

Weaving Mediation and Embodiment: The Media Ethnographer as Figurations of Mediation

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Building on previous ethnographic approaches, we propose a framework to describe and analyze how media ethnographers are themselves constituted in relation to processes of mediatization. Drawing from mediatization theory, we advance a twofold conception of the media ethnographer as being composed by interweaving processes of embodiment and mediation, which we refer to as figurations of mediation. Using a fourfold typology, we show how different kinds of figurations of mediation establish the media ethnographer's relations to the field, to research participants, and to research instruments in different ways. We argue that this framework affords media ethnographers the conceptual and methodological tools required to empirically observe and describe how the media ethnographer shifts from compositions through, in, of, and with media. Finally, we demonstrate how this framework can be operationalized by applying it to a case study of startup workers in Vancouver that involves the online platform Meetup.

Keywords: mediatization, figurations, mediation, media ethnography, media manifold, startup culture

A key challenge facing ethnographers who study media-rich environments is how to account for, and represent, the role of media in social processes (Perterra, 2018). This challenge is exacerbated by the dissolution of media, and associated practices, into a complex tangle of background relationships of our collective human experiences and actions (Ihde, 1990). Media ethnography, as a methodology, increasingly relies on repertoires of information and communication technologies to delimit fields, engage with participants, collect data, and communicate ethnographic experiences (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Social networking platforms, direct messaging apps, qualitative data analysis software, and research blogs are only some of the many devices that constitute the modern ethnographer's technological toolkit. Some ethnographic approaches—for example, virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), Internet ethnography (Constable, 2003), and netnography (Kozinets, 2010)—have embraced the epistemological challenges raised by the role of media and have convincingly foregrounded the role of digital infrastructures of communication in contemporary mediated social interaction. Nevertheless, questions remain about how the

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traditional tools of ethnographic investigation can be adapted to investigate social phenomena that involve new media (Airoldi, 2018; Reich, 2015; Seaver, 2017).

In line with ethnography's holistic and reflexive aspirations, in this article, we turn the analytical lens inward and question how we, as ethnographers conducting fieldwork in deeply mediated environments, constitute ourselves in relation to media. Drawing from mediatization theory, we use the first section of this article to argue for a twofold conception of the media ethnographer as a figuration that entails contingent processes of embodiment and of mediation. In the second section, we develop a fourfold typology for these interwoven processes, which we call figurations of mediation, and demonstrate how they can be used to establish ethnographers' relations to the field, to participants, and to their research instruments in different ways. In the last section, we use a case study to demonstrate how careful attention to figurations of mediation allows us to describe and trace shifts in the ethnographer's mediated subjectivity over the course of the fieldwork and, in turn, to identify important breakthroughs in the fieldwork.

Mediatization Theory and Figuring the Media Ethnographer

As a framework devised in part to grapple with the implications of media's increasing ubiquity and complexity, mediatization theory posits that social domains have grown dependent on the media (Hjarvard, 2008), or, to put it another way, "media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole" (Krotz, 2009, p. 24). Couldry and Hepp (2016) describe the increasing complexity of these interconnections as a media manifold—a many-dimensional space that cannot be experienced in all its complexity, but only actualized in downscaled representations. By acknowledging that media interrelations are neither implemented nor experienced homogeneously across all social situations, this interpretation of mediatization theory asks researchers to pay closer attention to how various people, institutions, and/or media technologies enable and constrain social interaction by connecting or impeding connections between domains, such as "politics, education, family, religion, sports, law, work, and so on" (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016, p. 463).

Essential to an understanding of this media manifold is the concept of figuration, which Couldry and Hepp (2016; among others, Knoblauch, 2013) adapt from Norbert Elias to be a "'mode[*i*] of processes of interweaving' (Elias, 1978, p. 130), a more or less stable interaction of individuals which produce in this interrelation a certain kind of social meaning" (p. 63). Elias originally developed the concept to avoid essentializing certain social categories (see Elias, 1978, pp. 119–121) by emphasizing their processual composition. One of his examples is to challenge the use of the pronoun "I" as a means of essentializing the individual. For Elias (1978), "I" is only a figuration of the individual—a process of designating an actor that is dynamically dependent on a set of relations to other pronouns that include the "we" or "them" (p. 124), leading him to go so far as to claim that the "static person is a myth" (p. 120). Science and technology studies have since developed parallel versions of figuration to describe certain kinds of techno-social typifications, or what Haraway (1997) refers to as the "necessarily tropic quality of all material-semiotic processes" (p. 11)—including the development of the individual.

Applied to mediatization research, figurations allow the researcher to study media repertoires as "an individual's selection from the media manifold" (Hepp, 2020, p. 92) within communicative practice

without essentializing any individual medium. For example, in his study of the quantified self movement, Hepp (2020) argues that the figure of the self-tracker epitomizes the individual in a time of the media manifold because he or she is engaged in an “ongoing process of constructing individuality at the intersection of different figurations” (p. 150). These figures are generated with the help of their media repertoire (e.g., combinations of smartphones, smart watches, fitness trackers, and shoe sensors) to create and sustain a sense of self. This digital self is concomitantly subjected to metrification and datafication by larger institutional actors such as digital media companies, whose outputs in turn feed back into the self-tracker’s self-representations (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

Much like the self-tracker, the figure of the media ethnographer is one that relies on a media repertoire to collect data, and one that exists in relation to broader transformations brought on by mediatization. But whereas self-trackers use media to alter or improve aspects of themselves, media ethnographers engage with the media manifold to conduct research at a disciplinary intersection of anthropology and media studies (Perterra, 2018). Our focus in this section of the article is tackling how figuration can entail a processual interweaving of various moments of fieldwork involving media repertoires, with a particular focus on the contrapuntal relationship between two distinct yet interrelated processes: embodiment and mediation.

The Figurations of the Media Ethnographer: Embodiment and Mediation

The first of two processes that constitute figuring the media ethnographer is one of embodiment. This process entails locating one’s self in the world: “putting us in a spatio-temporal relation with other beings and giving us a standpoint, literally, from which to perceive them” (Crossley, 2007, p. 82). Although embodiment is in some respects too vague a concept to be researched (Crossley, 2007), the ethnographer relies on this process to construct a legible body for the conduct and description of fieldwork (Hine, 2015). Based on this conception of embodiment, the media ethnographer must do more than merely distill experience into pure corporality (Hine, 2000). The body is more than a passive receptacle for experience but a dynamic and plural (Lahire, 2011) state of becoming in which the body is affected, and also “affects,” its surroundings. Knoblauch (2013) uses this insight to draw attention to the necessarily temporal dimension of embodiment and how its performance entails a “sequentiality” that serves as the basis for any routinization and/or habituation, which is, in turn, the source of communicative forms and social order.

The second co-constitutive process for figuring the media ethnographer is mediation. Broadly defined, mediation indicates processes of communication among individuals and between individuals and institutions (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015). Mediation stands in dialectical relation with mediatization; whereas the former provides a way to think about communication processes in the here and now, the latter can be understood as a meta-process framing mediation within “higher-order processes of transformation and change across society” (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 35). These include, for example, recent debates concerning how communication practices, policies, and norms change as mediation becomes increasingly reliant on privately owned digital platforms (Gillespie, 2010; Langlois & Elmer, 2013). Conversely, mediation is a necessary process for the development of mediatization and requires that we pay attention to “how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them” (Silverstone, 1994, p. 189). Given that we are ethnographers relying on media repertoires to conduct fieldwork, our

experience of the media manifold is shot through with mediation. The risk of conceiving and describing our interaction with the media manifold based on a conception of mediation that is simplified to a general process is analogous to the essentialization between society and the individual that Elias critiques. This conception of mediation overlooks how mediations shift in relation to social, cultural, and technological transformations and therefore undermine a holistic understanding of mediatization.

To avoid a reductionist approach to mediation, we need to allow for a multiplicity of mediation processes. Like embodiment, what is required is a dynamic definition of mediation that allows for variation and transformation. Conceiving mediation as empirically observable and describable means staying attuned to the contingent ways in which it enables and constrains sociality as various actors oscillate between alternative and non-mutually exclusive figurations. In other words, we should “examine mediation as a feature of social relations rather than a barrier to them” (Beaulieu, 2010, p. 458). In the context of media ethnography, mediation can be actualized alternatively as, among other things, field sites, objects of study, and research instruments.

The figure of the media ethnographer in the media manifold can therefore be conceptualized as a downscaled representation of the interweaving of embodiment and mediation. The challenge that remains is how to conduct fieldwork that allows the researcher to keep track of processes of embodiment and processes of mediation. This challenge can be resolved by paying attention to how the two processes are contingently interwoven over time and to the sequences that develop from these multiple interweavings. We, therefore, propose understanding each moment of interconnection as its own figuration of mediation; these moments are woven together to compose the ethnographer’s mediatized subjectivity.

Figurations of Mediation

Like any other genre of ethnographic writing—from classical and public to postmodern and mainstream (Adler & Adler, 2008)—media ethnographies lose or gain explanatory power through different representational conventions. Much like any ethnographer must construct a field of investigation (Vered, 2000), figurations of mediation are meaning-making compositions that weave together processes of embodiment and of mediation. Whether intentional or not, whether at the early stages of research design or the latter stages of recounting the fieldwork, figurations of mediation stabilize and naturalize processes of embodiment and mediation to create a coherent ethnographer and, in turn, a coherent account of fieldwork.

Figurations of mediation are more than purely textual representations, yet, much like Elias’s pronouns, prepositions can serve as useful indices for categories of mediation. Take as an example a fictional description of research, such as “a media ethnography of how families communicate through social media.” This statement includes not only the figuration of the family, but also the specific preposition *through*, which evokes a type of mediation. The significance of the figuration of mediation is made evident if we substitute a different preposition. Altering the research statement to end with “in social media” or “with social media” introduces an intangible yet qualitatively different interrelation between families and social media, which, as we argue later, also alters a tacit conception of the ethnographer’s embodiment in relation to the social phenomenon under investigation.

Although not explicitly aligned with mediatization theory, Hine (2015) uses the contrast between the prepositions *through*, *of*, and *for* to show how a media ethnography for the Internet entails an “embedded, embodied, everyday phenomenon” (p. 13). Inspired in part by Hine’s original prepositional analogy and building on examples taken from other media ethnographies, we sketch four types of figurations of mediation in the following sections. Rather than claim that one should avoid figurations of mediation tout court or that a single type of figuration of mediation is best suited to understanding mediatization, ethnographers should pay attention to and document the sequences of figurations of mediation they experience and develop to better understand mediatization.

Through Mediation

Through mediation enlists media as a research instrument. Studies in this vein take advantage of media affordances, and of the data generated through their use, to identify and map otherwise invisible or inaccessible social situations. From this perspective, mediation and embodiment are presented in a duality wherein the former is a tool to gain access to sites for fieldwork where the latter can take place.

Through mediation often involves drawing from computational methods such as social network analysis and large-scale semiautomated content analysis (Berthod, Grothe-Hammer, & Sydow, 2017; Howard, 2002) as a means of sorting through the data generated by media to guide ethnographers to sites for conducting face-to-face participant observation. For example, network ethnography (Howard, 2002) uses graph theory to orient the work of ethnographers dealing with dispersed and multi-sited fields. According to its proponents, network ethnography affords the possibility to combine quantitative measures of network structures with the qualitative, rich descriptions of face-to-face human interactions emerging from on-field research to overcome the supposed limits of traditional ethnography, such as the limited generalizability of ethnographic findings (Berthod et al., 2017). Critics of this approach emphasize how representations of fields obtained through data analysis are reflections of media’s affordances more than objective synoptic views of the fields. Moreover, such data-driven ethnographies limit researchers’ exposure to nonpurposive and incidental encounters, therefore curbing the potential inclusivity of the research process (Beaulieu, 2004).

In Mediation

The preposition *in* establishes a noun’s position or location in opposition to what is out. *In* mediation represents a relationality “of place or position in space” where embodied interaction takes place “within the limits or bounds of” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., para. 1) media.

In figurations introduce a spatial dimension for describing mediated social interaction that is in many ways a corollary to the “field” of traditional ethnography, but where the field is an ensemble of communication technologies (Coleman, 2010). Ethnographers deploy this spatiality in one of two ways based on two distinct understandings of embodiment. The first way entails another dualist conception of ethnographic embodiment in which the ethnographer compares online experiences of social interaction in media space with offline face-to-face interactions to describe and analyze distinct limitations or affordances presented by the space (Kozinets, 2010).

The second way in which ethnographers deploy spatiality is by using technologies to gain access to, and interact with, social actors in a shared space of mediation. In this latter approach, the ethnographer's social interactions take place in a "virtual world" and are described as embodied, subjective experiences of said world. Boellstorff and colleagues (2012) summarize the value of this approach as one that provides "non-elicited data about social and cultural lifeworlds in the moments of their enacting" (p. 105).

Of Mediation

We use the preposition *of* to designate ethnographic research in which mediation constitutes the researchers' and/or the research subjects' "matter of thought, feeling, or action" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., para. 25). As opposed to research in mediation that magnifies distinctions between offline and online, or face-to-face and mediated, of mediation foregrounds and magnifies the peculiarities (both spatial and temporal) of media as frames of reference for social situations and/or institutions. In other words, ethnographers use of mediation to focus on how communication is—explicitly and/or implicitly—the purpose of social interaction.

Ethnographers of mediation question the distinction between real and virtual, emphasizing instead the necessity of conceiving mediated processes and experiences as "continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 5). The field is thus a heterogeneous ensemble of media objects, physical sites, practices, and participants' social relations. This type of ethnographic research originally emerged as a critical response to other researchers' early attempts to confine the "field" to the virtual realm (Burrell, 2009) and where media phenomena were abstracted from other forms of sociality that developed within and beyond the screen (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009).

Hine (2015) differentiates an ethnography for the Internet from one that is of the Internet "because the Internet cannot be grasped as a complete entity that one could study in its entirety" (p. 5). Although her emphasis on the impossibility of grasping the entirety of the Internet is important (an emphasis consistent with the media manifold), we believe that *of* and *for* are similar in that both focus on embodied experiences of mediation as the object of study.

With Mediation

Research with mediation emphasizes ethnographers' own dependence on processes of mediation as means of experiencing a given social domain. While similar to certain kinds of in figurations because of an emphasis on the mediatedness of the individual ethnographer, with figurations render mediation processes within the media manifold where ethnographers' intersubjectivities are no longer contained in digital worlds, but are coextensive with mediatization.

With mediation undermines the potentially essentializing categorical distinction between "traditional" ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, and "digitally native" research methods that involve coding, programming, and software development (Marres, 2012; Selwyn, 2019). If, as we claim, conducting media ethnography in the media manifold means moving past an essentialist understanding of face-to-face interaction as the basis for all social interaction (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Hine,

2000), then we should be careful not to limit the methods afforded to the ethnographer for conducting research. Pink's (2011) multimodal and multisensory ethnographic approach serves as an example of research that embraces with figurations: "being with' can be likened to the idea of ethnography as a practice that seeks routes to understanding the experiences and meanings of other people's lives through different variations of being with, and doing things with them" (p. 270).

Figurations with mediation portray situated actions and mediation as coemergent with research practice. The ethnographer is in a sense complicit in the constitution of mediatization. Some, if not all, interactions with actors are therefore already mediated by the researcher's own relation with media.

An Ethnography Through, In, Of, With Meetup

The four figurations of mediation outlined earlier are by no means intended to be exhaustive. Having briefly outlined their qualities, we now demonstrate how these figurations of mediation can be used to describe the composition of a media ethnographer as part of fieldwork and how, in this particular case, an awareness of figurations of mediation allowed us to identify and analyze a sequence of shifts, including important transformations that afforded insights into the fieldwork.

The following case study is taken from an ethnographic investigation of startup workers in Vancouver, Canada. The interests and points of reference that the various actors in the study had in common included theories of "lean" and "agile" management (Ries, 2011), as well as discourses of network labor and continuous innovation (Gobble, 2018).

The individuals and organizations encountered were diverse enough to encompass a wide range of people working in different sectors, from publishing to software development, with different employment conditions: freelancers, contractors, salaried employees, etc. We encountered working practices that were often fragmented, flexible, and distributed across teams of remote and independent workers, making delimiting the spatiotemporal dimensions of the research field anything but straightforward. The challenges of multi-sited ethnographies involving such a broad and diffuse collectivity included identifying the constellation of actors (Hepp, 2020) and establishing ongoing relations with them (Marcus, 1995).

We quickly noticed that networking (Wittel, 2001) was an important communicative practice among the people we met—connecting to and meeting with other startup workers were significant preoccupations and activities. In the early stages of our investigation, we attended in-person events for startup workers; we "followed the people" (Marcus, 1995, p. 106) to the places they identified as workplaces and, likewise, during times that they identified as working time. We witnessed how digital media platforms served to coordinate and complement offline, face-to-face interactions. Despite the variety of media used to network, we noticed that people privileged certain digital platforms like Meetup.

Meetup was founded in 2002 by the dot-com entrepreneur Scott Heiferman. The platform allows users to search for events and to connect with people with similar interests who are locally available to meet in person (Benkler, 2006). Within its website, users can either join existing groups or create a new group

and become organizers themselves. Meetup's business model is based on the freemium formula: Joining groups is free, whereas creating a group and becoming an organizer requires the payment of a monthly fee.

Meetup was a particularly popular platform among startup workers for both finding and connecting with professional groups active in the city. Enacting the same practices we observed among the creative workers we encountered, we joined Meetup and started attending in-person events on a weekly basis. The investigation became inextricably linked to Meetup, yet this link was multistable in that the role it played could not be characterized using only one of the figurations described earlier, and, just as important, our engagement with the platform developed into a sequence of media figurations that suggested a particular kind of subjective transformation taking place during the ethnographic encounter. As discussed in greater length in the conclusion, tracing this sequence of transformations allowed us to recognize a substantive shift from outsider to insider in relation to startup work, which subsequently allowed for a deeper engagement with startup workers in the media manifold.

Through Meetup

In the early stages of the research, we used Meetup in a mostly instrumental fashion. Inspired by previous network ethnography studies (Neff, 2012), we set out to map the Vancouver startup collectivity through Meetup by using it to identify where people were gathering. Once identified, we planned to treat these locations as a multi-sited field by regularly attending these events. We started by searching for relevant groups using Meetup's internal search engine. We searched for keywords such as "software development," "startup," and "entrepreneurship," and examined all the groups returned by Meetup's search algorithm.

Our initial attempt to map the field through Meetup by simply navigating the platform through its online interface was challenging. Vancouver was (and remains) home to thousands of Meetup groups that hosted countless events all across the city. Moreover, it seemed to be common practice for people who used Meetup to create new groups and wait to see whether new members would join. As a result, our initial queries returned a considerable number of groups devoid of any activity or contents, with the exception of group titles and descriptions. A blank events calendar, an empty forum, and a low member count were usually indicators of a group about to be decommissioned as soon as their organizers stopped paying the monthly fee. This practice increased the amount of information we had to analyze to decide which groups to join.

To help us sift through the hundreds of Meetup groups active in the Vancouver startup space, we developed a rudimentary content scraper, the Meetup Spider, to automate the collection of groups' public information. Running from the laptop of one of researchers, the Meetup Spider sifted through hundreds of groups automatically and helped us to direct our research efforts toward the most active areas of the field. This simple media repertoire allowed us to speed up the process of establishing potential geographic locations for face-to-face participant observation in a way that was more efficient than manually browsing all the groups.

Our preliminary test with the Meetup Spider yielded very positive results; in November 2017, the first month of investigation, we were able to identify six Meetup groups to follow. The groups were selected on the basis of their topics and activity level. The criteria we used to define the latter included the extent to

which past events occurred regularly, the number of future scheduled events, and the number of participants. During this phase, processes of mediation and embodiment were split: Our basic research repertoire, composed of Meetup, a laptop, and the Meetup Spider, was experienced as a medium orienting our embodied (i.e., face-to-face) fieldwork.

Automatically collecting public data from Meetup was not without its limitations and blind spots. The automated collection of public information (also known as screen scraping) was not prohibited by Meetup's 2017 terms of service (Meetup, 2017). However, by sending hundreds of automated requests per minute to the Meetup servers, the Meetup Spider could have been treated as a spambot by Meetup and banned from the website permanently. Moreover, by simulating the behavior of a human visitor, the Meetup Spider was susceptible to the preferences introduced by Meetup's own algorithms. For instance, in the attempt to improve users' engagement, Meetup tends to suggest groups similar to those that the user had already joined or visited. As a consequence, using the Meetup Spider to collect data might not have given us access to certain Meetup groups or events that could have been relevant to the study.

In an attempt to develop an ongoing understanding of the dynamics of startup workers through Meetup and to establish a sense of long-term sustainability for the research process, we developed a custom software component, known as the Meetup Archiver. This was hosted on a cloud server and automatically retrieved data through the Meetup application programming interface (API). APIs are a typical feature found in digital platforms and can be conceived as pipelines that enable data to flow from the platform to third-party applications (Helmond, 2015). In our case, we built a Web application that submitted automated weekly queries to the platform (e.g., "Find all groups in Vancouver about startup") and stored the results in an online database. In its first week of operation, the Meetup Archiver returned information about 332 groups that had, in total, hosted 51 events involving 661 participants. We then generated visualizations to interpret the growing amount of data collected via the API that we subsequently released publicly on the research project website. These geographic visualizations served as a way to identify, each week, key meetings to attend.

The data generated through Meetup proved to be very useful in guiding the on-field research toward groups and events otherwise invisible. Through the API, we were able to access a wide spectrum of data and to use these data to develop criteria for identifying potentially relevant research sites. Switching from the Meetup Spider to the Meetup Archiver was, in hindsight, a safer and more sustainable way to collect data as well. In the 2019 revision of their terms of service (Meetup, 2019), Meetup explicitly prohibited screen scraping, thus making the Meetup Spider, and the data collected through its use, no longer suitable for research. The shift did not, however, change the way Meetup was included within our research repertoire because both the Spider and the Archiver were, in the first phases of our investigation, treated instrumentally.

In Meetup

As the fieldwork continued to unfold, our understanding of Meetup's relationship to Vancouver startup workers also started to shift away from one of simple instrumentality. To our informants, the platform was more than just a source of data to inform their choice of events. Similarly, our own use of the platform started to extend beyond this initial purpose. After spending some time browsing in group and event pages, we realized that meaningful exchanges between startup workers were also taking place in

Meetup. Our experience of Meetup shifted to encompass that of a field in itself, with its own online interactions, topics, and norms. This figurational shift did not stop us from also using the platform as an instrument. We continued to conduct research through Meetup, but conducting research in Meetup required that we reassess the field of investigation, our embodiment within it, and how this embodiment affected our interactions with the people we encountered. Within this figuration, Meetup was no longer just an instrument, but also a space in which mediated and embodied ethnographic experiences took place.

The first thing we did in the platform was observe practices and engage people by using appropriate behaviors. Therefore, before engaging in interactions with some of the Meetup groups, we spent time engaging in the kind of lurking that is common practice in certain forms of digital ethnography (Escobar, Hess, Licha, Sibley, & Strathern, 1994; Garcia et al., 2009). During this period of passive observation, we analyzed groups' audiences, the type of events hosted, and the kinds of discussion hosted by each group forum.

We then started participating in the online spaces, inductively following the norms and behaviors displayed in the platform. Transitioning from a figuration through Meetup as an instrument to being in Meetup as (also) a space for embodied experience required the creation and the customization of our Meetup personal profile and actively participating in group forums. We used the public profile to disclose the participant observer's identity as a researcher. This involved using our real names and uploading headshot pictures instead of hiding behind pseudonyms and avatars. Such a level of transparency, we thought, could increase our chances to connect with people and establish a network of relationships with members of the Vancouver startup community. In this respect, we used the profile's Bio section to post a description of the project and to invite potential participants to visit the research website for further information.

In addition, we populated the profile Interests field with keywords relevant to our research (e.g., digital media marketing, Web technology, professional networking, and Internet startups) in an attempt to be found by potential research participants. We then started interacting with other group participants using the discussion forums. Interactions within the group forums we followed were sporadic and event focused. Although self-promotion and advertising were usually discouraged or prohibited in most groups, participants used the forum to introduce themselves ahead of events, as a way to both break the ice before meeting in person and subtly promote their skills and services. We therefore followed suit and acted as any other participant. Instead of inviting research participants to get in touch with us by posting messages across groups' forums, we posted messages introducing ourselves and, in some cases, disclosed our identity and research motivations ahead of events we planned to attend in person.

The opportunity to publicly disclose our identity depended mostly on the nature of the group and the level of openness perceived while reading other participants' comments. Participants' responses to our comments and other interactions in the platform were always positive. In one case, our pre-event message was picked up by the event's organizer, who connected us with another member of the group who worked on similar topics. In addition to the forums, Meetup also afforded the possibility to contact participants directly and privately through an internal messaging system. We occasionally used this function to respond to inquiries about our research coming from other Meetup members and to follow up with people we met at events. Most of the time, we relied on other channels of communication—mostly e-mail and instant messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp and Slack)—to communicate directly with participants.

Of Meetup

As stated in the previous section, early fieldwork suggested that Meetup constituted a significant platform for Vancouver's startup workers that was embedded in their everyday activities. Participant observations of Meetup entailed shifting our focus away from a conception of the platform as a research instrument or as an environment in which to conduct fieldwork, and toward Meetup as (1) a matter of thought, feeling, or action for startup workers, and (2) a matter of thought, feeling, or action for the researcher.

The first implication of this shift entailed understanding Meetup as a platform that was itself the object of consideration for Vancouver startup workers in their everyday interactions. As such, we started to examine how they perceived Meetup as part of their everyday interactions and how they interpreted its role within said interactions. For example, over the course of participant observations of Meetup groups, attending face-to-face Meetup events, and conducting one-on-one interviews, we observed how independent workers relied on Meetup to deal with some of the difficulties that arose from the flexible organization of labor that characterized startup work. In interviews, workers disclosed the extent to which they enjoyed the possibility of organizing their workdays around their needs while also pointing out the lack of social connections at work and the lack of an office space. In this respect, they described Meetup as a means to counter the sense of isolation they felt working in precarious, flexible conditions (e.g., through participating in after-work social gatherings). Individuals also reported other motivations for using Meetup. Independent professionals used the platform as a marketing channel for their services or products. While self-promotion was discouraged within Meetup groups' online forums, participants described the platform as a valuable way to establish connections with potential partners or clients through participation in live events. Among the most surprising characterizations of Meetup was one that emerged in conversations with members of the Vancouver Organizer Meetup Group—a closed Meetup group of experienced Meetup organizers created by the Meetup's Organizer Outreach Office. One participant who managed groups with thousands of members referred to Meetup as the "ultimate marketing channel," a platform that is useful not only for connecting with potential clients, but also for establishing oneself, or one's company, as an authority within a specific sector or niche (Interviewee 5, personal communication, September 9, 2018). Examples of this use of Meetup included a venture capital firm organizing a group on blockchain and a business incubator hosting a group on startup entrepreneurship. Such a professionalized and calculated use of Meetup contrasted, yet coexisted, with our initial impression of the platform as a space generated only by grassroots, participatory communities.

The second implication of the shift to an of figuration meant that we, as ethnographers, had to reflexively consider our embodied relation to Meetup not only as a component of our research repertoire or as a space for embodied fieldwork, but also as a meaningful frame of reference for our research. We were no longer only ethnographers of startup work; we were also ethnographers of Meetup work. As part of taking stock of this shift in the research process, we realized that we were successfully using the topic of Meetup to connect to startup workers, leading us to consider how we might use this insight to design and implement further research strategies.

With Meetup

After six months into the research process, we made a point of publicly sharing our field notes and reflections on the project website in the belief that openly sharing these insights would ensure a certain

level of accountability and transparency on our part and could help us to redistribute our research (Marres, 2012) through the active involvement of a wide range of relevant actors, including developers, creative professionals, and startup entrepreneurs. In addition to a research blog, the project website also hosted the collection of interactive visualizations created with the Meetup Archiver, which we titled "Meetup Dashboard." The dashboard was updated every week and was made available to anyone interested in finding relevant events in Vancouver. The information published on the dashboard differed from the "relevant events" posted on the Meetup home page, which was based primarily on how many people RSVPed and on users' favorite topics. Using the Meetup Archiver, we could identify groups focused on niche topics that might have been otherwise difficult to find through Meetup's search engine, or spot emerging topics by identifying groups that were gaining attention. Although we developed the dashboard primarily as a research tool, we released it publicly in an attempt to provide startup workers a tool to explore less visible aspects of Meetup and to see at a glance the latest trends within the industry. For the same reason, we released the Meetup Spider source code as a free and open-source software using the software development hosting platform GitHub.

Thanks to our weekly dashboard releases and to the experience we had gained dealing with Meetup data, we could position ourselves within the community as "Meetup experts." This new aspect of our research figuration, forged by ongoing processes of mediation and embodiment, helped us immensely in our investigation. Connecting our figuration as ethnographer to a familiar platform such as Meetup and having the ability to showcase our technical skills in dealing with the API and data visualizations through the dashboard and the Meetup Spider free software allowed us to establish connections and conversations with people who might not otherwise have been interested in speaking to us. For example, instead of introducing ourselves as people conducting "research on flexible labor in the Startup community" during some face-to-face events—a rather dry and unappealing self-characterization—we experimented with more directly relevant introductions such as, "I work on data visualization about the Vancouver Startup ecosystem" or "I'm prototyping a new technology for identifying interesting meetups." These initial descriptions of the work were often better aligned with the kind of creative and entrepreneurial people who made up the audience of Meetup events we attended.¹

This new figuration with Meetup also shifted our experience of networking practices to one of networking with workers—in a sense closer to the one that Pink (2011) alluded to. For example, we were invited to present our research at a social innovation Meetup group's monthly event. In that context, the audience expressed interest toward the dashboard, scrutinized in depth how we handled the Meetup data, and helped us solve a technical issue that was affecting the quality of the data. In another case, a freelance designer helped us to improve the dashboard's user interface: "Very cool tool you whipped up there! Some of the locations ([COWORKING], for example) are off, and there are a few map UI patterns I might suggest improving, but it's a great start and good idea" (Interviewee 8, personal communication, August 29, 2018).

¹ A note on self-presentation: We experimented with these variations during exchanges at Meetup events. We ensured informed consent of research participants by disclosing the goals of the research and our identities as researchers when conducting interviews or online fieldwork.

The incorporation of the dashboard and of the Meetup Spider free software into our research repertoire allowed us to engage people in a way that was consistent with the kinds of entrepreneurial and promotional figures we had already encountered while studying the startup collective through, in, and of Meetup. Our embodied and mediated participation with workers as a Meetup expert was fundamental for nurturing long-term research relationships with some key informants because it also granted us access to otherwise inaccessible areas of the research field. One such informant was a senior executive at an early-stage tech incubator. Because he was a type of “networker” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007) or “industry insider” (Caldwell, 2009), his strategic positioning within Vancouver’s startup collectivity gave him a unique and privileged insight into its workings, but also made him very difficult to connect with. Working in an incubator, he was always on the lookout for companies in the early stages of development and for investors willing to finance their growth. His initial interest in the dashboard opened up the possibility to sit down with him for an interview. Later, his interest expanded, and he asked if we would be available to share our data with his network of startup entrepreneurs and investors:

It would be great to have some sort of collaboration with your research project, like the possibility to feed that map [the Meetup Dashboard, Ed.] and show it somewhere on [INCUBATOR WEBSITE]. Everything you are working can feed into our work, as I’d like to bring people together, as I’d like this project to be collaborative. (Interviewee 7, personal communication, May 23, 2018)

Although the collaboration did not develop further, this example demonstrates how ethnography with the Meetup platform generated opportunities to access field sites while also affording opportunities to experience forms of social interaction that would not have been available otherwise. It soon became clear that by figuring our identity with Meetup, we had established a more authentic and legitimate place among Vancouver startup workers. The Meetup Spider, developed initially as a research tool to guide us through the fieldwork, became part of our research identity and allowed us to be accepted as insiders by other participants. Figuring the researcher as a person working with Meetup made it possible to pursue the fieldwork as someone equipped with a project in a way that was analogous to what the startup workers encountered in the fieldwork.

Conclusion

Drawing from elements of mediatization theory, we used this article to develop a fourfold typology based on weaving together processes of embodiment and mediation to compose figurations of the media ethnographer over the course of fieldwork. Such a typology is by no means exclusive or exhaustive; different ethnographic approaches can weave together processes of embodiment and mediation in different ways or in different sequences and, therefore, figure different media ethnographers.

Through the case study, we showed how our research process involved some overlap between the four qualitatively different figurations of mediation. In a way, our ability to conduct research with Meetup was made possible by the experiences of shifting from through, to in, to of. The transition from one figuration of mediation to another was influenced by our habituation with Meetup as part of our media repertoire. Each figuration opened opportunities for different kinds of fieldwork and, more important, offered insights about

aspects of mediatization that would have been difficult to observe and document without a clear understanding of our subjectivity as composed of interwoven processes of mediation and embodiment. For example, the first figurational shift, from through Meetup to in Meetup, forced us to reassess our subjectivity because data ownership and accessibility issues affected our ability to conduct research through Meetup. At the same time, it opened opportunities for rearranging our relation to Meetup, thus allowing us to conduct fieldwork in the platform, rather than just through it.

We are not suggesting that this sequence of figurations represents a normative order where with is an improvement on through, nor that this sequence applies to all media ethnographies. Yet the sequence does trace a dynamic transformation of the ethnographer's relationship to Meetup: from one of instrumentality to one in which the researcher's own identity within the field is composed with the help of Meetup. In our case study, the last figurational shift (from of Meetup to with Meetup) coincided with our transitioning from outsiders to insiders. Figuring ourselves as people working on a technical project (i.e., the Meetup Archiver) mirrored how our participants also figured themselves and allowed us to establish authentic and long-lasting research relations with them. Thanks to this level of insiderness, we were able to witness and document how flexible workers in the tech industry figured themselves in relation with multiple projects, often at once, and just as often without any form of compensation for their work. These observations allowed us to understand how startup workers in Vancouver use their work with media to maintain networks of relationships and mitigate their exposure to job insecurity.

Figurations of mediation can be useful for media ethnographers who want to study mediatization by equipping them with a conceptual and methodological framework that enables them to identify and describe interwoven processes of mediation and embodiment. This is useful not only to identify and document moments of transition, as in our investigation of the Vancouver startup community, but also to allow ethnographers to empirically observe and describe how their subjectivity, and those of their participants, is constituted through multistable relations with media. Conceiving figurations of mediation as multiple and processual challenges essentialist approaches to mediation, thus allowing ethnographers to provide a holistic account of their role in social processes.

It is more important than ever to develop the methodological tools to access, describe, and analyze media's co-constitutive role in shaping processes of mediatization—how they increasingly enable and constrain the ties between domains of social life and intersect centers of social and political power. As we have argued, any ethnographic investigation involving media produces figurations of mediation. Rather than being presented as self-evident or distinct from the researcher, these figurations should be understood as part of the contingent interwovenness of processes that compose the figure of the media ethnographer. In line with the holistic aspirations of traditional ethnography, we should be more attuned to these figurations and their manifold variations and sequences—how we shape, and are shaped by, our encounters, actualizations, and incorporations through, in, of, with . . . media.

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