

methods to apply this approach. Some qualitative researchers know a lot about their sample beforehand and can identify major threats to inference before they start interviewing, allowing them to prioritize standardization at moments when they expect potential biases to their findings, and prioritize flexibility when they expect it will increase the depth and nuance of the information gleaned. Alternatively, researchers may learn through their initial interviews what the major threats to inference are, in which case greater *initial* flexibility

allows the researcher to adapt their interview method to gather initial findings, while greater standardization later allows for confirmation of initial findings. Overall, this framework provides simple and clear questions to consider that will allow a broad range of researchers who use interviews to decide for themselves how to best prioritize flexibility and standardization within their methodology, and allow them to make defensible claims from the rich interview data they have collected.

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Shifting Between Modes and Roles in Participant Observation

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted fieldwork as we knew it and forced many researchers to conduct fieldwork using digital tools, platforms, and data (see Digital Fieldwork 2021). Nevertheless, to some extent, increasing use and availability of digital fieldwork tools and platforms also "leveled the playing field," especially for younger, technologically adept, and less privileged researchers who lack funding, support systems, training, and favorable passport status that facilitate access to fieldwork Grimm (2022, 34). Since digital research practices are now here to stay, I argue that we need to go beyond considering these practices as mere ways of compensating for on-the-ground fieldwork and come up with propositions about how researchers who have limited time and resources for various reasons can integrate online and offline fieldwork in more or less structured or systematic ways. Slightly different from Murthy (2008, 839), who argues for "a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography" while highlighting the superior nature of physical ethnography by claiming that "new media and digital forms of 'old media' are additional, valuable methods," I argue that work conducted digitally/online is not merely

"additional," and both modes can be equally valuable for researchers.

Participant observation is a research methodology that might entail the active involvement of the researcher in an online or offline social, cultural, or political setting. Researchers can gain real-time insight into the context, processes, and mechanisms behind a social or political phenomenon by immersing themselves in the settings of the observed (Ross and Ross 1974, Bositis 1988, Gillespie and Michelson 2011).

In this piece, I propose ways of integrating online and offline participant observation by taking shifting modes (online and offline) and roles of the researcher into consideration. The paper is based on my experiences of studying political engagement and mobilization of emigrants from two authoritarian states, Turkey and Zimbabwe, in London, United Kingdom.

The main goal of my research is to explore how and why emigrants from authoritarian regimes politically engage with their home countries. "'What,' 'how,' and 'why' questions are central to the study of contention and that ethnographic methods are particularly well-suited to answering them" Fu and Simmons (2021, 1967).

Thus, participant observation, as a method, enables me to observe different forms of political engagement and mobilization, including demonstrations, fundraising events, petition deliveries, and elections that emigrants engage abroad to influence politics in their home countries and gain insight into their expectations and motivations to do so. Also, considering the ever-fluctuating, unpredictable, or potentially risky or dangerous nature of participant observation in illiberal or contentious political contexts, it is challenging for researchers to be on the ground for each significant event (Fu and Simmons 2021). Thus, researchers operating in such contexts can particularly benefit from integrating online and offline participant observation in their projects.

On the ground participant observation continuum

Based on Junker (1952), Gold (1958), Uldam and McCurdy (2013), and McCurdy and Uldam (2014), participant observation can be placed on a continuum where the “complete participant” is at one end and the “complete observer” at the other. As shown in Figure 1 below, complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer are all roles researchers can assume in their on-the-ground research.

In this continuum, ranging from complete participant to complete observer, the terms participant-as-observer and observer-as-participant require special attention as in-between forms of active participation. Research participants would be aware that the researcher engages with the participants to conduct her research when the researcher acts as participant-as-observer. In this role, researchers actively engage in the participants’ activities, interactions, and experiences while observing and documenting what is happening. For example, the researcher might take on tasks involving helping the organization, publicizing, or mobilizing efforts (Uldam and McCurdy 2013, 945). When the researcher assumes the observer role as a participant, she primarily functions as an observer and minimizes her occasional participation in the observed setting.

However, my experiences confirm the fluidity of the field conditions during participant observation, and how the boundaries between overt/covert/insider/outsider and observation/participation can vanish based on changing and shifting dynamics, and how researchers can assume multiple roles during participant observation. Thus, researchers need to reflect on their changing roles constantly.

Online participant observation continuum

I place online participant observation on a continuum

ranging from complete participant to complete lurker, as shown in Figure 2 below.

The complete participant may use a personal account, create content, post regularly, interact with other group members, and ultimately act as an active online community member. In contrast, the complete lurker would not participate or disclose their presence yet pays attention and listens (Popovac and Fullwood 2018, Hine 2008, Adjin-Tettey et al. 2023). The researcher’s lack of visibility or non-disclosure of their presence may be intentional or unintentional due to the nature of the online platform or activities. However, a significant portion of engagement with online communities, such as private groups, would need to be participatory since such communities would require the researcher to sign up, sometimes introduce themselves, and become community members (Cleland and Macleod, 2022).

There are also in-between positions of engager-as-observer and lurker-as-observer. The engager-as-observer would not primarily create content or post regularly but still engage with others by reposting, liking, and replying to what other people post. The lurker-as-observer would primarily observe others while minimally participating and disclosing their presence. Similar to on-the-ground participant observation, online participant observation also has a fluid nature (de Seta, 2020).

Integrating In-Person and Online Participant Observation

Integrating online and in-person participant observation allows researchers to capture broader experiences and interactions and is a powerful tool for exploring how politics work in real-time. Online participant observation provides insights into virtual communities, social media interactions, and digital political participation and mobilization of physical communities (Schrooten 2012, Paechter 2013, Balsiger and Lambelet 2014, Airoidi 2018, Bluteau 2021). For example, I utilized in-person and online participant observation methods in my research to capture the multifaceted nature of emigrant-led political activities, including offline activities, such as demonstrations, and online engagement through social media platforms.

Researchers can integrate online and in-person observation differently while positioning themselves in different places on the on-the-ground and online participant observation continua. In all these options, researchers can identify the gatekeepers, those in leadership, management, and organization positions, and essential members in organizations or communities.

Following a **sequential approach**, researchers can start their data collection and planning processes with online participant observation by observing online

platforms or communities formed on those platforms to gain initial insights. In this way, researchers can collect and analyze data on social networks, online interactions, discussions, and behaviors. All these data and analyses can help researchers inform their initial approach to formulating their research questions, hypotheses, and assumptions. Then, based on these initial online observations, researchers can identify and reach out to event organizers or community leaders online to explain their research and seek permission to attend events.

Following a **concurrent approach**, researchers can conduct online and in-person participant observation concurrently for observing and analyzing different aspects of a social or political phenomenon. They can select specific offline events based on online observations, such as political rallies, community meetings, or demonstrations, that align with their research goals, observe pre-event online engagement of organizers and participants, attend these events, and then return to online spaces to explore post-event online engagement.

Researchers can also combine online and in-person observations to **triangulate data or findings**. They can compare the data or findings to identify convergent and divergent patterns, commonalities, and differences or engage in member checking by returning to the online or offline communities. In this way, they can improve the validity and reliability of their findings and offer more comprehensive perspectives of the social or political phenomenon they are studying.

Finally, researchers carrying out online participant *observation* need to consider a broad range of ethical and safety-related factors not discussed in-depth in this piece, such as the appropriateness of overt or covert research in each context and platform, safety and well-being of the researcher, the blurry lines between public/private online spaces, privacy, and anonymity of users, complex dynamics and practices regarding the collection, analysis, and publication of the data based on the online platform, research topic, and other contextual factors (Berry 2004, Hine 2008, Dittrich and Kenneally 2012, Roberts 2015, Hennell et al. 2019, Winter and Lavis 2020, Di and Liu 2021, Grimm 2022, Lavorgna and Sugiura 2022).

The present paper emphasizes the need to go beyond viewing digital methods as mere substitutes for traditional fieldwork. Instead, it advocates for a structured integration of online and offline practices, specifically focusing on participant observation. The paper explores the roles within on-the-ground and online participant observation, ranging from active participant to complete observer. Furthermore, it provides insight into the dynamic and fluid nature of participant observation, emphasizing the importance of researchers continuously reflecting on their roles. Most importantly, the paper offers practical approaches—sequential, concurrent, and triangulation—for researchers seeking to merge online and offline approaches, particularly in participant observation.

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