensitivity to the lifeways of target populations, thereby making experimental treatments more similar to the political phenomena that are familiar to the lived experience of interlocutors. Sherman & Strang (2004), Levy Paluck (2008), and Thachil (2018) have called for the integration of ethnography with experiments and surveys, which have traditionally been perceived as odd pairings. This is because ethnographic researchers tend to notice and prize complexity while eschewing “all else equal” claims while experimentalists try to hold all else equal to isolate the effect of a particular variable. Ethnographic researchers almost invariably collect their data personally while many experimentalists rely on teams of enumerators and have little personal contact with the setting of data collection. The researchers who have taken up the call to incorporate more ethnographic modes of research in experiments tend to draw these two ends closer together via personal proximity to the data collection or interpretation.

Although relative few studies in Political Science have taken up Levy Paluck’s (2008) call for “experimental ethnography,” we suspect that more than a few experimentalists draw on an ethnographic sensibility to design studies, but that this practice is under-reported. For example, Bateson (2020) experimentally examines “strategic discrimination” against women and people of color running for US office. She quotes several candidates reflecting on the dynamic she experimentally documents, but Bateson also experienced these dynamics first-hand while running for elected office in California and designed her experiments with this experience as a guide. We can understand why such a personal reflection might be jarring to peer reviewers used to research that is justified in deductive, experience-distant, “objective” ways. But it is troubling that the marginalized and sometimes stigmatized place of ethnography in the discipline might incentivize scholars to not report an ethnographic sensibility that informs their experimental design. This cuts against norms of analytic transparency in the research process and suggests we may be undercounting the influence of ethnographic sensibilities in Political

Science because of practical disincentives. It also perpetuates the impression that ethnography is the “junior partner” to “more important” methods, even when it generated the key insight.

Under-reporting ethnographic approaches or insights need not be the enduring pattern. Increasingly, multi-method researchers are adopting an ethnographic sensibility in their own work and appreciating it in the work of others. One approach has been to incorporate ethnographic insights into the conceptualization and measurement of key variables and the design of experimental treatments in survey experiments (Pérez Bentancur & Tiscornia 2024). Another way is to show how sustained fieldwork can improve more distant observation methods by improving sampling, non-response, and construct- and measurement-validity. For instance, ethnographic observation over fifteen months inspired Thachil (2018) to recommend worksite sampling as an alternative to residence-based sampling for certain types of surveys and survey designs that “word questions in the specific experiences and vernaculars of respondents in ways that reduce the artificiality of the experiment” (p. 284). As Thachil (2018: 282) notes, “many survey experiments utilize scenarios intended to closely mimic real-life situations. Without prior knowledge of such situations, researchers are likely to default to boilerplate templates bearing little resemblance to the respondent’s reality.”

This approach to “ethnographic surveys” has influenced the designs of other surveys. For example, Auerbach & Krusk-Wisner (2020) highlight the importance of immersion as built upon sustained fieldwork that “enabled the careful construction of survey instruments appropriate to their particular contexts” (p. 1121). Likewise, Auerbach & Thachil (2020) report the results of “ethnographically informed conjoint survey experiment to a unique sample of 629 slum leaders across 110 slums in two north Indian cities.” Khoury (2020) follows this tradition, explaining why “[i]mmersive field research can help scholars navigate sensitivity” when surveying at-risk and hard-to-reach populations, such as activists in the context of Syria’s civil war. Miller (2024) introduces virtual reality survey experiments as a means of immersing survey respondents in a context that mirrors real-life situations. Recognizing that it is difficult to tell whether individuals will report gang violence to police from a text-based survey experiment, Miller argues that embedding his intervention to encourage reporting gang violence in a 360-view VR experience “makes respondents more likely to report attitudes and behaviors that reflect their actions in real-world scenarios” (p. 15).

In case study research, Simmons & Smith (2019, 2021) argue for rethinking comparison with an ethnographic sensibility to move past the inferential limitations of controlled comparisons (Seawright 2021). Close-range observation with an ethnographic sensibility can unsettle seemingly natural social categories and prompt the question: “[w]hat is this a case of?” (Soss 2021). Answering this question can prompt new theories, such as what we might learn by viewing welfare claims as a form of political participation (Soss 2000); divergent labor arrangements as fundamentally similar (Locke & Thelen 1995); or jihadist preachers as academics (Nielsen 2017). Greater reflexivity can make the role of contextual knowledge in case selection and analysis more transparent — what Knott (2025) calls “informed intuition” — and reassure future scholars that knowing something about your cases before going in is not a methodological crime.

### *Interpretation*

An ethnographic sensibility also shapes the interpretation of evidence collected and analyzed using non-ethnographic methods. Jones (2017) studies social engineering in the United Arab Emirates with an unusual combination of “palace ethnography, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and experiments” (p. 10). For her, the ethnographic immersion “offers a valuable look into the ‘black box’ of autocratic reasoning,” which shapes how she interprets focus groups and experiments. Focus groups and experiments suggest that when UAE leaders show interest in the youth, this makes them feel elite, “triggering status consciousness and a feeling of specialness.” Yet from her palace vantage point ethnography, Jones is confident that “the crown prince probably believed such direct praise would help motivate youth to achieve, showing them how much he cares” (p. 183), suggesting that elite attempts at social engineering are backfiring. Although interviewing does not in and of itself constitute ethnography, Clarke (2025)’s study of counterrevolutions as a case study demonstrates how on-site interviews with individuals in and outside of Egypt enabled him to “cross-check that my data were not biased by fears of state surveillance” (methods appendix).

An ethnographic sensibility also can shape the interpretation of results from other non-ethnographic methods. Statistical text analysis is an increasingly popular approach for analyzing text, increasingly extended to other data such as images and audio. An ethnographic sensibility informs how Milliff (2023) interprets a structural topic model of interview transcripts with relatives of murder victims in Black and Latinx communities in Chicago. Milliff’s participant observation—“shadowing Chicago Survivors staff as they interacted with families” (p. 1173)—gave him access to the community, helped build the trust, rapport, and emotional sensibility necessary to conduct interviews, and later informed his interpretation of vernacular and slang in the topic models (p. 1176). Nielsen (2017) also incorporates an ethnographic sensibility, informed by field research, when analyzing a large corpus of writings by Muslim clerics to understand why some preach violent jihadism while most do not. Nielsen’s close-range observations of cleric training at the Al-Azhar mosque and participation in Quran memorization allowed him to “recognize deeper levels of meaning while reading and listening” (p. 18), validate the results of statistical text analysis, and include variables such as “Quran memorization” and “religious primary school” education in the quantitative tests of his theory (p. 151).

## **PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR ETHNOGRAPHY-PLUS RESEARCHERS**

For all the compelling reasons in favor of embracing ethnographic sensibility, those with no experience in it may feel as if they are gazing out at an immense ocean, not knowing how best to dip their toes in the deep water. For the current generation of graduate students equipped with an arsenal of quantitative analysis skills, how does one build ethnographic sensibility into a project design in Political Science? Commenting on faux methodological pluralism, James Scott (quoted in Schatz 2017, pp. 137-8) has suggested that “departments of political science sometimes seem content to hire one animal from each methodological species,” only to keep them in separate cages.” If “ethnographer” and “quant” are two of these species, how might new scholars approach uncaging them? Is it possible to make some benefits of ethnography more accessible and widely appreciated by researchers for whom “ethnographer” will not be their whole identity?

We have three recommendations for such researchers, noting that they are far from exhaustive: (1) practice participant observation (2) embrace reflexivity, and (3) attune to the body and sensations. Our intention is not to turn every causal-inference and “big data”-trained scholar into an ethnographer, but the benefits of adopting, even partially, an ethnographic sensibility will pay dividends in future research.

### *Practice Participant Observation*

Our first recommendation is that any researcher using an ethnographic sensibility as part of their approach should have practical familiarity with *participant observation* from doing it from the nearest responsible vantage point. In its most traditional sense, such observation is conducted “out there” in the field – in mosques and churches where religious authorities preside (McClendon & Riedl 2019, Nielsen 2020), on the spaces occupied by protestors (Bishara 2021, Schwedler 2022); in neighborhood groups and activists’ planning meetings (Fu 2017, Hassan 2024); in conflict ridden war zones (Wood 2003, Masullo 2021, Parkinson 2021); in Khat chewing cafes and salons (Wedeen 2008); in rural everyday spaces (Cramer 2016), and on the city walls where street graffiti becomes a symbolic battle for discursive power (Lerner 2021). But exotic or remote destinations are not the only places to participate and observe (Pader 2006). Researchers should heed the cautionary tales of over-reliance on “fixers” and other modes of “drive-by” data collection (Schwedler & Chomiak 2024) and consider what immersion can offer, even if it must necessarily be uneven.

When the location of study is closed off or too dangerous, one could mingle with its diaspora and exiles, visit temples, ethnic and migrant enclaves, and exhibitions in more accessible host countries. Likewise, hanging out in shops, pubs, and restaurants with people who are from the region of interest may also be desirable, if not perfect substitutes. As the United States and other mature democracies backslide into competitive authoritarianism, one could look for both tangible and intangible practices that shape the way people speak and move, especially in the context of surveillance systems (Weitzel 2018; Dall’Agnola 2023) and facial recognition technology. To the extent that one conducts participant observation online, it should entail *participatory interaction* to assess how other tweeters or live streamers react in real time. Without some form of participation in the digital sphere, the researcher is at best engaged in close reading of digital text, which can be done with a certain degree of ethnographic sensibility but falls short of an immersive experience.

### *Embrace Reflexivity*

Ethnography as a tradition encourages reflection on how research findings are produced, where the researcher is just one co-creator and not a neutral, external observer. One practice common in ethnographic work is *reflexivity*, in which one asks oneself, “who am I in relation to others, and how might their perceptions of me and my team affect the research?” Since Malinowski (1922) set the bar at achieving “insider” status—becoming part of the community one is studying—generations of scholarship have since shown the value in both “experience near” and “experience far” positions (Merton 1972, Geertz 1973, Schwedler 2006, Stroup & Goode 2023).

Graduate programs often teach students how to write about reflexivity in PhD proposals, but leave them alone to experiment with “walking the reflexive talk” (Alejandro 2016). How reflexivity is applied in ethnography-plus work is a matter of art and requires, above all, an adoption of a broader “reflexive openness”—reflections on the ethical implications of one’s research (Jacobs et al. 2021). Practically speaking, researchers engaged in “active reflexivity” (Soedirgo & Glas 2020) should take notes often and explicitly report on how their positionality reflected their process of data collection and analysis, regardless of whether the research involves interviews, surveys, experiments, or other approaches (Henry et al 2009, Adida et al. 2016, Fujii 2017). When studying authoritarian settings, one should note how participants engage in self-censoring behaviours or remain silent due fear of state surveillance and punishment (Pearlman 2016). One might also consider “proxy interviewing,” which involves employing interviewers who share a perceived “insider” status along one salient dimension of identity (e.g. religion) and documenting how the straddling of insider/outsider status by the research team affected the data (Cammett 2013). Yadav (2018) shows how reflecting on one’s mistakes in the field becomes an opportunity for transformative changes in theory and evidence for researchers willing to “learn in [and] through practice.”

### *Attune to the Body and Sensations*

Despite having seven trillion nerve fibers in our bodies, including in our fingertips, political scientists often write as if they are automatons who gather data like well-trained chatbots. Qualitative researchers, especially those adopting a feminist lens, have always been more attuned to sensations and the body itself, such as the female body as both a target of state control and a site of resistance (Enloe 2014), the violated bodies of rape victims (Wood 2018), the spectacles of tortured bodies (Fujii 2013), and the stench and screams of animals in a slaughterhouse (Pachirat 2011). Pearlman (2023) links researchers’ emotional sensibilities to their ethnographic sensibilities, encouraging researchers to attend to their interlocutors with care, reflect on how their positionality informs their theories and evidence, and navigate ethical dilemmas with the help of empirically grounded, nuanced understandings of what particular choices mean in the local context of their research.

This reflexivity is a hallmark of interpretive and ethnographic approaches (Soedirgo & Glas 2020), and scholars honing their ethnographic sensibility tend to take reflections about researcher positionality seriously. In a study of customary law (*adat*), Sharia law, and state law in Chechnya, Lazarev (2023) describes at length how he encountered his interlocutors, and how his language ability, religious identity, and other characteristics affected what he could and could not understand about alternative legal forums in Chechnya. Including a written account of such reflexivity may provoke questions from scholars in other traditions about whether such “navel-gazing” is necessary, but it is crucial to the ethnographic ethos. Retrospective reflections are an important outlet for scholars who face the constraints of genre and word-count (Wood 2009, Ben Shitrit 2018, Krause & Szekely 2020).

Embracing an ethnographic sensibility means that even if one is not explicitly studying emotions or the body as a variable or as a site, one is still attuned to sensations—the sights, sounds, smells, movements, and even tastes—of the research process itself. To a survey or experimental researcher, this may sound odd; is it possible to “sense” participants filling out



bubbles on an online questionnaire, or to ascribe meaning to bodies sitting in front of a laptop? We argue that it *is* possible, and even crucial, to integrate an embodied approach into the research. Attuning to the gestures, meaningful looks, joking banter, and map-drawing that goes on as part of focus group research enables treating participation interaction as a unit of analysis (Posner 2005, Cyr 2016). When fielding surveys, combining in-person surveys with digital data should also draw awareness of the embodied aspects of survey research, as face-to-face surveys allows for contact with respondents, such as throngs of protestors in a leaderless social movement (Yuen et al. 2022). The limits of one's body are here too; it may also be wise to contemplate one's appetite for alcohol and unfamiliar foods as prerequisites for establishing cultural rapport, as Scoggins discovered while interviewing Chinese police (Scoggins 2014), along with more serious bodily challenges during fieldwork (Driscoll 2021, Hunt 2022).

Embodied sense-making is essential to an ethnographic sensibility. Through practice, researchers can improve their sensitivity and learn to shift attention into new registers that help them generate new insights about the social world. This pays dividends by encouraging creativity in methodological approach and substantive insights, by improving theory, and by encouraging reflection on ethical, moral, and emotional aspects of research. Dedicated political ethnographers stand to learn more about our world by bringing their hard-won sensibilities to important digital sites of politics, and non-ethnographers of digital media have much to gain by cultivating an ethnographic sensibility. In the digital age, embracing an ethnographic sensibility remains as urgent as ever.

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