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2019

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16208>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Waldecker, David; Englert, Kathrin; Ludwig-Mayerhofer, Wolfgang; Schmidtke, Oliver: Media Ethnography and Participation in Online Practices. In: *Media in Action. Interdisciplinary Journal on Cooperative Media*. Media Ethnography (2019), Nr. 1, S. 9–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16208>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.25819/ubsi/8313>

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Media Ethnography and Participation in Online Practices

David Waldecker, Kathrin Englert, Wolfgang Ludwig-Mayerhofer,
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Abstract

In this article, we focus on the issue of participation in online interaction in ethnography in general and in our own research in particular. In the first section, we discuss methodological questions concerning various forms of participation within the ethnography of online practices – practices that connect actors located in several different situations. Linking situations in this way transcends the traditional ethnographic mode of the researcher’s physical participation in a situation. In the second section of this article, we portray our approach to these issues in our research project, which examines the media practices of teenagers and young adults: we explore what they consider as an appropriate degree of observability on social media and how they actually use their accounts to gain attention or to stay unobserved. In doing so, we focus on the benefits and challenges of observing the online part of the young people’s interaction on and through social media.

1. Introduction

By its nature, social research collects data on whatever it investigates. Ethnography’s main method of data collection is *participant observation* (Atkinson/Hammersley 1994); ethnographers aim to establish what is “going on” (Goffman 1986: 8) in a certain culture, organisation or field by being there while things are going on. This also applies to media

ethnography, i.e. the ethnographic exploration of media creation and usage (Bender/Zillinger 2015). What “being there” and “first-hand impression” entail, however, depends on the type of media and the type of activity or culture being studied. This is also the case in the ethnographic study of online phenomena, especially of social media practices. In this article, we focus on the issue of participation in online interaction in ethnography in general and in our own research in particular.

In the first section we discuss methodological questions concerning various forms of participation that can take place within the ethnography of online practices. In the second section, we describe how we approach these issues in our research project Bo6 “Un-/Desired Observation: Surveillance Society and the Social Field of Media”. The project is part of the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC/SFB) 1187 “Media of Cooperation” and examines the media practices of young adults in reference to their observability on social media. In the context of the ongoing debate around privacy and security issues in social media use, we investigate if and how young people differentiate between desired attention and undesired observation in their everyday usage of social media platforms. Teenagers are often seen as particularly vulnerable (cf. Groenemeyer 2014) to the dangers of online interaction. We study how young people themselves judge media behaviour as “right” or “wrong” and which justifications inform these judgements. In this way, our project combines research perspectives applied in the fields of surveillance studies (Ball et al. 2012) and the sociology of evaluation (Lamont 2012).¹

2. Ethnography and Participation Online

Ever since ethnography was adopted as a method within the social sciences, it has been used to research local cultures. Ethnographers visit areas and people of interest and stay for an extended period or several shorter periods of time. This is still the way ethnography is conducted today, for example by Hochschild (2016) in her portrayal of Tea Party and Trump supporters in Louisiana or by Hannerz (2015) in his study

of the adoption and rise of the punk subculture in Indonesia. Other authors suggest using a “multi-sited” approach to perform an “ethnography in/of the world-system” (Marcus 1998) or a “global ethnography” (Burawoy et al. 2000), enabling the ethnographer to compare sites or to follow a topic, narrative or conflict across several sites. Ethnographers visit various sites – or several places within one site – to take part in and observe interactions between members of the researched field or site. The interactions they participate in take place on-site. While interactions occur that connect individuals on-site with individuals and phenomena off-site, the researcher is interested in the local interpretation and local relevance of the off-site interaction.

As it is (extended) participation that sets ethnography apart from other methods, a useful starting point for the discussion is to elucidate what researchers participate in when conducting ethnographic studies. *The basic unit of participation in ethnography is a social situation in which a specific interaction takes place.* The specific interaction and social situation co-constitute each other. As Goffman (1983: 2) puts it: “Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another’s response presence.” However, this definition presupposes that no media are used in the interaction. While the voice, face and body of a participant can also count as media, we restrict the term *media* in our research to those media that facilitate the interaction and communication between absent participants through the transmission of the spoken or written word, sounds and images. Social media platforms are only the latest instalment of this type of medium. But how can we conceptualise the connections established between situations through mediated interaction and what are the challenges ethnographic research faces in these situations?

While Goffman’s research focuses on the intricacies of face-to-face interaction, he nevertheless applies the term *interaction* to other domains. His understanding of social situations depends on “response

presence”, i.e. the ability to take part in a situation. Often, an actor needs to be present in person to be able to respond. In other cases, media connect people in different locations; to the above quote, Goffman (1983: 2) adds in parentheses: “Presumably the telephone and the mails [sic] provide reduced versions of the primordial thing.” Talking on the phone is a “reduced version” of face-to-face interaction, because certain forms of response presence, such as the gaze, are absent. Interaction via media does not take place within one situation, but connects actors located in several different situations. During a telephone conversation, for example, the actors are involved in at least three social situations, according to Hirschauer (2015: 121; authors’ translation): they are “present physically in one location (where distraction beckons), audibly at their interlocutor’s location (where background noise can be heard) and interactively in the placeless space of the telephone conversation.” Hirschauer (2015) suggests the term *intersituation* to conceptualise this connection of situations through mediated interaction. This triad of situations in telephone conversations is supplanted by a myriad of possible constellations in the Web 2.0.

Media ethnography therefore has to contend with the difficulty of participating in a mediated interaction in the same way as in an unmediated one. As Lindlof and Schatzner (1998: 184) phrased it about 20 years ago: “If there is one theme that runs through the differences between FTF (embodied) [i.e. face-to-face communication, the authors] and CMC (virtual) [i.e. computer-mediated communication, the authors] ethnography, it is the problem of participation.” While ethnographers can observe a face-to-face interaction, they are unable to observe all of the situations connected by the relevant online interaction simultaneously. That this is seen as a problem for ethnographic methods suggests that the tenet “participant observation” is implicitly understood as physical participation and observation, i.e. it requires the researcher’s physical presence in the field; thus “[o]bviously, observation [online] can only take place in a rather reduced and limited mode”

(Wittel 2000: no pagination). Where other methods employ statistics or a strict methodology, in ethnography “the ethnographers themselves are the ‘research tool’” (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 37, authors’ translation). Accordingly, Wittel (2000) suggests that, due to the lack of physical presence, there is no participation in online interaction: “one cannot observe ‘real people’ [sic] and this is what participant observation is about.” It is therefore not surprising that a number of publications have attempted to provide solutions to the challenges posed by the ethnography of online practices. Varis (2014) lists, among others, the following concepts: “digital ethnography” (Murthy 2008, Pink et al. 2015), “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2000), “cyberethnography” (Robinson/Schulz 2009) or “internet ethnography” (boyd 2008). All of these add a qualifier to “ethnography”, which suggests that “digital ethnography”, for example, differs from “non-digital ethnography” or “ethnography of the non-digital”. What is it that makes “digital ethnography” different from supposedly regular ethnography?

Unlike the term “organisational ethnography” that uses a qualifier to identify ethnographic methods adopted to a certain social format (Ybema et al. 2009), the word *digital*, rather than qualifying a specific social format, relates to the supposed prerequisite for sociality and its ethnographic exploration – physical co-presence – and the supposed lack thereof in online interaction. The term, in this way, suggests a technical modification of social formats. As Boellstorff (2016: 387f.) notes, even authors who suggest that it makes no sense to set online phenomena ontologically or epistemologically apart from non-digital phenomena differentiate between the “real” – offline – world and the “digital”, supposedly less real, world of online interaction. Although we would like to avoid delving into ontology, we want to illustrate the conundrum using an often-quoted example: Pink and her colleagues suggest studying online phenomena in context by applying “a non-digital-centric approach to the digital” (Pink et al. 2015: 7):

Digital Ethnography sets out a particular type of digital ethnographic practice that takes as its starting point the idea that digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit. [...] In effect, we are interested in how the digital has become part of the material, sensory and social worlds we inhabit, and what the implications are for ethnographic research practice.

This statement only makes sense because it implies that there is a chasm between the “material, sensory and social” world on the one hand and “the digital” on the other. It characterises the digital implicitly as neither material nor sensory or social, as a supposedly substance-less technical realm of its own. A more in-depth reading of the above quote suggests that a physical presence in an interaction is relevant for the differentiation the authors make, because the (non-digital) face-to-face interaction involving the physical presence of the ethnographer and other actors in “everyday and more spectacular worlds” is without a doubt seen as “material, sensory and social”. By contrast, the interaction in the “placeless space” (Hirschauer 2015) of the social media platform seemingly lacks these qualities. The description of the digital as somehow immaterial and virtual seems to strike a chord with an everyday understanding of what sets apart digital media, the internet and online phenomena in general from other forms of interaction.

With reference to the higher degree of realness ascribed to situations of physical interaction, Pink and her colleagues suggest examining online practices in context, i.e. by participating in the situations in which digital media are used and employed. “Non-digital-centric-ness” therefore “means that the digital ethnography project should not be prefaced with the idea of needing to use digital methods” (Pink et al. 2015: 10). By justifiably distancing themselves from automatically using digital methods [in this instance: ethnography solely based on both online participation and automated research methods] due to the digital

nature of the research field, they implicitly suggest that ethnographic research of online practices should participate in situations in which the participants are physically present; at least, they do not include a principle of “non-analogue-centric-ness”. We therefore want to expand this methodological consideration. Pink and her colleagues argue that “the use of digital methods should always be developed and designed specifically in relation to the particular research question being asked” (Pink et al. 2015: 10). However, we suggest – in order to fully embrace the ethnographic paradigm – that the choice of method and mode of participation in media ethnography should always be designed in accordance with the specifics of the research question and the research field – without setting any type of participation (digital or non-digital, so to speak) as a prerequisite for or central to media ethnography. In this way, media ethnography would follow one of the main tenets of the ethnographic method by focusing on the methodological pressure exerted by the field itself (Amann/Hirschauer 1997: 19).

It seems that the distinction between face-to-face interaction and interaction via media is entrenched in both everyday and ethnographic conceptualisations. Rather than taking this evaluation of online and offline practices for granted and using it as a basis for methodological considerations, media ethnography as a discipline could (and should) investigate how users themselves conceptualise “the digital”. We therefore propose to study the “categorical work” (Star/Bowker 1999: 310) that individuals employ when using social media.

3. Ethnography of Evaluations of Online Observability

In the second part of our paper, we lay out the methods employed in our research project in reference to the above considerations. Our research addresses only a small subset of the “categorical work” (Star/Bowker 1999: 310) performed by online users by examining how teenagers and young adults differentiate between undesired observation and desired attention online. We are interested in what these young peo-

ple *do online* and how they *make sense* of what they do; specifically, we want to know what they consider as an appropriate degree of observability on social media and how they actually use their accounts to gain attention or stay unobserved. Rather than examining the interactive processes between the users, their devices and the platform, we focus on the users' interaction in the "placeless space" (Hirschauer) of online communication. Instead of relying on the physical presence of the researcher in situations in which these devices and platforms are used, our approach includes a combination of methods: we tackle the issue in a two-pronged approach, with semi-structured face-to-face interviews on the one hand and online observation sessions on the other.² While we focus on the actual media practices during our online participation, we use the interviews to ascertain social media users' theoretical evaluations of their perspectives on online observability. We interview a number of students (aged 16 to 22) from either cities or small towns with different educational backgrounds and ask them during the interview to show us how they use their smartphone and specific social media apps, and how they deal with these apps' privacy settings. Therefore, we also observe the way the interviewees use and show us their devices during the interview. Usually, two researchers are present to conduct the interview and observe the demonstrations of social media use, respectively. For the online observations, we ask the individuals we interview to add one of the researchers' accounts as a contact (e.g. as a "follower" on Instagram) on the social media platforms they use; there, we observe their activities for two weeks. Below, we show how our participation in the digital part of the interaction, during the online observations, illustrates elements of the media practices we are interested in.

As our research focuses on evaluations of observability online, we can also monitor how young people deal with this question in practice. By studying their messages, comments, pictures and overall activities, we are able to see if and how they choose to publish photographs that

show their face and body in certain situations – at home, with friends, partially undressed at a pool or in order to show off their physique –, how they react to comments and if they delete specific items. As our research covers multiple platforms, we are also able to observe differences in the way young people use multiple accounts on several platforms. It is this form of impression management we are interested in. By participating online, through our own accounts, we are able to closely follow their activities: we have enough time to take screenshots or look at a picture in detail, which would be more cumbersome in a face-to-face interaction – this is aptly demonstrated during the show-and-tell parts of our interviews.

In observing the digital part of interactive processes in social media, we participate in situations that enable the actor to access the online interaction physically. Our ethnographic endeavour therefore follows the same steps the individuals interviewed talk about. Like the young people, we have to create and manage profiles on several social media services; we are able to discover how quickly an account can be created – and how complicated it can be to delete one. Just like them, we face choices concerning our profile and privacy settings and spend many hours at home in front of our screens, observing other users' online activities. We are also – at least partially – able to discern how the social media platform observes and reacts to our participation: our activities on the platform initiate algorithmic processes that lead to changes in the interaction with the platform itself, for example, by suggesting lists of potentially interesting profiles based on our location, previous searches, etc. To a certain extent, we therefore include the infrastructure as an actor in our research. By staying at home or in the office, by doing “armchair ethnography”, so to speak, for at least a certain part of our work, we can (nevertheless) experience what interacting with other people and their physical presence via social media feels and looks like. Regarding our research question, we can analyse how interaction with the platform is organised by the platform itself and other users in-

volved – something that would be difficult to accomplish by (solely) participating physically in situations in which social media are used.

4. Conclusion

Our ethnography and media ethnography in general share a challenge with the actors that engage in communication via media: they, too, take part in the online interaction via their respective offline situations; they are also unable to see the complete picture of offline and online situations that constitute the interaction.³ As ethnography focuses on the participants, their perspectives and involvement in interaction, an ethnographer is supposed to participate to the same degree as the actors themselves. Consequently, it should not be considered as a methodological problem (cf. e.g. Wittel 2000) if the degree of physical involvement is partially lower and therefore less “primordial” in online interaction research than in face-to-face research – as this is the case for everyone involved online. The sketch of the online part of our ethnography illustrates, in our view, that it makes sense occasionally to study social interaction in a seemingly “unreal” and “unembodied” way.

In our research, we examine the boundaries that young people set between desired and undesired observation in two different ways. In interviews, we experience the “sayings” of evaluations of appropriate online observability; through online observation and offline observation during the interviews, we capture the “doings” in actual online interactions. In doing so, we are able to comment on a strand of research that suggests that a “privacy paradox” (Barnes 2006) – between a stated interest in online privacy and a practical disregard thereof – is prevalent in online interaction (Lee/Cook 2015). Our preliminary results indicate that the “privacy paradox” is not as ubiquitous as suggested (cf. Englert et al. 2019). Instead, young adults and older teenagers say they exercise caution in online interaction and do follow suit. Many interviewees see social media as an ambiguous field, a view that is often reinforced by teachers, parents as well as the police and “media scouts” –

older students who come to class and talk about the safe use of social media. In their online interactions, the individuals interviewed often solely interact with people they know personally from other contexts; they have become wary of contacts based on social-media acquaintance which they embraced when they first started using social media at a younger age. Now, they prefer platforms that restrict audience access to their content and they often use measures provided by these platforms to this end. However, while they emphasise the importance of privacy options and settings provided by the platforms, they sometimes admit that they consider the surveillance by the platforms as less relevant or reluctantly accept it as a precondition for participation online. Interviewees fully aware of the diverse possibilities of institutional surveillance (and consequently their own loss of information control) note that the “choice” to stop using digitally networked media (in order to regain information control) is no longer an option in the digital age. Our own online participation during our research shows that, for us as everyday users, it is impossible to fully comprehend the data processing of the social media platforms. If research focuses on the participants’ perspectives, it is acceptable to leave these processes unexplored. They are, however, interesting from the perspective of surveillance studies. It could also be argued that social media platforms and their algorithms count as participants, too, if Latour (2005) and other post-humanistic authors are taken seriously. It is difficult to observe these data collection processes directly through participant observation, because social media companies consider them as trade secrets. Future research projects – which want to fully grasp the mechanisms beyond everyday users’ knowledge and influence – might therefore include reverse engineering (cf. Joler et al. 2016) and other digital methods (Dieter et al. 2018) in order to inspect the black box and back-end of observation online.

Notes

- 1 This paper focuses on methodological issues in our research; preliminary results have been published in Englert et al. (2017), Englert et al. (2019) and Schmidtke et al. (2019).
- 2 In our research, we also use group discussions focusing on the sociology of justification (Boltanski/Thévenot 2006) of online practices. However, we will not discuss them in this paper.
- 3 Their perspectives on the interaction are more fragmented than the perspectives of participants in face-to-face encounters. The latter are fragmented and partial to begin with, as participants usually see the faces of others, but not their own face; however, the participants in face-to-face interactions are subject to the same circumstances and distractions that constitute the situational setting.

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