ASPIRATIONS, AUDIENCES AND ALGORITHMS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATIONS OF BECOMING A YOUTUBER

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As social media platforms have increasingly profound sociocultural impacts, qualitative researchers need to find new methodological tools for engaging critically with this changing landscape. Ethnography advocates the *researcher as instrument* approach, meaning that the researcher is both the primary data collection instrument and the interpreter of the meaning of data. Although this methodology has a long and rich history in offline research, social media platforms as cultural field sites present novel challenges for participant observation. Whilst arguably there are limitless ways that one can approach an offline field site – for example, who one speaks to, the persona one adopts, the questions one asks – they tend to have clear spatial and temporal boundaries. On the other hand, whilst platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for cultural observations, it is difficult to achieve 'co-presence' online, as interactions are unpredictable, ephemeral and often private (Hine 2017). This requires the researcher to ask what it really means to 'participate' in these contexts? It far easier to be a passive critical observer than an active participant on social media platforms. In the case of my PhD research on the labour of aspiring and professional YouTube content creators, I concluded that it was insufficient to merely watch, like and comment on videos; I needed to become a YouTuber myself.

In this paper, I reflect on both the challenges and findings of my autoethnographic fieldwork as a YouTube creator. Taking the self-reflexivity of the ethnographic method one step further, *autoethnography* is a methodology that reaches into the subjectivity of the researcher, using their own experience in a setting as their primary source of data. Whilst there has been much excellent scholarship about qualitative internet research and digital ethnography over the last two decades (for example, Baym 2000; boyd 2016; Hine 2000, 2005, 2015, 2017; Markham 1998; Markham and Baym 2009), autoethnography has not received as much attention. It is a method of qualitative enquiry that has polarised an increasing number of scholars across a number of disciplines in recent years. This 'form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997)

can be an incredibly rich data source, breaking down the hierarchical boundary between researcher and participant. It allows the researcher access to the embodied and affective dimensions of the culture being studied, as is so marvellously exemplified by Loïc Wacquant's classic text about his experience of becoming a boxer in Chicago's South Side, in which he makes a case for a 'carnal sociology' capable of capturing 'the taste and ache of action' (2004). However, some have criticised autoethnography for being narcissistic, introspective, individualised and self-indulgent (Stahlke Wall 2016).

In June 2018 I posted my first autoethnographic video entitled 'Introducing my PhD!'. Since then I have posted a range of content, mirroring the styles and genre conventions of other creators. My videos have ranged from vlogs of research trips to online video conventions such as VidCon LA and Summer in the City London, reflections on my research progress, a 'day in the life' of a PhD student, and 'collabs' with other Internet culture researchers and journalists. Throughout this period, I have written regular fieldnotes about my experiences, thoughts and feelings on being a YouTube creator. Reflections have included the disappointment of a video doing badly and the excitement felt when someone leaves a positive comment, deep dives into my channel analytics, thoughts on the ways in which creators work across the multi-platform environment, and extensive musings on the 'The Algorithm' (as creators refer to it).

Researchers have questioned the extent to which doing something yourself can really tell you much at all about *how others experience that thing*. However, in my research I have found that the autoethnographic component has provided me with significant insights into the labour of online creators, from the ways in which they interact with channel metrics and the multi-platform environment, to the emotional highs and lows of trying to cultivate an audience. It has granted me access to the back end of platforms that are not visible to audiences, and insight into the 'algorithmic imaginaries' (Bucher 2017) of creators whose careers depend on interpreting fundamentally mysterious black boxes. Additionally, becoming a YouTuber has resulted in being seen as an 'insider' by other creators, allowing me to become more embedded within the community, and I have been granted access to conversations and interviews as a result. But more importantly, it has deepened my understanding of the lived experiences of online video content creators and provided me the ability to 'speak their language', therefore enriching the interviews that I have conducted. Whilst there is still distance between myself as a researcher and the content creators that I am studying, when a participant tells me that 'The Algorithm' is frustrating or their job is time consuming, I can truly empathise with them in a way that would not be possible without the autoethnographic element of this project. As Hine puts it, in 'taking part for real… I experience how it feels in a visceral way that would be hard to access in an interview or observational setting' (2015). And on an ethical level, creating a YouTube channel is a novel way of inviting member-check of the project's research findings, with the aim to improve its transparency and public accountability.

Though time consuming and affectively draining, autoethnography has added invaluable depth and nuance to this research, particularly when triangulated with online/offline participant observation and interviews with content creators. At a time in which 'big data' is seen as the answer to urgent social, political and economic questions, qualitative researchers are tasked with finding innovative methodological approaches that attend to

the oft neglected small data, the micro and the everyday within a landscape increasingly saturated by digital technologies.

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