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## Towards an epistemology of digitally mediated temporality: from ethics to empiricism

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to lay the epistemological groundwork for investigating how the digital present is experienced as present. This is significant because, given the ontological priority of the present in phenomenological inquiry, this gets us closest to capturing digitally mediated experience itself. It will be argued that this does not mean pathologizing the pervasive digitization of everyday life, and the digital age affords researchers an abundance of resources previously unavailable or elusive. The temporal experience of the unfolding present cannot be made a direct object of conscious cognition, which raises two serious concerns. The first is the possibility that digital actants such as algorithms can intervene in, exploit and modify temporal experience in ways that fly under the radar. The second is the challenge of constructing an epistemology and empiricism up to the task of investigating such phenomena in the pursuit of ethical principles including autonomy and accountability. In theoretical terms the article takes a phenomenological approach in which the present is always ontologically prior to any notion of an origin: in short, we always begin from the experience of finding ourselves thrown into a present – including a presently embodied self – that exceeds our grasp. The experience of temporality is the unfolding of that grasping, of disclosing the world by navigating and acting in it, and that means that understanding it is not a matter of excavating or working backwards to account for how we got to where we are, but mobility from the present.

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My entire scientific enterprise is indeed based on the belief that the deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality, historically located and dated, but with the objective of constructing it as a ‘special case of what is possible’, as Bachelard puts it, *i.e.*, as an exemplary case in a finite world of possible configurations. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 3)

This article is concerned with the possibilities for ethical subjectivation in a world that is multiply, digitally mediated, and how the experience of temporality can be empirically

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investigated. Subjectivation is conceived in phenomenological terms as the process by which we become selves. Importantly, this is a process that is never completed: rather than full selves as destinations or accomplishments, all we have is selfing, beginning from a present into which we find ourselves always-already thrown. In a very real sense, then, the present is ontologically prior to any kind of origin. At first blush this can seem daunting, as though we are doomed to fail to make sense of a world that is already full and fully in motion as we struggle to make heads or tails of it. And the same is true of self-identity: how can we understand ourselves if we cannot account for our origins and development from the outset, instead finding ourselves thrown into selves already out there in the world, acting on it and on others while being acted on by it and by them with all of the ethical repercussions that entails, before any notion of self-awareness has occurred to us? While it is the case that there is no subject that can fully apprehend the radical contingency of the present, its own origins and what lies beyond the horizon of future possibility, this need not be seen either as epistemologically blinkered or as ethically compromised. Following a lead from Baruch Spinoza by way of Judith Butler (2005), opacity is a condition of disclosure of the world and foundational of ethical relations between actors, human and otherwise.

Next, despite the obscurity of its emergence, conscious cognition can be defended as something more than a mere by-product of an unfolding world. What is meant by ‘conscious’ and the status of the human in relation to it remains a live debate, but for starters it pays to think of consciousness not simply as a determined artifact of the world, albeit one which discloses the world to itself, but an active participant in the disclosure of the world to itself – or, more precisely, in the unfolding of things, processes and phenomena in relation to each other. This echoes Tim Ingold’s (2008) distinction between selves as occupiers of the world skating across its preformed surface, and inhabitants making their way through a world in formation. It is also of a piece with Karen Barad’s (2007) agential cuts: where we decide to view and measure up the world from is not just a question of partial perspective on a world that is already there, but an active aspect of timespacemattering, as Barad puts it – those cuts leave their marks. Against most readings of actor-network theory, and certainly contra object-oriented ontology, this article cleaves to N. Katherine Hayles (2014) and Mark B. Hansen (2014) in their insistence on the uniqueness of cognition not only as an analytic category but as a locus of ethical inquiry. This will appear self-evident to some readers, but bears emphasizing in the light of the next proposition: that cognition is neither autonomous nor extractable from the world but very much of it, and as such that it is predicated not on an essential ontological foundation but compromised, complicit resources that disclose the world, the self, other selves and the relations between all of these, on the go and in medias res.

In practice, this means that there is every possibility of engaging critically with selfing and its histories and futures. We are used to if not exactly masters of asking what it means to be different kinds of selves in the world as it is, and likewise it is fruitful to inquire into what is distinct about subjectivation in the digital era compared with what came before. The promise of the approach taken here is that it obviates the impulse to diagnose what is being ‘done’ to selves by exogenous forces beyond our control, and it brackets out the existential dilemma that points to despair: how can we possibly grasp how selfhood has been altered by digital media if the very parameters by which we understand subjectivity – and sociality – have been rewritten by the same (see especially Couldry & Mejias,

2019)? This is the nub of the data colonialism thesis, but it has its origins in René Descartes' assertion of the impossibility of self-identity: the self can never be made a conscious object for the self. If that sounds distractingly metaphysical, Edmund Husserl's impasse in pursuit of 'an absolute time-constituting consciousness' (see Hansen, 2014, p. 26) – that is, a self-capable of grasping the present as it unfolds, still less of temporality more broadly – is probably a closer antecedent of contemporary concerns about our inability, arguably exacerbated by the pervasiveness of social media and datafication, to get to grips with the shifting sands of consciousness. The offer made here is to set out the advantages of not seeking to strip away or excavate our way to prior selves and selfings less contaminated by the deep mediatizations of the current era. This is not a call for amnesia, and the histories of subjectivity are endlessly illuminating. The point is rather that the ethical stakes of selfing are not buried in the past but manifested temporally, always beginning with the present.

### **Ethics from opaque origins**

Orit Halpern's (2014) account of the post-war rise in information management cultures in the United States paints a vivid picture of the implications of the drive to organize data not according to empirical inquiry into truth, for instance, but mere predictability. The ramifications of elevating efficiency above epistemological or ethical principles are substantial, and should have us asking in what ways our orientation towards the future is being directed and constrained at present. Which horizon of possibility are we being pointed towards, and what does it exclude? Louise Amoore (2020) brings this line of thought up to date in making the compellingly Foucauldian point that algorithms (not to mention social norms) trained to detect patterns that predict particular futures make those futures (or, for Foucault, inscribed patterns of behavior) more likely. Algorithms like the media platforms in whose interests they operate must be held accountable, but that question of what 'they' are doing to 'us' is not answered by trying to unearth their teleology either in their overarching objective – to maximize profits or data extractability, for instance – or in the mind of the coder. There is no origin or essence to be revealed, or at least not ones that can help us make sense of where we stand with subjectivation now, how we got here and especially where we are headed.

Hansen is at times almost sanguine about the potential for the affordances of subjectivation to exceed its determinative constraints over time, and even if we set aside a necessary subjective excess as wishful thinking it is worth keeping two thoughts in the frame. The first is that coders and tech moguls alike are unable to program sociality and subjectivity (cf Bucher, 2018); nor are sociality and subjectivity mechanistic expressions of prevailing economic or political orthodoxy (cf Andrejevic, 2020). Second, as noted above, Hansen reminds us that conscious reflection is entirely possible and worth defending, so long as it is understood to be another practice of the world and not arrived at in abstraction from it. Getting selfing right is not a matter of pressing pause on our engagement with the world, since it is only by doing things as we move about it that affordances, limitations and consequences are made apparent. 'Doing things' is deliberately amorphous: it is presumptuous to derive desired affordances from particular behaviors. It may well be that you cultivate the kinds of practices that sustain ethically superior relations towards others, for instance, through mindful

cogitation or brute calculation, but William James (2017 [1887]) reminds us that habituations good and bad alike do not rely on an initial conscious spark. And this opens up the possibility that busying oneself even in minimally focused activity, with no thought given to a higher purpose, can be foundational not only of good habits that congeal by accident, but of an entire ethics of being in the world and amongst others.

This hinges on that point made earlier by Butler: opacity of origins and evolution is not a hindrance to ethics but its very foundation. Just as the fact that we cannot give an account of how we came to be ourselves is constitutive of ethical intersubjective relations, likewise the obscurity that abounds around the question of precisely why we engage in this or that digital habit is exactly what makes its world-disclosing contingencies so profound. Simone de Beauvoir (2015 [1948]) termed this the politics of ambivalence: you may be only intermittently committed to certain ways of doing things, unsure of what might come of them and in any case usually failing to achieve anything so tangible as an ethical end, but nothing comes close to engaging in such projects, moth-eaten and trite as they may be seen to be under an unforgiving glare, to making apparent the nowness of the present: the vanishingly unlikely chain of events that led to you experiencing the present moment as you are experiencing it and the vertiginous openness of the futures you face. The durability of *The Politics of Ambivalence* rests on the assertion that cognizance of present contingency and future possibility is neither here nor there, and the ruts of seemingly banal behavior we unthinkingly commit to are not a hindrance to somehow seeing the world as it really is for the first time but the very things on which political projects are properly built.

Next, it is a short leap from de Beauvoir's ambivalent projects to Heideggerian care. There is of course every reason to doubt any ethical framework derived from the work of Martin Heidegger (1962 [1927]), but it is worth being clear about his conjectures regarding what he called the care structure. Heidegger's conception of care is sometimes misrepresented as a kind of idealized authenticity in our being for and amongst others, but since it derives as does all experience from the thrownness and fallingness of the present that is our constant origin, care in fact emerges only through the inauthenticity of the way we actually exist, grabbing whatever tools and ideas we find to hand in order to make some kind of sense of the world and ourselves. Similarly, without presenting another recapitulation of the much cited and often mischaracterized Lord and Bondsman passage of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1979 [1803]), the bondsman's autonomy is predicated on a commitment, ambivalent as it might be, to a program of work that is not of his determination, nor to any advantage to himself or purpose more broadly. It is tempting when faced with commuters absent-mindedly scrolling through Instagram feeds on their phones to see it as not only vacuous but as doing the work of corporate others, commodifying their attentions and their profiles in a ne plus ultra of Marxist alienation. And yet Marx too diagnosed alienation as the severance of the worker's toil from its capitalized value, not as the evisceration of the inherent meaningfulness of the former. The upshot is that a distracted commitment to any digital practice cannot be simply written off either as meaningless or complicit.

None of this is to celebrate any and all digital habits, only to be skeptical about jumping to conclusions about their being antisocial, or ersatz, or simply a waste of time. A digital ecosystem built around an algorithm designed only to maximize stickiness is as ontologically constitutive as any other, as Heidegger would maintain. If we accept that

our starting point is always an inauthentic present, then the possibilities opened up through acquired affective dispositions, those merely-felt orientations towards and anticipations of affective rushes, become apparent. Walter Benjamin's (1996) defense of distraction also comes to the fore: while it is conventional to think that only an unstinting gaze can apprehend the meaning of a work of art, there is much to be said for what might be revealed by taking in architectural design or the pieces on offer in a gallery only ambiently and on the hoof, with one's mind halfway somewhere else all the while. Recent theorizations of digital culture (see especially Pink, 2011; Moores, 2018) have drawn inspiration from human geography in particular to underline that it is not the objects in themselves that one encounters than define a space (or place), nor is it the quality of the attention which we pay to them. It is, instead, all about movement, the way subjects produce a space through their way-faring rather than discovering it as it is. And yet while much has been written on the centrality of mobility to the experience and scholarly understanding of digital life, there is less clarity surrounding what precisely provides attentive momentum around digital environments, and with what ramifications.

### **Temporality as mobility**

The tenet that time is innately forward-moving derives from Newton's second law of thermodynamics, and appears to present a neutral measuring stick against which other phenomena can be gauged. Einstein of course turned Newtonian physics on its head with the counterclaim that time cannot be thought of independently of space, which is where the heuristic of timespace that unfolds emerges. Barad's timespacemattering is offered as a corrective, emphasizing that nor is there anything neutral about timespace; it is not a background in front of which things come to matter, but entangled amongst all the phenomena, be they physical, cultural or political, we designate meaning to. As Barad puts it, how matter comes to matter is as important as, for Butler, bodies come to matter. Meditating on the nature of time is an eternal pursuit for metaphysicians, and attempting to understand exactly what the present is tortured Husserl across his career (Hansen, 2014, p. 26). But by performing the phenomenological bracketing out of its cosmic status it becomes possible to apprehend temporality as of the world to exactly the same extent that everything else is – matter, objects, phenomena, practices, ideas. Hansen follows Alfred North Whitehead in inferring from this an environmental consciousness in which the world unfolds towards and for itself, leading to the key intervention that categories such as ethics are not reducible to the conscious experience of the physical world but very much part of its own unfolding. This framing of temporality disabuses us of any notion of time as an innocent flow, and places consequentiality front and center.

Ultimately, for Hansen, temporal momentum is reducible to seriality or a basic notion of succession. In the conscious realm this leads to the not-uncontroversial claim that we experience life sequentially – perhaps not in the sense of moving from one discrete experience to another, but certainly a procession of differential states of perceiving, being affected by and affecting distinct configurations of objects and forces. A potential limitation of this conception of succession is similar to what many critics take phenomenology to be based on – human experience as nothing more than a sequence of ever-vanishing presents, with all of the amnesia and ahistoricism that implies. But it remains

entirely possible to hold on to succession without it implying a one-damned-thing-after-another severing of past, present and future, which is what Husserl's model of retention-impression-protension and Henri Bergson's (2009) *durée* [duration] seek to redress. Again, the point is that the past and (to an extent) the future are not merely psychological categories that we overlay onto our experience of the present: they continue to *exist* in the present as timespace unfolds.

Succession, then, frames ethics not simply as an exercise in assessing the consequences of seriality over time – if A leads to B leads to C, then what follows? – but in investigating how and what leads from A to B and so on. This is the meaning of the title of Hansen's *Feeding Forward*, and insofar as human cognition is defensible as a distinct ethical realm it politicizes the question of conscious awareness of feeding forward. It is difficult to get the wording of this right, and Hansen occasionally lapses into describing a process by which 'we' as subjects are 'fed forward' from one moment of perception to the next, when at any given present there is no discrete self being acted on by external forces, only selves amongst matter, forces, worlds all in formation. But to speak ethically means to retain the principle of us knowing how we move or are moved in succession, and in this Hansen follows Whitehead's zooming in on that moment in which each present becomes our immediate past, 'constituted by that occasion, or by that group of fused occasions, which enters into experience devoid of any perceptible medium intervening between it and the present immediate fact' (1967, p. 181). One needs to insert a pre-emptive caveat about the insufficiency of clock time (we return to this below) to capture how we experience time as duration, but Whitehead is succinct in specifying that he is talking about 'that portion of our past lying between a tenth of a second and half a second ago' (1967, p. 181).

For Hansen, then, Husserl's retentive-impressional-protentional complex which constitutes the timeframe of the qualitative experience of presence by consciousness, is the minimal timeframe for sensibility that could be accessed through the phenomenological interface. Consciousness is forever playing catch-up, never quite up to speed with what propels it from one moment to the next. It is this cognitive gap that has led many (see, for instance, Bucher, 2018; Lazzarato, 2014) to identify a uniquely perilous facet of the digital age, namely technologies capable of acting and reacting at scale and many times over in that interim referred to in the literature as 'the missing half-second.' Heidegger presaged fears over technological accelerationism in his later writings, and more recently it has become common (see especially Seaver, 2019), to describe the missing half second as a point of acute vulnerability in which selves, or proto-selves, are ripe for manipulation and exploitation. Phenomenologists have long held that perception is inseparable from intentionality – we do not first perceive and then overlay cognition through intentiveness – but, the argument runs, the whole enterprise of ethics surely rests on being able to account for that intentionality. What if we do not know what feeds us as individuals from one digital act to the next, or that such intentionality is being nudged in the pursuit of profit and power? And as societies, what are the consequences of and who exactly is accountable for newly entrenched but barely registered modes of feeding forward? There is another way of theorizing this cognitive blind spot, and it has echoes of critics of the early Foucault who insisted that discursive subjects were in effect docile bodies inscribed upon by political forces that are always-already prior to subjectivity. It starts with the premise that *intentionality is indeed of the world*

*rather than of us, but that ownership or originality of intentionality is not a condition of ethicality.* Time consciousness emerges out of the processuality of encounters between objects, forces and so forth, but this does not render it an after-thought. Seriality, in short, is co-determinate with temporality as time consciousness.

To be sure, this diverges from Hansen's stipulation that temporalization has to occur prior to the experience of time consciousness, and it does not quite gel with David Scott's (2006) reading of Husserl in which time temporalizes itself. But it does follow through on that point made by Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty about the inseparability of perception and experience, and likewise Bergson's observation that perception is always simultaneously an act of memory. If we take seriously the idea that the past is not just something held in the mind in the present but as actually persisting in it, then it is possible to conceive of *temporalization as something that unfolds with and not prior to its subjective experience*. This is not to lend human consciousness any kind of elevated role in relation to the temporalization of the world, simply to underline that since it is of the world then it is in the mix of forces that feed the world forward. There is a practical pay-off for taking this route, as it provides epistemological grounding for pushing back against the notion that experience can only be understood by working backwards to its root causes in the world. If a research participant is asked how they feel about an affective digital encounter, for instance, the temptation is to trace some kind of causality 'back' to an object or phenomenon that sets in play this subsequent feeling. Instead, the groundwork is laid for an analytic in which experience is apprehended in the present, revealing itself, disclosing the world and what is at stake 'between' the two as it goes. The scare quotes are intended to militate against thinking of any kind of opposition between subjective experience and the world: the former is very much of the latter, and it follows that the experience of temporalization *is* temporalization, rather than a cognitive overlay.

Consider Spinoza's anatomization of affect as an experience at once deeply personal and yet emerging as an intensity from the ground up rather than as something expressed from within. The hairs on the back of your neck standing up is simultaneously something that feels yours, and yet it does not express an inner emotion; it bypasses any cognitive interiority and instead reveals a synchronicity between the world and the body. Affect then is not a mysterious force acting on the subject from without, but a force that transcends interiority and exteriority and discloses itself in real-time through the procession of encounters between objects human and otherwise. That we cannot account for affect's origins is not a defect in our understanding of it, and indeed it should tell us something fundamental about the myth of originality that characterizes much conscious reflection and especially its formalization in empirical method. It has become common in digital ethnography to shelve direct lines of inquiry in interviews – Why do you do this, or Where did this habit begin? – in favor of walk-throughs and go-alongs that aim to get at more instinctive, less reflective forms of motivation and knowledge (Jørgensen, 2016; Møller & Robards, 2019; Light et al., 2018). Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]) thus wrote of the knowledge of the hand, Foucault (1990 [1976]) of corporeal knowledge and Bourdieu (1998) of practical reason. This is a rich intellectual tradition that has traction across philosophy, sociology, geography and ITS, but for present purposes one insight remains particularly germane. Locating the meaning of practices, say of digital way-faring, in the body instead of in the mind is simultaneously a way of indicating that it is distinct from cognition and also of the material world. But it also reemphasizes

that temporality is not a flow from causal origins to material effects – it flows from the present, its causal chains emerging always only from the now.

### **Towards a digital phenomenological empiricism**

The question of where desires, fears, motivations and so on come from remains absolutely apposite, but it is more fruitful to tackle this question by observing how they manifest in the present – how they are experienced *as* thrown-into presents – and lend propulsion towards the next instead of the researcher working their way backwards towards a projected before of the observed manifestations. A useful analogy here might be advertising: my urge to buy this device or those trainers is a potentially fertile object of analysis, but not if the intention is to separate desires that are genuinely mine from those insinuated invidiously by technologies subtler than I am able to detect. Seeing how such urges play out in the here and now still allows the researcher to look for the usual diagnoses of consumer culture – insatiability, inadequacy and anxiety – and to grounding these as sociopolitical rather than personal phenomena. What it declines to do is posit an unaffected self-prior to the urge to buy that gadget or those shoes. Heidegger's refusal to trace Dasein back to some prelapsarian origin, insisting instead that we always begin in an inauthentic, compromised present thus has a clear read-across to research methodologies used to understand digital culture. Most obviously it shines a light on the limitations of biographical interview techniques, but it also warns against the kinds of inquiry that compare the before and after the advent of this or that technology (Menke & Schwarzenegger, 2019).

An insistence on investigating the experience of temporality as relentless nowness necessitates targeting evidence of Bergsonian duration. In order to explain the distinction between duration and time, Bergson evokes the experience of listening to music. In one sense this is obvious: listening to a song, it is possible to discern a sequence of individual notes, but the subjective encounter is every bit an unfolding present whose meaning emerges out of what had come before and, again only to an extent, where the tune appears to be moving towards. Next, however, he asks us to consider the example of the bells of a clock tower. Clock time counts the bongs, making a measurement of the hour based on the movement of the earth about its axis. Duration, by distinction, does not count: its qualitative experience is of a present that consists of hearing a chime as part of a sequence, the meaning of each one oriented by what others (if any) one has perceived previously and the anticipation that this will continue and then come to an end. Being within this experience without making representations is how Bergson wants us to think of duration as flow, which is not an object for the mind. As it is he goes on to conjecture that this flow *is* the mind, which can be recast in Husserlian terms as durational flow being about the unfolding of self-consciousness to itself, without positing any distinction (or priority) between the world and the subjective experience of it.

The historic shifts depicted by Halpern and others are clearly significant, but they do not as Hansen would suggest mark a new ontological era. And, further, to Hansen's credit, it is also possible that the inauthenticity of clock time, this making of representations that amount to a degraded kind of temporality, is nonetheless more than capable of providing the momentum that underpins time as durational flow, the flow which is the unfolding of self-consciousness to itself. Now, it is important to bear in mind that this is

not a matter of saying that duration means the world inexorably flows indifferent to representations made in and for it. Those representations and measurements matter, whether it be in the form of algorithms detecting patterns and pursuing objectives, or indeed of us humans doing likewise – all are equally of the world, after all. And this gets to the heart of how duration discloses the world, by disclosing care as a temporal category. The earlier skepticism directed at looking for the true meaning of care in its origin or goal remains valid here; care is instead something that is felt, invested in and oriented by in the flow of the now. Even if one is listening to a clock's chimes specifically to make a mechanical measurement of the time of day, there remains a residual experience of durational flow alongside that cognitive act. This is similar to Sartre's (1992 [1943]) non-positional consciousness – think of the durational experience of 'reading a book' that underpins the conscious experience of following a novel's plot from point to point.

Pivoting this theorization of the experience of temporality towards constructing an empirical framework brings us back to the ethos that Bourdieu set out in *Practical Reason*. In foregrounding the phenomenology of Bachelard and Husserl (see also Throop & Murphy, 2002), Bourdieu sought to transcend the kind of empirical analysis that works backwards from lived experience to its root causes, to the ways in which the ongoing unfolding of the world is imbricated with, coeval with, its lived experience. It is true that this means never taking as given the first-hand testimonies of lived experience, but this then opens the way to grasping how temporality is experienced in ways that cannot be made mental objects. Bergson insists that authentic being is disclosed not by winding the clock back on lived inauthenticity towards some purer original essence, but forwards through inauthenticity from the present that is always our starting point. Heidegger significantly expands this model in Division Two of *Being and Time*, arguing that the inauthenticity of time lived as it is lived 'clockwise' in its very inauthenticity discloses ontological being-in-the-world, and specifically the temporality of Dasein. Heidegger was not the first to put forward the idea that time is self-extemporizing, but together with Bergson he comes to the conclusion that quite the opposite of this being evidence that the world simply unfolds according to the law of entropy, time is fundamentally inseparable from its being lived through.

### **Laying the groundwork for a practicable epistemology of the experience of mediated temporality**

Affect, understood as subjective experience of the kind that evades conscious objectification, might be thought to present a particularly promising lens upon the lived experience of the present. We are accustomed to conceiving of affect as epistemologically elusive, but we often persevere in trying to access it by tracking states of pleasure, anxiety and so on across time – albeit deliberately peripherally and circuitously and not asking subjects straight up how they feel. Durational affect can be experienced as a rush, but a rush one suddenly feels oneself in the middle of, the texture of which will depend on its coming and going but without any immediate sense of originary stimulus or end state. You find yourself sitting on the edge of your seat in a cinema, but as a durational experience this is not about you reacting to the suspense being played out in this scene within a sequence of scenes that make up this particular film. For Bergson as well as Husserl

and Descartes, too, the point is that the background hum of self-consciousness unfolding to itself, which is the world unfolding to itself, cannot be made an object of mind. I have written elsewhere that for Levinas likewise duration is the revelation of being in a world among others neither as a universal abstracted fact or revelatory destination, but the quiet intensity of being in time with others – momentum with others. To the same extent, while those algorithms make ceaseless objects of clock time they do not eradicate duration as an elemental and constitutive part of the experience of time in the digital era. And we mortals engaging in care projects that amount to little more than acquired body techniques of prodding and swiping are not endangering durational experience but, even as we go on making representations that amount to little, we ‘pass the world along’, as Heidegger puts it, disclosing the world experienced as rush and hum.

The point then is not to criticize digital ethnographers for looking for the wrong evidence of the experience of temporality and to redirect our gaze to the ‘right’ evidence of the experience of temporality: that is not available as a cognitive object to digital inhabitants nor to researchers. Instead, that experience of temporality as such is what makes cognition possible in the first place. This does not make duration a metaphysical entity; it is of the world as we are, the two inauthentic and co-determinate. This then brings us to the traces that form the base units of empirical phenomenological research, or, lest the term ‘trace’ on its own brings to mind a causal object, *textures* characterized by Jørgensen (2016) as the imprints left by the evolving relationship between actions, their traces and the values and feelings ascribed to them. Such reticular patterns leave evidence of the various arrangements that embody not just particular routes through digital environments but everything we associate with them as they are experienced as thrown-into presents – again, affective or emotive states are not overlays here but co-determinate of these spaces. Møller and Robards (2019) reassure us that such traces abound – not merely in the form of innumerable posts, likes and retweets, and certainly not traces of an interior state or origin, but of movement. Thus, when Sara Ahmed (2006) evocatively directs us to look to the impressions left on the surface of one body by another the purpose is not to objectify either body, still less to capture what has been done to one body by the other, but rather to focus on their mobilities.

There is something understatedly radical in Møller and Robards’ call to shift our empirical gaze away from social interactions that take place in relation to material structural configurations, and towards the ways in which digital materialities are both woven together in mobile practice, and ‘frame the kinds of mobility that are thinkable and doable’ (2019, p. 99). So often used elusively, those ‘ways’ are pivotal here, and the second clause elucidates the methodological affordances of pushing back against Whitehead via Hansen and their stipulation that the world has to temporalize itself before we get to experience its temporality. Keightley and Reading (2014) are on similar ground in defining mediated mobilities as the accumulation – that is, the process rather than outcome of (accumulating might be more apt) – ‘spatially and temporally specific mediated political, economic, social and individual experiences [and] processes’ (2014, p. 297). This is what holds out the promise of shedding light on, though not making an analytic object of, the duration that is constitutive of sociality. Where my methodology diverges from Møller and Robards and Keightley and Reading is the decision to decouple traces of paths, practices and affective states from the individuals who enact and voice them. This is not out of disrespect for those research participants but a different empirical aim:

rather than to try to give an account of authentic experience in the digital age, the goal is to set out as methodically as possible what the inauthenticity of everyday digital life reveals and does. Jørgensen's traces are not evidence of objects to which things have happened, nor are they straightforwardly histories of chains of events from an origin to the present from which measurements are taken. In order to get at the way digital (and other) mobilities disclose the world, the aim can be nothing other than duration, that which underpins the experience of time consciousness itself. The idea then is *to seek traces of present-ing and presence-ing, focusing on the nowness of the present* instead of thinking of it as some kind of destination. There are various ways of grouping these traces, but for the sake of developing a typology that can be applied consistently across the widest range of digitally-mediated practices, experiences and environments, I have arranged them into three broad categories: the temporal, habitual and relational. Temporal traces are those which evidence the texture of nowness, and include: busyness, where the experience of the present transcends the projects one is focussed on; distraction, where nowness and the various potential objects of attention are at odds with each other; curiosity, or a what-comes-next-ness that propels navigation and disclosure; boredom, essentially the inverse of the former, in which at-hand potential objects of attention fail to provide such momentum; idleness, manifest as a kind of luxuriating in non-forward propulsion, quite distinct from the 'stuckness' of boredom; and flow-state, the often-cited immersive experience of nowness severed from physical or even bodily perception. Habitual traces cluster together practices (conscious or otherwise) rather than states that mark presentness in one way or another, and include: cycling, or tracing circuits made familiar through repetition as an anchoring of present-as-origin; checking-in, which enacts confirmation of presentness rather than disclosive movement; presencing, a literal enactment of 'I am here, now'; encounters with other selves, objects and forces in synchronicity; affect, those less-than-conscious registerings of the feltness of the present; and emotion, where the feel of the present is made knowable and expressible. Finally, relational traces are those with affordances and, potentially at least, ethical stakes, and include: rationalization, where accounts of one's digital behavior are rendered, usually reflexively; provisionality, or commitments-for-now to doing things one way or another; homeostasis, where one's orientation from the present tends towards continuity; disequilibrium, the inverse of the former; potentiality, where nowness manifests a discernible futurity; and stakes, where the ethical consequences of different aspects of being in a digitally-mediated world are made comprehensible. Further, the temporal, habitual and relational aspects of the experience of the present can be mapped against different aspects of their towardsness, namely: projects, or activities that extend with some continuity over time; orientations, or bearings-towards determinate futurity; and emplacements, or the

**Table 1.** Mapping projects, orientations and emplacements across the temporal, habitual and relational.

	Temporal	Habitual	Relational
Projects	Busyness Distraction	Cycling Checking in	Rationalization Provisionality
Orientations	Curiosity Boredom	Presencing Encounters	Homeostasis Disequilibrium
Emplacements	Idleness Flow-state	Affective Emotional	Potentiality Stakes

experience of self amongst place-making practices and phenomena. The complete typology is laid out in [Table 1](#). While distinctions are made between consciously and unconsciously objectified aspects of the experience of the present, neither is elevated above the other: if we as researchers are interested in which behaviors, experiences or states are associated with, say, ethical relations with distant others encountered digitally, and perhaps ambiently or incidentally, then we should be open to the possibility that barely-registered habits of muscle memory may over inhere affordances as substantial as those conceived decisively.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to lay the epistemological groundwork for investigating how the digital present is experienced as present. This is significant because, given the ontological priority of the present in phenomenological inquiry, this gets us closest to capturing digitally mediated experience itself. It has been argued that this does not mean pathologizing the pervasive digitization of everyday life, but the digital age does afford researchers an abundance of resources previously unavailable or elusive. It absolutely remains the case that present perception is oriented by past experience, as well as by anticipated futures, which is why histories of digital media and warnings about foreclosures to come are vital empirical endeavors. However, the temporal framing set out here strictly conceives of past and future as forces acting in the present, and as such all that matters is to what extent they afford or constrain the momentum which sustains disclosure as present experience. This has a couple of significant implications. First, it is what allows us, regardless of normative motivation, to bracket out the authenticity of a perceived feeling – the whole question of whether an affective perception such as a craving for this or that digital encounter is genuine or imposed through crafty design or invidious marketing techniques can be set aside. Second, the same skepticism around intentionality can likewise be suspended: whether your behavior in digital environments genuinely derives from you or is determined exogenously can be parked as a matter for metaphysical speculation about the possibility of free will. Conceived phenomenologically, intentionality is not an inner state expressed in the world, but always of the world and disclosed by its own experience of temporality. Code also has this sort of intentionality, as do business models, each of which tessellates with ‘your’ motivations for pursuing and persisting at the everyday digital habits enacted more or less as muscle memory. The point is that it makes little sense to speak of the original mission, or design, of an app or algorithm as a discrete force that threatens to corrupt the otherwise wide-eyed, exploratory motivations of an autonomous human consciousness (cf [Flusser, 1999](#); [Serres, 1982](#)).

None of which is to deny the unthinking complicity of our habituated practices digital or otherwise in all manner of social, political and environmental depravities, or to deny our impressionability in the face of novelty and bandwagonism. The problem with empirical models that investigate the implicatedness of digital cultures of practice in deeper structural forces is that they necessitate conclusions proving such, and viewed under the microscope this can lead to the significant over-attribution of politics to acts that might be simply less freighted with meaning. This echoes longer running debates in the cultural studies literature over whether isolable cultural objects – or fragments of

objects, such as a still from a video or a page of a magazine – carry the full weight of structural determination and culpability for the carnage it continues to commit. Framing the observed present neither as the culmination of past forces nor the hopeful moment from which alternate futures might spring, but as presents experienced as presents in which past and future alike continue to exist, give the researcher a better grip on what is at stake, simply because those stakes are revealed only in the ongoing experience of temporality.

What this looks like in empirical practice can take some subtly different forms. Jørgensen identifies three lenses focusing on media environmental affordances, representations and communications, each conceived as active and forward facing rather than having been fed forward. Postill and Pink (2012) go further in pushing research away from origin stories that begin from historical solidities like culture, community and network. Instead, they direct our gaze to look for evidence of routine, movement and sociality – all by definition presently inflected. My own model arrives at a similar template, sharing the habitual (or routine) and relational (or social), but alighting on ‘temporal’ rather than movement as the remaining epistemic category. It should be clear by now that the distinction barely matters, if we adhere to the formula that time and mobility are two sides of the same coin. Each is interested in whatever fuels momentum for digital way-faring experienced as always-already present – not as navigation *through* a digital environment, but as navigation whose path-followings *constitute* those digital spaces. Insisting on the ontological status of inauthentic modes of experience such as boredom and distraction is thus rendered methodologically productive and not merely speculative. The same is true of the focus on the corporeal, with bodily affect evidence not of adjacent organs and nerve structures but what Ingold, following Merleau-Ponty, describes as a synergic system ‘all of the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world’. This is significant in that it allows for temporal experience to be grasped as at once embodied but also not as bodies acted on from without. But further, it likewise allows us to conceive of objects, subjects and forces in the world in a more appropriately dispersed, de-objectified way. That then opens the door to think about ambient encounters with distant others, digital architectures, memes and any number of other things, which provide further linkages between the stuff of digital ethnography and the ethical derivation of Sartre’s non-positional consciousness and Levinas’s duration with the other.

There is no doubt that empirically investigating digitally mediated temporality is daunting, especially when the familiar pillars of constructing historical records and proposing causal if–then explanations of change over time are upended. The traces of digital navigation do not explain movement from one point in time forward to another, but the disclosing of the world to the self and the unfolding of the world to itself. Conventional expositions of empirical analysis are largely foreclosed, which means that doing digital research and explaining its import to others means embracing immersion within still unfolding presents rather than definitive accounts of what and why in a temporally discrete chunk of time past. But there are techniques of visualizing, or more correctly, sensualizing, habituated mobilities through digital environments that at least come close to conveying the textures of their lived presentness, as well as affording insights that allow for scrutinizing the ethical ramifications of digitally mediated temporal experience.

## Notes on contributor

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