

Online ethnography

We have [discussed ways](#) of keeping track of the effective promotion and engagement around your project online. This might give you access to statistics, or literally capture tweets into a spreadsheet (see IFTTT.com). However, you might also want to take a more qualitative approach to immersing yourself in these online interactions and dialogues, to better understand the experience of those involved.

Why should I do ethnography?

You may need to evaluate the effectiveness of a project's online approach to engaging audiences, whether existing or new ones. This might be with the aim of attracting them to offline events, but whatever the focus, if the project designed a clear way in which to do this, it should be similarly straightforward to evidence its effectiveness. For example, if you have set up a hashtag or Twitter account, can you demonstrate people are using it to talk about your project, or to respond to your tweets?

How do I do this?

The best way to ethnographically evidence this is to check on the hashtag or online space over the duration of the project. If the project is using such online spaces to promote a forthcoming event, start observing it in the lead up, to see how hype might be building and where people might be using it to ask the organisers questions. You could then follow this by identifying any additional 'live tweets' during the event itself, which help evidence audience response and feedback. If people are asking questions that aren't being answered, consider whether it is in your remit to intervene slightly despite your role as unbiased external evaluator, and advise stakeholders that they should be better responding to their audience.

As part of this, make the same kind of notes you would in any other observation method. Identify the conversations that are particularly engaging, involving lots of discussion, as well as those efforts by the project leaders that might be falling flat. Take screenshots for your own evidence, or copy and paste content where relevant (we'll discuss the ethical implications in a moment).

When?

Try and set yourself a structure, or you may all too easily disappear down the rabbit hole of a particular discussion. For a particularly active Facebook Page for example, you might just limit yourself to exploring new conversations on the Page for an hour a night, for a week. Or look at the ten most recent posts to a hashtag, including the replies, retweets and Likes.

Ethics

The problem of online ethnography is that it can often be undertaken by a researcher without the group knowing. In the case of Twitter or Public Facebook Pages, anyone can watch what happens, as it is considered a public platform. But we run into difficulties when those we are watching forget that public nature, and we risk taking their often quite personal or private conversations out of context. Try and strike a balance between letting people know you are there, evaluating the project, and repeating it so much that you start to affect how people behave there. As with the live observation discussed in [another of our resources](#), you could ask any administrator or 'editor' of the space to introduce you first, stressing that people's comments or participation in the group would be made anonymous. Note that in the case of Closed Facebook Groups you've been granted access to it is even more problematic to observe and use people's participation as 'data'.