The futures of qualitative research in the COVID-19 era: experimenting with creative and digital methods

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Introduction

As COVID-19 health and safety restrictions have disrupted face-to-face qualitative research methods, many researchers have been left seeking alternative ways to engage with their participants and their field sites. At the same time, qualitative research is well placed to respond to the nuanced ways this significant event has impacted daily life, using practices attuned to the specificities of different contexts and lived experiences. Using digital technologies such as video calling to conduct research remotely has been widely seen as a way to adapt existing research methods to respond to the risks of our new COVID-19 world. Beyond working on adapting traditional methods, there has also been an opportunity to experiment with innovative and creative methods during this period.

While these methods, for many, have been taken up out of necessity, this chapter makes a case for considering the opportunity offered to rethink the empirical grounds of qualitative research, even once the threat of a pandemic passes (and on the prospects of being ‘post-pandemic’ see Dittmer and Lorenz in this volume). We draw on three case studies to consider the capacities of creative and digital research methods: a digital photo-diary study exploring fitness practices during pandemic lockdown; a qualitative analysis of health information content and sharing practices on the social media app TikTok; and a project employing online creative writing workshops to elicit participants' feelings and practices concerning their personal data.
The analysis of our empirical research relies on ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). In our case, this involves using sociomaterial perspectives that draw principally on vital materialism scholarship espoused in non-western and Indigenous philosophies and feminist materialism. Non-western and Indigenous philosophies have traditionally recognised the distributed and relational nature of human embodiment, agency and subjectivity as part of their worldviews (Hernández et al., 2020; Rots, 2017; and see Lambert’s chapter in this volume for discussion of Indigenous worldviews and research pertaining to Indigenous Peoples). Scholars contributing to feminist materialism perspectives, including Donna Haraway (2016), Jane Bennett (2020), Rosi Braidotti (2019) and Karen Barad (2007), have more recently developed a comparable more-than-human approach that builds on the philosophy of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari.

Vital materialism, as explained in this scholarship, adopts a perspective that brings ontologies, epistemologies and ethical issues together as inextricable: as Barad (2007) puts it, it is an onto-ethico-epistemological position. Vital materialism views humans as always already more than human, entangled in relations and connections not only with other people but also non-human agents, including other animals, plants, places and non-organic things. In this conceptualisation, human–non-human assemblages are emergent and dynamic: constantly changing as people move through their everyday lives in both time and space. Vitalities and vibrancies such as affective forces and agencies are generated with and through these assemblages, opening or closing capacities for action and human flourishing. We argue that bringing together vital materialism with innovative methods provides an opportunity to surface the ways that digital objects, bodies and practices are always implicated in the formation of subjects (Lupton, 2019). Digitised experiences are often conceptualised as disembodied in popular culture and even academic writing. As Hine (2015) reminds us, however, digital spaces are always encountered and experienced in multisensory and fleshly ways.

In this chapter, we show how the pandemic turn to digital and creative qualitative methods is an opportunity to reflect on how the sensory, bodily and habitual dimensions of more-than-human worlds may be attended to in research. We first provide a brief review of recent social inquiry responding to the sociomaterialities of the COVID-19 crisis and the methodological challenges posed by social-distancing conditions. We then present our three case studies, providing detailed accounts of the different methods used and considering the benefits and drawbacks of each. Finally, we discuss how the tumultuous events and consequences of the COVID-19 crisis offer an opportunity for rethinking research methods beyond simply managing COVID-19-related
risk (for further discussion of the opportunities provided by the pandemic see the chapter by Matthewman). We consider how creative and digital research methods can help social researchers to reflect critically on knowledge production.

**COVID-19 and sociomateriality**

Scholars drawing on vital materialism theory have begun to explore the conceptual onto-ethico-epistemological dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis, drawing attention to the intersections and intra-actions (Barad, 2007) of humans with places such as the home, hospitals, natural environments and leisure spaces, and with objects such as face masks (Braidotti, 2020; Fullagar and Pavlidis, 2021; Lupton et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020). A growing body of empirical social research has also appeared in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Some of this research has incorporated creative methods to examine how people have responded to the crisis and how the sociomaterial conditions of everyday life have shifted. For example, Olimpia Mosteanu (2021) used photography to document and analyse the role of windows in the London lockdown in supporting residents’ wellbeing during this period of social isolation. Thorpe et al. (2021) engaged in poetic inquiry to explore new ethical considerations and concerns around body movement, breath, space and contagion in relation to COVID-19 risk in the contexts of Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia. Ernesto Priego and Peter Wilkins (2020) created autoethnographic comics to reflect their experiences of the pandemic. Taking digital spaces as their field site, Crystal Abidin and Jing Zeng (2020) explored how an online Asian community created solidarity and support during COVID-19 when racist attacks and xenophobia towards people of East Asian appearance became intensified during the pandemic (Wyver’s chapter is devoted to the pandemic/race nexus).

Other researchers have experimented with digital and online methods to breach the distance between themselves and their research participants. After having to suddenly shift their Sydney-based ethnographic home visits to virtual visits mediated by video-calling apps and smartphones, Watson et al. (2021) investigated how their participants enacted intimacy and sociality via distance during the national lockdown by using the same technologies. Another digital method employed during COVID-19 restriction periods was that of zine-making workshops held online by Pollitt et al. (forthcoming). Using Zoom video conferencing to connect each participant working with materials such as paper, pens and glue at home, they led participants across
diverse locations in creating zines in response to prompts about women’s experiences of academic work during the crisis.

Inspired by this scholarship as we navigated the practicalities of maintaining our own research programs during COVID-19 conditions, we were prompted to re-design and reimagine a series of methods that accommodated the rapidly shifting research context. Embracing the potential of creative and digital methods, we thought carefully about what was available to us methodologically as we sought to answer a range of overarching research questions. Here, we share examples of these methods to illustrate the potential of thinking outside of the comfort zone and working at the intersections of theory and method.

Case studies

Digital photo diaries: exploring fitness practices during lockdown

Our first example focuses on an experimental digital photo diary method developed by Marianne Clark to explore people’s movement practices during lockdown. The project was prompted by her personal observations in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. At the height of lockdown conditions in Australia’s first wave of COVID-19 (April 2020), she noticed people engaging in outdoor spaces in new ways. Usually tranquil neighbourhoods were suddenly bustling with walkers and runners, and people could be seen working out in driveways and garages repurposed as impromptu gyms. At this time, exercise was one of the few allowable reasons for people to leave the house. Yet many beaches, fitness centres, organised sports and outdoor gyms were closed to limit the spread of the virus. These closures presented constraints to people seeking to achieve regular physical activity during the pandemic. Nevertheless, public health messaging encouraged people to remain active (World Health Organization, 2020a). These messages highlighted the importance of regular physical activity for supporting both mental and physical health in stressful conditions and provided general advice targeting individual behaviour. However, physical activity is always complex behaviour shaped by myriad social, economic, and material factors (Silk and Andrews, 2011). Pandemic physical activity messaging seemed to overlook these complexities, and Clark was curious as to how people negotiated different obstacles to create new exercise practices.

Given the centrality of the human body and its sensory and affective capacities in response to living in and through a health crisis, Clark was particularly...
inspired by sociomaterial frameworks that acknowledge the generativity of the material and more-than-human entities. Specifically, she was curious about how people engaged with indoor and outdoor spaces, digital technologies, and everyday objects to create new fitness routines in the sociomaterial context of the pandemic. This study was designed to explore how these heterogeneous forces were creatively re/assembled to produce movement practices and to surface the meanings these embodied practices held for people living in stressful times. With face-to-face research methods off the table, a methodological approach that accommodated the constraints of the pandemic was required. Clark also sought a method that could access the affective and embodied experiences afforded by movement not always easily articulated through language and text. At the same time, while pandemic conditions meant people’s comfort and familiarity with a variety of digital platforms had increased, she was also mindful of the widespread experience of screen fatigue and wished to limit the demand on participants to spend more time in front of a screen.

Given these parameters, Clark developed an innovative digital photo diary method. This approach draws inspiration from visual methodologies such as photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) and photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) as well as written and audio diary methods often used in ethnographic research. Many of these methods come from sociological and anthropological traditions and are intended to generate rich research materials that capture insights into the everyday worlds of participants (Glaw et al., 2017; and see Wynn and Trnka’s contribution for an extended discussion of this). Such methods also seek to privilege participants’ perspectives and voices, allowing them to decide what is meaningful and to purposefully curate images and stories they deem important.

Elaborating on these methods, the digital photo diaries asked participants to take photos capturing moments that were somehow associated with their daily movement practices. No parameters on who or what was to appear in the photos were provided. Instead, this method sought to privilege participant perspective. Participants were also asked to share a brief story about the image, describe its meaning to them and articulate how it related to their movement experience. The diaries sought to alleviate the emphasis on text and language as a means to express and represent experience and also to capture meaningful moments across time and space that might otherwise be missed in an interview setting.

For the study, participants were recruited via social media outlets (for example, Facebook and Twitter). To be eligible, participants were required to be between 18 and 64 years of age, living in Australia and currently participating in at least...
20 minutes of physical activity two or more times per week. Participants were also asked to confirm access to the technologies necessary to access email and to take and upload photographs.

The first stage of the project involved online interviews conducted over Zoom that also included a virtual tour of the physical activity space used. A total of 19 people participated in this portion of the study, ranging in age from 29 to 56 years. Participants included 12 women and 7 men. Ten people lived in Sydney, eight in Melbourne, Australia’s two largest cities, and one in Newcastle, a mid-sized city north of Sydney. All participants were also invited to participate in the digital photo diaries. Eight people agreed: five women and three men. For this part of the project, participants were emailed daily for 7–10 days and required to submit a total of five entries. Each email contained a link to a Qualtrics form that asked participants to upload a digital photo inspired by or related to their physical activity experience that day. The connection between the photograph and physical activity was purposely broad and left to participants to interpret. Examples and prompts provided included:

(1) A piece of equipment, object or technology that plays a role in your movement practice
(2) A view or image that inspires or touches you while participating in your movement practice
(3) Any other people, animals, or settings that are meaningful to your movement practice in some way

Participants were then asked to provide information about the photograph, including:

(1) When and where the photo was taken
(2) Who and what appears in the photo
(3) Any other information they believe to be important

Finally, participants were invited to write a short narrative about what the photo means to them and why they were inspired to take it. Participants were asked to write at least one paragraph of text in the allotted space.

Everyone completed the five entries within 10 days for a total of 35 entries. Qualtrics forms were filled out completely, with no technological difficulties reported. An array of images emerged, ranging from photographs of fitness equipment such as running shoes and wetsuits, to indoor and outdoor spaces and natural and urban landscapes. As Figure 10.1 shows, these images captured both mundane settings (for example, lounge rooms, gardens, urban
Figure 10.1  A photograph taken by a participant illustrating the importance of outdoor spaces and everyday fitness equipment like running shoes during the pandemic.
sidewalks) and aesthetic landscapes (for example, coastlines, walking trails, green spaces).

To analyse the diaries, Clark oriented herself to the ‘more-than-human’ forces emerging in the photos and accompanying text. Stories and images pointed to the ways that everyday practices and fitness-oriented movement practices are always entangled with histories, presents and futures and how they shift across time and space; what Barad (2007) refers to as ‘spacetime-mattering’. For example, participants noted how their personal histories and preferences for movement shaped their current practices as they sought to cope with the complex conditions of the pandemic and exist with uncertain futures. Stories surfaced of the entangled relations between humans and the more-than-human that are productive of everyday experiences and meanings. For example, domestic spaces such as lounge rooms and familiar fitness equipment such as rubber TheraBands and yoga mats came to matter in specific ways as they enabled daily movement practices that provided physical and emotional relief and release to participants. Additionally, movement for these participants was not about achieving an arbitrary health metric (for example, lowering blood pressure) or bodily aesthetic. Rather, improvised fitness routines emerged in response to the shifting and often stressful social, emotional, and material conditions of daily life during the pandemic. Movement came to matter in new ways and far from being a utilitarian practice undertaken to preserve ‘good health’, it was imagined and experienced as a capacious practice that shifted the embodied way of being in the world during COVID-19. Therefore, this creative, digital visual method allowed Clark to capture the embodied, affective experiences of living through the pandemic, and to surface the ways these experiences emerge through the relations between more-than-human forces such as space, technology, objects and movement.

The use of digital photo diaries was meant to provide means of expression that complement or even exceed conventional logocentric approaches. However, these methods still rely on access to digital technologies and data, which is not always equitable. Research on digital inclusion in Australia has found that lower income, lower levels of education and living in a regional area can all reduce the likelihood of internet access. Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, older people and culturally and linguistically diverse migrants are also more likely to lack access to the internet (Thomas et al., 2020). Additionally, the design specificities of the Qualtrics platform meant the digital photo diary template was quite static, leaving little room for participants to decide how to share and represent their images and voice. Further consideration to questions of voice (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) and experimentation with alternative platforms may further enrich this method.
Qualitative social media analysis: studying COVID-19 health information on TikTok

Our second case study is a digital ethnography conducted by Clare Southerton to examine the circulation of health information content on the social media app TikTok. TikTok is a short-form video-sharing app that saw a rapid rise in popularity in 2020 as many countries around the world were entering COVID-19 lockdowns (Chan, 2020). The platform’s content is highly trend driven and often oriented around meme making, especially audio memes: that is, using the same sounds or music others have used to make referential content (Abidin, 2021).

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, there was significant concern about the role of social media apps like TikTok in spreading misinformation about the coronavirus. The World Health Organization (2020b, p. 2) warned that populations around the globe were facing an ‘infodemic’: defined as ‘an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it’. While there is an emerging scholarship exploring the potential of TikTok as a platform for disseminating health information (Comp et al., 2020; Eghtesadi and Florea, 2020), there has been little examination of how health information is shared on TikTok, especially by health professionals who use the app. Given that information is experienced not only cognitively but also affectively, Southerton also sought to develop a method for examining and becoming attuned to the ways engaging with these platforms involves practices that are bodily and multisensory.

To explore these practices and communities, Southerton conducted a digital ethnography on TikTok over several months in 2020. Digital ethnography adapts ethnographic methods to increasingly digital worlds, taking digital spaces such as social media platforms as field sites (Pink et al., 2015). Following Christine Hine’s work on virtual ethnography, Southerton also drew on autoethnography as part of her practice, using her sensory experience of browsing the platform and watching TikToks ‘as a source of insight into the unresolvable uncertainties and tensions that can be a part of the Internet experience’ (Hine, 2015, p. 82). This method was chosen to develop a deeper understanding of how health information circulates on the app, by becoming attuned to the specificities of TikTok’s dynamic environment. By being embedded in platform cultures, Southerton was able to develop what Anderson and Ash (2015, p. 46) describe as a ‘qualitative vocabulary of thresholds and tipping points’.

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Southerton undertook sessions of browsing the app, which usually lasted between one and three hours. Initially, she used the app’s search function for keywords such as ‘covid’, ‘coronavirus’, ‘doctor’, ‘nurse’, ‘healthcare worker’. After viewing videos (TikToks) found using these keywords, further content was identified by clicking on hashtags on these TikToks. Southerton also periodically read the comments on TikToks to gain a better understanding of the interactions between the creator and their audience. Fieldnotes were taken in the form of screenshots from the app and written notes reflecting on experiences on the app. Videos were also downloaded from TikTok to keep for later review.

TikTok customises content for its users based on a range of information collected by the app (TikTok, 2020). TikTok’s personalisation and search algorithms are proprietary, and so it is not possible to access specific information about their workings. It is important to acknowledge, then, that content visible to Southerton on TikTok will have been shaped by this data collection, as well as the app settings, including language and the location of her smartphone in Australia, among other things. Furthermore, it is important to contextualise TikTok as a social space within broader issues of inequality of access that will shape the kinds of content on the app. As outlined earlier, access to the internet and digital technologies is lower among already marginalised groups, exacerbated existing economic, social and racial inequalities. However, digital inclusion remains high among young people (Thomas et al., 2020), and as such there remains considerable optimism among health professionals about TikTok’s potential to reach young people (Comp et al., 2020).

There are a number of ethical issues to consider when analysing social media content. In this case, although the content is posted publicly, it remains important to consider what the intention of the content creator may have been with regards to visibility and what the risks could be for the creator and their work (Patterson, 2018). Despite the orientation of the platform towards virality and gaining attention, not all videos posted to the site are posted with large audiences in mind. Highfield and Leaver (2016) identify the risks of analysing visual content, cautioning that creators may unintentionally reveal personal information in their content and, therefore, researchers must evaluate content carefully. Anonymity, however, is not always the best strategy as some creators may prefer attribution for their creation. In this instance, Southerton elected not to identify specific videos or creators in findings, with the exception of high-profile creators who had reached a level of micro-celebrity such that it was safe to assume their videos were intended
to reach a broad audience. However, she also was cautious not to describe any video in detail in research findings that did contain personal information about the creator. For example, if a video featured detailed information about where a creator lived or about their family, this information may not be appropriate to describe.

In analysing TikToks, Southerton employed a method that involved being attuned to the expressive qualities of the TikTok videos – watching some on repeat a number of times, as certain TikToks (especially those that are very short) would likely be viewed this way by users. This approach was oriented towards becoming attuned to the shifting affects throughout the video as it looped, with emergent elements of the video being notable on rewatching. This is an important aspect of the method, as on the app itself videos are played on continual repeat unless the users act to switch to the next video.

Using this method, Southerton was able to observe the ways that TikToks can be used to create the conditions for shared intimacy between creator and audience in the context of the pandemic. There were many qualities of the videos that showed a significant departure from existing communication strategies used by health professionals, even on social media. The content examined on TikTok explored the tensions, anxieties, discomfort and heightened emotions of the pandemic, with medical professionals filming videos immediately after significant events such as a death or offering intensely personal reflections on the impact of the pandemic on their work and everyday life. Many TikToks took the viewer into hospitals and other workplaces for medical professionals, giving behind-the-scenes glimpses of the clutter of medical machinery, instruments and other devices that make up these spaces. Other TikToks called attention to the way the virus is felt as a material thing, through videos that highlighted our new awareness of viral contagion and references to spit and other bodily fluids.

Certainly, this digital ethnographic approach has limitations in terms of what the research materials collected using this method can surface. Researchers using digital ethnographies are well placed to examine affordances, attention economies and felt experience of platforms – from an autoethnographic perspective – as well as the communities that emerge on and through them. However, this method is limited in what it can reveal about the motivations and experiences of users, as it relies on the insights the ethnographers themselves can glean from content and interactions. As such, in some cases, it may be appropriate to investigate a research question further with interviews with research participants, for example, to access these perspectives.
Creative writing workshops: examining participants’ data feelings and practices

Our third case study comes from the 'Living with Personal Data' project, a sociological exploration of what people understand, feel and do with their personal digital data. Deborah Lupton, Mike Michael and Ash Watson comprised the research team. The project as originally designed involved home-based video ethnographies with 30 Sydney-based participants, and eight creative methods workshops with groups of 6 to 8 participants. Fieldwork ran from early 2020 to early 2021, beginning at a time in which the research team was faced with suddenly changing the in-progress and planned research methods so as to be able to continue the study when COVID-19 lockdowns were instituted (in Australia, the national lockdown began from March 2020). We re-designed our methods so that rather than taking place in person, as we had begun to do in the project, all activities were conducted online.

In what follows we take an example from the series of creative workshops, led by Watson, and the materials it generated as our focus. Our workshops centred the notion of ‘data sense’ (Lupton, 2019), meaning the combination of human senses, embodied feelings, digital sensors and social sense-making practices which shape and make personal data. After re-designing our methods and shifting to an online format, we facilitated workshops via the digital platform Zoom. While this change meant that participants could not be in a room together and easily see the creative artefacts that each of them generated in response to our prompts, there were several other advantages to going online instead. Organising the workshops became much easier, as we were not limited to a physical location that suited everyone. Further, we could bring together participants who lived in geographically disparate areas and, therefore, diverse social contexts: including people living in rural and remote Australia, who are often left out of social research because of their less accessible location. We did not completely relinquish ‘hands-on’ methods, however. We structured the online workshops around two ‘analogue’ activities; participants joined via their computers or mobile devices and had pens and paper with which they could write and draw in response to our prompts. By engaging participants in hands-on activities, we involved their bodies in more-than-digital ways (that is, with more than verbal discussion and ‘beyond’ their technological devices). These activities were also creative, and as such, engaged participants’ senses as they imagined, made visible (through illustration), and wrote detailed stories about data and technologies.

Following introductions, each workshop began with a brainstorming activity: participants were given one minute to write down how they understand and define ‘data’ and ‘personal data’, followed by 15 to 20 minutes to collectively...
discuss. This structure allowed discussion to build from immediately shared perceptions of what data are and how data are made, as Figure 10.2 shows.

The findings from this initial activity showed how participants understood personal data. Broadly, these understandings fell into three groupings. Participants discussed categorisations of personal data (for example, personal, identifiable, private and public), types of data (for example, information about their finances, where they travel and live, whom they speak to or interact with online, what they read or watch and what they buy) and collections of data (for example, using terms such as observations, statistics, records, trends and profiles). Groups also discussed how personal data were generated in their everyday lives in active and passive ways, for example, through using emails, step counters, social media, search engines, streaming services and maps as well as via accessing buildings, taking public transport and moving through public spaces embedded with cameras or sensors. Structuring the workshop in this way thus had empirical and methodological value. The brainstorming discussion worked to connect participants’ understandings of personal data – which can be abstracted – to their own everyday technology use, routines and practices. Through this first activity, before the more creative second task, personal data ‘became’ something material and situated for the group.

The second activity was unique in each workshop: verbally and via the Zoom chat function, participants were given a creative prompt we had devised about digital technologies and personal data, to which they had 10 minutes to respond. One of these prompts was the following:

Imagine a near future where facial recognition technology is everywhere; write about what these smart things and spaces are, and the impact this would have on
your life’. Imagine a near future in which smart objects and smart environments constantly scan your face using facial recognition software. What are these smart things? How would this technology make your life easier? Make your life harder?

Watson asked each group to discuss what they had created and their experiences of doing the activity until the end of the workshop time. As with the first activity, rather than leading with predetermined questions, Watson encouraged group discussion, asking participants to respond to others’ creations, ideas, experiences, and perceptions and ask their own questions of others. Some participants directly shared what they had created by reading aloud and/or by holding up their creations to their cameras, while others talked about what they had written or drawn and why.

The group discussion after this started with a discussion of Black Mirror, the speculative technology television series, and noted other similar dystopian texts including Minority Report and spy movies in general. These examples from mainstream popular culture shaped people’s imaginaries of how a near-future world might feel. As they shared their responses to the prompts and discussed the thoughts these responses provoked, the group agreed ‘literally anything’ could become embedded with facial recognition technology. They focused more on how and why these technologies would be used: including for denying people access to public places, which Alex likened to a bouncer at a nightclub. Several participants also immediately extended from facial recognition devices themselves to what the outcomes of those devices would be, including public targeted advertising and the associated risks of other people seeing the potentially private interests/activities that were advertised. Alex posed the question to the group of rights to anonymity and privacy and how these may be flouted by facial recognition technology. Maddie added to this by saying in her written response to the prompt she had noted the impact that facial recognition could have on people ‘trying to escape’ from bad situations, and that personal hacking and tracking would be much easier if these technologies were more widely available to the public.

However, participants were just as ready to acknowledge the convenience and feelings of safety and reassurance offered by facial recognition technology. For example, according to one person’s written response to the prompt:

I think that facial recognition being everywhere will actually make Australia/the world a lot safer. In terms of crimes, hiring staff, going to major events, using services. People would be more self-conscious of the decisions that they make, and how they effect [sic] others... Will make life easier for a lot of people, as in say, for example, using ATM [automated teller machine] or paying for things. Can also help make life easier for people with disabilities; make daily life easier for them.
The group also discussed the impacts on people’s practices if they knew such devices were ubiquitous and continually recording people’s faces and movements while able to identify them instantaneously. They made reference to the recent US Capitol riots in Washington and how the increased use of facial recognition could potentially make a positive impact on crime in general. Courtney, who lives in the state of Victoria and lived through a second extended COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, added that facial recognition technology could potentially contribute to improved contract tracing processes by facilitating the easy identification of individuals. Watson probed the group about the feelings and emotions they expressed in their written responses to the prompts. It was notable that how people felt about the technology was strongly related to their perceptions of risk. Daniel, for instance, said he feels that your face is quite safe and not easily stolen or replicated, even with the use of facial recognition technologies, whereas Alex felt it was highly risky.

By analysing our findings using the vital materialist theories and approach detailed above, we were able to surface the constitutive entanglement of our participants’ personal digital data with their domestic environments, routine practices, familial and social relationships and their future-oriented imaginaries. The findings from these activities showed what personal data do in our participants’ lives, including what kinds of feelings, practices and relational dynamics data helps produce. Our findings also included what our participants imagine, feel, expect, resist, refuse, endure and enjoy about personal data and its generative processes. They gave us important insight into why participants care about personal data in the ways that they do and illuminated how data comes to matter in people’s everyday lives.

Discussion and conclusion

Just as COVID-19 has unsettled everyday life and disrupted assumptions about the world and our relations to it, it has also unsettled our research and thinking practices, prompting us to imagine new ways of knowing and being. However, knowledge is always unsettled, emergent and uncertain (Barad, 2007) and the extraordinary conditions of COVID-19 have explicitly brought this into view. Adapting and re-designing our research methods in response to the COVID-19 crisis prompted us to grapple with the emergent and situated nature of inquiry and to examine our own understandings of how knowledge is produced, how research materials are generated and what types are meaningful for social inquiry.
As many scholars turn to creative and digital methods, it is important to acknowledge the rich history of these methods and their use in existing scholarship. As our case studies have illustrated, existing digital methods such as digital ethnography require the development of new skillsets for new ‘field sites’. For example, Clark’s case study developed the digital photo diary method by drawing on existing photovoice and photo elicitation methods, while the ‘Living with Personal Data’ project developed novel creative prompts that built on a longstanding literature about arts- and design-based methods for social inquiry. Importantly, our methods are deeply informed and inextricable from the theoretical approaches we engage. They are ‘research creations’ that involve assemblages of people with concepts, ideas, materials, place and space (Lupton and Watson, 2020). These frameworks emphasise the importance of ‘response-ability’, a concept elaborated by Haraway (2016) and Barad (2007) that refers to the capacity to respond thoughtfully to the conditions one encounters; the ability to respond to ‘what matters’ (Barad, 2007, p. 38). Haraway (2016, p. 34) describes response-ability as a practice, a careful ‘cultivating collective knowing and doing’.

The methods we present here, although eclectic in approach, embody this orientation to response-ability. Our ability to respond emerges as a relational capacity – with our research topics, the digital, technological, affective and embodied, human, and more than human. The conditions of COVID-19 have prompted a rethinking of ‘what matters’, and so too has the need to think creatively about our methods during this time. As Christia and Chappell Lawson (2020) argue, among the challenges the pandemic has brought to the research community, there are also opportunities for innovation and adaptation. COVID-19 has prompted us to cultivate responsiveness as part of research practice beyond a crisis – to be equipped theoretically, methodologically and ethically to respond to multiple and shifting conditions that shape social life as the norm rather than as a risk to be managed. The creative and digital methods in our case studies call attention to the ways humans are always constituted within and through our environments. These methods, which creatively use digital tools to overcome physical distance, are always more than digital. We see the research encounter as constituted by sensing bodies, objects and relations, rather than only as individuated subjects who are mediated by technologies. Our case studies have highlighted the ways that creative and digital methods can be taken up to consider how the COVID-19 pandemic is felt, integrated into practices and embodied, as well as thought and discursively understood.

While COVID-19 conditions prompted a pragmatic reimagining of research, we argue this also prompts a deeper rethinking of how we understand
knowledge production and its entangled sociomaterial and political processes. No longer able to turn to familiar methodological toolboxes, researchers are called upon to identify and create ‘new’ ways to engage in processes of knowing, being and doing. In our experiences, creative digital and arts-based methods enabled our research projects to continue and moved us to rethink the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of our inquiry. This is particularly important for those researchers engaging with sociomaterialist approaches, as such perspectives prompt an unsettling of the conventional ways in which we ‘do’ research (Lupton and Watson, 2020; St. Pierre et al., 2016; Thorpe et al., 2020). Such emergent approaches are not of course ‘new’. Yet the uncertain and shifting conditions of the COVID-19 crisis underlined the continuously shifting and evolving nature of knowledge itself (not just in COVID-19 times): a fluidity, instability and dynamism that are not always assumed or acknowledged in research. In this time of uncertainty, we have an opportunity to think creatively not only about our methods but what it is we work with to examine them.

Note

1 The chapter in this book by Huppatz and Wynn analyses care through a feminist lens.

References


