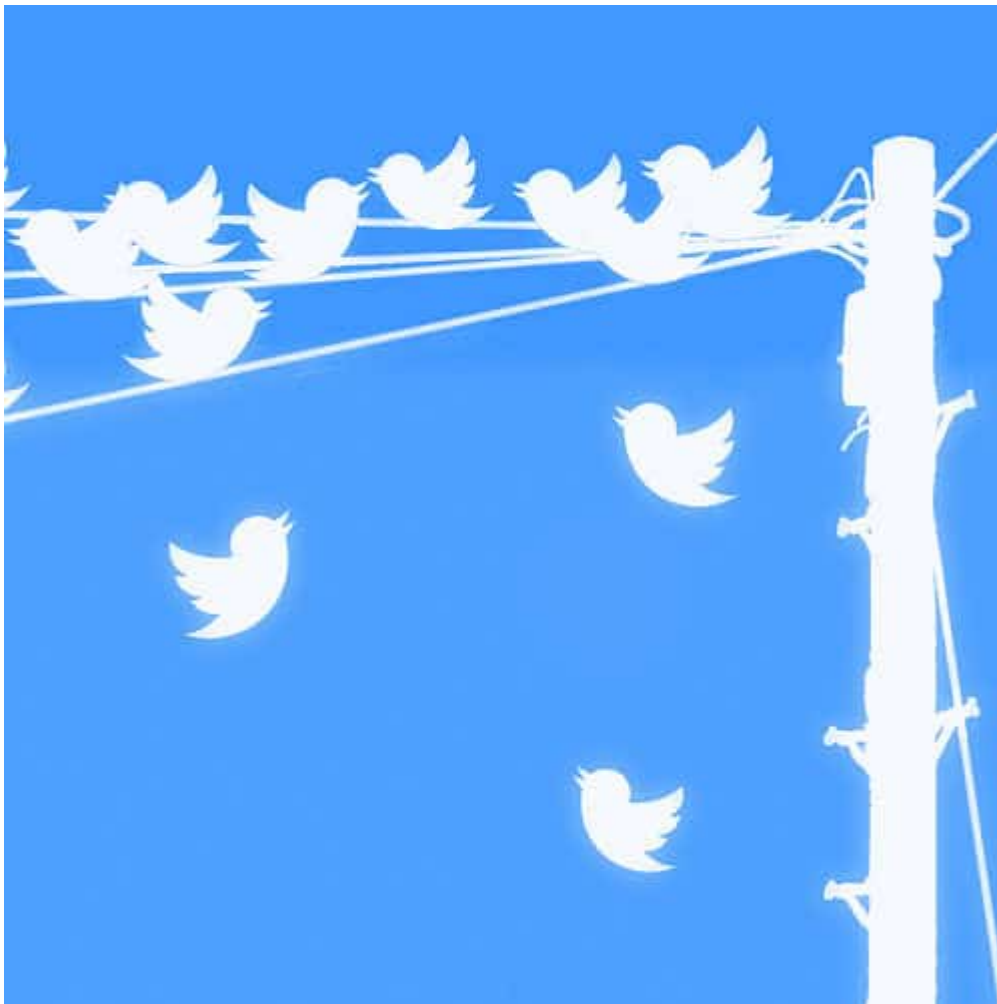




# Notes from inside a Twitter Experiment

## #EmergingDigitalPractices

written by Rachel Douglas-Jones  
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**Using participation in a collective online experiment with Twitter as a springboard, I interrogate the tweet as a fieldnote. How do the temporalities of tweeting intersect with disciplinary understandings and imaginings of “field time”, and how might we address fraught question of audiences, transparency and visibility brought about by tweeting from the**



field?

## A participant view

In the bright days of the Scandinavian summer of 2015, from a post-it note stuck to the screen frame of my Mac, I typed #ESIFRice into Twitter almost every morning, following a hashtag that crossed timezones and fieldsites from Thimphu (Bhutan) to Manus Province (PNG) to me in Copenhagen, over to Houston, Texas (USA). In returning to the notes and photos sent from the fieldsites of many researchers I have never met, I remain intrigued and puzzled by the effect of the week-long hash-tagged posting.

The #ESIFRice hashtag was created for an explicitly titled “experiment”, conducted by [The Ethnography Studio](#) in Houston, Texas, as one of a number of ethnographic explorations the Studio conducted that summer (Ballesterio, Campbell and Storer 2015). I took part, even though that summer I did not consider myself to be doing fieldwork. I was writing a presentation from my office in Copenhagen, for an event in Frankfurt. My head was in external hard drives and cardboard boxes, revisiting field-notes from fieldwork in Guangzhou, Southern China several years prior, handwritten in hospitals and committee rooms. During the week of #ESIFRice, as I tweeted about being in the field through my notes, I read comments from researchers around the world, and saw images from long drives across empty landscapes juxtaposed with photos of protests, waiting rooms and moments of rest.

With its tweeted form of recording and encoding the practices of fieldwork and “the” field, #ESIFRice created its *own* field. My comments below demonstrate the long-lasting effects of leaving a field: the questions one is left with, and those which emerge over time. Since the “experiment” ended, I have found myself wondering what the field and Twitter might do for one another, returning repeatedly to the question of whether, and in what way, the tweets shared during #ESIFRice are a form of fieldnotes. #ESIFRice invited participants to deliberately tweet from the field for a week, but what would a tweeted fieldnote be?



*What would tweeting do for ethnographic practice?*

I develop these questions as a thought experiment in using twitter as an “infrastructure of inquiry” (Estalella and Criado 2017), reflecting on both the writing and reading of tweets, and what tweets-intended-as-fieldnotes would or could do for ethnography.

## **Writing a tweet, or the time of the field**

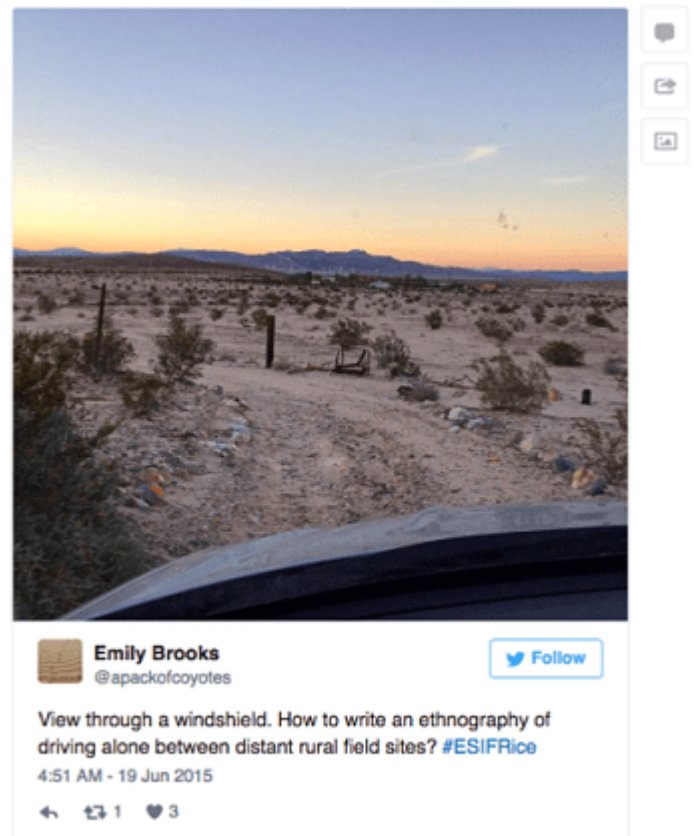
**Time in Anthropology:** In *Time and the Field* (2013) Dalsgaard and Nielsen remind us that that ethnography and “the field” have their own valued and idealised speeds, from the ideal of lifelong absorption (Radin [1933]1966:178-179) to the privileged “deliberate, patient ethnography”, (Marcus 2015: 153), the “slowness” of ethnographic writing, the “belatedness” of a text, and the politics of “timeliness”, of anthropological “relevance” (Rabinow et al 2008). Despite this resurgent attention to time, however, some associations remain entrenched: geography is *still* temporalized (Fabian 1983) and time *still* spatialized (Zeitlyn 2015). Imaginaries of place and time are so intertwined that #ESIFRice’s questions about a geographic hold on the imagination of the field are, I find, also questions about its temporalities.

**Tweets as Punctuations:** So it is into this morally charged environment that tweets must step. They appear fast. Their speed seems to puncture field-time, to bring the field “closer”, just as the slowness of posted letters once meant fields were far away (Simpson 2009). Considering the semi-tacit values of field-time, I found myself wondering whether #ESIFRice’s tweets from the field prioritised some forms of sociality over others: specifically, those visible in a tweet’s frame-able temporality, reducing or shifting to the background lifetimes, epochs, eras, generations, and realisations that come only after many years. Tweets —and I generalise here—seem directed at the happening of the now: an *event* orientation which makes a particular form of attention, as though moments were discrete, or are made so through the singularization of a tweeted description or photograph. If a tweet both punctuates and frames the now, it becomes readily available to an



anthropology of “the contemporary” (Rabinow et al. 2008) and its associated urgent timeliness.

**Hacking tweet-time:** To think *within* the medium of the tweet, then, means reaching for tactics that would deliberately re-orient their presentist gaze. One could dedicate one’s field-tweets to that which is still, and does not move. To that which is silent, or that which does not happen. A series might be committed to that which has long since ceased to be but leaves some trace, or that which has not yet happened. Thinking about what these kinds of tweets would look like—as a means of persuading a presentist medium into conveying anticipation or erasure—is a form of experimenting with ethnographic description (see figure at right). This would make tweeting a way of holding a specific theme in focus during fieldwork, making fieldnote-like tweets into a curious form of reflexive field practice, a way of pausing through composing a tweet, to see again, and consider what might be seen in the text or image by others. What might such “punctuations” do to still-often solitary fieldwork?



## Reading Tweets, form and content: Telegraphic pre-emption?

So let us turn from the solitary tweeter, face in their phone or screen, to readers of field tweets. With her colleagues Baird Campbell and Eliot Storer, [Andrea Ballesterio](#), one of #ESIFRice’s initiators, became interested in the “telegraphic”



form of the tweet—with its “productive tentativeness” and character limit (Ballestero, Campbell and Storer 2015). I like this formulation. Combining “tentative” and “telegraphic” brings provisionality to an element of Twitter I have struggled with: as a format of micro-blogging, tweeting can feel like “publication”, with all of the finality that implies for those of us used to privately drafting and editing or revising texts with colleagues. It also raises the question of *for whom* an ethnographer would tweet.

**Readership in the present:** Tweeting from the field would make many ethnographers anxious: is it not dangerously premature to write publicly, to speak directly from the midst of fieldwork? Would not a momentary condensation to 140 characters be pre-empting the careful, long term analysis out of which ethnographies emerge? Twitter seems the very opposite of deliberate, prudent engagement and reflection, especially if one is followed on Twitter by people in one’s field (Alyanak 2017), even though collaborative field blogging is a precursor here (e.g. [Cohorticulture](#) 2008-11). This aversion is particularly stark for a discipline where sharing fieldnotes is still moderately taboo (Sanjek 1990, Sanjek and Tratner 2015, though see Okely 2011) and where we know how much our choice of words, terms, concepts and frames matter. If we are not writing (just) for ourselves, if we are being “telegraphic”, then who would a field a tweet be for? While anthropologists have long been exhorted to record the “imponderabilia” of the everyday (Malinowski 2002 [1922]), what does it do to these imponderabilia, to analysis and to the ethnographer to broadcast everyday moments from the field almost as they happen? Asking the question shows how some fields lend themselves more easily to tweeting than others, some even offering opportunities for intervention.



### Reading the place of the image:

#ESIFRice was used by several anthropologists as a chance to intervene on taken for granted imaginaries of their field sites, by publishing “destabilizing” images (Campbell 2015). During #ESIFRice we saw coevalness as [Paige West](#) snapped pictures of vast multi-storey construction sites in Port Moresby, the 12 flights departing the domestic terminal at 7am (see figure at right), and a night out with PNG businesspeople: “This is PNG”, she wrote (West 2015). Populating a feed with images of everyday life in the places we work has great power

to jolt the assumptions of people who might see our Twitter feeds, and even to redirect our own ethnographic attention in taking and posting images. In an echo of Schapera’s use of a camera as a “visual notebook”, seeking to document (and preserve) daily life amongst the Bakgatla and Tswana (Comaroff, Comaroff and James 2007), image-based tweets give immediacy, the form’s casualness lending an appearance of non-mediation, direct access. But the geographic model of the field that West was challenging is pervasive. As inheritors of Mercator’s 1569 cartography, viewers map power and spatialise time (Fabian 2008, see also Crampton 1994 and the (doubly fictional) [Cartographers for Social Equality](#)). So it seems there is also a danger here, in the ease with which a platform like Twitter brings images to the fore, in the *re-association* of “the field” with *where* anthropologists happen to physically be. A regeneration of new forms of technologically directed location fundamentalism?



**Data Hungry Audiences:** Public tweets have further potential audiences. In





their form as independently circulating artefacts, they can become objects in other economies. What does a tweeted form of field notation mean to one's University, research institute or funding body? It is too easy to imagine keen new funding conditions set down in the name of "opening up the field", or of methodological "transparency"- making visible the daily moves of the ethnographer through ongoing tweets from the field. The path from optional to obligatory is short, and the implications vast. The dangers of this short circuit were pointed out by Strathern as early as 1999 as she considered the implications of audited scholarship: the constant performance of "research" may cost us actual research (Strathern 1999: 140). Tweets, with their quantifiable properties, are already partially integrated into measures, already cautiously (or casually) enrolled as evidence of "impactful" activity. All whilst academics are increasingly exhorted to manage themselves as a small business, promoting their entrepreneurial selves while preparing their work for insertion into "impact accelerators" (Economic and Social Research Council, UK 2017). Ethnographic fields are carved out within national economies for research funding, and I once spent forty minutes of a precious two hour research meeting in the UK enduring discussion about whether or not an upcoming project event should be live-tweeted. Through the ties of the ethnographer, field tweets are in danger of already having an audience—and effect—in mind.

## Thinking through tweets

**Being based in an IT University, heading a "Lab" in research methods, I am daily faced with the growing dominance of "experiment"** as a language and practice through which authoritative claims are being made. While the open-ended character of ethnography may be described both as experimental and as collaborative, neither can be assumed. We must recognise that while experiments are often a mode of authority in themselves, and while the term is sometimes borrowed for its epistemic kudos, it no longer only carries the special status of scientific authority through the *reproduction of controlled conditions* to produce facts (see Shapin 1994). Contrary to traditional lab-based research (and notwithstanding field experiments as an in-between situation, see Schwartz 2014



and Kelly 2012), when “experiment” is invoked today, it refers as much to a path of action that submits the experimenter to *uncontrolled and uncertain conditions* in the name of social transformation, in which the outcome may be everything from entirely pre-determined (by organisers or participants) to utterly irrelevant (the ‘experiment’ stands for itself). From a traditional scientific standpoint this latter, uncontrolled mode is spurious, but from a social science standpoint it demonstrates the longevity and discursive reproduction of “experimental epistemologies” (McCulloch and Pitts 1965) and the lure of spaces generative of a sense of possibility (Schwarz 2014: 6).

To experiment without invoking experiment for its own sake means to take experiment as a means towards an imagined end. Here, I have thought through the tweet for what it does to anthropological thinking and practice: a *thought* experiment, centered on the tension between a tweet as a condensation point versus the radical openness of ethnography.

*By focusing on the tweet, the noise around twitter as a platform recedes: becoming less some digitised semblance of “society”, or fire-hose source for visualisation through quantitative digital methods, and more a form to be worked in dialogue with critical and historically informed ways of knowing and doing anthropological work. Certainly worth a thought experiment.*

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