Integrating Digital and On-Site Fieldwork: Practical Solutions for Scholars with Limited On-Site Access

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ABSTRACT Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have debated whether digital fieldwork can effectively substitute for on-site field research. The prevailing view is that digital fieldwork is a last resort when in-person access is limited. Reflecting on my recent field research in Vietnam and Malaysia, I advocate for integrating digital and on-site fieldwork as complementary components of the research process. This approach is particularly valuable for scholars who are unable to spend extended periods in the field. The integrative approach helps researchers (a) prepare effectively for on-site fieldwork, (b) adapt the data collection process flexibly while in the field, and (c) continue data collection and maintain working relationships with local networks after leaving the field. Through this reflection, I encourage researchers to normalize the integration of both methodologies to leverage the strengths of each approach.

INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, online or digital fieldwork has surged in popularity, sparking intense debates about its ethical implications (Konken and Howlett 2023), the challenges and opportunities it presents for conducting research (MacLean, Smith, and Kapiszewski 2024; MacLean et al., 2020), and its viability when access to the field is limited (Amano et al., 2023). Central to this discussion is the question *Can digital fieldwork effectively substitute for on-site field research?* The prevailing sentiment is that digital fieldwork is often viewed as secondary to on-site fieldwork, used primarily as a last resort when in-person access to the field is not ideal.

In this article, on-site fieldwork refers to a methodological approach where researchers physically immerse themselves in a specific location to conduct research activities (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). These activities may include (a) recruiting research participants; (b) collecting both qualitative and quantitative data through interviews, focus groups, archival research, field experiments, surveys, participant observation, and ethnography; and (c) establishing and strengthening working relationships with local networks. Digital or online fieldwork, in contrast, involves conducting these same activities remotely, typically via digital platforms (Konken and Howlett, 2023, 853). I argue that the choice between on-site and digital fieldwork should not be considered a rigid binary. Rather than debating which methodological technique is "better," I advocate for integrating both methodologies, allowing them to complement each other and enrich the research process. Integration enables each method to leverage its strengths while compensating for its weaknesses, as Seawright (2016) suggests in the context of multimethod research. This integrative approach is particularly beneficial for scholars facing challenges in spending extended periods in the field due to caregiving responsibilities (Tripp 2002), funding constraints, disabilities (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015), and external factors such as pandemics, political conflicts, natural disasters, and authoritarian resurgence (Konken and Howlett 2023; Günel and Watanabe 2024). For junior scholars, the inability to spend adequate time in the field to collect data can be particularly detrimental, as they face intense pressure to publish to secure tenure or employment. Since long-term on-site fieldwork is not accessible to all researchers, scholars have advocated for approaches like "patchwork ethnography," which embraces short-term fieldwork and

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integrates knowledge production across "home" and "field" (Günel and Watanabe 2024). By proposing integrating digital and on-site fieldwork, my article also contributes to this ongoing debate, offering practical insights into making short-term fieldwork viable and effective.

conduct fieldwork must rigorously test their data collection tools, develop a data collection plan, and establish and maintain trust and working relationships with local networks. Integrating digital and on-site fieldwork can effectively support these efforts, especially for those with limited on-site field time.

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I argue that integrating digital and on-site field research as a cohesive part of the research process offers significant advantages for scholars, particularly when their on-site fieldwork time is limited. First, digital fieldwork is an invaluable preparatory tool before entering the field. It allows researchers to (a) conduct pilot tests to practice and refine their data collection tools, (b) build and strengthen working relationships with local networks, and (c) develop a detailed on-site data collection plan. Second, while in the field, online fieldwork can help the researcher maintain frequent contact with interlocuters and potential interviewees, increase the flexibility of data collection, and recruit additional participants for postfield data collection. Finally, after leaving the field, researchers can continue their data collection efforts online and maintain a support network through digital platforms.

This article reflects on my recent fieldwork in Vietnam and Malaysia in May 2024. As a junior scholar, conducting field research is crucial for my research. However, as a mother of a three-year-old daughter with limited family support in the United States, I am unable to leave my family for extended periods. Given these constraints, I decided to spend only two weeks in May—one week in each country—conducting interviews with activists from social movements and nongovernmental organizations. Acknowledging the limitations of my field time, I incorporated digital fieldwork before, during, and after my travels, significantly contributing to a successful overall experience. Although I spent only two weeks in the field, my overall fieldwork spanned approximately seven months, beginning with online interviews in January 2024 and concluding with my final interview in early August 2024.

Before proceeding, I must outline my identity, position, and the educational background that prepares me for fieldwork in Vietnam and Malaysia. Conducting overseas fieldwork requires substantial language proficiency and expertise in area studies (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read, 2015). As a recent immigrant from Vietnam to the United States and a scholar of Vietnamese politics, I bring deep knowledge of the country's language, history, society, and politics, which allows me to conduct interviews in Vietnamese. My familiarity with Malaysia, though less extensive, is grounded in self-research, previous work, and targeted preparation. Because Malaysia is a multicultural society where English is the second official language, I was able to conduct interviews in English, with additional support from a research assistant for interpretation and cultural clarification when needed.

Although this article is based on my field research experience with a qualitative project, its insights are equally relevant for researchers conducting experiments and quantitative research. Regardless of the methodological approach, all researchers who

DIGITAL FIELDWORK AS A PREPARATORY TOOL BEFORE GOING TO THE FIELD

Preparing for fieldwork and navigating its complexities are rarely addressed in graduate training (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). Consequently, most political scientists conducting field research must "teach themselves how to design it, prepare for it, and execute it" (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 83). This lack of formal training often leaves junior researchers facing significant challenges during their initial field trips in terms of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data as well as establishing support networks and building working relationships with participants—all of which require time and practice (Baird 2018). For junior scholars, particularly those who face limitations on extended on-site fieldwork, mastering these skills within the brief time available can be daunting. Therefore, I emphasize the importance of using digital fieldwork as a preparatory tool before entering the field, as it can significantly help overcome challenges associated with limited on-site research time.

Digital Fieldwork for Pilot Testing and Preparation

For researchers who conduct interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, and field experiments, rigorous pilot testing is crucial for adapting questions and research design to the local context and ensuring the validity and reliability of the wording (Mosley 2013; Mutz 2011; Roberts 2020). However, for those with limited time on the ground, performing a traditional pilot test and making necessary adjustments in the field can be impractical. Doing digital pilot testing can be highly beneficial in these cases for three reasons.

First, digital pilot testing helps researchers acclimate to their roles as data collectors—whether as interviewers, focus group facilitators, or experimenters—and build confidence, maximizing the effectiveness of their limited field time. Conducting online interviews, facilitating virtual discussions, or running online experiments beforehand helps researchers identify potential data collection challenges, understand their working and communication styles, learn from mistakes, strengthen skills, and manage biases (Roberts 2020). This process is particularly valuable for building confidence in novice researchers.

In May 2024, I traveled to Vietnam and Malaysia for a research project to understand how diverse social movements collaborate toward shared goals and adapt their strategies in evolving political landscapes. Given my tight one-week field window in each country, constrained by family responsibilities, I needed to maximize every moment on the ground. I began my pilot phase in January 2024 by conducting online interviews with social activists and civil

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society leaders from both countries. Initially, I found the process daunting. Other scholars' views on the exhausting nature of interviews and the importance of experience resonated deeply with me (Baird 2018). My early interviews were fraught with nerves—I rattled off questions mechanically from an overly lengthy list. I struggled with the discomfort of pauses, which led me to fill them with irrelevant questions unintentionally. Despite knowing that interviews should focus on the interviewee, I was preoccupied with how I was perceived. The use of video platforms may amplify self-awareness and heighten the discomfort of silence, which provides a valuable opportunity to learn how to navigate such moments effectively in real-life scenarios.

Through the online pilot phase, I gradually came to value silence in interviews, recognizing it as an opportunity for interviewees to reflect and articulate their thoughts more deeply. Silence is equally valuable for the interviewer, as it allows us time to process the interviewee's previous responses, plan the next question, and observe their reactions. Silences are also valuable data that can, in their own right, reveal important information (Fujii 2017). Although online interviews posed challenges in reading nonverbal cues (Konken and Howlett 2023), the practice improved my sensitivity to these signals.

In Malaysia, although I could conduct interviews in English, understanding the local accent initially posed a challenge, as did my accent for the interviewees. Pilot interviews helped me adapt to these differences before fieldwork began. Through online interviews, I developed strategies such as asking clarifying questions for unfamiliar terms and addressing potential accent challenges upfront, which fostered a comfortable and productive communication environment. By the time I was in the field, I had grown accustomed to the accent to a certain extent and effectively managed any accent-related issues during conversations.

Second, digital pilot testing enables researchers to refine their data collection tools, ensuring that they are well-tailored to the field context before going to the field. The pilot interviews helped me identify and discard irrelevant questions while developing new ones that better aligned with my research goals. Initially, my list contained 19 questions, and I tended to ask them all to ensure that I got all the important information, which distracted me from fully engaging with the interview. The pilot interviews taught me that some questions elicited more in-depth responses than others. For example, asking respondents about their memories of successful or unsuccessful collaboration yielded richer insights than simply asking about general cooperation among civil society organizations.

An online pilot study can also be particularly valuable when designing and conducting in-person experiments, as it allows for assessing the plausibility of both the theory and the experimental design. For instance, in a survey experiment that examined how framing influences public support for the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam, I began by engaging in online discussions with members of the community and representatives of NGOs working on related issues. These conversations provided insights into how the community is framed and the rationale behind specific framing choices, informing the development of my theoretical expectations.

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Finally, a digital pilot study can offer valuable insights into the field environment, particularly in challenging contexts. Although online fieldwork may only partially capture on-the-ground realities (MacLean, Smith, and Kapiszewski 2024), it can enable thorough *preparation* before traveling. Before conducting surveys, implementing experiments, or holding interviews and focus group discussions in authoritarian environments, it is crucial to "identify limitations before going into the field" (Scoggins 2014, 395). My experience suggests that initial digital fieldwork is invaluable for recognizing these limitations. As a scholar of Vietnamese politics, I have always been aware that interviewing social activists is sensitive in the country. However, my online interviews revealed that state repression has intensified over the past two to three years, making previously acceptable terms like "social activists" or "civil society organizations" sensitive, and the preferred term is "social organization." It was through these interviews that I truly grasped the current limitations. Based on this insight, I avoided using these terms during my fieldwork in Vietnam. Instead of asking sensitive questions directly, I waited for respondents to broach such topics before asking follow-up questions, and such patience typically paid off. In contrast, Malaysia's political environment has been opening up since the democratic transition in 2018. In this more open environment, discussing protests and movement coalitions is far less risky. To my surprise, my online Malaysian interviewees even suggested creating an online poster to recruit activists for my research—something unimaginable in Vietnam.

Because of the "practice" in the pilot phase, I felt significantly more at ease when I arrived in the field, conducting interviews in a more conversational style rather than relying on a written list of questions. Without the pilot study, I would have faced the daunting task of adapting my approach under the pressure of a short field visit, which would have added unnecessary stress.

An important question that arises concerns who to approach and where to find participants for the pilot phase. Although the primary goals are to assess the relevance of the data collection tools, familiarize oneself with the field, and build confidence, I believe it is most beneficial to strike a balance between pilot testing with individuals we have easy access to, such as friends and acquaintances with whom we already have rapport, and those with whom we have no prior connections. Striking such a balance is important for two reasons. First, although conducting a pilot test on individuals with which we already have an established working relationship can save time, this familiarity may limit our ability to gauge how we would perform in in-person interactions with research participants in the field—a scenario that is often more challenging and nerve-wracking. Second, although the primary goal of the pilot phase is to prepare researchers for on-site

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fieldwork, careful consideration should be given to whether the pilot data will be used in the final analysis. I often start with the assumption that I will use the pilot data for analysis because "a good interview is one where the researcher learned something she did not know before" (Fujii 2017, 53). Even if an interview during the pilot phase does not go as smoothly as expected, it can yield valuable insights.

For these two reasons, researchers should attempt to diversify "entry points" for the pilot phase, helping to mitigate the risk of network bias (Khoury 2024) and concerns about representativeness (Konken and Howlett 2023). However, if circumstances prevent the diversification of research participants during the pilot phase, researchers should prioritize pilot testing with any participants willing to engage (Fujii 2017). Finding research participants remotely can be challenging, particularly when a researcher has not spent time in the field. Initial participants for the pilot phase can be identified through their networks and advisors or by directly reaching out to individuals to request a conversation.

Before entering the field, I lacked personal connections with pro-democracy activists in Vietnam and Malaysia, as my previous research focused on public opinion toward social movements using online surveys, a direction further shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic during my graduate studies. In my research in Vietnam, where interviewing pro-democracy dissidents is highly sensitive, I initially sought potential online interviewees from outside the country. Like other researchers, I also found that diaspora communities are more willing to talk about sensitive topics and can provide valuable insights (Khoury 2024). I targeted activists who had recently left the country or were studying abroad but maintained extensive networks in Vietnam. Having recently departed, these diaspora individuals retained fresh and relevant knowledge about the situation on the ground. Through their networks, I was introduced to individuals in Vietnam who were willing to share their opinions online and meet with me during my on-site fieldwork.

Since I anticipated using the pilot data for later analysis and wanted to challenge myself by improving my ability to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds, I explored various sources to diversify the pool of participants. I contacted my advisor to connect me with heads and members of human rights organizations outside Vietnam, consulted a journalist friend who works closely with democracy activists, and contacted a friend who had served as a consultant for international NGOs. Additionally, I contacted several activists via email, as they were not part of my existing networks. My identity as a Vietnamese national granted me more local connections, which helped me access potential interviewees in the pilot phase. However, my identity as an outsider of the activist circle, coupled with my northern accent, also raised suspicion among democracy dissidents. Without an introduction from trusted contacts with close ties to the dissident community, many activists would hesitate to speak with me, fearing I might be "a government spy" or a communist, as one interviewee put it. However, if people agree to an interview, being Vietnamese offers advantages, especially for online interviews when I am halfway across the globe from the interviewees. Interviewees were more likely to keep their promises and follow through with scheduled interviews, as they knew we shared mutual connections. This sense of accountability may stem from the concern that I could spread news about their failure to fulfill commitments, encouraging them to stay engaged.

In Malaysia, since I am a distinct outsider, I have fewer starting points for finding interviewees during the online pilot phase. In addition, the political environment in Malaysia is less repressive; thus, I concentrated on activists within the country, identified primarily through my main local interlocutor. I also contacted a respected scholar of Malaysian social movements at a U.S. institution for potential contacts. At times, I feared that my project in Malaysia would fail, as it took considerable time and effort to find online participants in a country where I had no prior experience. Additionally, a few online interviewees did not follow through with their commitments. Because I am just a foreigner living halfway across the world, without mutual connections with interviewees, some disappeared after agreeing to the interview, unconcerned about their reputation.

Before going into the field, I conducted 17 online interviews in Vietnam and eight in Malaysia. Although some of the online interviews did not go as smoothly as anticipated, I used all of them in the pilot phase for analysis.

Establish and Strengthen Working Relationships with Local Networks

To conduct successful field research, a researcher must establish a network of contacts, gatekeepers, research assistants, and participants at the research site (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016). When time in the field is limited, building a working relationship with interlocutors and potential research participants (Fujii 2017) before arriving is crucial. Although some argue that trust and working relationships are best developed through repeated in-person interviews over months or years (Hwang 2024) and that virtual interactions are inadequate (MacLean, Smith, and Kapiszewski 2024), online communication can effectively *facilitate* this process to some extent.

Researchers can establish working relationships with local support networks using two primary strategies. First, researchers should connect with focal points who are respected within the local community by leveraging opportunities such as virtual conferences, training programs organized by local institutions (Amano et al., 2023), and professional networks. Connecting with graduate students in the host country can be invaluable, especially for first-time visitors, as they are often eager to learn and can serve as valuable interlocutors. Researchers can connect with graduate students in the studied country by organizing events that support junior scholars in the country, seeking introductions from other academics who are familiar with the country or reaching out to fellow nationals who are studying there to facilitate connections. Through these interlocutors, the researcher can identify potential interviewees who are willing to participate in online and in-person interviews.

Second, maintaining regular online communication with the interlocutors and potential interviewees before arriving in the field is crucial for establishing good working relationships. Sharing research plans, actively listening to their feedback, and respecting their perspectives through local online platforms can help build trust and understanding (Fujii 2017; Zulver et al. 2024). Although these efforts cannot guarantee trust and comfort before meeting in person, they can help facilitate a connection, making it easier to build trust during the face-to-face interaction.

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When working with interlocutors in the study country, it is crucial to recognize the power dynamics that may lead to an extractive relationship (Firchow and Gellman 2021; Fujii 2017; Gellman 2024). Researchers should always treat interlocutors with dignity and respect (Fujii 2017), ensuring that their time, efforts, and contributions are adequately compensated. This can include financial support (if permitted), research collaboration, sharing findings (when appropriate), offering them opportunities to acquire new skills, or connecting them with relevant resources and networks.

Before my trip to Malaysia in May 2024, I had never conducted field research there. To expand my network within Southeast Asia, in 2023, I collaborated with a colleague to apply for a grant to organize an online writing workshop for early-career researchers based in the region. I met a PhD student in Malaysia who specialized in social movements through this workshop. She became my first contact in Malaysia and played a crucial role in helping me find a research assistant and connecting me with potential online and in-person participants. Although we had never met in person before my field trip, we connected through shared research interests and frequent communication via email and WhatsApp, a popular communication tool in Malaysia. When we first met, what we had known about each other via online communication, such as research interests and other personal information, made it easier for us to talk and build trust.

To honor the contributions of my primary interlocutors in Vietnam and Malaysia, I offered to coauthor research articles with them. This coauthorship is grounded in the principle of collaborative methodology (Firchow and Gellman 2021; Gellman 2024;), where my interlocutors have an active role in the research process rather than me dictating the direction. For example, after conducting online pilot interviews and a few on-site interviews in Malaysia, I discovered an emerging theme in the discussions of pro-democracy activists about the significant challenges they faced following Malaysia's 2018 democratic transition. I invited the graduate student—my interlocutor in Malaysia—to collaborate on a project exploring how democratization affects the identity of pro-democracy movements. We developed the interview questions, collected the data, and are co-authoring the manuscript, which was accepted for presentation at MPSA 2025. In Vietnam, I am coauthoring an article with my interlocutor and have agreed to write a letter of recommendation to support his job search.

Being introduced to research participants through a trusted intermediary is a crucial first step in building a working relationship. Maintaining frequent contact and accommodating interviewees are essential for establishing trust virtually before arriving in the field (Fujii, 2017; Zulver et al., 2024). For instance, I allowed participants to choose whether to conduct the interview online or in person and scheduled it at a time and place that suited them. If requested, I sent interview questions in advance to help them prepare. Interestingly, many interviewees in both countries asked for the questions beforehand to "prepare thoroughly," possibly feeling that I might judge their knowledge as a professor at an American institution. To ease these concerns, I emphasized my interest in their perspectives and stories and my desire to learn about the field. Because sending questions in advance can risk canned responses or reduced openness, I only provided them when necessary, focusing on general themes rather than specific questions. Additionally, I kept regular contact via online platforms to update participants on my plans and discuss how to make the interview process as convenient as possible. In my experience, sharing my anxieties and challenges in preparing for the fieldwork also helped resonate with my contacts, as it shows that a researcher "is also a normal human being," as one of my interviewees put it.

Making a Detailed Data Collection Plan before Going to the Field

If a researcher can only be in the field for a short period, having a detailed data collection plan is critical to making the most out of the time there (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 98). Technology allows researchers to identify and schedule interviews in advance, even before physically entering the field. The initial online interviews and insights from trusted local contacts are essential for designing an effective on-site data collection plan. Before traveling to Vietnam and Malaysia, I worked with my interlocuters and research assistants to develop a detailed interview plan. After completing my online pilot phase, which provided insights into the situation in Malaysia, we designed an e-poster for participant recruitment, outlining eligibility criteria, benefits, and risks. This poster was distributed through our contacts and their networks. Additionally, I sought recommendations from a scholar specializing in social movements in Malaysia for potential participants. In total, 14 in-person interviews in Vietnam and 9 in Malaysia were scheduled with detailed times and locations. Despite rescheduling and adding new participants while excluding those who had last-minute changes, I was able to complete the planned number of interviews in the field.

It is important to view this plan as a flexible guide rather than a rigid schedule, as on-site fieldwork often involves unpredictability and uncertainty (Belousov et al. 2007; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). Nevertheless, having a plan is helpful when fieldwork time is limited, as it helps mitigate the stress and pressure of finding participants on the ground. Even if only half of the planned interviews are conducted, it can alleviate the sense of failure (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015) and associated mental health issues (Konken and Howlett 2023) while still providing valuable data for the research.

IN THE FIELD

Online fieldwork should not be abandoned when researchers are on site. Indeed, integrating online fieldwork while in the field is highly valuable in three critical ways.

First, researchers can use communication platforms that are preferred by participants to stay connected with potential interviewees who have agreed to meet. During my fieldwork in Malaysia, I regularly contacted respondents through WhatsApp to remind them of our scheduled interviews, address preliminary questions, and share information to help them learn more about me. In Vietnam, where the political environment is more restricted, many respondents preferred using Signal—a platform known for its privacy and security. This proactive approach not only facilitated smoother communication but also fostered a sense of familiarity, which, in my experience, significantly strengthened working relationships when we met in person. Reflecting on my fieldwork, I found it much easier to build trust with respondents with whom I frequently communicated online than those with whom I had little online interaction.

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Second, as previously discussed, a fieldwork plan developed before entering the field often has to be "reconsidered and revised" due to the unpredictability of research on the ground (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 135). For instance, participants who initially intended to meet in person may later prefer virtual interviews because of unexpected changes in their circumstances. Accommodating these preferences respects the participants' needs and aligns with the researcher's time constraints, particularly when on-site fieldwork periods are limited. While in Vietnam, I was eager to meet an activist known for her extensive work in environmental advocacy. We had planned to meet at a coffee shop, but she had to cancel at the last minute due to an emergency. She suggested a virtual meeting another day while I was still in the field. Ultimately, I relocated to a park near my hotel to conduct our interview via video call. This example highlights the flexibility that integrating online fieldwork while the researcher is on-site offers, ensuring that data are not lost due to logistical challenges.

Third, a researcher can continue online recruitment while in the field. Given the limited time on-site, researchers may be introduced to potential respondents whom they cannot interview due to time constraints. In such cases, online platforms can be used to contact these respondents and arrange interviews, which can be conducted virtually after the researcher leaves or during future on-site fieldwork.

My insider-outsider identity in Malaysia and Vietnam shaped distinct on-site fieldwork experiences, each with its own advantages and challenges (Fujii 2017, Yusupova 2019).

I felt very welcomed and supported during fieldwork in Malaysia. Being a foreigner sparked interviewees' curiosity, which proved advantageous. Interviewees frequently asked why I chose to study Malaysia. "Why not Indonesia? It's a much bigger country," one contact inquired. Many found it intriguing that a researcher from another Southeast Asian country (rather than the West) was interested in their nation. This curiosity often fostered openness and goodwill, making them go to great lengths to help me. In a broader sense, my shared Southeast Asian identity may have also contributed to a sense of kinship, bridging the gap between insider and outsider. Malaysian interviewees were much less suspicious of me than Vietnamese respondents were. Although this partly reflects Malaysia's less repressive environment, it also stems from my status as a foreigner. My obvious lack of ties to the Malaysian government or political parties reassured them, as I had no apparent motive to criticize them in local media. In addition, interviewees did not assume that I was entirely familiar with the local context; therefore, as a foreigner I could ask questions that might otherwise seem obvious without fear of judgment. For instance, when I inquired about one interviewee's motivations for collaborating with various NGOs, she seemed taken aback, responding, "We always collaborate. That is how things work here; we don't think about why." Later, she thanked me for prompting her to reflect on aspects of her work she had previously taken for granted.

During my field trip in Vietnam, research participants seemed less welcoming than they were in Malaysia. This may be because they assumed that I already understood how things work and could easily navigate the local context, which is not always true. Interviewees sometimes assumed that, as a Vietnamese, I was already familiar with everything happening in Vietnam. Interviewees may use nuanced expressions or slang or imply that I should already know certain things, as other researchers have experienced (Berger 2015). For instance, during an in-person interview, when an interviewee mentioned that NGOs that were focused on renewable energy were facing many challenges and that environmental activism was sensitive, I asked why. He responded, "You must know why, right?" leaving me to clarify his point.

AFTER LEAVING THE FIELD

Field research does not conclude when the researcher leaves the field (Knott 2019). Online fieldwork is particularly valuable after an in-person field trip, especially if the trip is short. First, it allows researchers to conduct follow-up interviews and seek clarification or additional insights. Junior scholars with limited fieldwork experience often regret missed opportunities to ask specific questions once they review their recordings (Baird 2018). To mitigate this, researchers should ask participants during in-person interviews if they are willing to engage in online follow-up conversations if necessary. If participants agree, the researcher can reach out virtually to address any lingering questions or gather further information.

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Second, when time constraints limit the duration of on-site fieldwork, making it challenging to conduct numerous on-site interviews, researchers can continue data collection virtually after leaving the field. During my field trip, I received contacts for six additional social activists in Malaysia and five potential interviewees in Vietnam, but I could not meet them in person. Knowing that I would soon return to the United States, I proactively contacted them to schedule potential online interviews. For those who agreed, we arranged specific dates and times in advance, allowing me to continue my fieldwork after returning home. Additionally, some respondents who initially decided to meet in person could not do so as planned and could only participate after I had left. After leaving the country but before conducting the arranged online interviews with these "new" interviewees, I maintained contact with them through online platforms to build working relationships. I also continued networking with interlocutors to explore whether they could help identify additional interviewees to expand my list. This integration of virtual data collection offers remarkable flexibility, ensuring that valuable data are not lost after the researcher departs the field. After returning to the United States, I interviewed

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around 10 more participants in each country until I decided to stop.

Finally, using online tools to maintain a network of contacts—including gatekeepers, research assistants, and participants—is essential once the researcher has left the field (Knott 2019). This ongoing engagement fosters trust and strengthens working relationships with individuals on the ground between field trips. Since returning to the United States, I regularly communicate with my contacts in Vietnam and Malaysia to inquire about their work and personal lives. Maintaining this connection keeps me informed about developments in the field, which is crucial for future data collection. I frequently receive updates about social movement organizations in both countries, including announcements about major meetings and new publications from my contacts. This ongoing dialogue ensures that I stay connected and informed about significant events, helping me avoid missing important developments. Moreover, this frequent communication makes it easier for me to prepare for future in-person fieldwork.

CHALLENGES OF THE INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Although integrating online and on-site fieldwork offers significant benefits for scholars with limited capacity for extended on-site research, it also presents distinct challenges compared with conducting exclusively online or on-site fieldwork.

Integrating digital and on-site fieldwork requires substantial time and effort. Although I spent only one week each in Vietnam and Malaysia in May, my fieldwork effectively spanned seven months. Balancing online pilot interviews with logistical preparations for on-site trips—alongside teaching and service obligations (MacLean, Smith, and Kapiszewski 2024)—often led to overwork. I frequently worked from morning until night, conducting online interviews, coordinating with assistants, and scheduling in-person interviews. That said, this helped make my short field visit more efficient.

Another challenge of the integrated approach is deciding when to conclude data collection. In exclusively on-site fieldwork, the data collection process typically ends when the researcher leaves the field. However, with an integrated approach, data collection often continues as researchers interview contacts introduced during fieldwork and those recommended by these contacts, potentially extending the timeline significantly. After returning to the United States, I decided to complete interviews with all the participants who were introduced during my fieldwork and a few additional contacts that they had recommended. I then paused to analyze the data, reflect on my experiences (such as writing this article), and plan the final outputs—whether articles, book chapters, or a book—as well as future fieldwork.

Second, the integrated approach requires researchers to address distinct ethical considerations associated with digital and on-site fieldwork. Minimizing harm to participants requires different strategies in the online and on-site fields (Konken and Howlett 2023). The primary concern with digital fieldwork is ensuring privacy and data security, as researchers cannot fully control interruptions or eavesdropping by family members, coworkers, or government surveillance (Konken and Howlett 2023; MacLean, Smith, and Kapiszewski 2024).

We should always treat research participants with respect and dignity (Fujii 2017), which includes trusting their expertise and insights about their environment (Zulver et al. 2024). Thus, researchers should communicate the project's purpose during initial online contact, allowing interviewees to assess its sensitivity and suggest preferred platforms, dates, and interview times. In Vietnam's repressive political environment, interviewees often recommend using Signal, known for its privacy and security, despite initial contact via email or Facebook. In contrast, Malaysian interviewees, benefiting from a more open political environment, are comfortable using WhatsApp, Teams, or Zoom. This means that researchers may spend time learning how to use diverse technologies if unfamiliar. Researchers should ask interviewees for permission to record online and, if granted, always use external recorders rather than app-based recording, which may store data in iCloud (Konken and Howlett 2023).

During on-site fieldwork, protecting interviewees and minimizing harm requires careful consideration of sensitive questions, where and when to meet, and prioritizing their preferences even if inconvenient for the researcher (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015).

For online and on-site interviews, it is essential to give interviewees a sense of control over their data (Fujii 2017). Before concluding, I often asked if they had questions about the project. Surprisingly, many inquired about how their responses would be used and whether their names would appear in quotes, despite my initial explanation that all data is anonymized. For instance, a Vietnamese interviewee requested that I omit specific details about her organization and a Malaysian interviewee asked to review the finalized article using his quotes to ensure accurate representation, even anonymously. Paying attention to ethical considerations for both types of fieldwork requires significant time and effort to prepare a thoughtful application for ethical approval.

Third, integrating digital and on-site fieldwork adds complexity to the compensation process. All interviews, whether participating in online pilot phases or on-site data collection, should be fairly compensated as a sign of respect for their time and contributions. I typically offer a small gift card with a value appropriate to the local context. For online interviews, participants often preferred cash transfer over gift cards because sending gift cards from the United States to Malaysia and Vietnam is challenging. However, this method can incur transaction fees and be time consuming. During on-site fieldwork, I often let interviewees choose between cash or a gift card, ensuring flexibility and accommodating their preferences—although balancing consistency across both methods can be a logistical challenge.

Finally, another potential concern with the integrated approach is the inconsistency in data quality. Research shows that in-person fieldwork tends to better represent populations, particularly hard-to-reach groups, in traits like age, gender, race, and political orientation, as not everyone has equal access to technology (Castorena et al. 2023; Zulver et al. 2024). Additionally, participants may respond differently, perhaps untruthfully, online due to limited rapport with the researcher or discomfort with technology (Konken & Howlett, 2023). As a result, combining digital and on-site methods can produce data of varying quality. While this challenge is valid, I encourage researchers to see it as a strength of the integrated approach for two reasons. First, although online recruitment for research participants before on-site field trips may bias certain demographic groups, these individuals can serve as valuable starting points. In the field, researchers can use these initial contacts to reach harder-to-access populations through subsequent online and on-site efforts. Second, the integrated approach offers an opportunity to gain deeper

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insights into the context being studied. Systematic differences in responses between online and in-person interviews may reveal critical contextual factors. Relying solely on one method might lead researchers to assume they have the complete picture or wonder how responses might differ from another approach. For example, to my surprise, most of my online Vietnamese interviewees openly discussed the recent arrests of two leaders of local environmental NGOs. In contrast, in-person respondents were more hesitant, avoiding these "elephant in the room" incidents or mentioning them only briefly or in lower voices. This contrast led me to think that, despite the Vietnamese government's tightened control of online spaces through cybersecurity laws and arrests of Facebook users discussing sensitive topics, it may be social pressure—such as concern about peers knowing they discussed these issues—rather than fear of government surveillance, that shape their willingness to engage in sensitive conversations.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my recent field research in Vietnam and Malaysia, I argue that digital and on-site fieldwork should be integrated as complementary components of the overall research process. Digital fieldwork should not be viewed merely as a fallback option when on-site fieldwork is infeasible due to the researcher's personal circumstances and environmental constraints such as global lockdowns, travel bans, or violence. For researchers with limited field time, integrating online fieldwork before, during, and after on-site visits helps minimize disruptions in their research.

Despite challenges such as the time-intensive nature of the integrative approach, logistical complexities in compensation, ethical considerations, and potential inconsistencies in data quality, the benefits of combining online and on-site fieldwork far outweigh these difficulties. Thorough online preparation beforehand and continued data collection afterward eased my stress and guilt about spending less time in the field compared to that of other scholars. Furthermore, as demonstrated throughout the article, integrating both approaches enables researchers to leverage each method's strengths and mitigate their limitations, as Seawright (2016) suggests. The integrated approach provides a deeper understanding of local contexts. Yet another example from my fieldwork is that online interviews with Malaysian participants highlighted significant NGO collaboration, refining my interview questions. On-site fieldwork, however, revealed the depth of this cooperation: activists from various movements frequently gathered in cafés, public forums, and nearby offices. Remarkably, this vibrant collaboration existed even before the democratic transition in 2018. This example illustrates how online fieldwork provides targeted, initial insights while in-person research adds detailed context, creating a more holistic and comprehensive understanding.

For all the reasons outlined in the article, I encourage researchers to normalize the integration of online and on-site field research to enhance data collection, deepen contextual understanding, and address the evolving demands of conducting research in diverse and dynamic environments.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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