Editorial

Doing Research at Online and Offline Intersections: Bringing Together Digital and Mobile Methodologies

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Abstract
This thematic issue is an interdisciplinary exchange of methodological, practical, and ethical issues linked to conducting research across online and offline spaces in times of mobile technologies. It includes a wide range of disciplines, geographical locations, methodological approaches, and designs. The seven articles in this thematic issue are organized around three distinctive potential entry points: (a) researching across online and offline spaces with ethnographic, multisited, nonmedia-centric approaches; (b) making use of mobile media for researching across online and offline spaces; (c) researching emerging technologies built across online and offline spaces. All authors make their research processes transparent and share not only the methodical challenges and ethical dilemmas they faced, but also the opportunities that arose and methodological ways forward.

Keywords
digital ethnography; hybrid methods; mixed methods; mobile media; mobile methods; mobile technologies; multimethod; multimodal; online ethnography; qualitative methods

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Across Mobile Online and Offline Spaces: Reflections on Methods, Practices, and Ethics" edited by Katja Kaufmann (University of Innsbruck) and Monika Palmberger (University of Vienna).

1. Introduction

Our thematic issue's unwieldy title, "Across Mobile Online and Offline Spaces," refers to the methodological development of two quite separate strands visible in methods handbooks and collections: (a) digital methods that indicate the end of the virtual (Rogers, 2013), and (b) mobile methods as a set of approaches in mobility studies that follow their object of research (Büscher & Urry, 2009) in order to overcome the sedentary character of traditional empirical methods, and, in a more narrow sense, the use of mobile media technologies to study social phenomena (Boase & Humphreys, 2018). The first strand includes a focus on efforts to overcome the conceptual and, later, methodological distinction between virtual space and its physical counterpart. Eventually, "hybrid" concepts and methods postulated the third as something more than the sum of its parts (Leander & McKim, 2003).

These two methodological strands are, however, rarely linked to each other. Throughout attempts to connect them, the process of dealing with, and eventually solving, the ensuing challenges has rarely been documented, leaving the possibility of other researchers learning from it to chance. Certainly, this is partly due to scholarly publications focusing mainly on research results over the research process. We are therefore delighted that *Media and Communication* agreed to

dedicate a full issue to bringing together contributions from a wide array of disciplines and topics, in which authors defer results in favor of giving much-needed space to share the practicalities of doing research, centered on the theme of research across mobile online and offline spaces.

While we are aware that by using the terms "online" and "offline" we perpetuate this dualism, we continue using them to underline that there is no unified approach to researching these spaces just as there is not necessarily a consistent, merging— i.e., hybrid—space. Spaces and perceptions of them do not always align; technologies, especially emerging ones, can be unruly, and researchers need to be adaptive and inventive, as we will show together with our authors in this issue's collection of articles.

2. Across Mobile Online and Offline Spaces

The idea that the online and the offline are not separate entities is nothing particularly new. After a period of research focused on cyberspace versus the "real world," researchers deconstructed the separation between the physical and the digital (Orgard, 2009; Udupa & Budka, 2021). This deconstruction was initially conceptual: As Gajjala (2009) argued, "we cannot really separate our being online from being offline, because online and offline are not discrete entities" (p. 61), and Gajjala demanded a new vocabulary to grasp the simultaneities of being online and offline. In a similar vein, Morley (2017) stated that "if we are to understand the complexities of how the virtually augmented spaces of our lives are now embedded within the material practices and settings of everyday life, the terminology is of some consequence" (p. 115). Accordingly, concepts such as mediaspace (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004), hybrid space (de Souza e Silva, 2006), or cON/FFlating spaces (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2020) were introduced to capture the nature of connected lives and the simultaneities of being online and offline. The interdisciplinary field of digital migration studies has been pioneering in bridging online and offline spaces conceptually (Leurs & Smets, 2018; Palmberger, 2022a). Research in this field has captured digital technologies' potential to create overlapping copresences, physical and virtual, with concepts such as "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008) and "smart refugees" (Dekker et al., 2018).

While discussions of the online and offline nexus have thus been vibrant both conceptually and empirically, methodological discussions have been less so (Orgard, 2009). In her book *Hybrid Ethnography*, Przybylski (2021, p. 6) states that "fieldsites that span digital, physical, and digital-physical spaces require more than additive methodology." The methodological shift present in this plea goes beyond moving offline methods to online formats. It entails finding ways to research online and offline phenomena in their complexity using both old and new methods (Tummons, 2020). The latter

may include the "digitization" of traditional methods and "natively digital" methods (Marres, 2017, p. 82). Most methods handbook contributions to date, however, focus either on the online or the offline aspect, while their intersection is rarely dealt with: neither in individual approaches nor in a broader disciplinary approach that calls for combined designs.

Given the spread of smartphones and the ongoing advancement of mobile media technologies that connect online and offline environments on the go (Campbell, 2019), the empirical complexity is further increasing steadily—and it only adds to the methodological challenges that researchers face. Consequently, it has also become impossible to maintain "a clear distinction between place (in a purely geographical sense) and mediated experience" (Morley, 2017, p. 113; see also Waldherr et al., 2021). With the rise of mobile media and augmented reality (Liao, 2019), self-tracking devices, the Internet of Things, and other mobile technologies to come (Frith, 2022), online and offline spheres are only becoming further intertwined and in multilayered ways. These mobilities complicate matters and no longer make the entry point for empirical research clear (Bolander & Locher, 2020).

In this thematic issue, we have collected seven articles from a range of disciplines and fields that present different ways of tackling the methodological—as well as ethical and practical—complexity that arises when researching across mobile online and offline spaces (Bolander & Locher, 2020). The texts provide important insights, not only into the relationship between online and offline environments, but also into the movements of participants in and between these environments, and how such movements critically affect the empirical research process. Some of the articles focus on the relationship between online and offline from a nonmedia-centric perspective; other articles start from specific media, while others research emerging mobile technologies that connect the physical and digital. We have grouped these contributions according to their entry points into these three themes: (a) researching across online and offline spaces with ethnographic, multisited, nonmedia-centric approaches; (b) making use of mobile media for researching across online and offline spaces; (c) researching emerging technologies built across online and offline spaces.

All authors make their methods transparent and share limitations, challenges, and ethical dilemmas they faced during the research process, as well as opportunities that arose and methodological ways forward. We highly appreciate the authors' openness and honesty in reporting extensively on their experiences. With this collection of articles, we want to strengthen the case for a more extensive academic exchange in *doing research* at the intersections of mobile online and offline spaces. Such research is likely to increasingly challenge researchers as developments in mobile technologies advance.

2.1. Researching Across Online and Offline Spaces with Ethnographic, Multisited, Nonmedia-centric Approaches

The first two articles are by Suzanna Jovicic and Cathrine Bublatzky, respectively, and they take a digital ethnographic nonmedia-centric approach (Pink et al., 2016). The premise underpinning this digital ethnographic approach is that "the Internet, and the 'digital' are not available to us in any transcendent sense, but are emergent in practice as they are realized through particular combinations of devices, people, and circumstances" (Hine, 2015, p. 29). Both articles clearly show that such an approach—an experiential form of knowledge—demands a situated and unique methodological response (Hine, 2015, p. 31).

Jovicic (2022) vividly demonstrates this in her discussion about field entry in which she describes the smartphone as an "ambivalent friend." Jovicic reflects critically on establishing rapport when participants "slip in and out of online–offline environments" through a discussion of her own research experiences in two youth centers in Vienna. While her research was designed solely offline, the youths' mundane smartphone practices that she encountered lay where the online and offline intersect. These "entanglements of online–offline digital environments and their dynamics" (p. 232) are the focus of her later methodological investigations. Jovicic's article is a much-needed analysis of new challenges ethnographers face with respect to field entry, relationship-building, and negotiations of privacy in everyday digital environments.

Bublatzky (2022) also scrutinizes transforming field sites and field relations across online and offline environments and the challenges but also opportunities this presents. She follows and co-researches with an Iranian artist and activist in exile. Both Bublatzky and the artist faced Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. In her discussion of the notions of "digital exile" and "mobile belonging," Bublatzky offers valuable insights for multimodal ethnographies that build on collaboration and cocreation, and her work "is situated at the intersection of mobile online and offline spaces" (p. 240). Bublatzky provides ample and refreshingly open insights in her research methodology, and she discusses the chances and challenges of incorporating multimodality in digital ethnography. Such an endeavor has the highest chances of succeeding, Bublatzky suggests, when ethnographers adopt a flexible, processual, and collaborative research mindset.

2.2. Making Use of Mobile Media for Researching Across Online and Offline Spaces

The second, third, and fourth articles are by: Larissa Hugentobler; Amanda Alencar and Julia Camargo; and Guanqin He, Koen Leurs, and Yongjian Li. These articles propose approaches in which mobile media apps are used as research tools to study phenomena across online and offline spaces. Recent methodological devel-

opments acknowledge the methodological potential of mobile media and smartphones (Boase & Humphreys, 2018). While their application in quantitative research is widely tested and established, making use of such potential in qualitative research is a newly expanding field (Garcia et al., 2016; see e.g., Kaufmann, 2018; Palmberger, 2022b). When mobile media are used in qualitative research, they are usually not just a tool that is applied regardless of context, but a digital space inherently linked to the subjects and their experiences under study, and thus a promising entry point for researchers (Kaufmann, 2020).

In this vein, Hugentobler (2022) suggests using Instagram, a location-based mobile social media network, to engage with visitors of (physical) tourism and memorial sites in an innovative qualitative asynchronous digital interview called the "Instagram interview." Hugentobler takes advantage of Instagram as an inherent part of many visitors' experiences both during and after their visits to the sites, and she aptly employs the platform to interview individuals about "entangled offline and online experiences" (p. 257) with the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC. Because of the app's location-based affordances, Instagram also lends itself well to sampling and recruiting, as Hugentobler explains before reflecting on her role and representation as a researcher in both digital and physical spaces.

Similarly, Alencar and Camargo (2022) propose the use of WhatsApp, a mobile messenger app, to co-research experiences of Venezuelan refugees settling in Brazil. Alencar and Camargo build on the essential role that messengers play in the lives of refugees. They present an intervention study in which they are maintaining a WhatsApp group among participants and researchers proved useful for grasping the refugees' settlement experiences in both digital and physical environments, while also facilitating social exchange among refugees. Alencar and Camargo use the case study to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of using a WhatsApp group as a "new form[s] of knowledge production that [is] inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful" (p. 270), and they also reflect on their own positionality as negotiated throughout the intervention process.

Last, He et al. (2022) present the case of using the video-blogging app Douyin to study self-representations of Chinese stay-at-home mothers and their daily lives across online and offline spaces. The authors use their vivid case study to reflect on how a mobile media platform's affordances and the resulting divide between different user groups can hinder qualitative research. They also describe how they circumvented obstacles, before discussing the possibilities and limitations of using user-generated short videos (vlogs) as research data. In the second part of their article, the authors skillfully develop the concept of motherhood 3.0 based on the "distinctively situated performance of motherhood" (p. 285) they found on Douyin.

2.3. Researching Emerging Technologies Built Across Online and Offline Spaces

The last two articles in this collection are by Moritz Schweiger and Jeffrey Wimmer, and by Chelsea Paige Butkowski, Ngai Keung Chan, and Lee Humphreys. These articles are dedicated to emerging mobile digital technologies built to connect digital and physical environments (Liao, 2019). Their analysis covers the challenges that come with it: As these technologies are "not yet stabilized, both technologically and discursively" (Butkowski et al., 2022, p. 304), the researchers find themselves in the position of coproducing the environments they study, even more than usual.

In this way, Schweiger and Wimmer (2022) report on a field study in the German city of Augsburg in which they dealt with the complex issue of how augmented reality (AR) changes city dwellers' perception of space. The authors faced various limitations linked to established methods when attempting to capture augmented space, and so they developed an innovative mixed methods design that combined questionnaires with an experimental field study and think-aloud protocols. Later, Schweiger and Wimmer discuss the "methodological challenges and opportunities of augmented reality field studies" (p. 290) and provide "best practices" for working with augmented reality as an emerging technology.

Finally, Butkowski et al. (2022) present the case study of a community-based Internet of Things network project that aims to apply Low Power Wide Area Networks (LPWAN). In the article, they reflect on how to navigate researching a technology in the making. Butkowski et al. discuss the methodological opportunities and pitfalls of their multimethod approach based on semistructured interviews, participant observation, and community-based project work. They identify key obstacles in studying the social construction of networked technologies that bridge online and offline environments, concluding that "these challenges also serve as generative methodological opportunities" (p. 303) for studying technological advances.

3. Conclusions

Together, the seven articles in this issue showcase a broad range of ways of tackling the methodological, practical, and ethical challenges that researchers face when studying current and emerging phenomena across mobile online and offline environments. With this collection, we hope to inspire and facilitate discussion and advance methods-focused scholarship and a cross-disciplinary exchange on mobile digital technologies and their embeddedness in everyday practices across mobile online and offline spaces.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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