



On “being present in the field” in studying protest online

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Received: 25 August 2025 – Revised: 23 September 2025 – Accepted: 30 September 2025 – Published: 4 November 2025

1 Introduction

Chowra Makaremi’s deep, insightful, and comprehensive analysis of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings in Iran is grounded in a meticulous study of videos, photos, and emotions shared on social media. State violence and repression, particularly targeting women’s bodies (see also Molana et al., 2023), have rendered on-site fieldwork in Iran impossible for Makaremi. Consequently, she “combine[s] online ethnographic interviews, digital ethnography on social networks and participant observations in ‘spaces’ of discussions (Twitter, Clubhouse)” (Makaremi, 2025:11) to develop what she terms an “off-site” ethnography. Her analysis serves as a compelling example of how “digital practices of life and thriving that take shape under conditions of impossibility” (Elwood, 2021:212) can be examined.

The necessity of conducting research via social media platforms extends beyond contexts of political violence and oppression, such as in Iran. Broader global power structures – including unjust regimes of citizenship, racism, and sexism – similarly obstruct researchers’ abilities to conduct on-site fieldwork. With the rise of social media and, more recently, the restrictions on movement imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, research on and with social media platforms has become increasingly prevalent. This trend is evident across disciplines, including geography, as demonstrated by studies on election campaigns (Wiertz and Schopper, 2022), community-based care (Kipp and Hawkins, 2022), and intimate surveillance (Datta, 2020) conducted through social media.

Makaremi’s work raises critical methodological questions about studying protests via social media. First, her off-site ethnography expands the boundaries of traditional ethnographic methods by relying on digital ethnography and archival material. However, this approach also prompts concerns about the reliability and interpretive frameworks used to analyze fragmented and incomplete digital data. Second,

Makaremi’s goal “to read this huge production of images and narratives as archives, or rather micro-archives, and to hold together the symbolic dimension, the imaginaries and cosmogonies the political emotions and affects, the material conditions of production and circulation online and on-site” (Makaremi, 2025:11) is ambitious but constrained by the inherent limitations of such data. Researchers must remain reflexive, acknowledging the biases and constraints of interpreting events from a distance. Third, the contextualization of social media materials – such as photos and chats – is essential as these artifacts are not only incomplete but also shaped by the practices and intentions of their creators. Lastly, off-site ethnography also raises broader questions about how global mobility, the circulation of data, and the production of global norms influence knowledge boundaries and the interpretation of events in “locked” (Makaremi, 2025:10) societies.

A central methodological challenge in Makaremi’s reflections on off-site ethnography concerns the legitimacy of knowledge production without physical field presence. She describes her approach as ethnographic work “at a distance” (Makaremi, 2025:9), defining it as “an empirical investigation without being present in the field” (Makaremi, 2025:10). She pursues the following central question: “how can we lead an empirical investigation without being present in the field?” (Makaremi, 2025:10). In my commentary, I would like to expand this question of *how* to conduct off-site ethnography by asking *what* we learn methodologically from analyzing protests through (exclusive) online (social media) participation. Inspired by geographical concepts of digital space, I argue that off-site ethnography reveals a form of digital co-presence in the field enabled by digital technologies such as social media platforms. Drawing on feminist geographers Araby Smyth, Elsa Koleth, and Linda Peake (Smyth et al., 2024:191), who define the field as the “place(s) in which your sphere of enquiry is located [and] the place(s) where you will find the data to analyse and answer your research ques-

tion(s)”, the field can encompass not only physical spaces like schools, family homes, or streets but also digital spaces such as hashtags, timelines, and chats on social media platforms. The experience of participating in protests *only* via social media is inevitably different from when our bodies are also demonstrating on the streets among hundreds or thousands of other people. However, I argue that online-only participation does not only remind us that the production of knowledge about political protests and social justice movements is always partial and in need of contextualization precisely because researching street protests via social media can be accompanied by the painful feeling of “not being there” and “missing out” on a powerful and unique collective affect. The often-involuntary necessity to follow street protests via social media only also opens up the possibility for researchers to centre the perspectives and embodied experiences of those activists who simply cannot participate in street protests – such as disability activists – and yet are central in their digital circulation and political impact. I will elaborate on these thoughts below.

2 Digital spaces and presence in social media research

As Jack Giesecking (Giesecking, 2019:85) notes, “digital devices, platforms, and codes ... permeate, define, and shape the spaces and experiences of all human ... life”. Over the past several decades, geographers have developed concepts to explain digital space. The emergence of “digital spatial infrastructures” (Leszczynski, 2019:14), such as geographic information systems, has underscored how space is co-produced, shaped, and transformed by digital technologies. Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge’s (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011) seminal work on code/space and coded spaces highlights the “inseparability of digitalization and space” (Bauder, 2021:82, translation by author; see also Leszczynski, 2019). Their research demonstrates how digital technologies not only produce certain spaces (e.g., airport security checks) but also transform existing spaces (e.g., cafés with or without free WiFi) in terms of their functions, uses, and identities (Leszczynski, 2019).

Building on these ideas, the concept of “cON/OFFlating spaces” emphasizes the diverse power relations embedded in and emerging from the relationships between technologies and (more-than-human) bodies, as well as “affects and emotions, materialities and representations” (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2020:144, translation by author) that characterize digital spaces. Tabea Bork-Hüffer and Brenda Yeoh coined the term cON/OFFlating spaces to describe the “conflation of [people’s] online and offline practices” (Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh, 2017:95) in the context of researching migrant professionals in Singapore in the mid-2010s. Rather than treating online experiences as distinct from offline realities, the concept of cON/OFFlating spaces highlights “people’s togetherness in

digital space” (Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh, 2017:95). Yet, digital technologies, such as smartphones, smart watches, social media, or digital cameras do not only connect people in a variety of ways. Digital technologies also enable a “connected presence” (Licoppe, 2004) or the “simultaneous presence in digitally mediated and physical contexts” (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2020:156).

Ayona Datta and Arya Thomas (Datta and Thomas, 2021:234) further describe digital co-presence as a “shifting, ambiguous, and intimate ‘contact zone’ that emerges by visually ‘composing-with’ as well as ‘learning-with’ the realities and constraints of space, technology and power”. These contact zones bring together diverse lived experiences, digital artifacts, technologies, and emotions, creating a shared presence in digital spaces. For example, the production and sharing of visual, voice, text, or geolocation messages on social media connect individuals across different sociospatial and temporal contexts, even when accessed asynchronously. However, these same digital artifacts also serve as tools for surveillance and control, enabling global tech companies to accumulate capital and state authorities to monitor and suppress dissent. In the context of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings in Iran, social media has simultaneously facilitated demonstrators’ ability to “communicate, mobilize and extend their networks of resistance” (Akbari, 2022:5) and enabled state authorities to criminalize, arrest, and violently suppress participants (Akbari, 2022).

In contrast to the concept of digitally connected presence through social media and other digital technologies, Makaremi describes her off-site ethnography as an observation without presence. At first glance, her argument of non-presence in the field appears to be plausible. Makaremi did not personally take the pictures and videos of the demonstrations in Iran, nor was she physically present on the streets when feelings of “rage but also elation” (Makaremi, 2025:12) filled the air. She characterizes her research experience as a “paradoxical distance”, explaining that she “was riveted by the events unfolding in Iran through the screens” (Makaremi, 2025:11).

Upon closer examination, however, this notion of non-presence becomes more complex. It is precisely through the images, videos, and texts circulating on social media – shared in various chats and across different platforms, pulsating with likes, comments, and re-shares – that we can observe what an emotional, affective, and experiential simultaneous digital presence entails. The researcher is connected not only to those who produced and posted the content but also to those depicted in it; to those who engage with it by liking, sharing, or archiving; and to a collective “we” (Makaremi, 2025:9) that views these circulating artifacts and becomes emotionally invested. This dynamic illustrates the mutual constitution of online and offline spaces, where digital co-presence fosters a sense of connection and shared experience, even in the absence of physical proximity.

Digital co-presence in the field, however, is arguably of a different quality than on-site, or physical, presence. Yet, is there any ethnographic research experience today that is not digitally mediated in some way? Particularly in the context of the uprisings in Iran, the dissemination of photos, videos, texts, and emotions via social media has been a central mechanism enabling the “digitally-mediated assemblies” (Akbari, 2022:4) that characterize these protests (see also Danesh and Athari, 2024). As Hanieh Molana, A. Marie Ranjbar, and Sahar Razavi (Molana et al., 2023:2) note, the “protests are organized and facilitated by word of mouth and through social media channels run by disparate groups across different sectors of society”. Consequently, the protests are not confined to the streets but are also taking place on social media platforms and the smartphones of users in Iran, the diaspora, and beyond. In recent years, social media platforms have become indispensable spaces for researching protest – not as a substitute for studying demonstrations and street activism but as an integral part of them. Apart from the affordances of digital co-presence, what else does online-only research teach us about social media methodologies?

In my view, the effort “to grasp a little more of what remains off-field” (Makaremi, 2025:11) is less about distinguishing between on-site and off-site fieldwork and more about the necessity to, first, embrace social media data in its partiality; second, contextualize social media research; and, third, centre the embodied experiences and voices of those who are central to digitally mediated protests but often remain under-recognized. I remember my own research on feminist activism in the context of Kyrgyzstan and how, since 2020, I have been studying the annual March for Women’s Rights on 8 March in Bishkek – the largest and most important feminist street protest not just in Kyrgyzstan but across the region (Suyarkulova, 2020b; RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service and RFE/RL’s Kazakh Service, 2023; RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 2024; Olzhbaekova, 2025) – only through shared stories, posts, and lives on Instagram. Since I cannot be there in person, I often feel as though I am missing out on an essential aspect of the protests – though it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what this might be. Is it the physical proximity to the other protesters, the feeling of being at the centre of the action, or my desire to capture more details of the space and time of the protests? The perspectives and snippets of the protests that reach me on Instagram move me and allow me to emotionally participate in the powerful moments of shared concern, solidarity, and community. At the same time, if I had been there myself, I might have taken a photo of a speaker from a different angle or focused my attention more on those rushing past the protests. The images and stories circulating on social media make me painfully aware of how involuntarily partial and incomplete the knowledge I can gain about the protests through my participation in social media is. Feminist thinking has long emphasized the situatedness and partiality of all scientific knowledge (Haraway, 1988), regardless of how that knowledge was generated. The study of protests

through social media makes this methodological premise obvious.

Consequently, research – specifically the collection and analysis of data with and about social media platforms – cannot occur in isolation from the broader context of digital knowledge and material production. It is crucial to recognize which social media platforms are relevant and/or can be used in which geographical contexts, which digital infrastructures (for example, in terms of hardware and software) shape the use of social media, and which demographic patterns characterize a particular social media context. This also includes reflecting on the positionality of the researcher and their embodied and historical connections to the field. Like all researchers, social media researchers build on embodied knowledge of their research field(s), including familiarity with platforms, algorithms, and code. All research is embedded in and emerges from specific power relations and conditions. The key is to contextualize the research by making these relationships explicit.

Ultimately, studying protest movements based on social media research allows us to focus on “counternarratives previously silenced and rendered illegible” (Atuk and Cole, 2024:70). In my own research context in Kyrgyzstan, for example, I think of those protesters at the annual women’s rights demonstration who use wheelchairs in inaccessible environments or cannot leave their beds and who, like me, participate in the protests mainly via Instagram. While ableist accusations deny them political participation (see Atuk and Cole, 2024), their digital practices and narratives on social media before, during, and after the March for Women’s Rights are a central part of this protest movement and also contribute to its visibility and socio-political influence in Kyrgyzstan and beyond (see also Suyarkulova, 2020a). It was through my social media research that I first became aware of the digital work of those I would not have met at a street protest.

3 Conclusion

Makaremi’s work on the Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings in Iran illustrates the transformative potential of off-site ethnography in the digital age. By using social media platforms as spaces of digital co-presence, Makaremi challenges traditional notions of fieldwork and demonstrates how digital technologies enable researchers to engage with events and communities under conditions of violence, repression, and physical inaccessibility. Although she does not make it explicit, her approach underscores the inseparability of online and offline spaces and emphasizes the mutual constitution of digital and physical realities in contemporary protest movements. The methodology of an off-site ethnography also raises critical questions about the reliability, contextualization, and interpretive frameworks of fragmented digital data, as well as the position and reflexivity of researchers working

from a distance. By embracing the partiality and situatedness of digital data, researchers can uncover new dimensions of political movements, centring voices and experiences that are often marginalized in on-site fieldwork. However, this approach also necessitates critical reflexivity, contextualization, and an awareness of the power dynamics embedded in digital infrastructures and platforms. Ultimately, social media research not only provides a lens to study contemporary protest movements but also amplifies counternarratives and practices of resistance that might otherwise remain invisible. Ultimately, Makaremi’s analysis underscores the importance of embedding social media research in broader power structures and material conditions and calls for a nuanced understanding of the interactions between digital technologies, embodied knowledge, and the production of global norms. This work not only advances methodological debates but also reaffirms the central importance of social media as a site of resistance and as a tool for critical inquiry in the study of political uprisings and beyond.

Data availability. No datasets were used in this article.

Competing interests. The author has declared that there are no competing interests.

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Acknowledgements. I am grateful for the inspiring work of Chowra Makaremi and the opportunity to reflect on my own digital ethnographic research practice in a different way. My deepest thanks go to the feminist social media users in the context of Kyrgyzstan, without whose work the development of my research would not have been possible. Finally, I would like to thank Nadine Marquardt for her constructive feedback.

Review statement. This paper was edited by Nadine Marquardt and reviewed by one anonymous referee.

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