

**EDITED BY ANGELA K. VANDENBROEK
AND NICOLE TAYLOR**

KITS FOR DIGITAL METHODS

Doing Sociotechnical Research

“Using ‘kits’ as open-ended frameworks for practical innovation, this volume provides a remarkable foundation for digital methods. From images and video to AI; from collaboration to programming; from teaching STEM students to building an academic website—and so much more—it’s a true resource. I’ll use it for years to come.”

– **Tom Boellstorff**, *Department of Anthropology,
University of California, Irvine, United States*

“*Kits for Digital Methods* brilliantly challenges and reimagines the technosolutionist concept of toolkit, offering instead a reflexive approach to critical engagement with sociotechnical systems. By treating kits as boundary objects, the volume helps spur methodological innovation through experimental, collaborative, and ethical engagement with the shifting terrain of digital life.”

– **Dominic Boyer**, *Social Design Lab,
Rice University, United States*



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Kits for Digital Methods

Kits for Digital Methods: Doing Sociotechnical Research is a guide to innovating research methods for a world where digital technologies permeate everyday life and research. Drawing on the expertise of leading sociotechnical researchers, it reimagines the “kit” not as a fixed set of tools or solutions, but as a flexible, transparent, and collaborative framework for methodological experimentation. These kits are sandboxes for experimenting, playing, and reflecting on the ethics and possibilities of digital research.

Organized into three sections—Digital Engagement, Digital Elicitation, and Digital Data—contributors share their processes for designing and adapting methods to complex digital contexts. Each chapter contains background, components, practical guidance, and lessons learned for exploring the frictions, failures, and surprises that shape sociotechnical research.

Kits range from remote fieldwork and social media ethnography to participatory analysis, collaborative image description, and AI-assisted elicitation—filled with concrete techniques for engaging digital environments, eliciting novel forms of data, and working with digital materials. This volume encourages adaptation, remixing, and the creation of new kits, fostering a culture of openness and methodological innovation. Written for researchers, educators, and students across the social sciences and humanities, it demystifies advanced digital methods while encouraging critical thinking, ethical reflexivity, and creative problem-solving.

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Kits for Digital Methods

Doing Sociotechnical Research

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and Nicole Taylor

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The Kits for Digital Methods Kit Introduction

Angela K. VandenBroek and Nicole Taylor

Background and Context

This volume grows from the generative synthesis of two overlapping but distinct orientations to research with and of digital technologies. Angela approaches digital methods from the vantage of feminist science and technology studies (STS), drawing from digital, design, and business anthropology to examine cultures and infrastructures of innovation—particularly how stories, expertise, and resources are mobilized to promise and perform social change in tech entrepreneurship ecosystems (VandenBroek 2022a, 2022b, 2021). Nicole’s work is grounded in digital anthropology, youth studies, and medical anthropology. Her work has examined how young people craft identities, express emotion, and socialize through digital platforms (Taylor and Nichter 2021, 2024) and how US teens navigate body image in a high school culture that moralizes weight as personal responsibility, even as it offers few opportunities for exercise and abundant access to junk food (Taylor 2015).

Each of our research areas is suffused with digital technologies—both as objects of analytic concern and as necessary engagements. We now navigate increasingly augmented realities (Jurgenson 2012) where digital and non-digital life inevitably coexist and that are populated by people whose own para-ethnographic research and experimentation demands a refiguring of our collaborative and epistemic relations with them (Boyer, Faubion, and Marcus 2015; Holmes and Marcus 2008, 2006; Faubion and Marcus 2009). Our research has necessitated methodological innovation to adapt to these evolving circumstances (see Taylor, this volume, and VandenBroek, this volume)—cementing for us both a deep interest in methods, ethics, and experimentation.

We met in the fall of 2021. Angela had just started a new faculty position in anthropology at Texas State University, and Nicole was finishing *A Filtered Life* (Taylor and Nichter 2021). We were, like most sociotechnical researchers, returning to the office after two years of online teaching and meetings, remote fieldwork, and working-from-home setups.

The Covid-19 pandemic intensified most people's interactions with technology as we came to rely on it for communication, human connection, and services. Ninety percent of Americans reported that the internet was essential during the pandemic, and forty percent said they used digital technology in new and different ways during that time (McClain et al. 2021). The pandemic forced many researchers to creatively adapt their data collection methods as well. During this time, sociocultural researchers, many of whom had previously relied upon in-person access to their communities of study, had to pivot quickly to adapt traditional data collection methods for a digital context. Thus, a burgeoning group of novice digital researchers entered a field of existing scholars of human-technology relations—together expanding conversations about how to conduct sociotechnical research and navigate the practical and ethical implications of digital methods.

Digital methods have increasingly gained wider traction as they expanded from what many researchers viewed as part of a research niche or necessary short-term workarounds during a global pandemic. This wider attention has created an opportunity for rethinking digital methods and expanding our understanding of sociotechnical fieldwork, including how we understand concepts such as “the field” and human sociality—growing the once niche area into a more robust field worth exploring and operationalizing for a wider community of researchers (Costa et al. 2022; Boellstorff 2021; Geismar and Knox 2021; Grasseni et al. 2021; Hjorth et al. 2017; Horst and Miller 2012). This moment has entrenched the call for deeper understanding of how people develop and interact with new technologies and fueled the need for new ways to engage with digital contexts during fieldwork; use digital technologies to elicit data; and collect, manage, analyze, and share digital data.

Within this milieu, we began collaborating on digital methods and ethics research (e.g., Taylor et al. 2023; Taylor and VandenBroek 2024) as well as methodological pedagogy. Between the two of us, we teach the full sequence of sociocultural anthropology research methods at the undergraduate, MA, and PhD levels at Texas State University, in addition to supervising graduate students as they develop methodologies of their own. Thus—even beyond our individual research interests—methods and methodological thinking have become central to our day-to-day professional lives.

Our collaboration soon took shape around a shared concern: advanced and innovative digital methods are rarely transparent enough for replication (including in our own work). We increasingly observe and engage in conversations with peers and at academic conferences that center on how to develop methods for digital contexts in a way that retains the core values of sociocultural research while drawing on creative and innovative adaptations for varied research contexts. Yet, while extensive resources are available for basic methodologies like interviews and traditional

participant observation, very little is available for learning more advanced digital methods—or, perhaps more importantly, the processes for developing them. This opacity is especially acute for students, for researchers new to digital and sociotechnical work, and for anyone who feels uncertain about navigating technical systems without formal training.

Kits for Digital Methods emerged from this concern to address the increasing desire by sociocultural researchers to effectively employ and develop methods for a wide range of sociotechnical research settings. The volume explores creative and innovative approaches to the study of digital culture and the production of digital technologies; it describes how to employ such methods for replicability; and it addresses how researchers can meaningfully adapt, combine, and develop methods for effective data triangulation.

Kits for Digital Methods: A Kit of Kits

In our early conversations with the publisher, the editorial team expressed particular enthusiasm for the idea of a “digital methods toolkit”—search engine optimization, they noted, looked especially promising for those terms. While SEO is certainly important in today’s digital publishing landscape, their title suggestion had an unexpected and generative effect: it sparked the creative approach we’ve taken for writing about methods in this volume. We found the word “toolkit” to be rather overused—especially in the context of methods texts—but the notion of a *kit* stuck with us. Unlike a toolkit, which typically refers to a practitioner’s full array of tools assembled for their craft, a kit is something else. Kits are partial, task-specific, and oriented toward a particular problem or project. They are curated for others—with politics and aims—as their use is not just instrumental but pedagogical, guiding, facilitating, and enculturating around particular ways of knowing and doing.

Kits, which function as a “mechanism for distributed cognition” (Mattern 2021; see also Shroyer 2020), provide practical guidance for scaling up and standardizing locally contextualized knowledge. Further, we argue that kits are “boundary objects”—“both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star and Griesemer 1989).

Shannon Mattern in “Unboxing the Toolkit” (2021) challenges kit makers to acknowledge and consider how they are “aesthetic objects that order and arrange things” with particular epistemic and ontological commitments that are not neutral. Kits embed politics, ideologies, and sets of relations. As Mattern illustrates, preppers’ bug-out bag kits enact a “technosolutionist libertarianism” that privileges self-reliance and tool possession over collective action and care.

Yet, kits can also be designed to co-opt solutionist frameworks to disrupt dominant logics and ideologies, such as the rape kits developed by Martha Goddard that strategically bypassed institutional distrust in women's testimonies and nurses' competencies by co-opting standardization bias in legal settings (Mattern 2021). Or the hemorrhage kits introduced in California hospitals, which reduced maternal mortality rates by 55% simply by ensuring that critical tools and guidance were assembled and immediately accessible during obstetric emergencies—intervening in a healthcare system that routinely fails to take women's childbirth risks seriously until it is too late to assemble the necessary tools and guidance (Belluz 2017).

Kits can also serve as generative infrastructures for creativity, skill-building, and self-efficacy. When LEGO was struggling to understand why children were no longer excited by its products in the 2010s, anthropologists—known as the “LEGO anthros”—offered a seemingly counterintuitive insight: the problem wasn't that kids wanted easier toys or flashier videogames as LEGO executives thought, but that they wanted to *accomplish* something via their play (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 2014). LEGO recommitted to the kit as a form of serious play, offering pieces to assemble with suggested assembly instructions that subtly teach building techniques, scaffold skill development, and cultivate confidence. Their kits often included unexpected pieces, like the use of frogs as table legs or flowers, that encourage and teach builders to be creative and resourceful—rather than making every brick custom to the kit with only one use. This shift reestablished the kit—not just the brick—as LEGO's core offering, aligning with their mission to “inspire the builders of tomorrow.”

Although kits often function by scaling down complex or intimidating systems into more approachable forms, this desirable quality—their accessibility—can also be easily co-opted for entrenching norms and discouraging learning and experimentation. When kits are designed to repackage “commodity fetishism and capitalist productivity” (Mattern 2021) into easy-to-use, time-saving *solutions*, they undermine the pedagogical potential of their kit-ness. As Mattern points out with examples like TV dinners, Lunchables, and pre-made cake mixes, such kits offer minimal participation and mask others' labor and expertise behind the ease of assembly. In this way, they subtly deskill users and foreclose deeper engagement, stripping away the very thing that makes kits powerful tools for learning, social justice, and ethical worldmaking.

With Mattern's challenge in mind, we set about defining what kinds of kits this volume would include. We could quite easily follow the “Lunchable” model and prepare slick, heavily processed materials and instructions, removed from the contexts, expertise, and labor that generated them. This prescriptive approach might appear efficient and confidence-inspiring, but it risks reifying the very hierarchies and stagnations we aim to unsettle. It would also position us, and the authors in this volume, as authoritative arbiters of

digital method—establishing fixed best practices in a space already shaped by disciplinary power asymmetries (see Otsuki, this volume) and entrenching such politics of authority within the kits themselves. Further, it would obscure the real work of methodological development, sealing it inside a “black box” (Latour 1987) of steps to be adhered to and materials to be used rather than examined, questioned, adapted, or reimagined. These qualities are especially important as it is well established that flexibility and adaptability are vital in sociocultural research methods for the study of new technologies that are constantly in flux (Barendregt 2021; Hjorth et al. 2017; Pink et al. 2015).

So, we’ve instead co-opted the kit framework—not to prescribe clean, ready-made solutions—but to anchor complex and often ad-hoc methodological practices within a more tangible, momentarily stabilized format. These kits aim to invert solutionist logics with contents that include reconstructions of each author’s thinking, planning, and learning rather than authoritative, ready-made solutions. They offer a kind of sandbox: a bounded but flexible space for playing, experimenting, adapting, marveling, and trying things out (Koycheva and VandenBroek 2024). We encourage readers to expand upon and adapt each method for their own research context. Sociotechnical research demands innovative methodologies, and this volume is meant to spark such creative practices. Through narrative, tables, figures, and step-by-step reflections, these kits aim to foster critical engagement with the politics, ethics, and epistemologies of doing digital research in sociotechnical worlds.

This volume is, itself, a kit—a *kit of kits*. Just like the individual kits it contains, the volume as a whole follows the structure of a kit: it begins in this introduction with background and context, components, and a guide for engaging with the volume, and concludes in the final chapter with the last steps and the lessons we learned along the way. This overarching kit is designed to support you in developing your own methodological innovation practices. By engaging with the methods, reflections, and insights shared by the contributing authors, you’re invited not only to experiment with digital and sociotechnical approaches but also to begin assembling method kits of your own.

The Kits for Digital Methods Kit Components

- ***Kits for Digital Methods: Doing Sociotechnical Research***

Of course, you will need this volume and all the kits it contains.

- **Notetaking Materials**

This volume is meant to be interrogated and engaged with. So, you’ll need physical or digital notetaking materials to document your own thinking as a supplement to the text.

- **Guiding Questions for Methodological Innovation (Component 1.1)**

A set of questions to keep in mind while engaging with this volume.

- **Sandbox Guide to Kits (Component 1.2)**

A guide for jumping into the sandbox of each kit to engage in methodological thinking beyond the niche examples they contain.

- **Kit Builder (Component 17.1)**

A form to aid you in the development of digital methods based on what we've learned in generating this volume.

- **Friends, Colleagues, Mentors, and Collaborators**

This volume and the practices we seek to inspire with it are not meant to occur in a vacuum. Seek out people in your research community to discuss, debate, interrogate, critique, generate, inspire, and build around the methods and topics this volume introduces.

The Kits for Digital Methods Kit Guide

Step 1: Engage the Digital and Sociotechnical

The first step to getting the most out of this volume is to orient yourself to the two key concepts that anchor this text: the digital and sociotechnical. Drawing on our backgrounds in digital anthropology and STS, we aim to position this text as more than just a niche methods text for a niche research area. We seek to open up these methodological discussions to a wide range of research disciplines and specialties with overlapping and productively frictive concerns—requiring that we identify and orient the volume around both the digital and the sociotechnical.

Taking the broad definition of *digital* as everything related to binary code (Miller and Horst 2021), this volume methodologically integrates Miller and Horst's (2021) conception of the digital as something that intensifies cultural change and explores the concomitant meanings and values of such transformations. This includes how sociocultural research methods can be creatively adapted to explore the rapidly changing nature of online sociality, human-machine interaction, and the impact of new technologies on human culture and behavior. The intersection of technological and social aspects of life, described by Boellstorff as the "digital reality matrix," is complex and requires a simultaneous grounding in principles of ethnographic method and the imagination to adapt and innovate for digital contexts (Boellstorff 2016, 2021).

As sociocultural researchers increasingly engage the digital—whether by studying worlds shaped by digital infrastructures, navigating digital platforms as sites of sociality, or incorporating digital tools into our own methodological repertoires and professional practices—we must attend to *the sociotechnical* and not treat digital technologies as mere tools or novelty elements of sociocultural life. To engage with digital technologies (or any technology) is to engage—knowingly or unknowingly—into sociotechnical systems. Digital research, in all its forms, is thus always already

sociotechnical—a principle well adapted within both digital anthropology and STS.

The concept of the sociotechnical emerged from the history of technology and the interdisciplinary field of STS as a rejection of the modernist conceit that social and technical domains can be cleanly separated (Hughes 1983, 1990, 1993). In place of that boundary, STS researchers insist that all technological activity is already social—embedded within, shaped by, and produced by human relations, institutions, and values.

The sociotechnical also resists the notion that technologies are the outcome of purely functional design, as if their successful operation confirms them as the only or best solution to a given problem. This functionalist imaginary, rooted in the authority of science and engineering as truth-producing disciplines, obscures the ways technologies come to be, not through neutral optimization, but through political negotiation, historical contingency, and uneven distributions of power (Pfaffenberger 1992).

Rather than viewing technologies as singular tools or discrete innovations, the sociotechnical concept invites us to see the digital as part of heterogeneous assemblages—of infrastructures, artifacts, practices, regulations, discourses, and imaginations—that work in concert as systems. These systems are not stable endpoints but ongoing engagements: continuously maintained, adapted, and shaped by the people and forces that animate them.

Moreover, they are guided by sociotechnical imaginaries—collectively held visions of social futures that inform the design, deployment, and legitimization of technologies (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, 2015). To engage in sociotechnical research, then, means taking up a reflexive stance toward the cultural logics, institutional arrangements, and future-oriented narratives that animate technological life. It means grappling with how digital technologies are not only embedded in sociocultural worlds, but are themselves world-making.

With this understanding in mind, we encourage you to approach the kits in this volume with an eye toward the ways that digital technologies and the sociocultural life that emerges around, within, and from them appear within sociocultural research in both expected and unexpected ways. Likewise, engage with how the sociotechnical researchers that developed these kits reflect on, contend with, leverage, and intervene in these digital technologies as sociotechnical systems as they develop methods, articulate ethical methodological stances, and iterate through ongoing processes of methodological learning.

Each chapter is organized into four sections: “Background & Context,” “Kit Components,” “Kit Guide,” and “Lessons Learned.” While it’s possible to read these sections uncritically—as a sales pitch, a shopping list, a set of assembly instructions, and a legal disclaimer, respectively—doing so would miss the point of this volume. Instead, we invite you to engage with these sections through the lens of digital and sociotechnical research traditions, treating them as opportunities for co-learning and inspiration. Read the background and context as a way to situate the method and its

author within broader sociocultural systems that shape their approach and ethics. View the kit components not as a checklist but as a curated collection of materials, priorities, and experiential insights—an opening into the black box of methodological practice. Follow the guide to trace the author’s decisions, dilemmas, and situated judgments. And take the lessons learned as an enthusiastic invitation to treat these methods as open, unfinished, and adaptable—offered not as final solutions, but as grounded guidance for your own critical and creative engagements.

Step 2: Develop Your Methodological Innovation Practice

As you engage with the kits in this volume, take fieldnotes of your observations. Aim to capture the methodological thinking that suits your own research and professional practices. Consider the ethical, technical, and strategic contours of methodological development and how the unique context of your own work shapes and is shaped by them. Take note of unexpected opportunities and affordances for engagement, elicitation, analysis, and communication and how they might be adapted to your own research contexts. Take seriously and engage reflexively with the challenges these authors pose to the thinking, biases, and taken-for-granted norms of your own positionality.

Then, begin to develop your own methodological innovation practice (Component 1.1).

Consider

- What are the ethical principles and resources that guide your methodological practice? How will you actively and iteratively evaluate the ethics of your methodological practice?
- Who are your direct and indirect methodological collaborators—human, machine, or otherwise? How might you take seriously these human and non-human actors as sources of collaboration, expertise, and challenge?
- What skills, technologies, or strategies do you currently have for engaging methodologically? What resources or forms of mentorship could help you expand this list to better align with your research needs and possibilities?
- How will you integrate a robust practice of methodological innovation into your research—one that sustains attunement to opportunities and reflexivity, rather than serving only as a reaction to problems or barriers?

Step 3: Jump into Each Kit's Sandbox

This volume is organized into three parts: Digital Engagements, Digital Elicitation, and Digital Data. “Digital Engagements” includes kits for engaging with digital contexts and technologies during fieldwork. Rather than treating digital technologies as logistical tools for access, these kits frame them as environments, actors, and systems that reshape what it means to enter, inhabit, and participate in the field. “Digital Elicitation” includes kits for using digital technologies to elicit data that would otherwise be difficult to draw out. These kits demonstrate how digital tools can be creatively mobilized to provoke, co-create, or surface data and insights—expanding what is sayable, visible, or thinkable in fieldwork encounters. “Digital Data” includes kits for collecting, managing, analyzing, and sharing digital data. By attending to the material and affective textures of digital data, these kits push researchers to treat digitality not just as a medium but as a method—something that co-produces the knowledge we generate.

While in a hurry, you may want to dive directly into the kits that are most closely related to your own research niche. When time allows, we encourage you to jump into the sandbox of every kit. Each was generated from a specific set of needs, desires, and fieldwork circumstances—shaped by the frictions, surprises, and improvisations that mark all sociocultural research. Thus, on the surface, some may seem far afield from your work. You might think, “When will I ever create my own AI system to improvise alongside musicians?” (Banerji, this volume) or “I don’t teach engineering students how to do qualitative analysis” (Reddy, this volume). But we invite you to look past the specificity of the fieldsite or topic to attend to what each kit reveals about methodological thinking, problem-solving, ethical negotiation, and the everyday labor of making research work.

Play, experiment, explore, and improvise in each kit’s sandbox to get a feel for how they work, how they might be adapted, and what they might inspire within your own research practice. Not sure where to start? Use our Sandbox Guide to Kits (Component 1.2) as a starting place. After spending some time with this kit of kits, we invite you back to this volume’s conclusion for the final step, where you’ll begin curating your own method kits, and we’ll discuss lessons learned.

Digital Engagement

- **The Remote Fieldwork Kit** (Valerie Black)

Consider: How has my methodological approach been shaped by biases that narrow which methods I take seriously? How might attending to their affordances, limitations, and ethics deepen my own research and support more equitable evaluations of others’ methods?

- ***The UX Researcher's Identity Balancing Kit*** (Elizabeth Rodwell)
Consider: What roles will you play in the field? How do these overlapping, conflicting, and often taken-for-granted roles shape your research and the ways you relate to others during fieldwork?
- ***The Programming as Participant Observation Kit*** (Samantha Breslin)
Consider: How can immersing yourself in the epistemic and infrastructural milieu of learning the skills and practices of the people we study generate new insights into their communities of practice?
- ***The Friending as Participant Observation Kit*** (Nicole Taylor)
Consider: How can you engage in meaningful and ethical participant observation in social media to unveil the ways in which site affordances interact with social norms and tacit rules to guide identity construction, sociality, and emotional expression online?
- ***The AI Impact Engagement Kit*** (Tamara Kneese et al.)
Consider: How might the insights and methods of sociotechnical research be deployed not only to study sociotechnical systems but also to meaningfully intervene in them?

Digital Elicitation

- ***The AI Feedback Kit*** (Ritwik Banerji)
Consider: How might inviting non-human actors into fieldwork encounters generate socially-acceptable space for discussing and interacting with taboo subjects?
- ***The Making Together Kit*** (Liliana Gil)
Consider: How do collaborative activities foster horizontality, co-experimentation, and shared learning within research spaces? What are the ethical stakes of these kinds of practices?
- ***The Photostories Kit*** (Ricardo Gomez)
Consider: How might you adopt modalities beyond the text of standard interview protocols to make space for difficult-to-express ideas, emotions, and experiences?
- ***The Collaborative Comics and Image Description Kit*** (Barbara N. Carreras)
Consider: Does your methodological practice embrace accessibility and welcome disability and difference? How might taking

seriously the experiences and expertise of disabled people lead to broader methodological insights applicable to all?

- **The Participatory Analysis Kit** (Angela K. VandenBroek)
Consider: What happens when you invite participants to think and analyze alongside you? What are the ethics and technical contours of online collaboration and data transparency?

Digital Data

- **The Purposeful Sample Kit** (Patricia G. Lange)
Consider: What is an appropriate sample in sociotechnical research? How is your understanding of sampling shaped by powerful social forces, including the fetishization of random samples and the landscape of capitalism and proprietary technologies?
- **The Metadata and Mapping Kit** (Grant Jun Otsuki)
Consider: What data about data (a.k.a. metadata) exists around your research—generated by you or by organizations around your fieldsites? What lines of inquiry appear when you take this metadata seriously as more than just digital background noise?
- **The Image Collage Kit** (Rebecca Carlson)
Consider: How might you take advantage of digital formats to experiment with visualization and juxtaposition to draw out unexpected relations, patterns, and insights?
- **The Encountering Qualitative Data with STEM Students Kit** (Elizabeth Reddy)
Consider: How do you overcome the challenges of collaborations fraught with epistemic bias without alienating collaborators with questions and concerns?
- **The Academic Website Building and Optimization Kit** (Matt Artz)
Consider: What if you co-opted the tools and strategies of commercial marketing to communicate more strategically with non-specialist audiences? How might leveraging these tools reach different audiences, and what might be made possible by doing so?

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