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Interactionism and Digital Society

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Abstract

During this article we consider the extent to which interactionist ideas can inform the analysis of current socio-technical trends and practices that surround the emerging contours of digital society. We make reference to four field domains of inquiry that are relevant to this task and highlight how established interactionist insights can be carried forward and inform future studies in this developing area.

Introduction

It is over a decade since Atkinson and Housley (2003) published *Interactionism: An Essay In Sociological Amnesia*.[1] Consolidating and developing themes discussed in allied publications, the book positioned the legacy and influence of interactionism as one that endures across a number of fields. It is a legacy, however, subject to a rolling social scientific amnesia that obscures the origins, interconnections and coherence of many of the tradition's core ideas. Notably, the influence of interactionism on much of what has counted as theoretical and methodological innovation in recent years is seldom recognised. Indeed, a key point made by Atkinson and Housley (2003) were that if the resources of interactionism were not already to hand, sociologists would inevitably need to invent them in pursuing the analysis of the socio-logic of human behaviour, groups and institutions. In one sense, this amnesia is an anticipated feature of the accelerated academy where the reception, use, modification, re-invention and re-naming of core concepts is enacted at a dizzying pace (Carrigan, 2016) within the 'post-disciplinary' academy.

At the same time, Atkinson and Housley (2003) reflected on the widely acknowledged fact that 'Interactionism' itself, whilst having conceptual purchase, is pre-paradigmatic and resembles more of an amalgam of interconnected ideas and influences rather than a 'pure' line of sociological thought. We stick with this assessment, and do not aim to speak for the broad church of interactionism in general. Our aim in this article is, however, to discuss the current significance and future contribution of interactionism, 'micro ethnography' (Atkinson, 2015), and the commitment to rigorous empirical analysis, championed by Atkinson and conveyed in the work of his fellow travellers. From the various themes and directions developed in Interactionist research, the aspect most worth stressing is the treatment of social organisation as irrevocably *processual*. Consequently, we consider and argue for the enduring relevance of *action oriented and practice focused* ethnography and what Atkinson (2015) has recently called 'micro-ethnography' as providing a central methodological apparatus that will maintain interactionism's (under recognised) position as central to social inquiries in to the complexity of contemporary social and cultural forms. In this paper, we focus specifically upon interactionism's contribution to the study of digital society (Edwards et al, 2013, Housley, 2015a) as an exemplar of a field populated by 'new social phenomena'.

If Interactionism is everything, then it is nothing

We do not have the space in this article to discuss the variously accounted trajectory of interactionism. There are many excellent treatments of this subject and, indeed, the topic has become something of a preoccupation for Interactionists themselves as they continue to be required to define what it is they are up to in the face of continued criticism, misunderstanding and the aforementioned rolling amnesia (Goffman, 1983; Fine, 1993; Atkinson and Housley, 2003; Maines, 2001).

For the purposes of this article, it is worth recounting that interactionism, as developed in the sociology department of the University of Chicago, has its

[1] The book was commissioned by the British Sociological Association as part of a Millennial series.

modern roots in the combination of Pragmatist philosophy – particularly that of Mead, Dewey and James – and the naturalistic inquiry championed by various key figures of the School such as Thomas, Zaniecki, Cressey, Park, and Hughes. Through these combined influences, interactionism emerges as a reaction to 'armchair' theorising and remained for some time a marginal sociology in a discipline dominated by the formal functionalist theory of Parsons and the attitudinal surveys of which Herbert Blumer (1969) was a fierce critic. From these beginnings, various expert commentators note an increased diversity, divergence and fragmentation of interactionism (Maines, 2001; Fine, 1993, 2003; Atkinson and Housley, 2003) as it mixes productively, for the most part, with other aspects of sociology and Continental social theory, finding purchase in new substantive areas and disciplines. Perhaps it became clear that a life at the margins could not be maintained, although there is some grounds for optimism and resilience (if not purity) through the identification of long standing sites of interactionist inquiry within the UK; inclusive of the Cardiff Ethnography Group (see – Delamont et al, 2001). Indeed, interactionism not only survived this integration and intermingling but actually thrived to the extent that Gary Alan Fine (1993) declared a 'glorious triumph' and Atkinson and Housley (2003) stated, with a note of irony, 'We are all Interactionists now." On the other hand the development and diversification of the tradition has given cause for proponent and critic alike to ask what *is* interactionism? Even a brief review of well-known works is enough to support the claim that key Interactionist scholars "share almost nothing beyond a broad acceptance of Blumer's classic three premises" (Sandstrom and Fine, 2003: 1042).[2] Here we want to reiterate two key principles of interactionism in relation to the doing of ethnography[3].

The first principle, variously emphasised by Atkinson (2015) and others, is that an interactionist inspired ethnographic practice (developed in dialogue with anthropology and ethnomethodology) takes social reality, social identities, Self, mind, and relations of micro/macro and structure/agency to be inexorably *processual* in their organisation. These are contingent and emergent properties of social life, rather than fixed and stable structures. The second principle concerns the understanding of social organisation and order – such as that readily observable in both public and 'workplace' settings – as the work of 'skilled and knowledgeable' social actors. This orientation thus undercuts formal social scientific approaches that proceeds through the invocation of a theoretically warrantable *Koncept* and, instead, proposes an empirical task oriented to how it is that people (in settings, teams, and institutions) put their worlds together.

So the task of the interactionist ethnographer is not to simply gain 'closeness' or 'understanding' via a recourse to a sloppy subjectivism but rather to attend to the practices with and through which intersubjectivity is possible and realised in actual settings. In another sense, the ethnographic task becomes not (only) to

[2] These three tenets are: 'individuals act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them'; 'the meaning of such things arises out of the social interaction one has with ones fellows'; 'these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process in dealing with the things he encounters' (Blumer, 1969: 2).

[3] The relationship between ethnography and interactionism is discussed at length elsewhere (see Atkinson and Housley, 2003). We see the ethnographic imagination and interactionism as aligned enterprises; although this does not exclude other methods of investigation and inquiry.

'immerse' ones self as a barometer of experience within a particular setting but, rather, to observe and describe the skilled practices, routines and competencies (some general, some specific) that are reflexively sensitive to context whilst also producing the context in which they occur. Some readers will note that this comes close to an 'ethnomethodologically informed ethnography' (see Pollner and Emerson, 2001).[4] Yet, Atkinson has always argued for and demonstrated the necessity of careful and close description in his work; not within the radically local strictures of ethnomethodology but in the sense that '*all* such techniques [for everyday living and specialised practices] can be called ethnomethods' (2015: 121). Key examples from this substantial and widely influential body of work includes the examination of medical talk, work and instruction (Atkinson, 1995), the everyday social organisation of opera and performance (Atkinson, 2006) the character and contours of 'genetics as practice' within clinical and associated settings (Atkinson et al, 2006) and the study of the practical transmission of expertise, for example glassblowing, within a variety of varied informal and formal educational settings and moments. This translates in to a programme of interactionist oriented ethnography driven by a respect for and faithful descriptions of what it is that people are actually up to and how they themselves produce the sense of those activities. We aim to provide some possible avenues of expression for this inspiration in what follows.

Interactionism and its Futures

During the closing remarks of *Interactionism* (Atkinson and Housley, 2003), the authors speculated on the possible trajectory of Interactionist ideas in relation to rapid social change and the re-ordering of social relations in the context of the changing character of work, health, education and other domains of social life. This article revisits and presses this speculation a little further; a necessary task, we feel, given the enormous changes that we have witnessed in the years that have followed that publication. We do so, however, bearing in mind Atkinson's (2015) refrain that equal, if not greater, attention must be paid to that which *endures*; in the sense of the transposability of people's practices in the production and negotiation of apparently 'new' domains and the ability of existing forms of social inquiry to account for them. Indeed, we stress that despite the commotion of contemporary society and the preponderance of socio-technical developments and disruptions that can be claimed (often by those operating in the very field that is said to have the transformative effect), interactionist ethnography realises its full contribution to sociological inquiry, and indeed to social critique, in finding the general in the specific, the familiar in the strange, and the enduring in the novel and thus remains an undiminished necessity for the study of social life.

Plus ça change…

It has been said that we are living at the outset of a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', characterised by the still emergent yet rapidly proliferating design and adoption of 'smart' automated socio-technical systems and the ability to both enhance and 'edit' human biological function (Scwhab, 2016). In the past few years we have seen the emergence of new forms of socio-technical

[4] Indeed, we make various references to ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA) throughout the paper and there is, of course, much to be said about the relationship between interactionism, ethnography and EMCA, but this is not the place.

enhancement and mediation across the domains of media, manufacture and mobilities and concomitant disruptions of existing social relations and patterns of integration and exclusion, categorisation and reification, and production and consumption. This is more than rhetoric. The combined total of Twitter and Facebook users is near two billion; two thirds of the UK population own a smartphone; the first 'driverless' heavy goods vehicles have taken to the motorways and we have witnessed the first automated car crash; unprecedented volumes and scales of digital information are being produced, harvested and analysed by states and corporations, and cities (Edwards et al 2013); sophisticated algorithmic surveillance systems have been developed which not only monitor 'persons of interest' but become the arbiters of who is of interest in the first instance (Amoore and Piotukh, 2015); and relations of community and identity are increasingly dispersed and flow across emergent digital and virtual domains. At the same time the street-level and institutionally organised and produced inequalities that have long concerned Interactionist work – including the study of 'race', urban poverty and social exclusion, workplace relations, and various instantiations of social stigma – remain and have arguably been exacerbated.

Given these 'new social phenomena' and concurrent calls for a reorientation of sociology within and across particular frames, and, indeed, the rewriting and rethinking and resetting of the social itself, we might well question whether Interactionist thinking, ideas, and methods are still relevant for understanding contemporary social forms? Or is interactionism destined to be discarded into the dustbin of history? Will new fields such as data science and the emerging neo-positivist paradigm find us returning from the streets, settees and flophouses in order to preserve the seat of our pants at our desks, comforted by the safety of our calculators and dashboard driven social proclamations? In the spirit of Paul Atkinson and through the context and durability of his work we say, *not likely*.

So why do we continue to have faith in a constellation of ideas, concepts and ways of working as something that won't just endure through intellectual sentiment but continue to have epistemological and practical relevance? We might begin to answer this by recognising – and what sociologist could have failed to make the same recognition – that at the outset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution it seems that sociology is grappling with very similar questions and troubles to those that exercised sociologists during the late 19th Century and most of the 20th Century, albeit within different parameters and scale (Housley, a, 2015a,b). In the remainder of the article we explore a number of these themes, organised within four domains, and point to the opportunities that we see for interactionism's continued relevance. These domains are *Institutional life, People Processing and Moral Entrepreneurship in the Digital Age, The Social Life of Methods, and the Interaction Order 2.0*

(a.) Institutional Life

Despite some claims that social institutions melted in to the air at some point in the 1990s, institutions continue to shape social life in powerful ways. Indeed, there is continued need for studies of organizational and institutional cultures and practice in the context of austerity and what may follow and technological

enhancement and disruption. We might also recognise the need for empirical investigation and theoretical unpacking of the ways in which future territories are thought and produced in and through particular institutions with the power to do so (Adam and Groves, 2007). This is not only a matter of gazing through the glass at agents and institutions who are manufacturing futures through various predictive technologies. Interactionist sociology, in a number of well known and influential studies, has also demonstrated both the ways in which institutions require of their members performances that are in line with institutional scripts and the ways in which such adjustments are subverted and resisted (e.g. Goffman, 1961; Glaser and Strauss, 1966; Roth, 1963).

Interactionist sociology has long been concerned with both 'the solid buildings of this world' and the production of 'damp corners' and 'cracks' in which resistance and preservation of the Self exist (Goffman, 1961). The question in the contemporary era is increasingly 'where are institutions?' It appears that an increasing number of institutions have both a physical and virtual existence, and some new institutions (for example politically powerful internet communities such as Mum's Net or even, in some senses, social media platforms and search engines themselves), no physical presence at all. Key here, are the ways in which 'new' institutions function in terms of 'people processing'; as experiments in what can be done to and with the Self and specific populations more generally (Goffman, 1961). Interestingly, as described in Susie Scott's (2011) studies of 'reinventive institutions', actors are themselves increasingly enrolling institutional technologies to perform work on their own Self, often in group settings that form a mutually elaborative, moral framework. This institutional 'Self work' seems to act as a precursor, if not a material pre-condition, for the social trends we are currently witnessing in terms of the proliferation of technologies for the 'quantification of the self' (we return to this below). The import here, is in the ways in which digital technologies afford what we might call 'extra-institutional' forms of people processing.

To take the medical institution as an example – a fecund area of Interactionist research including, of course, the seminal works of Atkinson (1995) – recent technological developments, such as 4D neo-natal scanning and smartphone 'pregnancy apps' (Thomas and Lupton, 2016) are reconfiguring the availability and form of supportive relationships and also the contours of medical knowledge and expertise in and through new forms of representation, modelling and communication. Thus the 'meaning' of embodied experiences such as illness, giving birth and dying, previously medicalised within the stone walls of the institution, are increasingly mediated not only by 'experts' but in and through networked technologies which model and represent these experiences in new and disruptive ways whilst, at the same time, gathering an array of data – biographical, social and biological – in order to develop and refine the capacities of the programmes themselves in and through a market oriented rationality (see Thomas and Lupton, 2016).

There are, of course, total institutions that remain isolated from the rest of society for various ends, yet it is also true that, increasingly, institutions – such as the legal and criminal justice system – come to exert a totalising effect upon various areas of social life. Indeed, perhaps one of the most significant

developments in recent times is the ways in which urban spaces have become increasingly institutional in character. Alice Goffman's (2014) ethnography of life on 6th St. Philadelphia is a rich description of how some people's experience and local scenes are shot through and defined by a running engagement with the carceral institution and law enforcement. 'Smart' city models incorporate increasingly sophisticated monitoring systems, not only of city infrastructure but of the actions of citizens. In addition to the inequalities produced and perpetuated in and through such processes of extra-institutional people processing the issue for 'micro ethnography' is in demonstrating the ways in which organisational frames such as public space or territories of varying scale are manifestations of street-level practices that produce and maintain them in everyday life (Smith and Hall, 2017).

(b.) People Processing and Moral Entrepreneurship in the Digital Age

New institutional arrangements are followed by new and old problems for the individuals and realities that they work upon. There are, however, few studies of new professional groups emerging around new digital socio-technical assemblages; their practices, their claims to know society, and the consequences of the digital institutions that they inhabit in configuring, scoping and representing everyday lives. For example, the emerging market for 'data scientists' and the surrounding hype regarding "Big Data' provides a contemporary case in point. The use and deployment of these forms of analytics, in the context of real life decision making, has consequences for the advancement of new moral panics and practical consequences for routinely disadvantaged persons whilst at the same time securing lucrative career trajectories amongst the din of the new data driven reinvention of entrepreneurship in the digital age; what we might describe as moral entrepreneurship 2.0. These practices are also linked to standard interactionist models of occupational socialisation, credentialisation, professional closure and related forms of identity work within organisations and, increasingly, through the aligned use of digital resources and self-promotion. For example, the combined use of social media to promote specific claims, wares and digital snake-oil lend themselves to interactionist analysis and a renewal of our understanding of moral careers' in digital times in relation to the framing of social problems and the distribution of resources for specific types of solution.

At the same time an aligned understanding of the assembly of data driven architectures and proliferation of computationally generated 'analytics' within social contexts such as the 'smart' city or educational organisation is necessary in order to document and interrogate the practical interactional contours of 'people processing'; or what stands as signatures for people within the morass of digital traces routinely mistaken for social 'data' (Smith, 2014) in and through changing institutional and organisational contexts. For example, the targeting of black young males in specific neigbourhoods as partial (but occluded) consequence of distanced oracular reading of social media streams, driven by the unexamined naïve prejudices of privileged white male technocrats. Some commentators have suggested that such prejudices are inscribed in and through algorithms hosted on poorly refreshed digital platforms, generated via methods that are inclusive of a set of nominated vocabularies (and the unexplicated matrix of motives

assumed within; see, for example, O'Neil, 2016) or the use of 'advanced machine learning methods'. The troubles present in such developments were recently 'embodied' by Microsoft's 'Tay' chatboot – an 'artificially intelligent' twitter bot account – that was removed after responding to other users with offensive, inappropriate and non-sensical content. Tay was, of course, a product of its environment.

In many respects these new practices can be linked to the emergence of new, often unquestioned, forms of accelerated 'expertise'. The proliferation of technical 'fixes' for social and organisational problems would benefit from closer scrutiny, of the sort that interactionist oriented ethnography provides. Especially in the context of high profile expensive 'Tech' failures in the public sector; and in ways that can refresh standardised models and approaches to the human computer interface as it becomes increasingly networked, mobile, distributed and used as a source of data gathering and interpretation by unaccountable, automated and socially incompetent algorithms designed by specific groups bound by particular values, norms and practices. This is of great practical importance not least in anticipating 'unintended consequences' for social life as a consequence of these automated 'social' interventions.

(c.) The Social Life of Methods

In the context of the data deluge associated with the emerging contours of digital societies, a range of studies have begun to examine the social life of methods and, indeed, data. Evelyn Ruppert's study of the changing organisational character of statistical based knowledge production and the transformative effects of computational approach to 'big data' being a good case in point. Ruppert et al. (2013: 24) state:

> … we seek to unsettle debates about how the proliferation of the digital is implicated in large-scale social change and remaking the governance and organization of contemporary sociality (for instance, Castells' [1996] network society, or the notion of biopolitics … we are concerned with the implications of digital devices and data for reassembling social science methods or what we call the social science apparatus. Here we build on our interest in elaborating the social life of methods … through a specific concern with digital devices as increasingly the very stuff of social life in many locations that are reworking, mediating, mobilizing, materializing and intensifying social and other relations.

An important aspect of the social life of methods involves following the data and carrying out observational studies that documents how digital-information-as-data is generated, processed and understood. Thus, data ethnographies encompass studies of data generation through the use of smart 'health sensors'. An additional but aligned frame can be found in ethnomethodologically oriented studies that examine similar phenomena and local methodological practices through the lens of 'methodography'; the study of social science methods and reasoning in practice. Developed, primarily, by Greiffenhagen, Mair and Sharrock (2011; 2015) 'methodographical' studies describe the practical work of methodological reasoning of social scientists as members (Housley and Smith, 2015). As Mair et al (2013:1) state:

> The social sciences are currently going through a reflexive phase, one marked by the appearance of a wave of studies which approach their disciplines' own methods and research practices as their empirical subject matter. Driven partly by a growing interest in knowledge production and partly by a desire to make the social sciences 'fit-for-purpose' in the digital era, these studies seek to reinvigorate debates around methods by treating them as embedded social and cultural phenomena withy their own distinctive biographical trajectories – or 'social lives'.

This work has strong connections with the concerns of method and measurement identified by Aaron Cicourel (1964) and, in broad terms, mobilises and applies interactionist proto-ethnomethodological ideas to an understanding of the social organisation and accomplishment of method and data. In the context of the data deluge and 'methodological innovation', the examination of the social production, generation, organisation and use of 'data' is a pressing concern. It is also one that benefits from observational and ethnographic scrutiny especially in the context of the audit culture and the claims associated with new forms of data (Smith and Atkinson, 2016)

(d.) The Interaction Order 2.0

Much has been written in recent times in relation to the ways in which the emergence and rapid proliferation of social media and digitally networked interaction is transforming 'interaction order'. New technologies and emergent forms of mediated communication are said to be rewriting relations of proxemics and propinquity. This, as a claim, is nothing new. Indeed, the relation between technology, communication and social relations was central in the understanding of the contours of Industrial society at the outset of the 20th Century (see Park, 1925: 8). Yet it is only a claim, and one derived from a focus on new communicative technologies rather than a close attention to the ways in which people actually use them in their everyday lives.

New communicative possibilities emerge with the smartphone, digital interactional domains, virtual worlds and social media platforms such as 'SecondLife'. These are distinct from what we might call monomodal forms of communication in that they not only facilitate instantaneous communication between situated social actors, thus transforming relations of space-time, but are themselves productive of new spaces of communication. It is also recognisable that they produce new contingencies, disruptions and dilutions in face-to-face and virtual streams of interaction. Yet at the same time such technologies are designedly and irremediably reliant upon actors' practices and members' methods. As observed by Harvey Sacks in relation to telephony;

> The technical apparatus is, then, being made at home with the rest of the world. And that's a thing that's being routinely done, and it's the source for the failures of technocratic dreams that if only we introduced some fantastic new communication machine, the world will be transformed. What happens is that the object is made at home in the world that has whatever organisation it already has. (1995: 548, cited in McIlvenny, 2002)

In this sense, then, it may well be that new communicative technologies and forms of digital interaction are not only potentially 'disruptive' but are, also, routinely accommodated by people in to their daily lives and the everyday and institutional settings in which they find themselves in a mutually elaborative fashion. As McIlvenny (2002) points out, technologies also reconfigure what that 'home' might be and it can be difficult to say what is accommodating what. We return to some of these matters below, but suffice to say that the ubiquity of communicative digital technology and the advent of Web 2.0 present new opportunities for interactionist research whilst, at the same time, raising questions as to the adequacy of existing Interactionist concepts and ethnographic methods for documenting the contours of contemporary society.

Rewriting relations in public?

The development and proliferation of 'always on' technology, ubiquitous connectivity, and, of course, social media and enhanced communicative technologies can be said to exert a profound impact upon interaction and relations in public – a key domain for the expression and accomplishment of the interaction order. Such technologies, and concomitant forms of surveillance and monitoring of populations can, also, be said to be reframing questions as to what and where contemporary public space actually is. Taking the mobile phone as an example, Benediktsson et al (2015) discuss the ways in which the device introduces to the dyad absent third or fourth parties (or more) that via mediated means – tones and tunes, beeps and vibrations – can call for attention and response in different ways. And, of course, when alone the individual's phone will similarly provide for communications with multiple non-present others and often unspecified, dispersed and temporally asynchronous audiences.

So, a good portion of the communication that is getting done in public space, for example, is not so much 'back stage' as invisible to a co-present observer. This includes the more obvious one-sided quality of overheard phone calls on a train, for example, but also the multiplicity of communication streams through other means that are both directly involved in the actor's participation in public space and those that are extraneous to it. For those who are more pessimistic about the futures of 'interactionist' ethnography, these developments raise questions as to the possibility of studying public interaction order through traditional observations. "Where the action is" is less clear. Has interaction order being reoriented, realigned or reconfigured through these devices? To what extent? Combined, then, it can appear that digital technologies and their emergent uses occasions at the very least a revisit if not full rewriting of some of the foundational Interactionist principles and concepts that account for the ways in which actors organise and handle matters of co-presence – not least within a digitally networked landscape of action and agency.

Of course, the majority of these concepts – civil inattention, situational propriety, involvement, and attention tracks – are developed in the writings of Erving Goffman (1963, 1971) which handled, specifically, face-to-face interaction and situational, as opposed to merely situated, social conduct. These concepts, however, should not be treated in isolation, or as applicable to only American 'middle-class' culture of the mid-20th Century. Viewed in the context of

interaction order, they point to universal aspects of human conduct that are in no way reducible to particular settings. Indeed, although Goffman (in a manner that echoes criticisms of interactionism more generally) is oft criticised for being the spokesman of cultural specificity and for lacking any 'coherent theory', his work consistently pointed to a theory of order and social organisation that had at its core the interactional demands of the social Self as a primary source of 'motivation' and 'constraint'. Indeed, the term 'interaction order' is often used in a far more limited sense to refer to interactional matters more generally. It is also often misunderstood in attempts to fit the theory in to existing disciplinary boxes such as 'structure' and 'agency', rather than the *processual* understanding of social life and the interactional work that comes to give things like 'structures' a social presence in the first instance (Rawls, 1987). And so to say that the proliferation of smart phone use, for example, in public space rewrites this order seems overstated at the very least. Although relatively little Interactionist work has, thus far, empirically documented smartphone use in public space, we might note that Interactionist ethnography has the potential to demonstrate in clear terms that which is new and that which is demonstrably stable but manifest in new forms and social arrangements. This is not to say, however, that new technologies do not pose new challenges, but what we want to suggest here is that we treat them as new challenges for *participants* in everyday interactions, rather than as problems reserved for theorists. That is to say that, to go back to the disruptive potential of the smartphone, actors have and deploy methods for producing, repairing and maintaining the situation in which they find themselves that remain somewhat stable in and through their flexibility.

We might also note, however, that a key distinction in Goffman's work – that between the situational (that which can only in face-to-face interaction) and the 'merely situated' – is at least troubled, if not in need of complete revision. Nonetheless, what Interactionist studies show is the ways in which social media do not constitute a domain that is discrete from everyday life but, rather, is both embedded within it and relies on ubiquitous methods for the accomplishment of intersubjectivity – such as using twitter hashtags to frame and 'key' (Goffman, 1974) communications – through which actors and members organise their affairs. As Atkinson (2015: 196) writes in closing *For Ethnography* "the generic perception of human conduct that Goffman initiated and documented retains its relevance. The same can be said of the ethnographic tradition in general." A key challenge here will be understanding the digitally networked character of social life in relation to the potential blurring of offline and online social relations and interaction. However, we would argue for an approach that examines 'networks' as both an accomplishment and a resource by and for interactants and other non-personal agents; a full exploration and discussion of which lies outside the context of this paper; but necessitates continued engagement with the studies and conceptual framework advanced by actor network theory (Latour, 2005) and aligned forms of inquiry.

Digital Interaction and the Quantified Self?

Digital technology affords new modes of performing and knowing the Self. As indicated above, digital and networked communications mediate in such a way that reconfigures relations of situatedness, co-presence, performance and

audience. Despite convincing arguments for the 'compulsion to co-presence' and the unparalleled 'thickness' of face-to-face interaction (Boden and Molotch, 1994), the looking glass is undoubtedly now dispersed and multiplied across different sites and, consequently, the actor's sense of Self is refracted, if not reconfigured. People can and are increasingly interacting in 'telecopresence' (Zhao, 2005) with one another, and, also, with asynchronous and unspecified audiences. An analytically interesting question then emerges, - how do actors develop a sense of Self in and through interactions which do not provide instantaneous, embodied *in vivo* feedback? In exploring this question through the practices and performances of social actors, research (including Zhao's, but see also, for example, Robinson, 2007 and Beneito-Montagut, 2015) has suggested that actors' online activities produce a 'digital self' that is, to different degrees, distinct from the 'offline self'. There is much empirical description and interpretation of this self-work and the presentation of the self in online settings to be done (building on existing work such as Gottschalk, 2010; Adler and Adler, 2008). Yet, we question the extent to which the presentation of the Self in 'online' settings is achieved through different means or experienced as distinct by actors themselves. This question itself turns on the specificity of the interactions that make a home of the setting for a particular presentation of Self. Actors are strategic in their performances and manage impressions in much the same ways as they do in, between and across the settings and communities of their offline existence. Actors may thus engage in activities resembling Davis' (2014) description of 'self-triangulation' in and through which a 'presentational balance' in relation to a dispersed and digital 'generalised other' is managed.

If socio-technical systems and online settings provide emergent fora for social interaction and the presentation of the Self, then digital technology is also providing new means through which the 'Self' becomes known. These technologies and actors' uses and interpretations of their outputs are commonly referred to as a producing a 'quantified self' (Lupton, 2016). Although we take some issue with the casual use of this term – the indices used by 'self-trackers' are primarily physiological – the point stands that the body is rendered 'knowable' through digitally constructed biometrics. The import, here, is the ways in which these indices are not the experience (of, say, sleep or a working day, or a run) but rather *produce* what that experience *was*. And so the sense of the body and 'Self' in relation to the activity is constructed post-hoc and also available to be shared via various platforms that contribute to the production of the 'online Self' (there is, for example, an ironic saying among the ultra running community that "if it's not on Strava, it didn't happen"). So, the 'quantified Self' emerges via colonisation of the concept of the Self by market forces and reified metrics that reduce and repackage human and social experiences. Whilst one flow of this data is presented to the user via whatever dashboard they interact with in a quantified feedback loop, another quite distinct and aggregate 'Self' is produced through the data that users wittingly and unwittingly produce and share. This feeds in to models of what 'average' sleep patterns, heart rates and 'stress levels' are in order to inform the algorithm that makes the 'assessment' of the individuals experiences which, in turn, comes to shape the next performance that gets done relatively to those data. The 'Self', in this sense, is thus reflexively

constituted on two planes.

At the same time, through similar technologies of metricisation and assessment, new forms of social stratification that exploit data from individuals and thus quantify and 'make real' extant forms of social stigma and prejudice. This quantified production of reality manifests in forms such as individualised insurance policies that benefit 'low risk' actors, surveillance applications such as 'Samaritans Radar' and the predictive analytics being used to produce 'risk scores' for an individual's likelihood of being involved in a 'gang' or violent crime. It seems to us that interactionism can do more to not only observe and describe the organisation of such matters but to make explicit and critique the ways in which 'social data' and 'social reality' are produced – and productive of winners and losers – in digital society.

Conclusion

We have taken the opportunity of this *Festschrift* to make a case for the continued relevance and significance of interactionism and Interactionist inspired ethnography in digital society. A case that is grounded in and strengthened by Atkinson's continued exemplary studies and commitment to the craft. We also take the opportunity to personally thank Paul for his guidance and influence upon our own efforts. As we hope to have demonstrated, or at least highlighted, there are a number of areas that not only provide an opportunity for Interactionist research, theory and method but which are in need of the theoretically informed, empirical approach to social life that interactionism entails.

In Atkinson's own work – and, indeed, as that work has influenced our own – these concerns and influences have been developed in a number of directions. Indeed, Atkinson's contributions – as reflected in the articles in this issue – not only cross a number of different substantive domains but in staying true to and nurturing the 'beating heart' of interactionism have developed a sustained and enduring approach to ethnography that,

> will provide a stream of life-blood for the social sciences, providing as it does fundamental understanding of human conduct in its extraordinary variety, of everyday life in its local diversity, and of social actors endowed with remarkable skills and knowledge. (Atkinson, 2015: 196)

In taking seriously the specificities of people's practices in an open and exploratory manner, Atkinson's recommendations for a rigorously analytic 'micro ethnography' offer the grounds for a continued relevancy for interactionist inquiry, no matter what the future holds.

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