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Reclaiming the Radical: Feminist Legacies and the Transformative Power of Media Ethnography

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Abstract: In this commentary, we respond to Kirsten Drotner’s foundational article “Media Ethnography: An Other Story?” published in *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* in 1999. Drotner’s text innovatively wove together the scholarly, intellectual, and social conditions that helped establish media ethnography as a key approach to studying everyday media use. Drotner issued a call to action, namely, to develop media ethnography by pursuing dialogue with feminist epistemologies and to attend to unheard voices and silenced experiences. This call has gained new relevance in the contemporary moment. Positivist logics and quantitative methodologies dominate research agendas and thereby risk to undermine interpretive qualitative media research. Continuing paths set out in Drotner’s original essay, this commentary traces the connections between media studies, cultural studies, anthropology, and feminist epistemologies that provided the groundwork for the ethnographic turn in media studies. Second, we discuss the transformations media ethnography has undergone in response to the digital turn over the course of the last three decades, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities presented by digitization and datafication. Continuing the dialogue with feminist epistemologies, we offer a critical reflection on digital ethnography, exploring how digital technologies reshape the epistemological concerns and research practices of media ethnographers.

Keywords: media ethnography, feminist legacies, feminist epistemologies, digital ethnography

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1 Introduction

It could be argued that over the last 20 years it is precisely women, young people and non-white groups who have spearheaded the more general developments in modernity towards internationalisation and multiculturalism. (Drotner, 1994, p. 91)

Kirsten Drotner's foundational text "Media Ethnography: An Other Story?", published in 1994, innovatively wove together the scholarly, intellectual, and social conditions that helped establish media ethnography as a key approach to studying everyday media use. Her work offers a critical reflection on the epistemological assumptions and methodological nuances of media ethnography, tracing its evolution within audience reception studies. Drotner emphasized how from the 1970s on, media studies grew from dialogues with postmodern cultural studies and anthropology—particularly regarding issues related to power, representation, and reflexivity (see also Markham & Baym, 2009). Drotner furthermore argued feminist theories played a key role in shaping these discussions. As the epigraph indicates, to this intellectual development, Drotner also highlights the social, cultural and political transformations of the era which, following a postcolonial and liberation ethos, led to the academic institutionalization of fields such as women's studies and ethnic studies.

Drotner issued a call to action, namely, to develop media ethnography to attend to unheard voices and silenced experiences. This call has gained new relevance in the contemporary moment wherein positivist computational and algorithmic logics and quantitative methodologies decentre and thereby risk to undermine interpretive qualitative media research. Continuing the path set out in Drotner's original essay, this commentary traces the connections between cultural studies, media studies, anthropology, and feminist epistemologies that provided the groundwork for the ethnographic turn in media studies. Second, we discuss the transformations media ethnography has undergone in response to the digital turn over the course of the last three decades, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities presented by digitization and datafication. Continuing the dialogue with feminist epistemologies, we offer a critical reflection on digital ethnography, exploring how digital technologies reshape the epistemological concerns and research practices of media ethnographers.

2 Epistemological underpinnings of media ethnography

Epistemologically, the ethnographic turn in media studies owes largely to what Drotner identifies as the development of an Anglo-American interpretive paradigm. This paradigm is based on symbolic interactionism and seeks to study the social within the everyday interactions of individuals and communities. In the North-American academic context this approach can be traced to the Chicago School of Sociology and the subsequent integration of qualitative research in American sociology. In the British context, the interpretive paradigm was largely shaped by the emergence of British cultural studies at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, established by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart. The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies had a fundamental impact on media studies research by pioneering the analysis of media texts and popular culture through the lens of ideology, power and difference in relation to everyday life. This latter strand promoted the understanding of media as a site of cultural negotiation and conflict, highlighting thus the role of audience members in interpreting and potentially resisting media messages (Hall, 1980). Such postmodern and poststructuralist concerns with difference, subjectivity and social constructivism found a fertile ground in fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and media studies, which informed each other in the effort to address the aftermath of the so-called “crisis of representation” (Latham, 2012, p. 73).

The crisis of representation had emerged in the 1980s and questioned the ability of researchers to objectively depict the experiences of marginalized or “othered” groups. It thus emphasized the limits of representation itself, the situatedness and partiality of knowledge and truth claims, as well as the inherent power dynamics in any act of representation. For example, the “writing culture” debate in the field of anthropology, initiated by the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), brought about discussions on issues such as writing, objectivity, and reflexivity (Zenker, 2014) and drew attention to “the inextricable relationship between epistemology, politics and practice” (James et al., 1997, p. 2). This transformation created a strong basis to establish new links between anthropology and media and cultural studies. Besides the shared research commitments, media and cultural studies scholars such as Angela McRobbie (with Garber 1976; 1982), Dorothy Hobson (1982), Ien Ang (1985), Stuart Hall (1980), David Morley (1980) and Raymond Williams (1980), had a strong theoretical toolbox to offer.

To further “advance insight into pitfalls and problems in qualitative methods and in ethnographic studies in particular” Drotner called for “qualitative media

studies” scholars to pursue an “intensified dialogue” with its “feminist legacy” (p. 93, 103). Here we would like to take a moment to draw out the feminist epistemological debates Drotner alluded to, to show also their continued relevance for (digital) media ethnography to date. Feminist standpoint theories emerged primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, evolving both as theoretical frameworks and as methodologies for feminist research (Harding, 2004, p. 1). Dorothy Smith’s concept of the “standpoint of women” (1974) laid the foundation for these theories, which were later expanded by Nancy Hartsock, who introduced “feminist standpoint theory” to establish an epistemological and methodological basis rooted in women’s experiences (1983). Sandra Harding in *Is Science Multicultural* (1998) brought feminist and postcolonial epistemologies in dialogue to account for how science legitimated colonial enterprise and how colonial ideologies leave their imprint on contemporary research, shaping theories, methodologies and hypotheses. Patricia Hill Collins further developed the “black feminist standpoint” (1990), also drawing attention to the intersectional configuration of power hierarchies resulting from the interlocking of axes of difference such as gender, race and class. These theories have significantly influenced debates in feminism and beyond on epistemology and methodology, emphasizing the link between lived experience, context, power, and knowledge creation.

Donna Haraway builds on standpoint theory to call for the pluralization of knowledges. She argues that “there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful,” but warns against the risks of romanticizing or appropriating the perspectives of marginalized groups while claiming to represent their views (1988, p. 583). She critiques the binary between objectivity and relativism which is often brought up to dismiss the apparent anecdotal character of qualitative research with a small “n.” Haraway critiques the “god trick” of both value-free objectivity, which presents a false, universal “infinite vision,” and relativism, which offers an unaccountable “view from everywhere” (p. 581). In response and to overcome binary thinking, she advocates for embodied “feminist objectivity” (p. 580), by producing “situated knowledges” that are accountable, politically charged, and situated in specific contexts. This approach emphasizes “location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (p. 589). This is not an argument for freedom of speech, or a scientific-relativist “everything goes,” but rather a commitment to telling other (unheard) stories, while accounting for the situatedness and constructedness of any knowledge production exercise. From the title of her essay, it shows Drotner advocated exactly for exploring the heuristic potential of media ethnography to account for and amplify the “other story” (1994), which other methodologies risk overlooking and thereby further marginalizing.

3 The radical potential of digital ethnography

Challenging objectivity, neutrality, singularity and universalism, we outlined above, has become relevant again in recent years. In media studies and other fields digitization and datafication are embraced to provide new research avenues and means of data collection. The promises of all-encompassing datasets, possibilities for aggregation, pattern detection and modelling, have led to “dataism” (Van Dijck, 2014, p. 197). The quite widespread trust in the quantitative study of digital data sets—accelerated in recent years with AI systems—is infused with the ideologies of scientism and positivism. As a result, a scholarly turn is observable across academia, where investments in digital humanities, data science and computational social sciences also signal a scholarly turning away from other (qualitative) approaches. As Kate O’Riordan posits: “In tandem with the way that Foucault argued that knowledge is power, data as a dominant form of knowledge production can be thought of as power” (2022). This means new hierarchies between knowledge production paradigms are established, ordering data-driven approaches as more superior and legitimate over qualitative “Small Data” approaches. In parallel with Drotner who observed in the 1990s how “qualitative media studies is often defined in opposition to quantitative sociological studies” (1994, p. 87), media ethnography is often pitted against big data, which means it may be seen as the inferior “other to big data” (Boellstorff, 2013, p. 2). Going against the current, critical media scholars are pleading to move “beyond data universalism” (Milan and Treré, 2019, p. 319) by pluralizing interpretations of data as reflecting their situated and cultural contexts (Alinejad et al., 2018). Digital ethnography, branching out from media ethnography, offers important tools to do so. Digital ethnography is an interpretative qualitative research methodology that involves studying people’s behaviors, interactions, and cultures across digital spaces, often through immersive, qualitative techniques like participant observation or interviews. Unlike the “god trick” (Haraway, 1988 p. 581) of big data research which is media-centric, digital ethnography offers a more nuanced, human-centred view by addressing the meanings, experiences, feelings and socio-cultural, political and economic contexts behind digital practices. Interestingly, while Drotner called for media ethnographers to “gain in *theoretical precision* by being informed by theories that are seminal to feminist and ethnic studies” (p. 87) and coming to terms with feminist legacies underpinning the project of media ethnography, these legacies are similarly not commonly explicitly embraced digital ethnography.

Consider for example these field setting publications on digital ethnography authored by scholars in media and communication, anthropology, and sociology: *Virtual Ethnography* (Hine, 2000); *The Internet. An Ethnographic Approach* (Miller and Slater, 2000); *Netnography* (Kozinets, 2010); *Digital Anthropology* (Horst and

Miller, 2012); *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* (Boellstorff et al., 2012); *Doing Qualitative Research Online* (Salmons, 2016); *Digital Ethnography. Principles and Practice* (Pink et al., 2016); *Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography* (Hjorth et al., 2017) and *Ethnography for the Internet. Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (Hine, 2020). It is telling that except for the book by Boellstorff and colleagues, feminist theory is not thoroughly discussed, for example, feminist thinking is not included among the entries in the indexes of these books, nor is it widely acknowledged in bibliographies. Pink and colleagues agree that the “gender turn” (2016, p. 2) has indeed played a significant role in the various transformations ethnographic research methods have undergone over the years. However, its successful integration and consolidation has the paradoxical effect of erasing its radical epistemological relevance. Thus, the feminist and social justice disposition underpinning the conceptualization and operationalization of digital ethnographic research now remains largely implicit.

In the current global predicament of genocide, neo-colonialism, ecological crisis, polarization, and neoliberal capitalism, it is urgent for researchers to turn new attention to the everyday lives of people, particularly those in the margins, not only to describe and amplify their experiences but have them speak back to critical theory as a site of power struggle and micro-politics. Digital ethnography offers the radical potential to counter the negation of qualitative research. Moreover, digital ethnographic research has indeed the capacity to bring into view the material conditions under which power operates through the digital infrastructure; more importantly, it has the capacity to make visible the potential sites of transformation against hegemonic discourses around the digital. The question arises how media researchers might integrate feminist epistemologies more explicitly into digital media research, to ensure that the lived experiences of marginalized groups remain central to the analysis of digitalization and datafication. Here we would like to suggest two concrete takeaways for us to consider going against the current: feminist ethics of care and collaborative research techniques.

First, with the turn to computational data studies, particular research ethics commitments have become particularly prominent, dissolving attention for others. The growing focus on the minimization of risks, legal compliance and avoiding legal liability of universities signals a return of researcher disembodiment and detachment from communities under study. This risks researchers turning away from fundamental ethical principles such as “do no harm” and glossing over the specific needs, expectations, feelings and rights of involved communities and research subjects. Feminist ethics of care may offer a scaffolding to operationalize a more people-centred ethical research practice for qualitative media research. Illustratively, Irina Zakharova and Juliane Jarke have called for studying “datafied societies” from this ethical stance, “following the footsteps of feminist writers, activists, and academ-

ics who take care as a vantage point for scrutinising and reimaging technoscientific societies” (2014, p. 651). Feminist ethics of care approaches commonly builds upon the work by Joan Tronto, who with Bernice Fisher defined feminist ethics of care as follows: “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (1990, p. 34). To operationalize feminist ethics of care principles in practice, Rosalind Edwards and Melanie Mauthner proposed a set of practical questions and points of attention which digital ethnographers may find useful to centre the voices and experiences of marginalized or minoritized groups. They invite researchers to reflect on the situated context and “the people involved in and affected by the ethical dilemma raised in the research.” More specifically, they draw attention to “the specific social and personal locations of the people involved in relation to each other.” They ask researchers to identify their needs, the relations of power, how these might be interrelated, and also how these differ among people involved in research. They promote introspection about whether the research actions might impact relations between researchers and people involved as well as among those involved. In addition, reflexivity and accountability is promoted by asking researchers to answer the important question of who one is identifying with as a researcher and who might be othered in the study. Next, they draw attention to impressions and expectation management by asking what informant’s understandings and judgements may be expected. Finally, they raise attention to the need to develop communication strategies by asking “how can we best communicate the ethical dilemmas to those involved, give them room to raise their views, and negotiate with and between them?” (2012, p. 8; see also Leurs, 2017).

What may ethics of care look like in digital ethnographic practice (see Hasenöhl, 2022)? For example, to study datafication in the context of everyday life, Marie Sandberg and Luca Rossi propose drawing on this perspective to address the implications of datafication in the lives of irregularized migrants navigating violent border regimes (2022). They argue that “approaching migrants’ digital data ‘with care’ means pursuing a more critical approach to the use of big data in migration research where the data is not an unquestionable proxy for social activity” (2022, p. 10). Rather, they probe data as a means to untangle and reveal the complexities and contradictions of everyday social life. Ethics of care are not a panacea to overcome the many challenges that are inherent to qualitative research. Critics remind us that when only superficially engaged with, ethics-of-care approach researchers risk validating the dominant views of the majority of researchers, who are from WEIRD (western, elite, industrial, rich and democratic) societies (Mager et al., 2025; Morley, 2017; Datta, 2018), and that essentializing paternalistic, neo-imperial, colonial and hierarchical notions of care may be reinforced (Kamlongera and

Katenga-Kaunda, 2023). Strong attention and reflection is needed on who has the power to decide who is deemed worthy of receiving this care as part of a qualitative research project, how, and with what aims.

Second, there are established traditions and recent experiments with using techniques to facilitate co-creative and collaborative encounters with community members as part of qualitative fieldwork. In the toolkit of participatory action research, the photovoice technique is a participatory technique that aims to empower research participants, particularly from marginalized groups, to document (for example in a “media diary”) and share their lived experiences through photography, promoting social change and amplifying their voices often excluded from mainstream narratives (Gubrium and Harper, 2016). Reena Kukreja used photovoice with undocumented South Asian migrant male workers in Greece (2024). Through intentional visibility via photography and multimedia installations, these collaborators engaged in constructive resistance against their imposed invisibility and marginalization. By portraying themselves as empowered activist-citizens and using their own digital media records as evidence, they challenged dominant narratives that depict them as threatening or deviant. Asking informants to keep media diaries is another knowledge co-creation technique which can be useful to collaboratively decide on research foci and mitigate hierarchies between researchers and informants (Hyers, 2018). For example, in a study of digital feminisms in China, Xumeng Xie invited young female participants to keep a social media diary (2023). Participants were asked to create weekly diary entries over ten weeks, documenting their encounters with gender and feminist topics online and offline, resulting in ten entries each. Before starting, they received a brief guide and an example entry from the researcher, without a formal template. In each entry, participants recorded and reflected on significant social media events related to gender and feminism, explaining why each was important, how they engaged in the discussion, and how it connected to their family and school life. The entries were shared with the researcher and formed the basis for an in-depth interview which explored preliminary patterns from the diary entries and allowed for participants to bring in their interpretations. Recently, the “social media scroll back” technique was developed to facilitate an encounter in which a researcher and participant collaboratively “scroll back” through the participant’s social media or smartphone archive to co-analyse the content. Claire Moran and colleagues reflect on applying the scroll back method in projects on diverse topics, including identity, race, sexuality, gender, and media industries, and with various participant groups such as migrants, women, queer femmes, and media professionals (2024). The ethical considerations and research techniques discussed are just a few of the hands-on tools at our disposal to reclaim the critical potential of the empirical study of everyday practices while operationalizing the feminist commitment of “the personal is political” into research practice.

4 Conclusions

Thirty years ago, Kirsten Drotner underlined the intimate intertwinement between the ethnographic turn in media studies and feminist epistemologies. This intertwinement is at risk of being forgotten in contemporary debates about digital ethnography. As a result, radical concerns for difference, materiality, and power relations are rendered invisible, further marginalizing emerging critical standpoints and digital imaginaries. Feminist epistemologies provide us with important tools to counteract the tendency in media and communication studies to privilege positivistic truth claims in the pursuit of political economy critique. In a time when computational and big data approaches dominate research agendas, there is important radical potential in combining ethnographic approaches and feminist epistemological commitments to expose how power insidiously operates in the materiality of everyday life. It is thus important to remind ourselves of the importance of turning to qualitative media ethnography, to attend to the unique insights of marginalized groups in understanding inequalities and power relations. Media research aiming to examine the power-ridden implications of digitization and datafication should begin with, or at least consider, the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

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