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Participatory Visual & Digital Methods

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ALINE GUBRIUM • KRISTA HARPER

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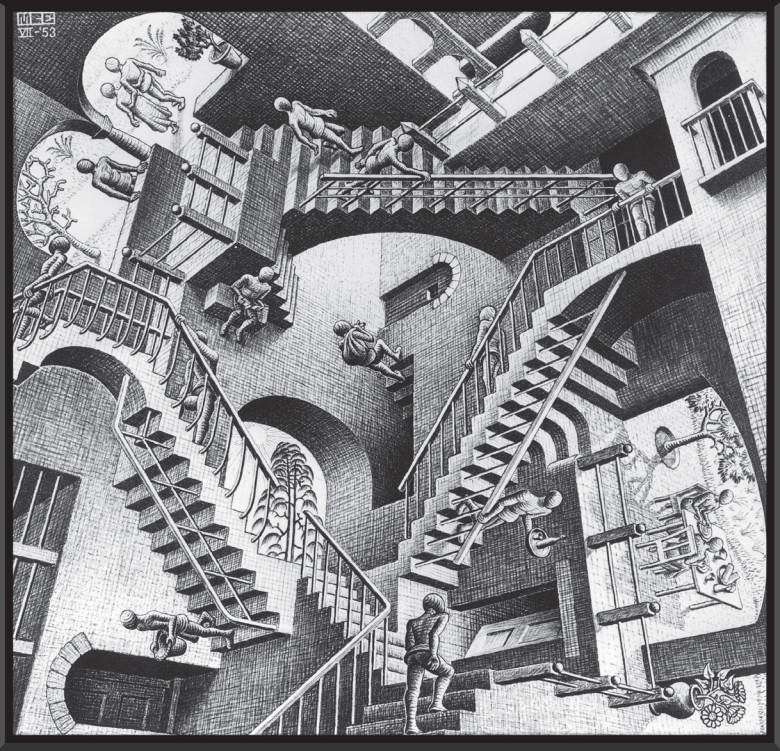

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Aline Gubrium
Krista Harper

Walnut Creek, California

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To our families, with love

Acknowledgments

Six years ago this summer, we met for lunch for the first time in downtown Amherst. Aline had just arrived at the University of Massachusetts as a new faculty member in Community Health Education and was launching a new participatory action research (PAR) project with a digital storytelling component on women's reproductive health in Western Massachusetts. Krista had just returned from six months of fieldwork in Hungary, where she had just carried out the Photovoice project described in this book. We knew immediately that we wanted to write together. This book is a collaboration of equals, passing the baton back and forth on the long race to the finish line. As authors, we have listed our names alphabetically to reflect this.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What Is Participatory Digital and Visual Research?

Emergent digital and visual methodologies, such as digital storytelling and participatory digital archiving, are changing the ways that social scientists conduct research and are opening up new possibilities for participatory approaches that appeal to diverse audiences and reposition participants as co-producers of knowledge and potentially as co-researchers. Given the shift in the social sciences to more participatory forms of research, participants are increasingly conceptualized as collaborators in the process. In the field of public health and other applied fields, as well as much of contemporary feminist studies, participatory action research (PAR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR) have gained prominence as an approach to scholarship and advocacy. Through digital representations of their experiences in YouTube videos, the taking and sharing of visual material online through interfaces such as Facebook and Flickr, and mapping their own environments in collaborative blogs, such as in "orange: a just and beautiful city 07050" (jbc07050.blogspot.com), research participants are now positioned as producers of veritable social research data that, in turn, can be repurposed as material for community mobilization and advocacy. Participatory digital and visual methodologies produce rich multimodal and narrative data guided by participant interests and priorities, putting the methods literally in the hands of the participants themselves and allowing for greater access to social research knowledge beyond the academy.

More than 20 years ago, feminist and postmodern anthropologists led a discipline-wide discussion of the ways that we produce and provide access to cultural representations through ethnographic fieldwork and writing (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Fox, 1991; Harrison, 1997; Marcus, 1995; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989; Tedlock, 1991, 1995). Calling for the reinvention of anthropology, these scholars challenged the disciplinary norm of the detached "lone ethnographer" and invited

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the "natives" to talk back in scholarly texts. Few of these critics, however, challenged the notion of the written text as the central medium of anthropological knowledge. More recently, we have witnessed calls for a shift in the ways we train social researchers, including revision of the ways we produce text in these fields, and a frank acknowledgment of the ways that ". . . as fieldwork has become multi-sited and mobile in nature, subjects are more 'counterpart' than 'other' " (Marcus, 2008, p. 7) and that younger practitioners may aspire to conduct more "activist" research, such that their work can have useful applications.

Arjun Appadurai (2006) trenchantly argues for a "de-parochializing" of research, "for opening it up as a genuinely inclusive and universally available capacity" (p. 169). In this manner, research can be positioned as an endeavor with "democratic potential" and as a "right" fundamental to full citizenship that should be available to all human beings as they have the capacity to serve as researchers, "since all human beings make decisions that require them to make systematic forays beyond their current knowledge horizons" (Appadurai, 2006, p. 167). Appadurai's work with subaltern youth through the organization Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action, and Research (PUKAR) emphasizes a "documentation as intervention" approach. In reviewing the approach, Appadurai notes:

> [T]hese experiments in documentation have opened a double path for many young people; one is a deepening of skills they desperately need; the other is the recognition that developing the capacity to document, to inquire, to analyze and to communicate results has a powerful effect on their capacity to speak up as active citizens on matters that are shaping their city and their world. (p. 175)

This 'double path' is key to our enthusiasm for the potential uses of participatory visual methodologies—uses that derive just as much from the research process as they do from produced outcomes.

In response to the critique of ethnographic representation, visual ethnographers have begun to embrace participatory approaches. While written texts remain a central practice in the discipline, they are increasingly turning to new/digital media for scholarly production (Pink, 2007). By digital, we refer to methods that are often computer-based or "virtual," whether this relates to the mode of production—such as with the editing of digital stories on laptops—or with how the outcomes of production are disseminated, such as with digital archives. We are quick to point out that digital methods are not always necessarily participatory in nature and have in many ways become online or computer adaptations of traditional qualitative inquiry methods, known as "online/Internet research methods" or "virtual methods" (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008;

Hine, 2005; Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2004), such as in the use of online interviewing (James & Busher, 2006; Salmons, 2010) and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008). That said, "digital ethnography" or "digital anthropology"—in the sense of studying online social life—is not a special focus of this book. For cutting-edge research in this field, see the work of Chris Kelty (2008), Gabriella Coleman (2010, 2012), Tom Boellstorff (2008), Boellstorff et al. (2012), Michael Wesch (2009), Whitehead & Wesch (2009), Amber Case (2012), and Jillian York (2012).

Shifts in the everyday use of digital visual technologies increasingly challenge the centrality of the written text in anthropology. Having grown up with the Internet, laptops, Facebook, and YouTube, today's undergraduates and graduate students are particularly drawn to the use of digital technologies in conducting social research. Indeed, many of our research participants also use these technologies in their daily lives. The emergence of more "open source" technologies and methodologies has resulted in new venues and networks of knowledge production.

Core Stories: A Collaborative Approach to Case Study Construction

The impetus for this book began when we co-organized two conference panels in 2008: one, "Visualizing Change: Emergent Technologies in Social Justice Inquiry and Action," at the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) Annual Meeting in Memphis; the other, "Emerging Methodologies: Public Anthropology and the Challenge of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)" at the Northeastern Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in Amherst, Massachusetts. The intent of both panels was to cast new imaginings of the ways that social and applied researchers might include collaborative visual and digital methods in research projects. We subsequently took part in another conference session, "Public Anthropology/Public Culture: Image, Voice, and Participation in Public Visual Culture," in 2009 at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Annual Meeting, where we focused on ethical issues pertaining to participatory visual and digital research methodologies and future possibilities for engaging with them. The warm reception we received at these sessions prompted us to co-edit a special issue of *Practicing Anthropology* that same year on use of participatory digital research methods in applied anthropology. Our discussions surrounding these events led us to conclude that a book that introduced anthropologists and other social researchers to participatory visual and digital methods would be of interest to many and was increasingly needed in the field.

So what do we mean when we use the term "participatory," in conjunction with visual and digital methods of qualitative inquiry? By participatory, we refer to methodologies, approaches, or techniques that afford the "subject," "community member," and/or "field site" greater narrative latitude when it comes to ethnographic knowledge production and a larger role in determining why and how research outcomes are produced and received by lay and academic audiences alike. There are several terms for research methods that integrate the active participation of community members in the co-construction of knowledge: CBPR (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008), collaborative anthropology (Lassiter, 2005), and PAR. Although each term has its own history of development, we choose to use the term "PAR" throughout this book because it is widely used and places emphasis on "action" as a research goal.

At least in concept, the increasing use of community-based and participatory approaches has led to the assertion that social research is shifting toward a new paradigm premised on achieving equality, not only on the basis of "the distribution of predetermined benefits but also in the status and voice" of historically excluded stakeholders (House, 2002, p. 633; Peterson & Gubrium, 2011, p. 2). In the field of public health, Green and colleagues (1995) describe CBPR as centered on community–researcher collaboration, from developing research questions through the dissemination of findings. In practice, uncertainty remains in relation to conflicts over the perspectives, priorities, assumptions, values, beliefs, and language of "participation" and "research," as well as over its conceptualization of "community" (Israel et al., 2005). We also recognize inherent discursive and practical challenges of participation. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) note, participation often "remains a way of talking about rather than doing" research (p. 32).

We began writing this book with the idea that we would assemble a simple text to be used both in classroom and field settings. Our intention was that it would be written so that students and social researchers alike, who were interested in using participatory digital/visual methods in their own work, could access the book as a resource in considering the planning, design, implementation, and analysis of a project employing these methodologies. However, as we began writing we realized that for a book about participatory approaches, who else better to inform the story of these approaches than their own practitioners?

Our approach to writing was thus very much aligned with a participatory approach to knowledge construction. When we began to collect material for the specific methodology chapters we realized the "collaborative" wisdom of drawing upon the perspectives of key scholars who have driven the field of participatory visual research, beginning in the early 1970s. Reviewing the work of key visual anthropologist Timothy Asch,

Sarah Elder's (2001–2002) articulation of the concept of "core stories" is very much in line with our modus operandi for considering case studies in this book:

> . . . [A] "core story" [is] the kind of identity story each of us tells about our lives. These stories are as much a part of us as our fingerprints. Our stories give form and meaning to the inchoate details of our experiences, allowing us to make sense out of life's raw footage. Core stories are signifiers for where we have been and where we might be traveling. They teach our listeners the intricacies and valences of our values, values of which sometimes even we are unconscious. In the various telling[s] of this . . . story, particularly [under certain circumstances], Tim laid down a framework for our understanding of what was important to him. He gives us a map of where he came from and where he might be heading, a place and space inscribed by his life's process. (Elder, 2001–2002, p. 91)

Interviews we conducted with prominent practitioners in the field were crafted into case studies: core stories that reflect the methodological sense-making trajectories of these scholars about their own work and the forms of participation and knowledge created and invoked in their work. These stories allow the reader to see the ways in which practitioners' academic and ethical values infuse their approach to collaboration, such that participation takes on a variety of contexts depending on the type of visual medium used, the multiple applications for the methods, and the pathways drawn by practitioners in terms of developing a program of research surrounding the methodologies.

We began with interviews (many, perhaps ironically so, conducted through a fairly new digital technology, Skype) asking scholar/participants to describe their history of engagement with participatory methodologies. Engagement was framed in terms of participants' epistemological, ontological, and ethical perspectives on participation and/or collaboration in the field, and then how these perspectives have shaped use of the particular technique in their work. We also asked participants to describe a project (or projects) in which they had used a participatory visual approach and the process and outcomes resulting from this work. Finally, we asked them to describe the benefits and challenges of using these methodologies, with many participants highlighting ethical implications, as well as the affordances of using the approaches to conduct truly engaged research that might serve the needs of communities involved. Participants also relayed how they saw the methodologies adding to the field(s) of social research.

We digitally recorded these interviews and transcribed them, with copies of audiofiles or transcripts emailed to participants for review. Participants were asked to provide any corrections and suggestions that they wished to make. Similar to the approach outlined in a number of

the case studies, participants were also given the opportunity to delete or change anything in the transcript that they felt uncomfortable including in the case study or that did not properly capture their story. Finally, upon receipt of the "member-checked" file, we assembled a core story from the interview, and then returned these narratives to participants. Just as with the interview transcript, participants were given the opportunity to review the core story and provide elaboration, comments, and edits to their stories. We have also included our own "core stories" of using a particular methodology. Gubrium's core story focuses on her use of digital storytelling for reproductive research and justice purposes in her work as a medical anthropologist in the field of public health, while Harper's story focuses on her work as a cultural anthropologist using Photovoice as a research and advocacy method for environmental justice among the Romani in Hungary. This book, then, is just as much a collaborative (auto)ethnography of participatory digital research as it is an introduction to the methodologies, with the dialogic process of core story construction very much reflecting on our own research projects and the growing interdisciplinary literature on participatory digital and visual research.

Participatory visual methodology case studies featured in this book include Photovoice, digital storytelling, participatory GIS (PGIS), participatory forms of digital archival research, and collaborative and participatory film and videomaking, as well as those focused on the ethical implications of participatory visual research and dialogic/participatory data analysis. While we do try to give an overview of the current state of affairs for each methodological approach, for some areas such as participatory videomaking, visual anthropology, and science and technology studies, there are more exhaustive surveys available than what we present here. Other participatory digital methodologies gaining traction in social research fields, but not reviewed in-depth in this book, include collaborative blogging (Downey et al., 2012; Fish et al., 2012; Forte et al., 2012), interactive multimedia (Young & Barrett, 2001), and digital ethnography in its own right (Dicks, Soyinka, & Coffey, 2006; Murthy, 2008; Wesch, 2012).

Although we provide overviews of each methodology "in practice," we do not provide detailed technical descriptions of how to use specific software programs in the methods chapters. We suggest that interested readers seek out the most current user guides and groups online. Finally, we readily acknowledge that while we have tried to be inclusive in our review of the various approaches, there is much "madness to the method" of trying to write about participatory visual and digital research approaches, as much of the literature on this work appears online, with libraries and information systems straining to keep afloat of how to catalog all that is

out there. Indeed, the terminology and practices related to these methodologies are constantly shifting, with "emergent" techniques and areas of research constantly springing to life.

Are We Going to Let the Tide Turn Without Us?

Just as a sea change is occurring in social research to include participatory visual and digital methodologies (Gubrium & Harper, 2009), the relevance and social justice potential of ethnography is also reaching policy and activist settings, with social researchers having a responsibility to respond to new approaches to fieldwork and new conceptualizations of just who or what represents the field, who directs meaning-making in the field, and who sets the agenda for research (Checker, Vince, & Wali, 2010). Participatory visual methodologies are proliferating in the human sciences, as well as in applied fields such as public health, education, nursing, and social work (excitement that we may gauge from the sheer number of graduate student committees we are asked to serve on, often due to our interest in these methodologies).

Digital and visual approaches to participatory research offer opportunities to open up the ethnographic process and to share research with a diverse array of audiences. We recognize that some of these methods have been used in prior iterations since at least the 1960s. However, today's academics have to reckon with the cultural impact of virtual media, and especially the way we must reconsider text as the primary object we produce. In this we agree with Marcus (2008) that graduate students earning social science PhDs today are entering a new academic terrain. The entire landscape of academic production is changing and with it, the publication and dissemination of ethnographic research. Our participants themselves have come to expect more than just reports of findings, encouraging us to address the relevance of the findings to their communities. Furthermore, while these approaches have been readily taken up and applied in different settings, scholars have not yet drawn out the theoretical implications of emerging methodologies.

Why Are You Here?

We hope this book will be useful to a range of readers. Some readers may be graduate students in the classroom who are intent on learning about more participatory approaches that they might take in their research and/or activist endeavors. Others may be established academics, ready to begin a new project and already knowing that they would like to integrate participatory visual and digital research methods into their project design from the outset. Other readers, having conducted more

traditional ethnographic research in a specific setting, may now wish to introduce participatory approaches to "give back" to the community and to foster more collaborative research relationships. Participatory action researchers who have not yet used visual or digital technologies will learn about using these methods to engage participants and to reach policymakers with their research findings. Others may simply be trying to decide whether participatory visual and digital methods match the goals of community collaborators and their own research agendas.

Setting Sail: Preview of the Book

In this book, we explore some of the reasons motivating researchers to consider the ethical and power issues invoked in the social research process and outcomes, the ways this work is disseminated to diverse audiences, and how participatory visual and digital methodologies fit into all this. We explain how to start applying participatory approaches, from project design, through data collection and analysis, to presentation and dissemination of research to multiple audiences. Each stage of the research process brings with it new questions about the nature of participation, the appropriate use of visual and digital technologies, research ethics, and the goals of our knowledge production (Table 1-1). We begin by reviewing the theoretical foundations and ethical implications of these methodologies, and then review the various methods as they can be used for social research purposes.

In Chapter 2, we look more in-depth at the foundations of participatory visual and digital methodologies. We review critiques of traditional ethnography put forth by postcolonial, feminist, and postmodern scholars. From the perspective of applied social science, we discuss the ways that ethnographic field methods have been applied in international and community development work, contexts which serve as the wellspring for many of the methods reviewed in this book. We also look at the ways digital and visual methods have been informed by more academic settings, especially in the humanistic disciplines. Science and technology scholars, in particular, are well known for taking a critical perspective to the use of digital and other communication technologies as "shiny new objects" brought on board to conduct ethnographic research. We end this chapter by examining the social implications of incorporating new digital visual and communication technologies in social research.

In Chapter 3, we examine ethical issues involved in conducting participatory visual and digital research. Especially where these potentially public methods are concerned, it is extremely important to expand our ethical considerations beyond those of merely obtaining participant consent forms or fulfilling the expectations of a university human subjects' board. As Bourgois (1997) notes:

Table 1-1 Charting the participatory visual/digital research process

	Research Design/ Preproduction	Data Collection/ Production	Data Analysis/ Postproduction	Dissemination and Application
Collaboration and participation	Partnership as starting point of research Developing research questions together Research as a practice, as collective action	Community-based teams or collaborative dyads Involvement of wider group of participants	Team discussion of visual documentation Participatory editing of media or texts Opportunity to include wider community, in person or online	Multiple research products Multiple authors Discussion of audiences and outcomes Exhibition as opportunity for further research
Technology	Appropriate technology Partners value technical and research skills as "capacity building"	Training and use of digital or visual technologies: digital photography and video, multimedia archives and stories, GPS/ GIS, blogging	Digital image circulation "Opening the archive" through Internet	Modular units versus "whole stories" Challenges of presenting complex multimedia projects in journals
Ethics	Ethical principles after Said, *Writing Culture*, and feminist anthropology Decision to pursue PAR IRB process Community IRBs	Training research teams Consent in visual research Learning the local ethical landscape Despite efforts, some researcher/subject distinction persists Ongoing reflection in situ	Who participates in PAR discussions? How are these facilitated? Discussion of how data will be presented and used in next phase of research? Role of the anthropologist?	Image ethics: attention to the context where images are consumed "Circulatory regimes" (Ginsberg, 2008): hard to maintain control in digital environments Internet: uneven access, may not be inclusive

(*Continued*)

Table 1-1 (*Continued*)

	Research Design/ Preproduction	Data Collection/ Production	Data Analysis/ Postproduction	Dissemination and Application
Knowledge production	Research goals: intentions in tension What is "interesting and important"? Funding and planning, especially in international	"Emic" perspectives in focus: participants choose where to point the lens Metaresearch: participant observation of participants' observation Interplay of perspectives: inside/outside academic/activist anthro/ interdisciplinary	Description-analysis-action Visual documentation Visual elicitation A place for stories Negotiated meaning Member check for validity	Multipronged approach Accessibility, language New venues and forms Room for affective and aesthetic elements Informed action as a research outcome Academic recognition

> [t]he problem with contemporary anthropological ethics is not merely that the boundaries of what is defined as ethical are too narrowly drawn, but more importantly, that ethics can be subject to rigid, righteous interpretations which place them at loggerheads with over-arching human rights concerns. (p. 113)

While participant consent and assurance of confidentiality are important aspects of ethical research practice—and something that we duly address in the chapter—we must also broaden ethical considerations to address the ways that power differentials affect the process of participatory research, as well as its outcomes and manner of dissemination. Dimensions of power include considerations of the ways that rapport and trust is built in the research process, the type of reciprocity accorded in the process with the communities and community members involved, and a recognition of power (im)balances inherent to matters of representation, to name a few.

Finally, we end by linking precursors of these methods—especially the theoretical and epistemological crisis in anthropology in the 1980s—to the development of participatory or collaborative research designs. In so doing, we review the differences between academic/social research and community organization goals and the uses of social research, both in terms of applied and basic research purposes. In particular, we discuss how these two sets of goals and purposes might be interwoven to "open up" the research design process through the use of participatory visual and digital methodologies.

Chapters 4 through 8 are each devoted to a particular visual and/or digital method that might be used in conducting participatory research: Photovoice, participatory film and videomaking, digital storytelling, PGIS, and participatory digital archives and exhibition. In each chapter we introduce the method and accompanying techniques involved. We then briefly provide a historical overview of the method, introducing the reader to pioneering scholars who helped to establish the method in the field. Finally, we present two to three "core methodology stories" of researcher/practitioners—all pioneering scholars in their own right—who have used the methods in their work. Such core stories cover the gamut of recent participatory visual/digital research projects, from those focusing on environmental and public health issues to youth activism and community development, and draw upon fieldwork conducted in communities in the United States, Canadian First Nations, eastern Europe, southern Africa, Oceania, and beyond.

Overwhelmingly, these core stories discuss potential ethical issues to be addressed when conducting projects using participatory visual and digital methods. Indeed, future scholars should heed the voices of the

seasoned scholars presented in this book, as we believe their cases build a collective "how-to" guide for conducting ethically conscious social research. They present on-the-ground examples of ethical issues to be considered by social researchers when using participatory visual/digital methods, including: community building and decision-making when designing research projects; voice, representation, and power when producing digital/visual texts, and concomitant academic, community, and activist roles in the process; target audiences for dissemination of research products and modes of dissemination; and participants as knowledge producers and agents of change.

As scholar-activists using participatory visual/digital methods ourselves, we are particularly keen on exploring the nexus between the benefits provided by these methods for conducting ethnography and ethical and epistemological dilemmas elicited through their use. On the one hand, the methods grant researchers access to participants' emic categories, while offering participants more control in the creation of ethnographic representations. On the other hand, new ethical dilemmas arise as to who participates in the research process and who has the right to show or manage the products of research collaborations.

In addition, where PAR approaches are concerned, scholars using the methods need to incorporate some amount of reflexivity with regard to recent social science critiques of taken-for-granted concepts, such as the "community" (Creed, 2006) and "participation," and the ways these terms may be exploited in the name of getting research done. We are also interested in pursuing how social researchers using these methods reconcile the recent visual anthropology critique of the image-as-commodity or agent for reification of cultural identity. Responses to these quandaries hold ramifications for the production and consumption of visual representations, as well as for research participants. They also integrally affect the ways we might reconceptualize data analysis, and how we represent our data in research outputs or as "products."

In Chapter 9, we take a close look at traditional forms of ethnographic data analysis, as well as at the tenets of participatory research, which ask that we as researchers be self-reflexive when it comes to our process for conducting research and the ways we construct and represent research findings-outcomes. In particular, we describe more recent dialogic/participatory approaches to data analysis (Tedlock, 1995) that encourage shifting roles for the academic researcher and the research "subject" to those based on a more equitable relationship. We present several exemplars of a re-visioned analytical approach for participatory research that speak to the need for reciprocity when analyzing and producing research findings, as well as to reconsider our audiences when conducting social

research in this now virtual age. We end the chapter by discussing how academic texts might be created based on a participatory approach that moves beyond written text, using new media to share our research with diverse audiences. Furthermore, we consider how emergent forms of knowledge production might affect scholarly publishing and what we might consider as venues for research in this new age.

We end the book perhaps with more questions asked than answers given. Several key questions apply to the emergence of participatory visual/digital methodologies, such as where are these methodologies leading the social sciences, and how do these methodologies respond to the call to recapture ethnography? We hope that this book will provoke future dialog on these questions, particularly in terms of the implications of the methodologies for the training of new social researchers, and of the goals we ultimately seek in social research knowledge production.