

30

ORGANIZING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON THE INTERNET

Models and challenges

Maha Bali

In this chapter, I propose to do multiple things. I'll start with a brief overview of online ethnography and autoethnography, while showing why I prefer doing autoethnography rather than any other methodology when researching people's interactions on the internet. Using vignettes, I explore how I got into collaborative autoethnographic research through the use of a massive open online course (MOOC). Then I provide an abbreviated narrative of how that MOOC experience provided the impetus to expand the opportunities to organize virtual participation at conferences, leading to et4buddy which eventually grew into Virtually Connecting (VC).

Ethnographic research into online spaces is not new (Baym, 2000; Buchanan, 2000; Herrmann, 2015; Markham, 2003; Paccagnella, 1997; Rheingold, 2012; Stewart, 2015a, 2015b). Doing ethnographic research on the internet "transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of Internet" (Hine, 2008, p. 257, as cited in Airoidi, 2018). It builds on the recognition that rich social interactions can be mediated by the internet, and that they are worth documenting and interpreting to understand human social interaction (Hine, 2017). Ethnography is unique as a methodology in how it centers the researcher's embodied, immersed experiences to understand the viewpoint of others who inhabit a particular space (Hine, 2015).

Autoethnography goes one step further than ethnography by mainly focusing on the experiences of the researcher (Adams, 2008; Bochner, 2016; Boylorn, 2014; Krizek, 1998), and this has significant advantages when researching online spaces. The thick description of an autoethnography often aims to make connections with broader themes and connect the micro personal experience with the macro (Holman Jones, 2019; Wall, 2016). Autoethnographies and collaborative autoethnographies offer rich, thick description, do not claim to be objective, distant, or unbiased, nor do they claim to be generalizable (Bali, Crawford, Jessen, Signorelli, & Zamora, 2015). Indeed, one must always recognize the partiality of autoethnography (Bali, Honeychurch et al., 2016).

Doing ethnography and autoethnography on the internet is both convenient and challenging. The convenience comes from the ability to do ex-post-facto research on an event or time period long after it has passed, because so much of what has happened online remains

online, on places like Twitter and Facebook. However, some things also disappear. For example, if an online space closes down completely and does not get archived, that information is lost forever (Herrmann, 2016). Moreover, as Hine (2015) asserts:

Autoethnography is a powerful tool for exploring the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in Internet usage and for exploring how online and offline sites are connected in contingent and flexible fashion. It also cautions against unthinking pursuit of a “complete” understanding of such a phenomenon, and counsels researchers focusing on complex online/offline phenomena to embrace the sense of uncertainty and “good enough” assumptions that permeate the experience of navigating such territory.

(p. 89)

I wanted to model autoethnographic approaches, rather than just tell about them. Another convenience is participant observation can be completely unobtrusive if you are observing public spaces such as Twitter, blogs, YouTube. Of course, this creates an abundance of data which can itself be problematic. Furthermore, many online interactions may be inaccessible to researchers because they occur in private, publicly without a hashtag, and on other platforms such as Facebook groups.

Researchers are also limited by how individuals represent themselves in their online identities, where things like sexuality or disability may be rendered invisible. There are also significant ethical challenges. As Markham (2004) noted:

Indeed, when we drill down to the basic epistemological assumptions undergirding any study of discursive practices in culture (physical or virtual), consideration of how the interaction among participants and researchers reflects and shapes identities, relationships, and social structures constitutes a useful, reflexive, and ethically essential practice.

(p. 141)

As online/offline lives become more blurred, ethical questions and quandaries need to be taken seriously (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010; Markham, 2018; Massanari, 2018).

This autoethnography is about my own experience as co-founder of VC (www.virtually-connecting.org) or VConnecting, which is our Twitter handle. VC is a grassroots movement that originated on the internet but is a hybrid (online/offline) experience, organizing informal conversations between people participating in conferences and people who cannot be there physically but wish to meet them virtually.

VC is a good space to study organizing because there is room to explore the “four major transformations of our epoch: (1) media convergence, (2) mediated identities, (3) redefinitions of social boundaries, and (4) the transcendence of geographical boundaries” (Baym & Markham, 2009, p. x). VC involves people communicating over several different media, including offline, across countries and continents, and merging the social with the professional and the online with the offline in very explicit ways. As Airoidi (2018) noted, we can no longer separate the digital from the offline self, and you will see in this autoethnography how I show both. Ellis (2004) writes about how autoethnographic narratives need not focus only on the researcher’s identity as researcher but can include other aspects of their whole

selves. As you will see, in most of my narratives, my identity as a mother and as an Egyptian are central to my experience.

I am an Egyptian female academic, a mother of a child who was less than four years old when VC first started (original name for the pilot was #et4buddy). I'm a faculty member at the Center for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo. Most of my professional development happens online. I did my PhD remotely, traveling back and forth to Sheffield, UK, sometimes from Cairo, sometimes from Houston, Texas, and sometimes from Norwich, UK, depending on where my husband worked at the time.

Near the end of my PhD, I discovered academic Twitter and MOOCs. When I got into Collectivist Massive Open Online Courses (cMOOCs) and started developing my own Personal Learning Network (PLN), online learning became central to my life not just my lifelong learning. I built relationships online and took them deep into collaborations and friendships. I co-authored many articles with people I had never met. Some of whom I have now met, but many of whom I have not. I co-designed internet games and open curricula and used them in my classes where my students interacted with people across the globe.

My research paradigm is within interpretive and critical traditions but also strongly relies on what Laurel Richardson (1997) calls "crystallization" (i.e. the same thing can look different if you shed light on it from different angles). This means I can entertain ideas of VC advocating for justice and challenging hegemony while also reproducing inequality in some ways.

Starting autoethnography on the internet: the story of #Rhizo14

I had decided after my PhD that my future research would be participatory. I felt strongly that individuals should have the right to represent their own stories first before others offered up an interpretation of their story for them. I was also influenced by my postcoloniality. Much anthropological and orientalist research represents the colonized from the Western gaze (Salter, 2005). The internet is a Western space, usually researched by Westerners from their world view, with various implicit biases (Williams, Brooks, & Shmargad, 2018).

My view on the internet is unequivocally different. Social media empower me differently from the ways it empowers someone in North America or Europe. The risks it poses for me are also completely different. Likewise, the effort it takes me to have my voice heard in an online context is utterly different and invisible to my Occidental friends. For example, I am fluent in English, near-native, but it's not my native language. I have "good enough" internet most of the time, but it's not as stable or fast as in richer countries. I have fewer opportunities for professional development in general, so online professional development is essential to my growth as an academic in ways it is not for others who have access to in-person opportunities nearby.

My first opportunity to conduct internet research post-PhD occurred while I was doing a connectivist MOOC called "Rhizomatic Learning: The Community is the Curriculum" (hashtag #rhizo14). I wanted to collaborate with others and explore participatory approaches to doing the research on this experience. Early on, people split into two camps. Some wanted

to do surveys and interviews. A few of us were inspired by another collaborative autoethnography about a MOOC recently published by Bentley et al. (2014). I believed an autoethnography offered the benefits of allowing us to dig deeper into our own self-reflections as participants, bringing out the invisible thinking behind our public interactions. It would allow us to see each other's ideas and further reflect on how others' interpretations could influence our own interpretations of our learning and theirs. It had the limitation, of course, of only including the autoethnographic accounts of those who participated in the collaborative autoethnography itself. We also realized that our autoethnographic group enjoyed the MOOC. Therefore, our collaborative autoethnography, while not uncritical, still painted a biased picture of the MOOC.

I remember how this whole collaboration started. I posted something on the Facebook group, inviting people to do research and we started a Google doc exploring different approaches to collaborative writing, until we decided on collaborative autoethnography. We then created a Google doc to collect people's narratives. Unintentionally, but serendipitously, sometimes someone would login while another was writing, and they would leave notes in the margins for them. Sometimes one of us would decide to read what was there and leave a comment, and synchronous and asynchronous conversations started happening on the margins, going beyond the general questions we had started with. Over time, a smaller group of us were committed to presenting and publishing this research, doing something with these narratives, and were unsure how to represent this non-linear stuff into a linear article. We met via video conferencing to discuss, we discussed on Twitter and we reflected on our blogs. We kept writing things, submitting proposals to conferences and to journals and getting rejected.

This prompted some of us to start a new Google document questioning "Why isn't our research getting published?" We created this Google document when I was having a Direct Message conversation on Twitter (DMing) with one of the group members and talking about lack of publishing opportunities. This document became even less linear than the first document. We crazily tried to publish it, publish the process of our thinking and interaction together, but even Hybrid Pedagogy, a digital open-access journal that encouraged alternative formats, felt it was not an academic article. Eventually, we agreed with the editor that we would write a more normal-looking article around the process of "Writing the Unreadable Untext" (Hamon et al., 2015) – that was the name of our article, an example of the messy process of conducting collaborative research. Writing that article was cathartic and helped us publish our autoethnography eventually (Bali, Honeychurch et al., 2016), after much rejection and constructive feedback from friends.

There are two other reasons why I prefer autoethnography over other research approaches. One is that there are certain experiences, such as the experience of participating in a cMOOC, that are difficult to understand from an abstract perspective. A group of embedded people telling their stories is more meaningful to the reader. The second, and more important reason, I do autoethnography is a matter of agency and decolonizing. By writing autoethnographically, I have more control over how my story gets told, rather than allow another researcher to control/colonize my position, tell my story, through their interpretation. I was the only Arab, Muslim person who was active in that MOOC. Based on my interactions in the MOOC, I do not believe Western researchers could absorb, understand, and interpret my experience and behaviors in ways that I would agree with. Moreover, I felt

there was something unique about my motivations and responses to the learning experience, and a collaborative autoethnography allowed me to think about my experiences alongside the experiences of others from different parts of the world.

The rhizo14 collaborative autoethnography research became a jumping off point for organizing other collaborative autoethnographic work. One was a multi-authored autoethnography on a MOOC (Bali et al., 2015). In the other instance, my students and I co-authored – with a peer observer – a collaborative autoethnography based on a course I taught at my institution in Cairo on digital literacies (Bali et al., 2019). Although the course took place in a physical classroom, the autoethnography was written by compiling parts of students' narratives from their public blogs, asking additional questions on a Google doc for them to answer, having discussions on comments along the margins, editing the main text by incorporating some of those marginal comments into the narrative. In addition, we met in person once and discussed minor issues on WhatsApp.

Incidentally, Google docs and their features and limitations evolved between 2014 and 2019, and the kinds of collaboration this tool allowed, and how it altered the power dynamic influenced how research moved forward, as we (a group of us rhizo learners again – Hogue et al., 2018) discussed in our paper using Actor Network Theory, which, although not autoethnographic, included a semi-fictional narrative describing our collaborative writing process, similar in style to Ellis (2004). It is also noteworthy that I met Rebecca Hogue, co-founder of VC at #rhizo14.

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Pre-VC: snippets of the et4online story

I guess this portion of the story needs to come first, so readers know what Virtually Connecting (VC) is before I go any deeper. This was first published on my blog as Autoethnography on Virtually Connecting part 1, (May 2019). To write this, I needed to go back to old blogposts and tweets on #et4buddy, the original pilot name for what later became VC, and I got slightly distracted by the emotions evoked by seeing those old tweets, photos, how people responded to what Rebecca and I were doing.

VC came about precisely because of my need for online professional development. It was complicated for me for several reasons, which I shy away from detailing in the article *Virtual, Hybrid or Present* (Bali & Hogue, 2015), which we wrote immediately after the #et4buddy pilot.

I (Maha) was kind of obsessed with the desire to attend Emerging Technologies for Online Learning [Conference] this year. I was a steering committee member and co-presenter in several sessions, so the sheer number of people I knew at the conference was overwhelming, more than any conference I had ever participated in. I was ready to finally meet everyone in person.

But life happens. For a mom of a young child, living in Egypt, too many things needed to work out for me to make it. Despite many generous offers to help, in the end, I had to let it go. I was heartbroken.

I was more willing at the time to admit to being heartbroken for not being able to go, than admitting the following fundamental truths. As a scholar from the global South, it is financially much more difficult for me to attend a conference in the United States. It is not only the cost of airfare, but simply the daily costs there, once the exchange rates set in. Likewise, as a mother from my culture, traveling without my child can and does happen, but is looked down upon. Taking her with me at age four meant I needed to fly a husband or mom overseas to babysit her while I went to the conference. This is an additional cost: two more flights and expenses for two more people. At the time, this was not something we were willing to pay. Furthermore, my institution would almost never afford me travel to more than one conference a year. Much later, when I got invited as a keynote speaker at international conferences, we made those trips, usually because the conferences invited me and offered compensation to offset the costs.

I was not sad that I was missing co-presenting five sessions. I was sad that I would not be part of the hallway and social conversation at the conference. As virtual unconference chair that year I considered doing some sort of online interview with people onsite. I once mentioned it to my friend, Rebecca Hogue, whom I had met through #rhizo14, and she suggested she be my “buddy” onsite.

When Rebecca suggested the buddy program, I latched onto it like a lifeline. We discussed it with other steering committee members and decided to create a pilot program that I feel enhanced the conference experience for other virtual participants and people following the Twitter stream. Onsite participants also told us they felt it enhanced their experience too. This year’s #et4online with #et4buddy elevated my own conference experience beyond the best I had seen before (which was #et4online last year).

(Maha in Bali & Hogue, 2015).

Here is how Rebecca describes it in the same post:

One of my motivations for the #et4buddy pilot program was that it allowed me to piggyback on Maha’s social capital. She knows a lot of people...Although Maha may not describe herself as someone with high influence, she is definitely someone who is well connected. She has personal connections with all three keynote and plenary speakers, as well as members of various steering committees. I was hoping to capitalize on Maha’s connections to become part of the “in” crowd. I was also hoping that Maha would push me out of my comfort zone, encouraging me to approach new and influential people.

When we decided to run this, called it #et4buddy, we decided to use Google Hangouts on Air to allow us to record and livestream to YouTube automatically. (Internet bandwidth at my home makes it difficult to record video offline and then upload a video. It could take six hours to upload a 30-minute video.) Hangouts allowed us to have up to ten participants. We announced the experiment on both our blogs as a dialogue of the process of how the idea came about. For example:

Rebecca: So we could use the conference as an experiment into ways to enhance the conference experience for both virtual and in-place participants. Sort of a way to bridge

the divide. I can be your ‘feet on the floor’ for a few specific segments of the conference, which I think would make the conference more meaningful for me too. You can encourage me out of my comfort zone into exploring presentations that I might not otherwise engage in. Oh that sounds like so much fun!

Maha: Oh my GOD YES that is an AWESOME IDEA REBECCA!!! You know I am also responsible for the virtual unconference, supporting Jesse who will be there on the ground. Are you planning to attend that?

We announced on Twitter, Facebook, and on the virtual conference pages, and some people joined in, or watched the livestream. We got immediate feedback that people onsite and virtual liked it. Somehow, these sessions were unlike previous meetings online, because they were hybrid. Some people were physically together and it made all the difference (Bali & Hogue, 2015). This turned out to be just the beginning.

From et4online to virtual connecting

The purpose of Virtually Connecting is to enliven virtual participation in academic conferences, widening access to a fuller conference experience for those who cannot be physically present at conferences. We are a community of volunteers and it is always free to participate.

Using emerging technologies, we connect onsite conference presenters and attendees with virtual participants in small groups. This allows virtual conference participants to meet and talk with conference presenters and attendees in what often feels like those great spontaneous hallway conversations, something not usually possible for a virtual experience. (<http://virtuallyconnecting.org/about>)

When et4online was over, I thought Rebecca would be sick of me. We met two or three times a day during et4buddy at et4online, and we were on Facebook messenger all the time trying to schedule times to meet up with folks for et4buddy. However, the next morning, she and Whitney Kilgore connected with me and we talked about how we could take this pilot further. When writing about the experience of et4buddy, an experience that I thought mainly benefited me and other virtual folks, I discovered the benefit it had for Rebecca. She wrote, “I’m pretty sure that as a result of the experience, my social capital has increased” (Bali & Hogue, 2015).

We felt that we were on to something. That there was a need to expand how conferences were organized, that given the always on, interconnected, polymediated world in which we live, we should embrace and should enhance virtual types of participation. This was the impetus for creating VC. While VC started with only Rebecca and myself, it grew to include individuals we knew who wanted to volunteer, virtual or onsite. Then people who had never heard of us – or us of them – joined. Our network expanded. Our number of events expanded. We now have over 50 active members, 5 co-directors from 3 countries, and 9 people who are regional leads and a growing group of advisory buddies. In 2019 alone, we held VC in X conferences. Over the years, we have organized conversations in countries all over the world, including Croatia, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, and South Africa as well as the usual suspects US, UK, Canada and Australia. VC, which started out for

Organizing autoethnography on the internet

my personal benefit, is seen positively by people in different parts of the world, people with different amounts of privilege and who have different intersectional identities.

For me @VConnecting created a new channel for those who couldn't attend events/conferences or who may not get the chance to talk to conference speakers a more intimate opportunity to chat with thought leaders in our field. It's truly a game changer!

(Kilgore, 2018).

For me @VConnecting demonstrates how generosity, flexibility, and inclusivity provide immensely fertile ground for rich conversations. In stretching boundaries, amplifying voices, and building community, it models the very best of the academy

(Jhangiani, 2018).

#VirtuallyConnecting is my hope ♥ It tears down the walls, makes bridges, and connects people regardless of their nationality. #NoBanNoWall

(Mehran, 2018).

I appreciate @VConnecting because it is welcoming and 'walks the talk' - and has shaped the way I think about conferences and what they should and could be

(Walji, 2018)

Hi Maha! @VConnecting has opened doors to communities I would otherwise not have known and invited me to show up as a worthy and welcome contributor to these conversations. As a structure it has help put a dent in my impostor syndrome.

(Spelic, 2018).

Each of these tweets are from individuals who are "outsiders" in one form or another. For example, Parisa Mehran was an Iranian graduate student (she has since completed her PhD) of TESOL in Japan. Therefore, she is keenly aware of issues of social justice and is also a critical mirror who helps expand my thinking about what VC could become. She is now an active buddy herself. Mehran's tweet emphasizes walls, bans, bridges, and seems to emphasize her political position as someone whose nationality was being banned from entering the United States at the beginning of Trump's presidency, and her specific mention of "regardless of nationality" is probably also unique to her positionality.

Whitney Kilgore's (American) and Sukaina Walji's (Muslim, British educator who lives in South Africa) tweets show how VC has changed what conferences seem like and who can participate in them. Whitney's talk is about "access" but no walls, bridges, or doors.

Furthermore, she does talk about the additional intimacy in the interactions. Sukaina emphasizes the “walking the talk” aspect of VC; that the practice works alongside the values we claim to strive towards.

Sherri’s tweet is more explicitly personal in the sense of how it benefited her directly. Sherri also uses the physical metaphor – opening doors, but this still contrasts with Parisa’s “tearing down walls,” because, in comparison, the kinds of barriers Sherri faces as an African-American K-12 educator to access Higher Ed are different than Parisa’s as an Iranian scholar unable to get a visa. Sherri also focuses not on just inclusion but on parity of participation. Rajiv’s language seems to be talking about similar things to what Parisa is talking about, but perhaps because of his own location, and identity as a person of color in Canada, the terms are milder – “stretching boundaries” rather than “tearing down walls.” He is also focused on the marginal voices, and hence he mentions “amplifying voices” and not just building community. Moreover, he mentions the quality of the conversations themselves – so it is not just the attitudes of inclusivity and the act of amplifying voices that matter.

We started writing what would become our continually evolving manifesto, including our goals, values, and motivations. It begins:

We are motivated by a desire to improve the virtual conference experience for those who cannot be present at conferences for financial, logistical, social or health reasons. This often includes unaffiliated scholars, graduate students, adjuncts, moms of young kids, and people from emerging economies or countries far away from where most academic conferences are held. (See: <http://virtuallyconnecting.org/virtually-connecting-manifesto>)

Our collaboratively written manifesto also includes phrases such as “We try to welcome and create space for new people to participate” and “We do not aim to disrupt the onsite experience – we aim to only take up a few minutes of an onsite person’s (informal) time to offer it to those not privileged enough to attend the conference,” and “We are open to constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement.”

An autoethnographic narrative: organizing equitable hospitality in practice

The following is an autoethnographic narrative which, following Ellis (2004), uses composite characters and events modeled around real people and real events, but no one person or event should be personally identifiable here. Nothing in this story is exaggerated, but these incidences usually don’t happen in every single VC session. This narrative helps someone who has never done VC understand the processes and what goes in the mind (and heart) of the person and the team making it all happen. Moreover, it shows how VC is organized, beyond an article the co-directors recently published on intentionally equitable hospitality (Bali, Caines, Hogue, DeWaard, & Friedrich, 2019). This narrative also clearly shifts between online and offline dimensions, and shows both my professional and personal/social side.

It’s 9.20 pm and my daughter still hasn’t slept. We have a VC hangout scheduled to start at 10 and I’m the virtual buddy. I’m supposed to start the hangout at 9.30, email participants the link to join the session, and get them ready before the hangout goes live at 10pm my time. The session is scheduled at this time because it was the best time that fit both the onsite guests’ and the virtual buddies’ schedules. But my daughter is still awake and she has school tomorrow. She should have been asleep by now.

Organizing autoethnography on the internet

I used to get really anxious about my daughter not sleeping when I had a synchronous meeting, frustrated she wouldn't sleep well, frustrated I couldn't get on with my work which I almost always schedule after her bed time so as not to take away from time she deserves. But the backup buddy system we recently put in place relaxes me. Someone else can take responsibility. Everyone understands. Also, my kid is older now, and one night of bad sleep is not a problem. If it is an informal session like VC and she joins, it is not the end of the world.

I get onto the Slack app on my phone and ask my backup virtual buddy to handle the email and start the hangout and say I'll be there soon (incidentally my backup buddy was supposed to be at this event in person but could not make it due to a family emergency). Earlier in the day, I had checked Twitter to see if anyone wanted to join today's session. We noticed a while ago that people who know VC will quickly say that they want to join, but people who are new or shy or minorities will like or retweet but not explicitly say they want to join. Earlier today there were two such people, and I gently nudged them by responding to their retweet "Would you like to join our hangout and talk to the speakers?" And when they said yes, I asked for their email via Twitter DM and added them to our list of signups on a shared Google doc linked from within the Slack channel for the conference. I also forwarded them the email that explains how to prepare (technically) for the hangout.

Today, the session has three onsite guests and two VC onsite buddies/volunteers. We put out a call for anyone who wanted to join VC sessions on Twitter and a mailing list of people with interests similar to those of this particular conference. As usually happens, the people who responded were either white men, people familiar with VC or high-profile people. We decided a while ago that we can keep inviting high-profile people to VC sessions because virtual participants want to meet them (think of graduate students who get to chat with people whose work they've been following for years) but we also want to avoid sessions with too many white men and a general lack of diversity. We had also done a couple of personal invitations to people we found on the program who seemed to be doing critical work on edtech, and one participant from Venezuela agreed to join. Our onsite buddy also found a well-known Cameroonian scholar whose work several of us respect, but who usually can't join VC sessions virtually due to a choppy internet connection. Our onsite buddy invited him to join onsite, since this conference had good Wi-Fi. So our guests were a high-profile English man, a lesser known Venezuelan graduate student, and an established but not high-profile Cameroonian scholar.

My virtual backup buddy starts the session and thankfully my kid is asleep by 9:40 so I put on my headscarf on top of my PJs and ask my husband if he's staying up to watch TV or if I can sit in the living room. He says he's staying up, so I go sit outside where it will be quieter. I see a couple of virtual participants are already online, and my virtual co-buddy Jack from Canada is trying to help one of them troubleshoot a tech problem. I start chatting with the other person, a newbie who seems nervous and explain the process.

"So what is the topic?" she asks.

"No topic, we're just chatting with them about the conference and we'll see how the conversation flows," I say.

She seems unconvinced. I ask her if she has been following the conference hashtag on Twitter and she says yes, so I suggest she could ask the onsite participants about something she found there, if she wants.

Our onsite buddies join the hangout. They are Myriam from US and Sam, a German living in Spain. The conference is in France. While they wait for onsite guests to join them, Jack and I notice a few virtual participants who signed up but hadn't made it. One of them is an unaffiliated scholar I know, who cannot travel much, so I DM her. For some reason, she hadn't received the email link, so I give it to her. I am glad she joins because I have missed her. The other missing person is an Australian VC volunteer so I message her privately on VC Slack, and she says she is on her way. Jack notices a new request on Twitter to join and he sends the link to the person via DM. We later discover that this person (Anna) has a disability that prevents her from attending conferences and she heard of VC and wanted to try it.

Maha Bali

I make a note to get in touch later and see if she wants to join our team. Most of our most active buddies are those who can't travel to conferences for pressing reasons: graduate students, adjunct, or independent scholars who have financial constraints, global South scholars, people with young kids or ageing parents. People with problems getting visas. People with health constraints.

It is nearly time to go live, and I see four onsite guests. One of the onsite guests brought someone else along. That's usually cool as long as everyone gets a chance to speak. When this happens, onsite buddies step back a bit to make room for guests to speak. We get ready to go live and get consent from everyone about livestreaming and recording on YouTube. Jack presses the "broadcast" button.

Once we go live, we go through a round of introductions, virtually then onsite, and we start asking onsite folks to share about the conference. It is interesting and all, but the white guy is taking up a lot of air time. I notice Myriam is encouraging this. I also noticed Sam trying to interrupt, but he is new so doesn't know how to do this assertively but politely. I speak up from the virtual side and ask specifically to hear from the other two guests.

The white guy hogging the conversation is a trigger for me as a postcolonial feminist. His actions remind me of all those meetings where men have silenced me. I did not co-found VC to listen to this guy's monologue. VC is for the virtual participants and their voices. VC is about conversation not content. I am frustrated with onsite buddies for not handling this sooner and decide to discuss with the team later, because it feels like my responsibility to ensure they know the importance of this, and that they feel they have the tools to handle these situations, to embody intentionally equitable hospitality.

I notice the Venezuelan graduate student speaks English well, but sometimes struggles to find the right word, and I see Sam at some point saying something to her in Spanish and she nods enthusiastically. They just agreed that whenever she is stuck for a word, she will say it in Spanish and he will translate. This seems to help her talk a bit more.

Myriam notices that virtual participants have not spoken much and pauses to say "We would love to hear from virtual participants – do you have any comments or questions?" One of them unmutes his mic and starts speaking, while others type some thoughts and reactions. One of the participants has not fixed her microphone problem, so she asks a question. Jack speaks it out loud for her so onsite folks can hear it. I tweet something out and I see someone on Twitter asking a question, so I relay it to the onsite guests and they respond.

Suddenly, a face pops into the screen asking, "Do you have time for one more?" I want to cry when I realize who it is. It's Sandy. We met online through a cMOOC. Two years ago, we met in person at a conference in nearby Beirut. We hadn't seen each other since but were in touch via Twitter DM. Sandy told me she isn't always comfortable with VC because she is a quiet, shy person. That's why it is so special that she decided to pop in. Part of our hospitality is not to pressure people who don't like VC to join. We exchange virtual kisses and conversation continues.

Around the half hour mark, the onsite buddies check in with onsite guests to see if they need to leave or can stay longer. They all say they have to leave. We thank them and Jack says he can stay online for ten more minutes if virtual folks want to hang around. One of them leaves but the rest stay. One of them starts speaking, saying she was too shy to participate while the high-profile onsite speakers were there, and we have a good conversation for a few more minutes. When Jake has to go, he tells us all he will stop the broadcast and leave, but we are welcome to keep chatting after he is gone. I linger and

chat a bit with the newbie, Anna. I ask her about how her first experience of VC was and whether she would like to be more involved. She tells me a bit more about herself and says she'll think about it. We discover our kids are around the same age and decide to introduce them via hangouts sometime soon! And we both sign off.

After I leave the session, I go into VC Slack, the channel where we are discussing that session and notice that others are telling Sam it was great, he stepped in to help with the Spanish. We reiterate that in future we should announce VC sessions with an added note about which languages are spoken among VC volunteers in the session, to help encourage people whose English is not strong. We also chat briefly about the white man who dominated the conversation and how we can avoid that in future. Perhaps by asking him to speak last so that we ensure others have had time to speak at least before he even begins? Or perhaps also the onsite buddies could have been more assertive. But we are all still learning. I discover on Twitter that someone had mistakenly sent a link for people to join the hangout. We usually keep these links private as trolls can use them. We only share links to watch sessions publicly. I quickly DM the person who did this and explain to them why we don't normally do that, and especially this particular session where one participant had privately expressed a concern about trolls to me. After he apologizes for posting the link publicly, I thank him and tell him I have made the same mistake before.

I send out a tweet thanking all the participants in the hangout whose Twitter handles I have and share a link to the recording. I see the onsite buddies tweeted a photo of the onsite guests and I ask their permission to use the photo of them in VC material. And I get up and go to sleep.

VC has an explicit social justice orientation, one that works towards equitable participation in academia as it challenges the gatekeeping of conferences by including marginalized voices in those informal conversations that build social capital for the privileged (with occasional triumphs and failures, as the previous narrative shows). As such, it is like critical autoethnography, which interrogates larger cultural interpretations, grand narratives, and hegemonic discourses (Atay & Trebing, 2017; Diversi & Moreira, 2018; Moreira & Diversi, 2010, 2011). VC is inclusive by “piercing the bubble” of those who are privileged to attend conferences. However, at the same time, the informality and community can seem intimidating to outsiders (Bali, Honeychurch et al., 2016). While some have managed their way in, many may not even try. We felt at the time that the answer was hospitality, our own kind of “intentionally equitable hospitality” and that’s what we wrote about recently (Bali, Caines et al., 2019), and hopefully the narrative above demonstrates one example of it happening in practice.

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