Söyleşiler

LIFEWORLDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH CRYSTAL ABIDIN

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LİFEWORLDS: CRYSTAL ABİDİN'LE SÖYLEŞİ

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Dr. Crystal Abidin, a digital anthropologist and ethnographer of vernacular internet cultures, kindly accepted our invitation for an online interview recently. I had been following up her brilliant work on internet cultures of the Global South for several years, but our lucky physical encounter was last January at Locating Media PhD programme of Siegen University, Germany. She shared her sincerity and sharp intellect with us in a workshop as well as an evening lecture. Let`s see her new projects and insight on "New Methods in Communication Studies" as is labelled by this issue.

Asli: So first of all, thank you very much again for accepting to talk to me for Moment journal, Crystal; I`m excited about it all. Can you tell us the story behind, your blog wishcrys.com? How and when did you start blogging? And how does it tie in with your academic work?

Crystal: I have been blogging since I was 11. And at that time in Singapore, growing up, the most popular platforms were OpenDiary, Livejournal, Blogger and the like. Then in undergraduate, so when I was about 19

onwards, I started sharing some of my writing on bigger platforms – writing for magazines, online websites – and I curated and collected all of these snippets in a blog. It was only during my PhD that I consolidated all of these into a *.com*. A lot of the posts on wishcrys.com are copied over from my older blogs from as early as 2008. I consider it my 'work site'. It mostly comprises the academic work that I do and the research that I do, but it chiefly also communicates a lot of thoughts I have in the moment about things that are happening in the world. Until last year, I was also curating case studies of internet phenomena as they happen on social media. So oftentimes, this would mean that in the moment, whatever I see developing, I write a record of history of it, including a lot of screen grabs. You might be familiar with these in the case studies around influencer scandals, around *pray for x* hashtags whenever different cities come under fire or are in grief. So the first function is to communicate my work, the second is to document the case studies of the moment.

The third is mostly to connect with my informants. My primary informants are influencers and people who work in the influencer industry. My larger research has many tentacles, looking at weddings and the commodification of them, mixed race children, social media use, meme ecologies, but all in all, most of these are mediated by technology. So when I want to communicate my research and my outputs, my informants are always welcome to read the journal articles or books that I write. But I feel it is my duty and responsibility to also consolidate the research into a format that is palatable and accessible for my informants to read. And this I have various reasons for: The first is the ethos of open access – and it's not just access to the actual format – but open access as in how scholars can make research understandable as part of public scholarship. This would mean reframing the key points of a paper or theory to make it applicable to the layperson on the street who would otherwise not really care about academia, The second reason is that most of my informants generally benefit from the visibility of their work. One of the pay-offs for them is this catharsis of being with a researcher, having your stories documented as history, and of course, to a certain extent, a bit of publicity for them when I present the work in conferences and papers. The third reason for curating my research is that it helps me build up my social capital; when I interview or want to interview a new informant, sending them my CV and a list of my publications probably means absolutely nothing to them. They probably don't care about that. But if they can see from, say, my Instagram portfolio or my blog that I have been studying this phenomena for many years, and if many case studies are open to them to look at, the invitation to be interviewed and to participate in research seems more appealing, and they might be more likely to respond to me. In brief, my blog underscores a variety of ethos.

A: Yes, great…I had actually guessed a few of those, but one or two of those have been new to hear. And it's really wonderful that you pointed these out in terms of, you know, doing the crises watch and the issue analysis through your blog. That's interesting in the sense that, a lot of the researchers around classical perspective, they would actually rather do that on their own in terms of, you know, field work notes, field work diaries, and not really make them public, so to speak, because they would also sort of fear the, let's say…The copycat issue, that is sort of eating up academia, I think, that has been eating up academia for a very, very long time. And even though now, we're at the advent of social media, a lot of sharing, a lot of practice research…I think this copycat issue is causing a lot of auto-censorship, and lack of sharing between academics. It's really great to hear that you've been blogging since the age of 11. And, just seeing the ecosystem of what blogging has been since that time. Because it has shifted a lot, probably since that

time…and at the same time, you know, tying that up with your academic work, or research. So…it would be really interesting to know how that will play a role in also the upcoming future, for the work of scholars in similar fields.

C: Yeah, I was going to say I definitely do also struggle with what you call the 'copycat' issue, but it is more about academic integrity. One of my recent experiences occurred when I read a journal article and noticed that the author was extensively citing exact phrases from a keynote that I gave at a small cozy symposium. I returned to the symposium programme and saw their name as an attendee. It was disappointing, and I had not yet published the research presented in the keynote as it is forthcoming in one of my books. I keep good records of my works-in-progress and also record the talks that I give, so I had evidence to bring to the editors of the journal. While the editors apologized, no action was taken. I have also had past experiences of key phrases that I had coined in blogposts being published in others' papers, and journalists lifting the screengrabs and empirical data from my blogposts without any acknowledgements. It can be a rather exasperating experience. Yet, such incidents are often tricky or difficult to proof, and it is going to be exhausting for scholars to be over-protective over our work. However, it is also important to acknowledge that such issues disproportionately happen to some types of academics – younger scholars of color, women scholars – and often the perpetrators are privileged, senior, and established scholars in academia, who maybe have a shorter runway from thinking of an idea to writing and publishing on it.

To keep my sanity and to maintain my mental health, it was very important for me to decide early on that my ethos in academia is collaboration over competition. So I am open to sharing work-in-progress ideas – I document them online, and they are usually date and time stamped clearly. I often share key slides from my keynotes and talks freely, even if I am still writing the paper for publication. But as you say, I have experienced idea theft. I cannot control what people do, but I take heart that I will always have new ideas and perspectives. I also make strategic decisions over when to call out these issues, especially when I see the systemic inequalities of it happening to scholars in the margins.

Closer to home and my interests, there is also the issue of translations. Many times, good ideas and concepts have already been written about, but perhaps not in English, or not in outlets that are easily searchable by only English speakers. I sit on the Executive Committee of the *Association of Internet Researchers* (AoIR), and am presently leading a pilot initiative known as the AoIR Translations Project. We are brainstorming over how for academics across languages can access resources through a network of multilingual scholars. Since you work in Germany, you might be familiar with the fact that German academia is quite specific – many scholars publish only in German and may not always dialogue with the literature outside of the German fields. Likewise, there is undoubtedly really good scholarship published only in German that non-German speakers may never be able to access personally. A similar issue happens in the fields that I work in, in Chinese, Japanese and Korean as well. We have a really multilingual and multicultural group of AoIR volunteers working with me, so I hope to bring you more updates on this pilot initiative the next time we meet!

A: Glad to hear the effort you placed into this decolonizing action in publishing. So my next question is actually also related to your research ideas and possibly republishing, you definitely have an authentic

perspective for communicating your research both in the works as well as after completion. Or maybe it is a never ending process for you that smoothly transitions to new topics and ideas. Can you expand on that?

C: I don't know if I do have an 'authentic perspective', but I take that s a compliment and thank you very much! My overall research is organized into streams, so I do not think of my work in a 'paper by paper' or 'topic by topic' kind of way, but as major and minor 'flows' and 'streams' of research. My overarching research focuses on influencer cultures, internet celebrity, and social media pop cultures in the Asia Pacific region. Then I have second order categories, big broad concepts, looking at the ideas of online visibility, minority activism, childhood and commodification, and the like. For instance, quite a few of my projects, papers, and articles, look at young children on social media – how they are represented by their influencer parents, by agencies, by clients; and in my more recent work, how the K-pop idol industry and Korean reality shows use social media to cultivate and promote these child stars. This 'batch' of talks, papers, and articles fit very nicely under several of my research streams, as my current research looks more closely at East Asia.

A: I see... Sounds like a very good structuration that you've managed for yourself. Thank you. The next question is not too much of a jump. So I think I can still ask that. How does it feel to be immersed in digital cultures yourself and doing its ethnography at the same time? Have you been criticized for possible bias or too much involvement? And I guess this will be sort of a German or German academia sounding question, because I've also been exposed to the same question a number of times.

C: My primary training during my PhD was in anthropology and sociology, and Media and Communication. Most of the topics that my research covers now is broadly in the realm of social media and digital cultures, but I mostly come at these from the ethos, practice, and methodology as an anthropologist, as a way of understanding my informants' life worlds. Much of my research actually involves a physical ethnography component of doing participant observation in the flesh. This meant that when I was studying influencers, I not only looked at their online content, but also spent a considerable amount of time with them in person, with their agencies, their family and romantic partners, their business partners to understand what they do offline to construct themselves online. To do this well, there needs to be a level of cultural compatibility and coherence. For one, I need to speak the same 'language' and registers – this includes young people and slang, platforms and their lingo, cultures and their registers, industry-specific jargon, and so on. Understanding the vocabulary and concepts clearly allows me to situate their life worlds and thoughts better, and allows me to ask more insightful research questions.

I am trying my best to learn new languages as I progress in my fieldwork and career, and have brought along translators on some of my fieldwork, so that my native speaking researcher assistants can assist us with technical terms, cultural nuances, contextual subtleties, and even innuendos.

I do make a concerted effort to be immersed in the life worlds of my informants as best as I can. This is especially pertinent in the study of digital cultures – we might assume that because we use the same platforms that things are experienced similarly, when really there are many silos and subcultures requiring time and effort to learn and explore. At the same time, because I am not just 'another person online' or an influencer but a trained anthropologist and academic, I always remain critical about my research distance to

the phenomenon I am studying – maintain the emic and the etic. In short, I do not think I have a fear of being too involved.

A: So this brings us to our fourth question, what methods narratives and situated knowledges do you expect to be developing now that VR and AR are at the heart of algorithms? And when answering that you could maybe keep in mind the pandemic effect as well?

C: My primary methods as an anthropologist still include participant observation, digital ethnography, content analysis, personal interviews, focus groups, and the like. Most of what I do is always driven by in-depth, ethnographic qualitative research. As an anthropologist, most of the time we focus on people and cultures, the unit of analysis. But likewise, we can also study the people and cultures of big tech, like corporate anthropologists aiming to understand the cultures of the engineers who formulate the filters, algorithms, platform that we use online.

Specifically in terms of VR and AR, I have been studying virtual influencers for a couple of years now. Virtual influencers became mainstream in the popular imaginary when Lil Miquela – the racially ambiguous Instagrammer – emerged. Unfortunately, many of the accompanying discussions were a little short sighted and did not always account for history. For instance, virtual characters have long been established in the Japanese market, with VR girlfriends, pop singers, VTubers, and the like. So there, we return to our earlier conversation about inter-cultural translations of concepts and scholarship, and the struggle to bridge the gap between an English-language academia versus the diversity from around the globe.

With the pivot to online learning and digital methods during COVID-19, I think this was a little bit exasperating for many researchers who have long been delving deep into virtual worlds or using technology to mediate our research. To understand these virtual worlds you needed to be there, there was no way that you could not be online, it meant that you had to invest in those spaces, in a similar way as you may do with influencers in social networks. I would say that many of these digital methods have been pioneered a very long time ago – like the work by Lori Kendall and Christine Hine, for example. But as we pivoted to the pandemic, scholars from many disciplines and many areas of study needed to adapt to online methods overnight. All of a sudden, every other day, there was a new blog post, talking about the new 'pivot' to 'online' – how to do interviews online, how to do online research, and it felt as if so many people were discovering something new, perhaps out of the contingencies, without the time and ability to go and learn what others have done before them over the decades. So there was much reinventing the wheel happening.

A: Right. So I'm relating to that, would you actually agree with our title and the new issue of Moment journal, "New approaches in communication studies"? So would you agree that there are possibly new approaches, but not really new methods that are sort of reinventing the wheel?

C: Maybe it depends on whether the discipline has always been quite traditional and or constantly adopting new approaches, and that if there is a pivot then this is new for that discipline? It could be that maybe for a group of established scholars, this is something new we have to grapple with. But I think in terms of methodological approaches, we need to – now, more than ever – return to the scholarship of media studies, sociology, and anthropology, where many concepts about digital cultures and 'moments' and 'turns' have been long discussed. So perhaps I should be generous and say, it is possible that some of these are new,

depending on the field, or the area of the world we are looking at. But it is also possible that some of these are repackaged or adaptations of established concepts and thoughts that we have not yet discovered or learnt about.

A: Yes, fair enough. So the next question is on your two books, you mentioned on your blog that you currently are working on two books, can you tell us about them without dismissing the surprise bit?:)

C: Give me one second. I'm so excited to show you this (*she reaches to her shelf and shows the hard copy of her new book, "Mediated Interfaces. The Body on Social Media" on the camera, feeling delighted*)… so, because of COVID-19 delays, this book took five months to get to me, but it finally arrived this week, just two days ago. Early next year, I have another co-authored book coming out with Polity Publishing, about tumblr. tumblr is an interesting platform, even if most people do not think of it as being current or relevant anymore. All three of us authors have a genuine love for tumblr as users and as researchers, so we aimed to write about the platformed and socio-cultural history of tumblr, and its current state. That's my next book that is coming out. After that, there are three books that I am now working on. One is a 10- to 13-year history of influencer cultures in the Southeast Asian region. It was originally my PhD thesis from which I graduated in 2016. But because I started looking at this area very early on in my undergraduate Honors, and because I have continued this relationship with many existing and new informants, it has now become a longitudinal study, rather than just a PhD topic. The tentative title is *Please Subscribe*. As a companion to that, I am writing another book that looks at the pre-histories, the very early histories of influencer cultures, that focuses on blogshops. That book's tentative title is *buymylife.com*. The third book, which maybe I will say the least about, I am writing with a co-author – it is broadly going to be about TikTok cultures from a social science perspective.

A: I was expecting the third one from you☺ I mean, if you had not mentioned that, I was going to ask you whether you were going to write anything on TikTok (my daughter will be very happy☺).

C: That is going to be an interesting one; I have quite a few papers that are out or forthcoming or under review on TikTok. But I think that it is very important, for this particular book, that we write in the genre of public scholarship which, to be honest, takes a lot more effort than writing an academic book – you have to imagine what the audience knows, you have to pitch very heavy theoretical and conceptual things to be accessible, you have to hold a non-specialist audience's interest.

A: Yessss, definitely. Because I was looking, I was looking through sort of the new research that was, that was sought. Things you can do while you're in quasi lockdown situation, you know, and also things that you can relate to yourself, and maybe you know, are interesting, and that you can work on, I really did not notice a few calls on Tiktok. Somewhere, some of those were sort of more comparative work, which are not really too interesting. But some were really specific calls that actually wanted to understand the very ecology and the infrastructure behind Tiktok, so it was, really interesting to hear your new book; it sure will get a lot of traction. Wow, I'm impressed. Congratulations, for all that hard work.

C: Just doing my job!

A: Yeah, I can tell that, but certainly doing it incredibly well☺ So, our final question actually relates to your hobbies. So what are your hobbies and have they shifted at all during the pandemic?

C: Something that few people might know is that prior to doing a PhD and being an academic, I was on the path of trying to be a professional orchestra musician. I did a lot of theory exams, practical exams, learnt many instruments, and wanted to be a percussionist. But by the time I finished my last year of undergrad and my Honours, and I was designing my next move, I could no longer pursue both professional music and academia and hope to accomplish either with a high degree of excellence. It is still a bit of a thorn in my flesh, or an ache in my heart. Whenever I attend symphony and orchestra concerts, I still think about how music could have been my career. But I still continue enjoying music on the side as a hobby. I play the marimba, the drums, an assortment of percussion instruments, the the piano; I sing at church, and I enjoy acapella choir the most. My spouse is also a very musical person, so our household is always calming – we actually met in high school, in the school marching band! During the pandemic, with less international and interstate mobility, we have spent more time exploring our state, Western Australia, by car – forests, sand dunes, rivers, coastlines, campsites; roadtrips have been enjoyable. In these moments, I spend time planning my work schedule and break in advance so that I can really enjoy being offline and not thinking about work. Oh! I have also become a plant person. I have always liked plants and have a little garden I care for, but during the extended self-isolation during the pandemic, I have been caring for plants more – it is a worldwide trend, with many people suddenly being very much into indoor plants. There's definitely a metaphor here in wanting to care for something, or provide life to something, in a time where we may feel helpless, or just wanting to watch something grow and develop as a way to map time. Maybe someone out there has already written about plant hobbies in the time of the pandemic?

A: Great to hear all that. And, yes, so I'm impressed once more actually, with your hobbies too. The music and singing actually both sound very professional and towards excellence as well. I would love to hear you do both actually, you know, playing the percussion, and singing one day, who knows? Well, thank you for taking the time to talk today. It's been great hearing how you've been during all that time, after seeing you in Siegen…and also with the fascinating work that you've been doing and carrying on.

C: Thank you, too! Just the other day I was chatting with a colleague from Siegen in an email, reflecting on how time is such a strange concept – like, the last time we met in January was my last international business trip in the past year. Everything went well and was enjoyable, but we were on the cusp of the pandemic and everything spiraling around the world. It feels so strange to reconnect with people whom we last met in the best of moments, and coming to grapple with our realities now. Hopefully the next time we plan something together again, it'll be under better circumstances, and we will get to meet and celebrate having overcome this difficult time.

A: Exactly. That's what I had in my heart as well while writing to you.