

The media go-along Researching mobilities with media at hand

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Abstract

This article contributes methodologically and theoretically to Christine Hine's call for a mobilities oriented internet ethnography. First, a 'media go-along', combining interviews and observations of a personal communication service at hand, is developed. Research participants give verbal and visual tours, framed by the researcher's discursively constituted invitations for orientation. Then, a theoretical framework integrating an analysis of media environment mobilities is developed. From research material on hook-up and dating apps targeting non-heterosexual men, it is shown how 1) research participants' navigation is materially contingent upon the medium and subject to momentary purposes and styles, 2) researcher presence and access must regularly be re-inscribed discursively, and 3) mobile media analysis, based on the media go-along's representations of verbal, material, affective, and kinetic aspects of social interaction, is useful in the analysis of socially-conditioned access to, and production of, single media practice and experience.

Keywords

mobile method, media environment, orientation, Grindr.

Introduction

One central aspect of modern media technologies is how they allow media to move with us wherever we go. Furthermore, the multiple media technologies, devices and services involved in everyday life constitute 'polymedia environments' (Madianou & Miller, 2013) that require performances of 'cross media communication' (Petersen & Rasmussen, 2007). Such mobile and connected mediatized lives are intertwined with certain ways of moving and being present. These social and technological developments inform the turn in media studies towards concepts of *space and place* and, more recently, *mobility*.

A prominent voice in this movement is Christine Hine. In *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (2015), Hine updates her 'connective ethnography' and inscribes the approach into a general sociological interest in mobility and "the extent to which new methods could allow for objects of inquiry that are not assumed to have a static existence in a single location" (Hine, 2015, p. 63). This enables the ethnographer to "contemplate use of the Internet as an imaginative and sensory experience as much as a practical exchange of information" (Hine, 2015, p. 64). Generally, virtual and visual ethnography push to add "material, visual, aural and kinetic components of human activity" to verbal expressions in the study of social interaction (Ardévol, 2012, pp. 86-87). Furthermore, Hine claims that the double mobility of research practice and the conceptualization of research objects are productive departures from the online/offline dichotomy that has governed much Internet research (Hine, 2015, p. 64).

Since Joshua Meyrowitz defined media environments as "patterns of access to information" (1985, p. 37), a spatialized notion of media has deeply influenced several strands of media studies. This includes HCI (Card et al., 1983), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), and netnography (Kozinets, 2010). These polymedia and cross-media concepts can be understood as describing mobilities occurring across such media environments and, thus, respond well to Hine's call. However, instead of taking aim at use across several media, I propose that mobility analysis can refine knowledge production in media-infused interview situations.

This article, then, contributes in two ways: First, in the development of the media go-along method for researching singular media literally at hand and, second, by suggesting a mobility framework for analyzing the knowledge production of such media go-alongs. Thus, the article focuses on what goes on with and within a single digital media device and service by tying in the acts of holding, looking at, interacting with, and talking about them. As I recognize that the researcher is part of the social world studied, it is imperative to include the interactive situation in which subject narration arises. As Hammersley & Atkinson point out in *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*: "How people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 15). Similarly, when media use accompanies interviewing, the ways that research participants respond to the media present should be included in a trialectical analysis of such a researcher-participant-media situation.

I apply concepts of mobility to the study of media in the following way: I start out by presenting the article's source material as well as its means of production – which I name the 'media go-along'. I, then, define 'mobile method' and review four "ethnomethods" by which "...scenic intelligibility is achieved" (Urry, 2009, p. 104). Based on these, I outline the media go-along in greater detail by describing its material and discursive elements. Following this, to understand how the built environments 'wrap around' both the research situation and the media service studied, I analyze a media go-along situation from the perspectives of emplacement and orientation. Then, focusing on media mobilities, I analyze two media go-along situations: The first analysis focuses on the *purposes* and *styles* of media mobility, and the second analysis deals with the way in which a research situation can be understood as a flow of movement between environmental features and discourses. In the concluding remarks, I survey the article's contribution to the study of single media environments.

What follows is a brief summary of the data corpus as well as a sample interview situation that illustrates the applied method.

About the case material

This article draws on media go-along situations with users of the dating and hook-up apps Grindr and Scruff. These are part of a larger data corpus consisting of transcripts of 20 interviews, 16 of which contained media go-alongs. All interview participants signed a consent form. Interviews typically lasted one hour but ranged in duration between 30 and 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed, and the media go-along situations were coded and accumulated in Atlas.TI.

Most participant recruitment was conducted via my personal profile on the hook-up and dating app Scruff¹, which is directed at "gay, bi, and curious guys"². I was and am a user of the app. As my research interests began to take shape, the profile text was updated to reflect this. Thus, most participants were users of this particular app, and some introduced similar apps during the interview. In the verbal-visual tours, only Grindr³ and Scruff were used although other services were mentioned. Throughout all of the interviews from which this sample was drawn, the following services were mentioned: the Jack'd⁴, Manhunt⁵, Growlr⁶, and Tinder⁷ apps; the Planetromeo.com, Gaydar.net, Gay.com, and Fabswingers.com websites; and the Skype, ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger chat services.

The media services in focus have been called by Kane Race 'online hook-up devices' and are defined as devices that build on network connectivity and "make use of these capacities to facilitate sexual and social encounters between men" (Race, 2014, p. 254). These capabilities specifically draw on standard repertoires of mobile social media but extend them by making relative user proximity the organizing principle for what user profiles the interface makes visible. The following research situation is taken from my media go-along with James (all names changed), a British, gay, cisgendered⁸ man living in London. The situation is an eloquent example of how the research participants describe these apps. Furthermore, it gives a sense of the questioning technique related to the media go-along:

Article: The media go-along

Researcher: I was wondering, if you can pretend I don't know anything about this app and you can kind of give me a tour of how it works?

[...]

James: Okay, so, Scruff is an app – oh, I got a message...

Researcher: [laughs]

James: ...for looking for men to meet, either sexually and socially, and actually well come around to this later, I tend to meet at far more social interaction than sexual interaction, unless when I'm traveling. By clicking on someone's profile – I got really slow Internet – you can find information about that man, how far away he is, age, demographics, and you have the ability to send him a woof, which is an identification that you find him attractive or want some interaction with him or that you can add a favorite, you can message him, you can unlock your pictures, there are diff levels of membership. I have a basic membership, so there are things I can and can't do. My understanding is that if you pay for membership, you can filter who you want to see, you can have far more private photos, you can send and receive, and there are a whole lot of other functions, but that's [sic] not functions I use at the moment. You have a function for favorites, that are people who you wanna remember and get back to. And a message function. What I like about this app, compared with apps that I used to use, is that it's geo-specific, it's mobile, and you can move around a particular location, and you can see who's nearby and who's close by.

In the following, I present Jo Lee and Tim Ingold's contribution to mobility theory from *Locating the Field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology* (Coleman & Collins, 2006) as well as concepts from Urry and Büscher's article, "Mobile methods and the empirical" (2009). This will lay out the organizing principles of the literature review.

Mobility theory

In a book chapter entitled "Fieldwork on foot: Perceiving, routing, socializing" (Coleman & Collins, 2006), Lee and Ingold sketch out mobile method's object and mode of research by analyzing Goffman's observation of two people walking down Union Street in New York. The description highlights the embodied nature of the work involved in keeping the walkers in sync, so they share a visual perspective. Another aspect of walking together down the street is maintaining a distance that makes conversation possible while keeping a distance that is comfortable and contextually appropriate. Lee and Ingold highlight the work that these walkers do to orient their bodies so as to maintain a shared perspective and a sensual closeness that allow them to co-observe and experience an environment together. This embodied and processual sense of knowledge production leads them to position 'fieldwork on foot', or mobile ethnography, as the opposite of Geertz's notion of reading cultural texts "over-the-shoulder of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz, 1973, in Lee and Ingold, 2006, p. 83). Thus, movement becomes a central category for understanding the way in which people are present in the world and, subsequently, the way in which the researcher is present in the field.

These two interrelated sensibilities are further delineated in Urry and Büscher's practical two-step definition of the mobile method. First, the researcher tracks or follows movement, including but not limited to the movement of people and things. Second, as a consequence of moving and being moved, the researcher becomes tuned into the "social organizations of 'moves'" (Urry, 2009, p. 103). In other words, a method is wholly mobile if it:

- allows all participants to move together and
- analytically focuses on the mobility aspect of sociality

This definition serves as the point of departure for the review of four mobile methods: the 'Grand Tour' questions, photo elicitation, the go-along, and the think-aloud technique. Consequently, they inform the applied method in this article, which I name 'the media go-along'.

Literature review: mobile methods and media

The method of interacting with research participants while they access objects, places or cultural scenes or are confronted with representations has its roots in ethnography. This might explain why James Spradley in *The Ethnographic Interview* (1979) integrates spatially-inspired 'Grand-Tour' questions (1979, pp. 50-53) into an interview technique. This is done to encourage interview participants to remember their social scene and take on the role of a guide into that scene. The tour metaphor brings to mind an event in which a tour guide, through narration and sensorial access to a cultural space, gives the person guided a sense of place. In Spradley's use of the term, the narrational component dominates while the sensorial is mostly left to the imagination. It is understood that the power of imaginative emplacement in one's own cultural scene empowers the informant to produce detailed verbal accounts – something that Spradley rather complacently describes as being designed to encourage informants to "ramble on and on" (Spradley, 1979, p. 50).

The Grand Tour allows for a certain degree of narrational moving together in that informants are given the opportunity to draw the researcher into social scenes organized not only around spaces but also around times, events, people, activities and objects. As the scene is neither observed nor co-experienced, the researcher's ability to verify, steer or question the narrative production is limited. One may say that the researcher has little mobility. The flipside, then, is the flexibility for all parties to draw in a multitude of sites; thus, the connections between them play a central role. So, although there is little ability to actually move together, this connectivity seems poised to produce interviews in which the operation of different mobilities can be elicited.

In the interview tradition, the photo elicitation technique offers a similar focus on the verbal production of emplacement. But, with this, the flexibility of the Grand Tour site is limited to the representation included and the narrative departures that can be reasonably tied to it. Photo elicitation generally refers to the method of inserting photographs into an interview situation with the purpose of evoking deeper elements of human consciousness

than words are able to (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Thus, it brings to the fore the idea that authentic representation depends on the mental and cognitive capacity to remember. This capacity is thought to be supported by visual stimuli. Yet, we stay within the confinement of the semi-structured interview and do not move into the field. In contrast to the Grand Tour, photo elicitation creates a somewhat symmetrical mobility for the participants – both have visual access to the photo. However, since the researcher is (in Harper's text) the producer of the photograph, the researcher is, ultimately, the one who strategically frames the narrative movement. This communicates the researcher's point of view to the participant and points to the views of others within the culture being investigated, thus sharpening the participant's reflexivity in their knowledge production. The method attempts to infuse into the interview situation the same kind of two-sided interactivity to which Urry and Büscher point as the first condition for a method to be truly mobile. However, there are obvious limitations to a mobility based entirely on a verbal form (the Grand Tour) or limited, researcher-controlled representations (photo elicitation). The next step is to consider methods by which research participants can interact with either built environments or media environments.

Falling between interviewing, observing, and deep hanging (participant observation over a longer stretch of time), the 'go-along' method is a mobile ethnographic method that "brings to the foreground some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of lived experience as grounded in place" (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 456). With this method, the "fieldworkers accompany individual informants on their 'natural' outings" (ibid., p. 463). She criticizes (ethnographic) interviews for being removed from the natural setting, which she sees as a prerequisite for accessing subjects' "stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment" (ibid., p. 463). The purpose of researcher mobility, then, is to be present with participants in places that are spatially charged for them since this is understood to create opportune situations for the researcher to produce authentic accounts of experience and practice tied to those places.

A similar interest can be found in the think-aloud technique, mostly used within HCI studies and media ethnography (Ericsson et al., 1984; Eveland et al., 2000; Nielsen et al., 2002). The obvious difference is the fact that, while go-alongs are physically mobile, a think-aloud protocol mostly involves participants sitting in front of a computer on which they perform certain user interface-related tasks while simultaneously talking about what they are experiencing and doing and why. There is disagreement over the degree to which the protocol grasps mental states, enables their representation, or obscures them by overloading the participant. Nielsen et al., thus, suggest that "two cognitive processes are competing, the process of thinking and the process of verbalising" (Nielsen et al., 2002, p. 106). An almost positivist ontology underlies this epistemological uncertainty, something that is in stark contrast to the phenomenology underpinning Kusenbach's work on the go-along. In think-alouds, memories and feelings have traditionally been treated as noise (Nielsen et al.,

2002, p. 104). In the go-along, body and environment are treated as *a priori* portals through which narratives of meaning arise.

The reviewed methods adhere differently to Urry and Büscher's two-step definition of mobile method as movement with subjects and analytical attention to mobilities. The methods elicit cultural reflection through verbal constructs, representations and built or media environments. The verbal constructs and representations seem poised to offer more flexibility with regard to the kinds of travel with which the participant can invite the researcher to engage. On the other hand, they do not offer the built and media environments' sense of immediacy, which may better support a phenomenological analysis of movement. Furthermore, the 'together' part of Urry and Büscher's assertion makes clear that interfacing with what can be meaningfully called 'environments' is the only way to experience the interactive and reflexive characteristics that lie at the heart of togetherness.

Mobile interviewing methods, such as Grand Touring questions and photo elicitation, may narratively construct environments that are, then, discursively traversed. Alternatively, representations may serve to evoke such narration. Spatiality here serves mostly as a mnemonic device and, potentially, as a way of communicating individual points of views. Thus, it ultimately serves as a tool for personal and social reflection. On the other hand, mobile participant observatory methods, such as go-along and think-aloud, allow for the active exploration of materialities – whether they are built or media environments.

In the following, I draw on the Grand Tour, photo elicitation, go-along, and think-aloud techniques to suggest a media go-along method for studying the material and discursive elements of a personal media environment.

The media go-along: materiality and discourse

The media go-along is not a direct transplantation of Kusenbach's method into another spatial realm. Instead, in light of Markham's critique of the mindless application of traditional methods on Internet phenomena (Markham, 2013, p. 434), it is accompanied by a critical re-examination of the premises of fieldwork that the method offers.

The media materiality of the Scruff app can be described as both wide and deep: wide over different views or areas, such as 'global', 'nearby', 'favorites' and 'messages' in Scruff, and deep as histories of messaging and other interactions are accessible via the digital-archeological practice of scrolling. In relation to the user, I assert that media are, indeed, environments in that they are material structures that, in different ways, give shape to what a user can even experience and do. Simultaneously, such vastness makes it impossible to take in the media landscape as a whole, necessitating a mode of travel and route-taking in which information is taken in. These mobilities are what produce 'places', which are defined by Moores as "experiential constructions in which environments are practically appropriated via action and emotion" (Moores, 2007, p. 5). Both navigation and its associated feelings

constitute the media environment as a place for the user. What I define as a media go-along is a method designed to respond to this exactly.

A media go-along is similar to Kusenbach's in that it actively explores the subject's stream of experience and practice in relation to a given setting. Perhaps due to the lower penetration of mobile media use in everyday life back in 2003, the existence of mediated communication is entirely ignored in Kusenbach's article. This excludes media from the neighborhood field. My introduction of media into the research process and phenomena studied, on the other hand, serves to acknowledge that research and social life are sites that exist across the offline-online dichotomy.

The media go-along allows the researcher and participant to navigate and talk about media in that they have sensorial access together and simultaneously. As such, it is a method for access and of a particular scope: It is a process of access, of *entering* the media service at hand, while producing empirical material on the processes *within* it. The process of entering is not a process reserved to the researcher; rather, it is a prerequisite for the research participant as well and even co-constitutive of what object is actually studied.

The method is inspired by André Jansson's development of the 'texture' concept in "A second birth? Cosmopolitan media ethnography and Bourdieu's reflexive sociology" (2012). By attending to both the "communicative fabric of space" and "the feel of the weave", the concept of 'texture' dialectically bridges culturalism and materialism (Jansson, 2012, p. 142). Analysis of texture, then, deals with the evolving relationship between actions, their traces, and the values and feelings ascribed to them. Jansson draws on Henri Lefebvre to underline the processual nature of texture. Textures are "reticular patterns" – that is, material traces and arrangements that embody the values assigned to particular routes (ibid., p. 142). The approach offers categories for both the media material texture and the ways the researcher invites 'routing' practices. The proposed media material categories are *affordances*, *representations*, and *communications*; and the questions that invite routing fall into either *open* or *thematic* categories. These are presented in table 1.

By including thematic routing invitations, I diverge significantly from the go-along proposed by Kusenbach. Curiously, she prefers go-alongs that are 'natural' – that is, as close to the participant's normal experience of a given environment as possible. This implies that she devalues 'contrived' tours that break away from the immediate encounter by introducing critical questions. One may criticize such a naturalistic stance as operating with a false notion of an undistorted reality existing 'out there'. This unnecessarily limits the ways we may support participants reflecting on their intimate media relationships. As Hammersley and Atkinson note, "while culture members freely and legitimately engage in checking claims against facts and frequently employ causal explanations to account for one another's behaviour, the social scientist is debarred from this on the grounds that it would 'distort reality'" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 13) As explanatory practices are part of everyday life, it does not necessarily disrupt the participant's immediate actions in a problematic way. Rather, it may allow for a better understanding of their motivations.

	Open touring invitations	Thematic touring invitations
Media environmental affordances	“Give me a tour and show me how it works.”	“Show me how you use the favorites area.”
Media environmental representations	“Do you mind if we talk a little bit about your self-presentation on the app? Either you show me [...] on the screen or if you’d like to, keep it to yourself and explain to me how you present yourself.”	“In the other apps, do you have any differences in the pictures you put in as profile pictures?”
Media environmental communications	“Okay so what I would like to do now is go through – you go through the top five recent people that you’ve been messaging, you don’t have to show me the messages, but maybe just tell me who this person is and what kind of talk you’ve been having with this person.”	“Can you show me or show me one that is, like: ‘This one is very like that, that’s what I really like?’”

Table 1: Empirical examples of open and thematic touring invitations divided by related media environmental aspects.

Open and thematic types of questioning serve as starting points for a more or less open orientation in the media environment. The open touring questions invite the informant to narrate a pathway through the app that is mostly of their choosing. The thematic touring questions, on the other hand, are invitations to move to certain places (the favorites function, the user profile, the messages area) and/or to expand on certain themes. Examples are why the participant ‘favorites’, ‘blocks’ and ‘woofs’, their cross-media strategies for profile picture representation, and giving examples of ways of communicating that are somehow good or bad.

To summarize, the media go-along method delineated above suggests an interview situation in which the researcher together with the participant look at, navigate and talk about the latter’s personal media. Categorizations of materialities and researcher discourse frame the understandings of and routing into the media environment.

Moving towards an understanding of media mobility, I now take a step back to consider how built environments ‘wrap around’ the media go-along. This is done by introducing the concepts of emplacement and orientation.

Emplacement and orientation in built environments

When conducting media go-alongs with people using hook-up and dating apps, I found that access to the smartphone screen was tied to affective relationships with the concurrent built environment as well as my actual bodily positioning toward the participant and the smartphone. One may speak of these aspects in terms of emplacement and orientation.

Emplacement can be defined as “the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment” (Howes, 2005, p. 7). One example of the way in which emplacement operates within a built environment is apparent in my interactions with Hassan, another interview participant. During the chats in which participation is negotiated, we have trouble finding a suitably public yet quiet space (a preference of mine), which leads Hassan to suggest that we simply meet at his place. I reject this offer politely, and we finally find a spot that proves to be very busy; this makes him rather uncomfortable. We move around to find a quieter place; and, eventually, Hassan does become comfortable enough to tell me about his use of Scruff, although not comfortable enough to be recorded. His skepticism might be tied to what I later learn are some fairly traumatic experiences of privacy breaches and negative interactions on the app as well as a precarious personal situation. Initially, while not quite aware of how deeply the roots of his resistance run, I talk him into permitting me to look at Scruff on his smartphone screen. However, since the flow of passers-by repeatedly makes him to halt his narration and his narration itself is restrained and defensive, I realize that his discomfort has a deeper resonance than simple shyness. I return to the interview form and give up applying the media go-along. During and after the interview, he tells me that asking to meet privately is his way of testing whether I am ‘serious’ or not. During and after the interview, he assumes the role of informant without making any passes.

This situation may be understood through the concept of emplacement. Interacting in a public place nudges the interaction away from its sexual possibilities in two ways: It removes the prospect of the encounter immediately turning into a sexual one, and it symbolically signals intentions of professionalism. The sense of emplacement arises from the interplay between physical restraint and symbolic meaning. Likewise, our genders and sexual bodies and the fact that we have initially met within a space reserved for intimacy negotiation must also be drawn in to understand the situational emplacement. Furthermore, Hassan’s negative experiences with and feelings about Scruff make him much more careful in the way he allows himself to become comfortable with the situation. Both the environment and the streams of people passing through, as well as my inquiries, seem to create a precarious situation in which he must be careful to safeguard his personal space. When I do get visual access to his Scruff app, his unwillingness to engage discursively makes the interaction quite uninformative and unpleasant for me. In this moment of emplacement, aspects of the body and the mind struggle to find an equilibrium, that is, a sustainable presence in a built environment. Together with my probes into his media environment, this amounts to a possible transgression of his personal boundaries.

Moving on from the dynamic relationships encapsulated by emplacement, we may also consider what it means when media users look at and interact with media through their smartphone screens. A go-along in a media environment such as Scruff is different from a traditional spatial outing. The fact that there are, in Emanuel Schegloff’s words, “two ‘theres’ there” (2002, pp. 286-287) further complicates the way in which presence can be thought of, established, and maintained. One way to consider this is by thinking about ‘orientations’.

Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann state that “the place in which I find myself, my actual ‘here,’ is the starting point for my orientation in space” (Schutz, 1975, p. 36). Sara Ahmed formulates it slightly differently as “the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 545). Orientation, thus, bridges notions of presence and movement.

In this context, orientations of the participant, myself, and the media device are the foundations on which visual and narrated tours of the hook-up apps rest. In my go-along interviews, a rather close physical proximity was necessitated by the attributes of the device screen on which the media environment was presented. Sometimes, the meeting place accommodated only a face-to-face positioning (across a table), making screen sharing a more awkward and deliberate physical act. At other times, the participant and I would sit shoulder to shoulder – for example, on a bench. This made orientations towards the screen less awkward as co-observation only required a leaning in on my part and a slight turn of the wrist on the participant’s part. Sometimes, the participant would flick through the app while talking, and I would be able to follow. At other times, the participant would – via slight movements of the body – provide me with select visual access when it was deemed relevant.

This section has demonstrated that questions of emplacement and orientation help us understand how physical environments ‘wrap around’ the media go-along in which the researcher, through open or thematic touring questions, invites the participant to engage with the media materialities. However, these participant engagements are not only shaped by the researcher and the media materiality at hand but also by the participants themselves. In the next section, I will theorize this as ‘media mobility’ and analyze two media go-alongs accordingly.

Analyzing media mobility

Lee and Ingold propose a language for describing textures of movement: “There are different ways of making and remembering routes, and there is variety in how what might be called the ‘aspect’ of the body is formed: exploring, wandering, foraging or approaching a goal, for example” (Lee & Ingold, 2006, p. 75). Similarly, Urry and Büscher identify the mobile research entity “practices of seeing, imagining, remembering, formulating places” (Urry, 2009, p. 110). This construction of the research object allows for questions about the *purposes* and *styles* of spatial appropriation. Mobilities originate in a place and are forces more or less purposefully directed at something in ways that may reflect the personality and identity of the actor performing it. Returning to the article’s purpose of suggesting a mobility framework for analyzing the knowledge production of media go-alongs, I analyze the purposes and styles of ‘routing’. Having described how touring questions are framing devices that serve as invitations to take certain routes, I will now turn to two actual displays of routing, starting with that of the research participant Tran and I.

Detouring and favoriting

Tran is rather outspoken about her reservations towards Grindr. This outspokenness can be found among many research participants. In her case, I will argue, it relates partially to her general outsider status in the sexual-cultural landscape of these apps. While they are dominated by gay, cisgender men, Tran identifies as a genderqueer transfeminine person:

to me, gender identity is arbitrary and I don't identify with it, so I can play with it as well. So, in a way, I have a very opportunistic attitude towards it. Whatever works for me best, which is identifying as a girl. Or presenting myself as a girl, gives me more attention, gives me more sex.

Let us consider the following situation in which she interacts with me and the app:

Researcher: So, when you get 25 messages when you open it [Grindr]... how do you react to getting 25 messages...

Tran: I'll show you what I got. So, that's my profile. I don't write any text.

Researcher: Why not?

Tran: It's pointless, nobody read it.

Researcher: Okay [both laugh].

Tran: And, usually, when I do write something it's quite... because, when I was gay boy, I would write... what did I use to write...? Yeah I'd say some random thing like: 'No screwdrivers, no potatoes, no whatever.' [both laugh] And people were like: 'What do you mean?'

Researcher: Okay [both laugh]. People who got it, though...

Tran: So, I got all these messages now. So, this one I liked. So, when I see someone I like I would rather put a star on it, because you know it's a sex app, so when you're horny last minute, you always wanna have your list of favorites just in case. See who's online right now, get straight to the point, you don't have to look for someone you like. You say: 'Okay this one I know I like, he's online, let's go talk to him.' So, I don't even have to chat with him that much. You save it in your bank and, when you need it, you can go further.

Tran generally remains visually orientated towards the app even when I ask her questions. Unlike James' narration (presented in the introduction), Tran's media orientation is motivated by more than simply collecting information for the general interview process. She can be said to move in and out of the immediate media environment seemingly without much effort. When invited to engage with her experience of getting many messages every time she opens the app, Tran moves into the media environment first by looking at her user profile ("I'll show you what I got"), then by seemingly detouring from the representational features of that area into her past ("when I was a gay boy"), and, finally, by making her way to – and engaging with – the messages area ("So, I got all these messages now").

Tran has become used to the co-observational situation to such a degree that she responds to an abstract question about how it feels to receive a lot of messages by inviting me to look at the actual messages she has received. Taking full advantage of the media go-along situation, she makes intelligible to me the scene in which her emotional response

necessarily plays out. However, in her navigation towards the messages area, she stops in the profile area. Looking at the profile affordances – specifically, the profile text – she seems to be reminded of previous profile texts, their meanings, and their purposes. The drive to parody the hateful ‘no-lists’ that are ubiquitous in gay dating services can be understood to be motivated by the tension between the discourse of desire as history-less and Tran’s experience and expression of sexuality and gender as somewhat performative and relationally produced. As I take her lead and invite her to expand her biographical tour of her ‘profiling’ practice (“People who got it though...”), she instead returns to the initial question about her many received messages. Instead of answering the initial question, she becomes engaged in a profile picture (“this one I liked”), and this leads her to unfold the way in which she uses the favoriting affordance to archive profiles of possible sex partners for later retrieval. Here, she directly answers and illustrates the question I initially asked.

Media movements are, of course, able to change from moment to moment across a media environment and across an interview. In one moment, participant movement may be steady enough for the researcher to follow; at another moment, the participant may guide the researcher to unknown environments, testing the limits of what is intelligible to the researcher. I experience Tran’s narration as somewhat unpredictable since there are many changes in the relevance of her continuous navigation and oral accounts. The way in which Tran follows intuitions and thoughts as they emerge while she moves around the media environment can be seen as her performance of memory work (Kuhn, 2010) *with* the app. In an initial analysis, I understood her movement as erratic. However, in discussions with a colleague, I realized that such a label implies that a pattern exists – one that is not followed but somehow ought to be. My clumsy invitation to think about message overload constitutes a pattern that she initially seems to ignore. Instead, she returns our attention to the messages area. Here, she engages with a single user’s message, explaining that she has favorited him and that, in general, such favoriting is a way for her to manage the steady flow of incoming messages. This seems to imply that her movements within the app are indeed sensorial and experiential generators of narration – a narration that is controlled and, ultimately, in the service of the thematic interests I introduce. There is a real possibility that her detouring may be a way for her to escape a pathway that is experienced as misleading. In contrast, it may also be that her detours are simply a matter of thinking curiously with the app. The fact that the situation is very loosely structured and controlled lends credibility to the latter analysis. At any rate, she brings herself back to the track I originally suggested.

Generally, her style of media mobility is casual, yet competent, and very self-assured. Tran can be said to be comfortable within Grindr and with the researcher in tow. The profile text shows a generally playful and resistant approach to the Grindr territory and culture. When passing by her profile text, she is reminded of these strategically-shaped landscapes of power and her tactical appropriation of the app affordances to resist them. When enabling her to pause the tour, I am given an insight into the texture of her media use – that is, a historical tracing of actions within the profile area along with the embodied

values assigned to these actions. Tran seems generally to adopt the thematic purposes that I vaguely introduce while retaining an openness to the media environment that reflects an un-purposefulness and an explorative manner of moving around.

Recalling the two-step definition of mobile method, I have thus far analyzed movement within the built environment, the researcher framing of mobility through discourse, and the style and purpose of a participant's media mobility. To get a sense of how we may analyze the mobility of a researcher-media-participant interaction, I turn to a situation with the research participant Francois.

Precarious presence and insidering

Clearly, the ways that subjects and researchers work together in framing and traversing media environments are highly contingent. They depend on factors such as rapport, research purposes, the framing, material and spatial resources available, as well as memory skills. This is no less true when media devices are added to the mix. Traversal of media environments with another person is a discursively framed material navigation. The following exchange with yet another interview participant, Francois, is an example of such a navigation. We have been exploring the 'Viewers' section of the Scruff app, which is an environmental feature that affords an overview of the people who have looked at his profile:

Researcher: How did you feel when you discovered that people could see where you looked?

Francois: At first, it's actually a friend who uses the same app who told me that. He showed me, and it's very easy to find out. And, actually, we can find out this. I think it's... I always forget [fumbles to find the right interface button]. It's this one. The 'views' ['Viewers']. So you can see I've been viewed by someone, actually some of the people I talk to and some of them I haven't talked to. And for this one, for example, I had talked to him...

Researcher: Uuuh.

Francois: Exactly [both laugh].

Researcher: Hello there.

Francois: That's an interesting...

Researcher: He looked at you three hours ago.

Francois: I think we talked. To be honest, we have talked [checks the messages area]. Yes, exactly [...].

With respect to this affordance, he places himself within a learning narrative ("It's actually a friend who uses the same app who told me that"). I invite Francois to orient himself towards the 'viewers' affordance and explain what feelings he assigns to it ("How did you feel when you discovered that people could see where you looked?"). The particularities of this media materiality may serve as a resource for Francois' narration. Getting to the 'Viewers' section is a confused and fumbling process for him. His movements show he is a 'rookie', someone who has yet to attain a naturalness to his use of the affordance.

When he finally reaches the 'viewers' section, Francois is confronted with the people who have most recently been looking at his profile ("I've been viewed by someone"). The

co-observational situation is verbally recognized by Francois (“So, as you can see”), which may give him a sense of immediacy. This can explain why he so quickly moves beyond this environmental affordance into reflections on how these views came to be. The profiles displayed prompt him to consider which of the visits or views are related to recent chats (“actually, some of the people I talk to and some of them I haven’t talked to”).

What is visible on-screen serves also as a resource for me as a researcher. To become present in the media environment hinges on the mutual awareness that we are co-observing what happens on his screen. Such presence is reinforced discursively through the phatic “Uuuh” and “he looked at you three hours ago”. Leading up to this situation, it is established that I am a partial insider in this area of his lifeworld. It is in this context that I quite insistently remind him that my gaze dwells on this particularity and that I want him to dwell on it as well. Furthermore, it can be said that I am ‘insidering’ – that is, maintaining and exercising my insider position. With his apparent acceptance of me into this intimate sphere (“exactly”), the situation stands out as a performed togetherness around co-presence and a shared affective response. In mobility terms, such situations are “practically achieved phenomena of trust, emotion, appreciation” (Urry & Büscher, 2009, p. 110).

I then bring the conversation back into motion as I move our attention to the fact that the user we are looking at visited Francois’ profile recently (“He looked at you three hours ago”). This slightly disrupting, seemingly phatic communicative act can be understood as an open touring question. Francois follows suit by attending to the facts that presumably led to the user looking at his profile. He then returns to the memory work by recalling and tying in previous interactions. Simultaneously, he moves to the messages area to verify what exactly happened.

Francois and I might both be bodily positioned to see the same screen, but I would argue that, due to the density and layering of affordances, representations, and communications, coupled with the ability to move rapidly from one view to an entirely different one, media presence is such a precarious state of being that it must continuously be marked and validated through verbal expressions. Placing oneself with the participant discursively is a way of affirming that I am, indeed, seeing what the participant is seeing. One *inserts* oneself into the environment without necessarily *asserting* much.

The two phatic exclamations constitute a formal break in the narrational movement through the app. Such breaks can be counterproductive in the sense that it may hinder immersion. By contrast, phatic breaks may also create a stronger sense of visual, embodied, and cultural togetherness, a rapport that ultimately conditions the will and ability to move together in the first place.

By way of conclusion, I will now draw together the different levels of mobility analysis treated in this article and, against this background, discuss the potential of the media go-along method.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined the media go-along method and the mobilities related to materially- and discursively-constructed media environments. I have shown how researching with media at hand provides a stepping stone for understanding media use as mobilities occurring across a media environment. Specifically, the analysis, based on four different research situations, ties together the way built environments ‘wrap around’ the research situation, the social, sensorial meeting with the media device and app, the researcher’s discursive invitations to media orientation, and the purposes and styles that describe participant media mobilities. This goes well beyond the online-offline dichotomy that so often delimits research inquiries, a limitation that motivates Hine’s introduction of mobility theory into her Internet ethnographical framework.

This article makes it clear that mobility analysis, based on media go-alongs with media devices and services at hand, supports data and knowledge production. These have verbal, material, sensorial, and kinetic components. The analysis shows that media go-alongs enrich the empirical material by representing both researcher *and* participant navigations and understandings of these media. This gives textual presence to media materialities, the way they are felt, and media mobilities. As such, media go-alongs allow for a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) of a single media environment. Instead of orienting Hine’s mobilized Internet ethnography outward towards traversals through polymedia landscapes, it is turned inward towards the intimate researcher-participant traversals of single media environments.

As is the case for all qualitative research, the method is an endeavor that involves some risk of harm for both participant and researcher. As is seen in the encounter with Hassan, both the media environment and the research situation can be experienced as sources of harm. The vastness of the media environment makes it somewhat unpredictable what might appear during a media go-along. The visibility and materiality of the phenomenon heighten the irrevocable nature of the unplanned and unwanted encounter. Thus, a discussion of which ethical frameworks might pertain to the particular risks involved in media go-alongs is warranted.

Notes

- 1 www.scruff.com.
- 2 <https://www.facebook.com/scruff/info/> – consulted on October 8, 2015.
- 3 www.Grindr.com.
- 4 <http://www.jackd.mobi>.
- 5 <https://manhunt.zendesk.com/hc/en-us>.
- 6 <http://www.growlrapp.com>.
- 7 <https://www.gotinder.com>.
- 8 Cisgender defined in Oxford Dictionaries as “denoting or relating to someone whose sense of personal identity corresponds with the gender assigned to them at birth.”

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