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Abstract

In this article, we argue that two significant shifts, namely, the blurring of lives offline and online and the increasing significance of the visual character of these lives, pose new challenges to social science research methods. We propose the application of snap-along ethnography to address these challenges. Snap-along ethnography is an ethnographic method with three core features: 1) participant observation conducted simultaneously offline and online, 2) a concomitant analytical focus on the act of taking, sharing, posting and commenting on images and the content of the images taken, and 3) a research design that builds on the participants' own, spontaneous and self-originating actions of taking images. We illustrate the application and benefits of the method with examples from an ongoing research on young people's visual forms of political action.

Keywords:

Visual action, activism, politicization, hashtag ethnography, visual ethnography, walk-along ethnography, social media

1. Introduction: Visual politicization in the social media age

*I always have a phone in my hand, Jessika says.
I mean, all the time. I never even put it in my pocket because something can always come up
that I want to take a photo of.*

I asked Jessika, a young mental health activist, to choose a couple of her Instagram photos for us to discuss. Jessika is a frequent commentator of mental health and climate emergency on Instagram. She also regularly posts selfies of her crying. However, choosing photos is impossible for her. While she acknowledges that some of her posts are meant to “*break taboos and stereotypes*” amidst the Insta-norm of “*pretty white homes and never-ending smiles*”, taking photos and posting visual content are so habitual for her that their societal relevance is hard to grasp:

*I genuinely cannot see how I make a difference with my photos because they demand nothing
from me. For something to be societally relevant, shouldn't it be something that people make an
effort for? Like politics, where you really have to try.*

The rapidly increasing visibility and ubiquity of cameras and photos in our lives have given root to a multifaceted transformation in forms of political action. In addition to transforming traditional means of political action – such as demonstrations and protests – towards more performative and visually striking forms (Butler 2015; McGarry et al. 2020, 20; Mirzoeff 2020), it has also brought forth new ways of political claims-making and politicization. On visual social media, most notably Instagram, gender representations are now politicized by posting images of hairy armpits and tummy fat.

Meanwhile, the climate crisis is highlighted by an endless stream of images from polar bears on melting ice to carefully staged performances of the bloody and mutilating consequences of the climate emergency. By showcasing unexpected, unconventional and norm-defiant, or simply shocking and emotionally distressing images before our eyes, visual social media affords politicization in novel ways.

Furthermore, as the above quote from our research on youth's visual political action shows, visual social media also harbours forms of *nascent politicization* – political action that is only just emerging and taking shape. Consider Jessika's somewhat hesitant, yet obviously meaningful comment on the mass of pretty smiling selfies, and her own crying face on Instagram. Visual social media makes visible (sic) the slow transformations from expressions of individual distress towards more explicitly political claims – the early stages of politicization that remain largely hidden in traditional arenas of political action. When people take to the streets in demonstrations, the feelings of unease and injustice are already formulated into common concerns and political claims. The public intimacy afforded by visual social media makes visible the stages where this reformulation is only just taking shape.

However, only a part of such visual forms of politicization is identified as political with our existing conceptual and methodological tools. While we recognize politicians' selfies and images of demonstrations posted by social movements as political, the less obvious and nascent forms of politicization risk escaping our analysis. These novel forms of politicization, we argue, require new methodological tools to be identified and made sense of. To this end, we propose the method of snap-along ethnography to fill the void in the current political and social scientific toolkit.

Thus far, research on the political afforded by visual social media has largely been conducted with online visual data. For example, the use of Instagram in electoral campaigns and by leading figures has been subjected to analysis (e.g. Fidler 2014; Mahoney et al. 2016; Ekman & Widholm 2017). Similarly, the political character of memes (Shiffman 2013) and selfies (Kunstman 2017; Hardesty, Gironde & Belleau 2019) has been the focal point in grasping visual political action. Selfies, in particular, have been identified as key sites of contemporary struggles for representation and identity performance (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz 2015; Caldeira, Van Bauwel & De Ridder 2020) foregrounding the increasing political character of online visibility.

More broadly, the politics of visual social media has recently been explored with the concept of *visibility*, highlighting both the political potential and subsequent struggles for visibility and recognition afforded by visual social media (Pham 2015; Nikunen 2019; Mirzoeff 2020), as well as the power of regulating visibility. Political analyses of the latter have touched upon the “politics of Instagram” (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin 2020, 8): how the algorithmic preferences and content moderation shape the contents of Instagram or how its “aesthetic culture” enables the emergence of online tribes and “aesthetic identities” (Manovich 2020). The political consequences of visual social media for offline practices have also been considered. Notably, organizations have become invested in “visibility management” (Flyverbom et al. 2016), and offline mobilizations are increasingly being organized with a specific online visibility in mind (e.g. McGarry et al. 2020). In sum, analyses of the political with regard to visual social media have either focused on the political character and potential of online visibility, on the politics and power that steer it or, to a much lesser extent, on the offline effects that the “age of hypervisibility” (Butler 2015, 56) has had on political action.

In this article, we argue that to grasp both the transformations of offline political action brought forth by visual social media *and* the entirely novel forms of politicization they give rise to, we need to renew our methodological approach in two key ways. First, we need to transgress the increasingly artificial offline/online divide and create new methodological tools that can *recognize and analyze action taking place simultaneously online and offline*. Second, and concomitantly, we need to equip ourselves to *identify and grasp the social and political meanings and functions of visual content* as equally relevant as verbalized claims and arguments. For this purpose, we propose the method of *snap-along ethnography* and illustrate its use and usefulness with research examples concerning young political actors.

Snap-along ethnography is an ethnographic method with three core features: 1) participant observation conducted simultaneously offline and online, 2) a concomitant analytical focus on the act of taking, sharing, posting and commenting on images¹ and the content of the images taken, and 3) a research design that builds on the participants' own, spontaneous and self-originating actions of taking images. In this article, we explain the core features of the method and provide some examples of its benefits via empirical examples.

To present the method concretely and illustrate its value, we address two questions on the youth's visual political action: 1) how do the youth participate by *taking/creating images* and 2) how do the youth participate *with and through images* (online and offline)? Instead of looking at images *of* activism, the approach primarily engages with images – and the social practices surrounding them – *as* activism. We particularly focus on the unique value of the method in bringing forth nascent and emerging forms of politicization (Luhtakallio & Eliasoph 2014), which, we argue, would be nigh indistinguishable with existing research methods.

In the following, we first discuss the challenges that the increasing significance of online action poses for current ethnographic research and reflect on the need to develop visual research methods in the face of the growing visual character of day-to-day communication. Next, we outline the key features of the snap-along method and offer concrete examples of how we have employed the method in an ongoing research on young people's visual forms of political action (see Luhtakallio 2018; Author 2020; Malafaia & Meriluoto 2022; Meriluoto 2022; Clément & Luhtakallio 2021; Meriluoto 2021). Finally, we conclude by suggesting how and for which research purposes the snap-along method may prove particularly fruitful.

2. Contemporary challenges to online and visual ethnography

The snap-along method introduced in this paper taps into and simultaneously develops three strands of literature. Methodologically, it draws on ethnographic and visual methods while proposing some additions and reconfigurations for both. In the specific case of visual political action explored in this paper, the method also contributes to the literature on political participation and introduces a novel approach towards recognizing and analyzing forms of political agency that have hitherto remained obscure or even unrecognizable. In the following, we present the paper's indebtedness to each literature and pinpoint the issues the proposed method seeks to address.

The online/offline distinction has become a decreasingly useful heuristic in grasping ‘the spheres’ of public action, as whether action ‘takes place’ online or offline is gradually harder to determine (McGarry et al. 2020; Viola 2020). For example, research on contemporary collective action has illustrated how most forms of organizing, making claims and gathering supporters happen in spaces and ways that overlap the technically determined boundaries of the two spheres (Hallett & Barber 2014; Jenkins, Itō & boyd 2016). However, while many forms of netnography entail long-term participant observation in online communities, few incorporate additional offline observations to the virtual ones (e.g. Hine 2000; Kozinets 2002; 2010). Vice versa, few ‘traditional’ offline ethnographies focus seriously on the practices, relationships and cultures that take shape on social media (however, see Hallett & Barber 2014). Here lies the first necessary issue to be tackled: if we acknowledge that the boundaries between online and offline are becoming increasingly blurred, while remaining committed to the principle of holistic contextualization (Miller et al. 2016, 28–29), we need to develop ethnographic methods that allow observing online and offline concomitantly (also Postill & Pink 2012; Käihkõ 2020; for examples, see De Ridder & Van Bauwel 2013; boyd 2014; Collin 2015; Miller et al. 2016; for an overview of terminology, see Abidin & de Seta 2020).

Understanding the complexity of simultaneous online and offline actions requires reconceiving Internet research so that the concepts of place and time, processes of entering the field and collecting data, ethical aspects and the relationship between researcher and the objects of the study are redefined (Leander & McKim 2003; Hallett & Barber 2014; Caliandro 2018). For example, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) suggest the concept of hashtag ethnography to describe a method of approaching a hashtag as a field site, taking new forms of social media activism seriously. They show how hashtag activism can forge a shared political temporality and how social media platforms can provide strategic outlets for contesting the prevailing social order. Collin (2015) discourages “treating the online and off-line as independent realms of experience” among young people and instead conceptualizes “mediated youth participation” as a contemporary expression of youth citizenship (2015, 12; see also Jenkins, Itō & boyd 2016).

To grasp political action taking shape in a world where the virtual coexists with the corporeal, the snap-along method draws from the so-called walking methods (e.g. Kusenbach 2003, O’Neill & Roberts 2020) developed to capture people’s everyday experiences, mundane habits and lived understanding of their lives. As O’Neill and Roberts (2020, 4) argue, walking as a method has a particular capacity to communicate the corporeal aspects of lived experiences—how people’s everyday practices and experiences become visible and are shaped in their encounters with their physical environments (also Pink 2007). In snap-along, the images are spontaneously taken by the participants as they go about their day (cf. Pink 2007), and as such, can be viewed as their captions, comments and interpretations of what is going on. They allow access to the participants’ ways of seeing and offer a view on what they perceive as relevant and interesting without the researcher steering the analytical focus or offering the primary interpretation of an event. Furthermore, their sharing and subsequent life on social media allow the analysis of the participants’ interpretations and meaning-making that are difficult to grasp with purely observational walking methods (Kusenbach 2003, 459).

However, for grasping the political action afforded by visual social media, transgressing the online/offline dichotomy is not enough. The next task in developing ethnographic methods to address the social media age challenges is to bring in insights from visual methods to investigate the increasing significance of visual content, particularly visual

action in the hybridized online/offline environment (also Postill & Pink 2012; Ardévol 2013; Hand 2017).

Thus far, online and offline social scientific analyses have been mainly interested and equipped to analyze text and speech (Henry 1986; Spencer 2011, 1–2; however, see Pink 2012). While the analysis of images has gained significant methodological traction over the past 20 years, the methodology remains unsystematic and dispersed (Pauwels 2010), and the diverse political potential of images and their taking continue to be undertheorized on social science literature (however, see Luhtakallio 2013; Lilleker, Veneti & Jackson 2019, 5; McGarry et al. 2020).

Visual methods, for their part, have made a long and substantial, albeit a somewhat sequestered, contribution to social sciences. Methods of visual sociology have been discussed in a substantial body of literature (for a comprehensive view, see e.g. Harper 2012), yet they remain subjects of critique for lack of depth and clear connection to the corpus of ‘mainstream’ sociological methods and theorizing (Pauwels 2010; Luhtakallio 2013). For example, Rose (2014) argues that at present, visual methods are most often concerned with the *visible* rather than the *visual*, that is, what the images show rather than what they do (Rose 2014, 31). Hand (2017, 215) identifies a similar dilemma in studies of visual social media, emphasizing how a sole focus on images misses their embedding within and significance for wider social context and practices. While visual studies have been an invaluable trailblazer in highlighting the value of visual content, they have been less attentive to the practices of the contemporary types of image-making and how these practices are shaped by and, in turn, affect people’s social worlds.

There are some notable exceptions incorporating visual methods into analyses of political action from which the snap-along method draws insight. For sociology of social movements, visual representations have long offered a possibility to grasp elements of politicization that are complicated to analyze by means of, for instance, interviewing people (Doerr 2010; Luhtakallio 2012; 2013). Social movement contention has been seen as a particularly spatial, bodily and, indeed, visual form of politics, whose means of influence on the media-dominated public spheres lies strongly in the chances of being seen and recognized (e.g. Lilja 2017; McGarry et al. 2020). Therefore, social media age scholarship on activism has somewhat more background in including the visual dimension into its analyses (e.g. Neumayer & Rossi 2018; Gómez Cruz & San Cornelio 2018). Political ethnographies have used visual content since the early ages (see Blackmar 1897; Bateson & Mead 1942; more recently, Auyero & Swistun 2007), but focused methodological work on studying specifically visual forms of political action is, nevertheless, largely void in the scholarship of activism (however, see Neumayer & Rossi 2018; Dean 2019; Warren et al. 2020).

On another front, while it has been noted that questions of young people’s political agency or, indeed, “selfie citizenship”, require new approaches to understanding political action altogether (boyd 2014; Rambukkana 2015; Kuntsman 2017), visibility is thus far an underexplored feature in the analysis of these emerging forms of political engagements. Indeed, the existing scholarship on Instagram as a political platform most often mix traditional methods, including content analysis, network analysis, focus group interviews and surveys (e.g. Vromen, Xenos & Loader 2015; Savolainen, Uitemark & Boy 2020; Caldeira, Van Bauwel & De Ridder 2020). Thus far, the most concentrated efforts towards understanding specifically visual forms of political action can be found in online ethnographies, usually mixing online observations, visual content analysis and interviews

(e.g. Doerr 2010; Tiidenberg 2014; Allaste & Tiidenberg 2015; Gomez-Cruz & San Cornelio 2018). However, most existing ethnographic explorations on emerging forms of political action either focus on the visual dimensions of participation online or merge online and offline observations but lack tools to explore the visual aspects of political action.

The snap-along method offers a systematic way of combining online and offline observations of picture-taking, sharing and commenting, as well as the exploration of the content of the images and their meaning through photo-elicitation-informed interviewing. Through offline observations on how images are taken and how they are used in different social situations, snap-along ethnography considers both the context in which images are produced and the phenomenon created and transformed through image-taking. By combining these analyses with discussions about the images with the participants, the snap-along method enables a simultaneous analytical focus on the images themselves, the talk on the images and the practice of taking and using them.

3. Snap-along ethnography: How to do it

While the snap-along method builds on innovations in walk-along ethnography and visual sociology methods, it adds distinct new features. First, the core feature of the snap-along ethnographic method is simultaneous offline and online observations. As we follow our participants taking pictures and using them in their physical everyday lives, we simultaneously follow the sharing, commenting and deleting of images online. This intertwining of the online and offline is central even if our focus is only on understanding the visual action that takes place in online environments. To grasp the meaning of posting images, online observations need to be complemented, not only with interviews about posting them, but also with observations of the participants' everyday actions around the images. Through this combination, we can understand how and why posting these particular images in this particular way makes sense for our participants.

Second, the snap-along method focuses concomitantly on the acts and practices of picture-taking, storing, sharing, posting and commenting, as well as on the visual content of the images taken by the participants. In this manner, it combines the social meaning of image-taking as a practice, with the messages conveyed through the image itself.

Third, in contrast to many visual methods, in snap-along ethnography, the images, their means and terms of production, as well as further uses, are all objects of study. The researcher does not approach the participants with disposable cameras and a predetermined 'task' for photographing. Instead, the images taken and analyzed are the participants' own – images they would have taken regardless of the researcher's presence. While participating in a study unavoidably affects the participants' picture-taking habits initially, making them, in our experience, either more self-conscious and cautious or more reflexive and explicit about their image practices, the length of the participant observation enables the participants to sufficiently 'grow tired' of the researcher, allowing them to continue their image practices with little regard to the researcher. Furthermore, the images remain in the participants' possession throughout the research process. Ideally, the researcher can follow the 'life course' of the participants' images. What happens to smartphone images after they have been taken is a hitherto underexplored phase of visual social studies: where or with whom are the images shared, what kind of comments they receive, do they inspire or provoke images from others in return and,

ultimately, what kind of chains of significance may form around each image (also Hand 2020).

In what follows, we present the steps we have taken to apply the snap-along method in an ongoing, multi-sited comparative study of visual action and politicization among young activists (Luhtakallio 2018).

The snap-along ethnography starts like any other form of ethnography: by identifying relevant fields and gaining access to them. In our case of youth activism in different European contexts, the offline and online observations informed one another from the start, suggesting new potentially interesting themes and action groups to be investigated. After choosing the first most topical themes and potential action groups, we approached the groups to discuss the research in-depth and proposed to the group and to its individual participants that they be followed for research purposes both on social media and in physical presence. Only after gaining explicit written consent from the participants did the researchers begin following their visual posts and saving them in secure hard drives as data.

The importance of building trust and getting to know one another with the participants is as crucial in snap-along as in other forms of ethnography, if not more so, as we were asking the participants' permission to observe their online presence constantly without it being immediately visible for them every time they use social media. For this reason, we took extra care in explaining the ethical commitments and safeguards that were in place to protect the anonymity of the participants. We made clear that the images collected and analyzed would never be published without a separate, specific and explicit consent by the participants and that they would also have the right to request the data collection to end at any time they wish. The researchers also reminded the participants regularly of their continuing observation online.

To observe the participants online, we took screenshots of images they posted on *Instastories* and their *Instagram* wall. We did this around every public event the respective groups organized and about once a day for four to six months with the individual participants we followed. Screenshots were a useful method of capturing the images, as we found that most images posted were in the form of *Stories*, where the images disappear after 24 hours. Some participants also frequently curated their Instagram wall, so the screenshots provided a means to capture how the wall looked like at a given moment in time and to document changes. Some participants were also active in sending the researchers images they found interesting or relevant via email or WhatsApp. These images were often particularly interesting, as the participants had already chosen them as somehow particularly relevant for the purposes of the study. The photos were organized either in event-based or person-based folders.

The 'offline' core of the snap-along method, borrowing from walk-along or "go-along" ethnography (e.g. Kusenbach 2003; O'Neill & Roberts 2020) meant concretely spending time or "hanging out" (Kusenbach 2003) with the participants. In our case, this meant hanging out with them as they went about their various activist practices – making notes of things they do, particularly things they take photos of, asking why they had taken that particular photo, and then following up online whether the photos taken were also published, and if so, where, with which hashtags and captions, and what comments or discussions followed, and at occasions further discussing these events in the images' 'life course' with the participants.

The observation of image-taking was particularly fruitful and made the most sense to both the researcher and the participants when the context provided a particular reason to take photos. As the focus of our research was understanding visual political action, different activist events were fruitful contexts for concretely snapping along: the participants were attuned to taking photos and often also ready to share their first impressions of the meanings thereof.

Furthermore, a combination of walk-along and ‘sit-along-in-buses’ approaches to the snap-along often provided the best opportunities for longer conversations about images. In addition to following the actual taking of images during the participants’ activities, it was in the off moments – coffee breaks, train rides, moments of waiting ‘before’ something happened – where conversations about images and observations about their everyday use were the most fruitful. These are the instances where people routinely take out their phones and start going through their social media content or their picture galleries to pass the time, and the situation readily lends itself to a conversation about the images. Here, the researcher can both inquire about why particular images were taken and also observe which ones hold particular importance for the participants, which images they save in the limited storage space of their phones and which ones they regularly take and show others as markers of key events or aspects of their life.

Finally, what proved essential for understanding certain forms of visual action was the very traditional ethnographic feature of snapping along: long-term following of the cumulative or emerging developments in the participants’ taking and posting of images and their thinking of their visual actions.

The need to erase the online/offline divide demonstrated itself clearly: the young participants were constantly present right on the interface of physical and virtual presence, talking to people (including the researcher) simultaneously with their corporeal voice and through a mobile device. This space, not between but concomitantly on and offline, was the primary ethnographic place (see Pink 2009) constituted in the study.

After having observed the participants online and offline for a lengthy period (usually 4–6 months), the participant was invited to go through their images together with the researcher and talk about them. During these sessions, either (and most often) the participant, if willing, showed the researcher images from their device, usually a smartphone, choosing which images they wanted to show and talk about, or the researcher showed the images stored in the particular participant’s folder from their laptop chronologically and invited the participant to speak with open-ended questions, such as “What is this image about?”. This initiated long conversations that not only dealt with the particular images at hand but the participants’ actions on social media and on the society in general. These conversations were informed by the photo-elicitation method (Harper 2002). The conversations evoked took heed from the images but often expanded and moved way beyond them (also Hodgetts, Chamberlain & Radley 2007).

However, in contrast to many photo-elicitation examples, the images talked about were not new to the participants, developed and curated by the researcher (e.g. Hodgetts, Chamberlain & Radley 2007). The participants owned the images: they remained on their devices and social media accounts, and they had the prerogative of choosing them, either at the stage of choosing to post them or when choosing which images to show the researcher. They also decided which images they wanted to talk about and which they

found irrelevant or uninteresting. This is an important feature of the snap-along research design, and it also brings forth new questions that may be asked and analyzed: Which images does the participant want and not want to talk about? Why would they choose these specific pictures? In these conversations, some participants chose to talk about the images they had taken and posted, whereas others also considered others' images that they had re-posted or stored on their phones as particularly relevant and worth discussing.

Of particular importance were observations concerning what features of the images the participants highlighted and what meanings they attached to them. From this perspective, it was fruitful to first ask the participant to describe the image to the researcher. This allowed observing how the participant sees the image, what they primarily saw the image being 'about' and what less obvious features they wished to highlight. This often quite organically led to the participant moving further in explaining what the image 'meant' or 'symbolized' for them, allowing a path to inquire into the participant's interpretation of the image, the meanings they attached to it, and how they wanted the images to be seen and responded to.

The snap-along-method shares its ethos with the photovoice-method, interrogating "contextually based meanings from an insider perspective" (Sutton-Brown 2014, 170) but remains more open-ended about the objectives of photography. While both methods are equally committed to following the participants' cues about what they see as relevant, the snap-along method does not boast an aspiration of empowerment nor an agenda for societal change as the participatory method of photovoice (Wang & Burris 1997; Milne & Muir 2020). Instead, snap-along gives the participants the veto on what they make of their visual action and remains receptive to any conclusions they may reach about the results thereof.

The conversations on and around images with our participants offered us tools to understand the subtle meanings of images that might have been missed with a combination of online observations and visual analysis. They also further informed the continuing online and offline observations by suggesting themes that the participants took as relevant and clarified the analytical foci of the research. For example, we initially expected the images depicting public action to be the most interesting and relevant for our analyses. Although this was true, our discussions with the participants also revealed that many had a strong wish for societal influence on the selfies they posted. This steered our continuing offline observations and added new questions to our analysis. These subtle meanings and objectives for taking and sharing images can be entirely invisible when observing images online and require an in-depth understanding of the participants' sensemaking to be detected and understood. In the following, we present some of the approaches we have thus far taken to analyze the research material produced following the steps of the snap-along method, as well as some preliminary findings deduced with their help.

4. Illustrations of the snap-along method: Politicizing climate and mental health visually

The research project this paper stems from is still ongoing, and the analysis, particularly the conclusions to be drawn, will still evolve. However, with the following two examples illustrating the visual dimensions of young people's political action, we will concretize the

potential of the snap-along method in studying societal action in the concomitant online/offline and visual intersection that everyday life increasingly looks like.

The examples result from two sets of questions we have addressed with the snap-along method: 1) How do the youth politicize by *taking images*? – What are the functions and purposes of the concrete act of image-taking and how does the possibility of taking and sharing images shape the organization of offline actions, such as a protest? and 2) How do the young politicize *with images*, both online and offline? – Which images do they post and why, in which conversations, with which captions and hashtags, and how do they use images in offline encounters and for what purposes?

The fieldwork from which we draw illustrations in the following includes a climate activist group in Portugal and a mental health activist group in Finlandⁱⁱ. While the research project has a comparative objective, in this illustration, we refrain from the comparison and present the two applications of snap-along with somewhat scarce wider contextualization, as the purpose here is to show with the help of different fields the different aspects that the snap-along method can unveil (for comparative analyses of the cases, see Malafaia & Meriluoto 2022; Clément & Luhtakallio 2021; Kettunen & Malafaia 2021; Clément 2020).

In the following, we use the two sets of questions above as avenues to illustrate the different offerings of the snap-along method to understand visual action. The examples are fieldwork extracts that show two relatively different yet fruitful situations of applying the method: an activist event unfolding as visual action and a cumulative process of unfolding reflections by a participant. They portray the method's use in two distinct cases of political action. The first describes the visual action as part of an activist group's protest and the effects of increased visibility on political mobilizing, whereas the second follows an individual's path towards activism and presents how we can identify and make sense of nascent forms of politicization with visual data.

Snapping to align with movement strategies in the Student Climate Strikeⁱⁱⁱ

Following climate strikers with the snap-along method brought us closer to the movement participants who specialized in the visual alignments of the movement's strategic efforts to be visible (sic) in the multi-level public sphere they operated in.

Since the beginning of the Strike, the people responsible for covering the event live - the “social networks’ brigade” – were on it. I kept close to the people dedicated to this ‘visual task’ to understand the latter's role on this big day.

I went to get more posters with Marta, a member of the brigade, and asked her what kind of images she was registering.

- In this demonstration, for me, what is most important is... well, the messages on the posters are very important because this way, people can get an idea of what the group's claims are. But it is also important to get the movement, the issue of the loudspeakers... it's also important to get the songs across and to show the people that are here. I'm posting filming focused on the posters, posters plus people, only people, only the loudspeakers... I'm trying to diversify, you know. In some stories, I put some messages of the songs, or I don't include any message at all because the video is self-explanatory. I sometimes also post photos as stories to change things a bit. It would be boring to see only videos. --- I'm also posting publications [definitive posts], four or five so far. -

-- I've also posted the "capitalism is not green" [a banner brought by the youth wing of the communist party] to show the different struggles. I've posted a video of kids [very young children attending the demonstration] but without showing their faces... this was a story. As for publications, I've posted their posters. You can tell that it's a small person, so people can get the diversity of the public involvement here. I'm more selective concerning publications. I'd rather do stories. --- I prefer stories because they provide fast info. It's so fast I don't think so much about the image anymore. For publications, I think more about them...like hiding people's faces or that loudspeaker on the air or that poster... I frame it more. I think more about it. When I do posts on stories, it is faster.

And are you using hashtags or some sort of subtitles? I ask.

I'm not adding hashtags to the publications because I don't have time to do that. I would rather have a set of hashtags in advance, and now I would only copy-paste. But I don't have the time. --- This is live, so it has to be fast. I'm not at home doing it. If I was home, I would worry about the hashtags reaching more people or what the best subtitle would be, you know?

I ask if the brigade has some instructions regarding the task of 'covering' the event. Marta says no – the thing is just to post a lot.

Posting a lot. Spam. What matters the most is to make your presence felt.

Besides the images shared online during the action, the brigade also considered it important to post images to "warm-up" and boost protest participation. Moreover, a call for a nationwide sharing of the Climate Strike images was launched on the national Facebook and Instagram pages of the Student Climate Strike. After the Strike, the activists not only shared images of the protest but also (and more intensely) screenshots and images of the protest's appearance on national TV to show the Strike's dimension and impact.

In this example, visual politicization flows seamlessly with movement strategies of visibility and different levels of framing for the participants and the general public. Indeed, visual framing of the movement is taking place both before – to attract protesters – and during and after the event to garner proof of the different desired aspects of the movement, including its strength and the diversity of participants. These visual actions resonate with what has previously been described in social movement visibility (e.g. Doerr 2010; Luhtakallio 2012), yet the novelty is the immediacy (also Hand 2020) and that the task of producing online visual content has been specifically assigned to certain participants who concentrate entirely in this activity during the protest event. This implies, among other things, that online visibility affects the conception of time (and timing and anticipation) in political contention (see Tavory & Eliasoph 2013).

Furthermore, visual social media expands the notion of the public in which the protest assembles and takes shape (see McGarry et al. 2020), reconfiguring both the arena in which the protest is enacted and the public to which it appeals. By oscillating between the online and offline, the protests' visual performances create a hybrid public arena in which the noises from the loudspeakers, energy of the participants and pace of the protest are equally felt and shared regardless of one's physical presence in the protest.

Increasingly, the visibility of the protest becomes imperative, as it is the vehicle through which the sensory politics of the protest – the intensity of the chants, the urgency of the

matter and the determination of the protesters – are being constructed. Although being visually and physically present has always been key in protests' impact, this visual presence now takes place simultaneously and seamlessly online and offline.

Taking and sharing images should not be seen as mere communication of the protest events but as an integral part of the protesters' acts of politicization and protest. For its analysis, simultaneous online and offline observations with attention to both the content of the images, as well as the practices, and in this example, the pace of their publication are equally invaluable.

Becoming political by posting crying selfies^{iv}

Jessika, whom we met at the beginning of this article, is part of a mental health activist group. Observing this group with snap-along took us to a very different activist sphere from the climate strikers. While the group had outspoken political objectives and a name defining them as an “activist group”, the participants did not all self-define as activists and many had scarce, if any, experience in societal participation, like Jessika, who is an active Instagram user and posts several images and videos on Instastories every day. The most striking feature of her Instagram presence comprises her selfies: she regularly posts selfies where she cries. She has also shared selfies from the psychiatric ward and captioned her selfies with thoughts about her suicide attempt. Despite the frequency of this powerful imagery, their political character was, for a long time, less than obvious.

We meet to discuss Jessika's Instagram posts. I ask about the crying selfies and why she posts them. Jessika is seemingly squeamish and tries to avoid answering the question. This is a difficult topic for her:

I don't know. It's my public diary. I hate the toxic positivity of social media, and I want to show that all feelings are a normal part of life. But this is just normal sharing. I don't care who sees my posts.

A week later, Jessika posts a video on her Instastories. She has started thinking about why she posts selfies where she cries:

I haven't really considered Instagram as having an impact because it demands nothing of me. I don't feel like I make an effort to have an impact. It was a bit of a surprise to realize that I have this objective in the background that social media is too full of positivity and picture-perfect lives. It shows in people's selfies, and it makes me really angry.

In the video, Jessika explains how she wants to counterbalance people's “fake positivity” by showing other emotions as well. She then encourages people to share their own thoughts about their social media activity. A lively online discussion follows, during which people ponder their own reasons for posting and sharing certain content. As she explains her position, Jessika writes:

I have this desire to have an impact on social media and steer it in a different direction with my posts.

She pauses for a bit.

Okay. It was revolutionary to say, “to have an impact”.

The following day, the group meets on Zoom to discuss how they have met their goals, one of which is to support the members’ skills for political action. The topic of activism has been contentious before, and the term does not sit easily with everyone. Aija starts the conversation about political influence:

Do you see yourselves as activists? Is what we are doing activism?

Yes... Helmi responds, sounding a bit bewildered and tired that this needs to be discussed again.

No! For real though, now, stop! Please! I’m so ashamed! Jessika cries out.

The discussion continues with how social media presence can be activism. During the break, Jessika looks extremely uncomfortable and asks whether she can even be part of the group if she does not see herself as an activist.

Maybe I shouldn’t be here, she sighs. This is really scary. I don’t feel like I have an impact on anything, so this scares me.

Jessika leans back on her bed. For the rest of the conversation, she sits in complete silence, and we only see a small part of the top of her head.

Later that evening, Jessika posts a video on her Instastories saying that the day has been “revolutionary”.

Something great and significant happened today. There was this meeting and a WhatsApp conversation, and they have made me rethink a bunch of stuff. I am so bewildered.

A week later, I call Jessika to check in. She still seems a bit astonished:

It still feels revolutionary to use the word “to have an impact” and to notice that in fact, I do want change. That it is there in the background. But I recognize the thought now. That has been simply revolutionary.

After her “revelation”, Jessika started posting crying selfies almost daily, making them the most recurring image type on her account. When I met her with a small group of activists two months later, “having an impact” had become a natural topic for her. Instead of shying away from the topic, she confirmed the objective behind her crying selfies with ease:

I think that it’s really powerful that Jessika posts selfies where she cries. It breaks the norm when you share something like that, says Kaisla.

Jessika responds with confidence and ease:

That’s why I’d just want to see crying people on social media throughout the summer.

Jessika's crying selfies are a good example of the less obvious or even only emerging forms of politicization that we can grasp with the snap-along method. The transformation in Jessika's interpretation of her selfies indicates their slow change from expressions of individual feelings of discomfort towards a more politically framed and verbalized argument. Although at first, Jessika described her selfies as "*normal sharing*"; with some sense of things 'not being quite right' attached to them, discussions with her social media followers and with fellow activists made her reformulate this feeling of discomfort towards a more publicly oriented political claim. Over the course of a few months, the crying selfies went from being her "*private diary notes*" to deliberate critique towards "*the norm*" of positivity and mental tirelessness prevailing in social media.

These subtle shifts in the political imagination of actors from the individual towards the collective and the more explicitly political require long-term observation to grasp the participants' interpretations, worldviews and meaning-makings of their visual online practices. With mere online observations, these selfies would only have been seen as signs of someone's sorrow or ill-health. On the flipside, with mere offline observations, this form of activism would not have been noticed at all. With the help of the snap-along method, we came across such processes recurringly. They were not (always) spectacular, lasting or successful, but they showed significant shifts in the participants' ways of framing their actions. These shifts were observable in a similar fashion on our different field sites, from the mental health activists illustrated above to participants of homelessness groups, precarious workers' movement, and, also, climate activist groups that, in this article, served as an example of more traditionally politicized social movement actions.

This example shows the particular potential of snap-along ethnography to grasp the level of nascent politics whose manifestations may remain obscure for a larger public but may be extremely meaningful for a subaltern counter-public (e.g. Fraser 1990). For social scientists' ambitions to understand and address social change, this kind of access to the not-yet-public forms of the political is valuable. In our visual social media age, such transformations from personal unease towards explicit political claims are more and more likely to take shape in the fast-paced online stream of images. The publicity of intimacy afforded by visual social media makes visible the proto-political emotions of distress. Their subtle transmutations from the personal towards the political can only be fully grasped through snap-along ethnography.

5. Conclusion

What is the novelty of snap-along ethnography? New names for methodical approaches matter when they help us distinguish something that is clearly in need of refining. We argue that in the current scholarship, online ethnography needs such refining to prevent the trend of fashionably calling almost any kind of following of online activities "ethnography" (also Abidin & de Seta 2020). Ethnography is indeed *à la mode*, as a call for a context-sensitive and in-depth understanding of today's differentiated social worlds has swept across the social sciences – interestingly, simultaneous with the rise of the big data hype – as a response to the perceived shortcomings of the variety of text-based data (from interviews to written or transcribed public debate) and methodologies to address them.

We propose that snap-along ethnography is a rigorous methodological tool to respond to the demands of understanding the simultaneous online and offline lives crowded with visual content and actions while not giving up on the holistic contextuality accorded to ethnography. The method proposes a systematic way to transgress the online/offline divide and offers tools to analyze images and social practices related to their taking, using, sharing, storing, commenting and deleting. Our first attempts to apply the method illustrate that in terms of requirements for the researcher, it is as demanding as any ethnography and produces results that not all kinds of 'browsing-along' approaches can attain. In addition to making sense of political action, it will likely prove valuable in grasping other forms of social life during this increasingly digitalized visual era (see Hand 2020).

Our examples show that taking into account the visual action aspect of today's political participation opens new avenues for interpreting politics and new possibilities for grasping emerging forms and causes of political action. Furthermore, these cases illustrate how analyzing purely online visual content disregards both the offline context and social reality in which the images have been taken or created, as well as their possible offline objectives and effects. By focusing solely on the screen life of images, we fail to notice the possible political meanings the acts of taking or creating an image might have. Conversely, by focusing exclusively on the offline practices of image-taking, we may miss the political meanings of visual content itself, the potential arguments they make in online discussions, as well as the shifts and re-negotiations of meaning they may encounter in the processes of sharing and commenting of online content. With the snap-along ethnographic approach, we can but take the social form of the selfie seriously, take one example and provide sharper analyses of the directions of political communities.

In addition to addressing the hitherto underexplored and theorized form of visual political action, the snap-along method enables recognizing and grasping forms of politics that are subtle, less obvious or still nascent (see Luhtakallio & Eliasoph 2014). While visual social media affords these subtle forms of politicization that hinge between individual unease and public argumentation, they would be hard, if not altogether impossible, to recognize and analyze with traditional methods. However, it is these emerging forms of political action that are taking increasingly visual forms that we need to look towards if we want to understand democracy today and tomorrow.

¹ It is important to note that while we mainly used the terms 'image' and 'visual content' for the sake of brevity, we included video footage and other visual content with movements, such as gifs, modified images with memetic features, etc.

ⁱⁱ The first example is from a fieldwork with the Portuguese climate strike movement. The fieldwork began in fall 2019 and is ongoing. It concerns the public events and organizational activities of both the climate strike movement and the Extinction Rebellion, mainly in Porto and the surrounding region.

ⁱⁱⁱ The field extract is from November 29 in Porto, Portugal. The authors warmly thank Carla Malafaia for this example. The translation from Portuguese is by Malafaia.

^{iv} The second example is from a fieldwork with a young people's mental health activist group in Finland. The group is run by a CSO and seeks to dispel the stigma associated with mental ill health. We followed the group and their individual activists with the snap-along method from the beginning of 2020 principally in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The fieldnote is from April 22–June 12, 2020. This fieldwork was conducted by Taina Meriluoto.

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