

# 17 Midia, Xavier and Sarah: the politics of linking in feminist and postcolonial digital humanities

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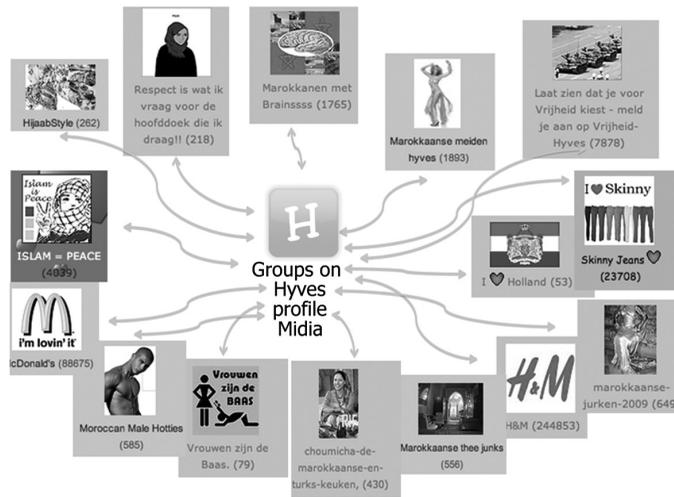


Figure 17.1 Hyves groups on Midia's profile page

As nation-states loosen their hold on the imaginations of people in a world of transnational capitalism, the role of information technologies is crucial indeed. These technologies are having a profound impact on our literary as well as our artistic practices, creating a new space that demands its own aesthetic. This new aesthetic, which I term a hypertext aesthetic, represents the need to switch from the linear, univocal, closed, authoritative aesthetic involving passive encounters to that of the nonlinear, multivocal, open, nonhierarchical aesthetic involving active encounters.

(Odin 2010: 29)

This chapter revolves around my three heroes Midia, Sarah and Xavier. I've gotten to know these three research participants over the course of the last **eight** years of fieldwork, and they have made a lasting impression on me. In the methodological and empirical sections of this chapter I will introduce Sarah and Xavier. First I would like to introduce Midia, a thirteen-year-old Moroccan-Dutch girl living in Utrecht. Midia describes herself as a Muslim and as a gamer. While she was born in Utrecht in the Netherlands, her parents came to Europe as guest workers. Occasionally she goes to the mosque and at home she speaks Dutch and Moroccan Arabic with her parents. She has a desktop computer with an internet connection in her bedroom, which she shares with her



younger brother and sister. In addition to the game World of Warcraft, social media and the discussion forum Marokko.nl are important to her. Figure 17.1 shows a compilation of groups she joined on the social media platform Hyves at the time of my research.<sup>1</sup> Midia felt it was important to join different Hyves groups so that she could include several hyperlinked icons on her personal profile page. By joining these groups she could emphasize a variety of belongings.

She expressed Muslim belonging with the group 'Islam = Peace', asked for recognition for wearing a headscarf with the group 'I demand respect for the headscarf that I'm wearing', and by joining 'HijabStyle' she expressed her love for fashion. This interest was further highlighted by linking to the groups 'H&M', 'Moroccan-dresses' and 'Skinny Jeans love'. With 'I Love Holland' she showed positive identification with the Netherlands, which she combined with 'Moroccans Brainssss'. She also presented her preference for Moroccan men with 'Moroccan Male Hotties' and emphasized her femininity with the 'Moroccan girl hyves'. By joining the group 'Women are in charge' she claimed for greater female autonomy. Her multilayered belongingness is also apparent from the food-related groups she joined, such as 'Choumicha-the-Moroccan-and-Turkish-kitchen', 'Moroccan tea junkies', and 'McDonalds'. Finally she noted her **libertarianism** with the group 'Show you stand for Freedom – join the Freedom Hyves', which displayed on her profile page the iconic photograph of the 'Tankman' standing in front of a column of tanks during the 1989 Tiananman square protest in China. The hyperlinks digitally reflect the various gender, diasporic, youth, cultural and religious affinities that young people with a migration background negotiate, combine and infuse on a daily basis.

As Odin argues in the epigraph included above, hypertext aesthetics is grounded in a digital material network of humans, texts and machines. Growing opportunities for social media and smart phone users to have a say over their own digital self-representation raise new questions about agency and power relations (Thumim 2012). Hyperlinked digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat offer innovative forms of 'discontinuity', 'fragmentation', 'multiplicity' and 'assemblage' (Odin 2010: 2), but they also reproduce hierarchically gendered, racialised/ethnicised, classist and geopolitically skewed offline relations. By teasing out the intricacies of forging and maintaining links, connections and relationships, this chapter seeks to offer suggestions for how to engage in critical feminist and postcolonial digital humanities scholarship.

In championing data-mining of unprecedented large-scale databases of Facebook and Twitter user-generated content and digitized archives, digital humanities scholars have initially uncritically jumped on the Big Data bandwagon. A desire to reclaim its rights of existence and urgency probably explains this initial uncritical embrace of data-mining. Now that the dust is beginning to settle, it is of great importance to see how the humanities – a field that has historically revolved around theory-driven approaches rather than data-driven research – can reinvent itself. Feminist and postcolonial legacies can play an important role, particularly because digital humanities research is mainly carried out from a western, white and male perspective (McPherson 2012). This way the traditional mainstream 'humanist ideal of "Man" as the measure of all things [...] in the humanities' risks to be reproduced (Braidotti 2014: 244). This is highly problematic, particularly because digital data is never neutral, innocent or self-explanatory. The generation, storage, mining, scraping and analysing of data is shaped and constitutive of intersectional power relations along axes of difference including geographical locations, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class. Roopika Risam and Adeline Koh argue, therefore, that an intervention from gender and postcolonial studies is required: 'postcolonial digital humanities

brings critiques of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization and their relationship to race, class, gender, sexuality and disability to bear on the digital humanities' (2013). The following question then arises: what is required of a self-reflexive digital data researcher? The rich history of cyber feminism and feminist and postcolonial science and technology studies offer guidance to develop an inclusive, reflexive and social justice-oriented digital humanities research agenda (Leurs forthcoming 2017).

Inspired by Midia's hyperlinking practices, this chapter addresses the forging of links between people, texts and technologies as theoretical, methodological and empirical challenges that have particular implications for feminist and postcolonial digital humanities. The remainder of this chapter is structured on the basis of these three challenges. First, on a conceptual level, I argue that the notion of the link offers an opportunity to move above and beyond binary and technological determinist renditions of hu(wo)man-machine relationships. Second, on a methodological level, I address the development of rapport and clicking with key research participants to scrutinize hierarchical relationships between researchers and informants that also exist in the digital era. Finally, I argue how hyperlinks on social media can be seen as important empirical data, as they shed light on how migrant youth combine transnational and local connections and affinities in their attempt to find a place in the world. The argument draws from PhD research I carried out between 2008 and 2012 on digital identities of Moroccan-Dutch youth (Leurs 2015) and postdoctoral research conducted between 2013 and 2015 on digital cosmopolitanism among young Londoners (Leurs and Georgiou 2016).<sup>2</sup>

### Thinking about linking

The worldwide web can be understood as an extensive network of pages and multimedia objects that are networked on the basis of the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) protocol. HTML allows for pages to be connected to each other, and hyperlinks thus form the backbone of the web. Besides a technical programming language, we can also understand hypertext and links as analytic metaphors. On a symbolic level, they illustrate for example that every Facebook profile, YouTube video, Tweet, selfie, music file or other online source can be bridged with a hyperlink and that thus everything on the web finds itself equidistant from each other. As Midia's profile page showcases, hyperlinks create 'multiple entryways and exits', and they constitute the multiple but connected character of the network: a link 'connects any point to any other point' (Landow 2006: 58, 61).

In this section, I will argue that the situated hyperlink offers an occasion to understand people's non-binarian and layered relationship with technologies. Donna Haraway's seminal 'Cyborg Manifesto' (1991) offers a strong foundation to develop such a perspective. The cyborg figuration is capable of blurring traditional dichotomous boundaries of male/female, black/white, human/technology, culture/nature (see chapter 3 in this book). The cyborg figure is not dependent on an opposite, an 'other' to form itself, and its boundaries are unclear. Haraway's manifesto has a strong following among critical technology scholars but popular accounts of digital media still often draw on binarian technologically deterministic thinking.

Technological determinism presupposes that societal, social, cultural and political progress (or decline) is causally determined by technological developments. On the utopian side of the spectrum, postmodern cyber-feminists like Sherry Turkle (1994) and Sadie Plant (1997) developed a curious relationship with major technology companies

in their common promotion of a neoliberal *Californian ideology* of progress. Akin to how tech companies promote products by emphasizing innovative opportunities for users, cyber feminists initially presupposed cyberspace could be distinguished from the offline world. Cyber-feminists initially theorized that users could distance themselves from the offline world. Without gendered, racialized and classed power relations, the internet was imagined as an alternative, egalitarian space that would offer 'liberation' and promote a more democratic world. The interpretation of the so-called 'Arab spring' in North Africa and the Middle East as a Twitter or social media revolution is one recent example of technological deterministic rhetoric. These dominant foci commonly marginalize offline protests, material contexts and unintended consequences (Allagui and Kuebler 2011). Technopessimists can be found at the other end of the spectrum, articulating a dystopian view of the internet. For example, they warn that digital technologies undermine our democracy, individuality and creativity (Lanier 2010). Or they insist that internet activism has created an illusion, and as a result we are no longer able to recognize that technologies are used for purposes such as propaganda, manipulation, censorship and, above all, surveillance (Morozov 2013). These perspectives are not entirely unfounded, but they do not help us to understand why users are willing to spend (and enjoy spending) a large portion of their working hours and spare time online.

Building on the cyborg metaphor, a feminist and postcolonial 'mutual shaping' perspective offers a more nuanced picture of how neither subjects nor technologies are homogenous, isolated and static entities, but are co-constitutive (Wajcman 2007; van Doorn and Zoonen 2009). This perspective can be operationalized by combining attention for the medium specificity of social networking sites with an eye for how everyday offline gender relations – in turn shaped by various factors, including diverse migration histories – are constructed online. Platforms like Facebook or Twitter are not neutral environments where identities are freely constructed, for these environments offer a limited radius of action. Gender, race and class and medium specificity may therefore be approached in their relationship as reciprocal social and technological relations; technological properties and axes of difference are dynamic processes that are mutually constitutive.

Midia's profiling practices revealed how she examined the possibilities and limitations of the Hyves platform. She chose hyperlinks to express divergent belongings, and by doing so she questioned the parameters of her social and physical world. The created links show how she positioned herself within a variety of socio-cultural parameters. Two decades ago, Haraway already valued the ambiguous functioning of hyperlinks, both on the level of metaphors and as empirical reality:

although the metaphor of hypertext insists on making connections as practice, the trope does not suggest which connections make sense for which purposes and which patches we might want to follow or avoid. [...] So, the figure of hypertext [...] should incite an inquiry into which connections matter, why, and for whom. Who and what are with and for whom? These are practical, pragmatic, semiotic, technical questions.

(1997: 127–129)

Haraway conceptualized the implications of hypertext based on initial development of the worldwide web and computer-mediated communication in the early 1990s. Although still very unevenly distributed, digital technologies and social media are incorporated

in every day life routines of a steadily growing group of people all over the world. For example nearly 1.2 billion people log into Facebook every day (Facebook 2016). The concept of hypertext can be used to acknowledge the ambiguous and layered relationships between people and technologies. We can recognize the agency that users experience when they seize opportunities to represent themselves online in a certain way. We must also be sensitive to how the digital cultural industries imagine intended usage and thereby create new forms of exclusion: for example, the *default* setting for a profile on Facebook was initially based on male, white, western, middle-class students. The hyper-link can be seen as an analytic tool to explore local, material, linked and situated user-generated content as well as to recognize the associated symbolisms and imaginaries of such representations. This is consistent with the goal of feminist and postcolonial digital humanities, which seeks to research, critique and improve local, national, transnational and global forms of exploitation, exclusion, agency, ambiguity and hybridity in relation to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class.



### Making links: methodological challenges

Ow god, those snobs are turning to us again as if we are a living laboratory. go research yourself one time or so 🙄 something like ooh we from the university are going to put some things under a microscope because we do not have anything better to do. Pff.

User HaasHaas published this reaction on the discussion forum website www.Maroc.nl after I posted a question related to my PhD research there. The statement is illustrative of a strong sense of distrust that Moroccan-Dutch youth and other minority subjects in the Netherlands and abroad have towards researchers. Their suspicion is entirely understandable, as many previous studies on Dutch minority groups have focused on deviant behaviour, including crime and disorder, mental health, radicalization, early school leaving and unemployment. Taken together, such factors are, for example, argued to have created a dramatic ‘Moroccan problem’ in the Netherlands (Jurgens 2007). Similar claims have been made about various youth groups elsewhere. Journalists have written extensively about ethnic minority youth, but rarely are young people themselves asked for their opinions. Inspired by feminist and postcolonial theorists who call for reflection, critique and engagement with social injustices, it was my goal to listen to young people, do justice to their narratives and broaden the discourse by circulating an alternative story. It was my research aim to give a partial and situated account of the everyday life of Moroccan-Dutch youth and young Londoners, and to this end I took the use of digital media as a starting point.<sup>3</sup> To carry out such a study, I had to overcome the initial scepticism and distrust of young people, but I also had to face my own prejudices. In this section I focus on building relationships and creating links with informants and I give an account of obstacles and challenges such a research endeavour may entail.



Feminist and postcolonial theorists have revealed the complex historical and contemporary power relations of ethnographic-oriented in-depth interviews. The history of the in-depth interview can be traced back to colonial anthropology. This discipline emerged at the time of European imperialist exploitation of overseas colonies. Western researchers immersed themselves in the lives of indigenous groups, believing they could gain access to an *insider perspective* on the *subaltern* subjects. In this way, the perspective of *the other* could be translated to the *point of view* of Europeans. This process of translation

and representation was not innocent, since it was used to hierarchically categorize populations on a scale of inferiority and superiority, which in turn was used to justify domination and exploitation (Said 1979; Spivak 1988). For this reason, a substantial group of feminist and postcolonial scholars do not carry out fieldwork with research participants. Recently, however, in their attempt to come to terms with its colonial legacy, critical ethnographers have developed the deconstructive research mode 'ethnography as critical-theory-in-action' (Madison 2012: 14). This perspective seeks to acknowledge alternative views, polyphony, fragmentation and multiplicity. The following question however arises: how we can problematize fieldwork power relations and conduct respectful, social justice oriented research with *the other* without appropriating her perspective?

Above all, it is of great importance to reflect critically on the power relationships that one encounters and often reinforces as a researcher. For example, in February 2014 during my fieldwork among young people in London, I was confronted with a considerable gap between myself and Sarah, an informant from a British-Pakistani working-class family. Sarah is the second hero in this chapter. She described her ethnic background as follows: 'my nationality is British but my ethnicity is different. I'm from Kashmir'. She was ambitious and very committed to young people in her borough. She was wearing a colourful headscarf, and she spoke openly about her experiences. At the beginning of our interview, after I had introduced myself and talked about the study, she introduced herself as follows:

I'm 17 and I'm eh currently doing my A-levels, and I'm also a Youth Councillor, and I was deputy member of Youth Parliament. I have applied to do accounting and finance at university, and I wanted to go to London School of Economics, but unfortunately they rejected me.

At that time, I was a postdoctoral researcher at the London School of Economics and Political Science. After obtaining a PhD at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, I was lucky to be awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie research grant from the European Commission to conduct a study called UPLOAD: 'Urban Politics of London Youth Analysed Digitally'. As a white, highly educated man, I was a member of this elite private university, and Sarah reminded me (and herself) of the distance that existed between her and me. The interview took place at a youth centre in Tottenham in North London. The centre, where young people from the neighbourhood were working with radio and computers and playing sports, was located only a few hundred meters from the spot where in the summer of 2011 'riots' happened after police shot dead Mark Duggan, a mixed-race neighbourhood resident. Sarah lived nearby. These events were subsequently analysed as a culmination of factors, such as recreational violence and smart-phone use (hence the term BlackBerry Messenger Riots), but more important, dynamics were commonly ignored including structural racism, cuts in public services, unemployment, poverty and the economic crisis, which led to the area having the lowest social mobility anywhere in the global North, were commonly ignored.

Scholars almost always engage in unequal dialogues with their informants. Of course, scholars have a moral obligation to listen to their research 'subjects' (Back 2007), we also have a responsibility to present informants as complex, reflexive and contradictory human beings with their own histories rather than as objective, static and disembodied anonymous facts. This perspective contrasts heavily with the dominant

view of data-driven knowledge production that falls from the sky into the hands of the male scientist. This dominant paradigm does not focus on people but on data-extraction, -exploitation and -abstraction: 'He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity' (Haraway 1997: 24). Digital humanities researchers risk replicating this perspective, in the wake of optimism about opportunities, there is little attention for individual human stories that are hidden behind the various data points. *Big data* and digital data-abstraction have little regard for how, for example, scanned archives or social media user data is always constituted at the intersection of, for example, geographical location, gender, race, social class and age (McPherson 2012).

During my fieldwork I strive for situated (offline and online) *small data*-driven research. Inspired by feminist and postcolonial engagement, I aim to ensure research informants have agency over their own self-representation in my analysis and writings. In my efforts to share data collection, definition and interpretation power with informants, I use a mix of creative, participatory and digital techniques. With creative techniques I refer to approaches that invite informants to create and analyse something in order to stimulate more meaningful reflections on experiences and identity (Gauntlett 2007). In this context, I invited Midia, Sarah and the other informants during the interviews to draw out their digital experiences on paper in order to gain more insight into their internet user preferences and meaning-making processes. The maps drawn by the informants were used as a red thread and as a structuring tool for the interviews. Participatory techniques refer to approaches that enable informants to have a greater say over the knowledge production process (Gubrium and Harper 2013). During my research, for example, I always ask informants to suggest their own pseudonym or *nickname*. Informants generally share complex stories of their ethnic, racial, religious and/or migration background. I strive to criticize essentialist categories by employing gendered, racial, ethnic, youth cultural and religious labels that informants used to describe themselves. Finally, I use digital techniques to diagnose social and cultural changes on the basis of digital practices (Rogers 2013). During my interviews with young people in London, I made and analysed Facebook friendship networks visualizations with interviewees (see Figure 17.2). After they logged into their Facebook accounts, they were asked to open the corporate but freely accessible application TouchGraph.<sup>4</sup> TouchGraph then grouped their Facebook friends into different clusters, each with its own colour. The informants themselves then analysed the different clusters by discussing which geographic location, gender, race, ethnic and social class dynamics they recognized between and within the different groups.

A growing number of scholars is seeking ways to redress the hierarchical relationship of dependency between researchers and research participants. For example, some scholars argue that key informants should be recognized as co-authors of publications (Back, Shamsir and Bryan 2012). However, such initiatives again raise new concerns: ethical guidelines of scientific journals and funding agencies often require that informants are protected from harm and argue that informants should not be individually identifiable. Such attempts aim to close the gap between researchers and informants, but needless to say, hierarchical power relations will always exist. However, feminist and postcolonial concepts like self-reflexivity and commitments to social justice can allow for the establishment of sustainable relationships, diminish feelings of distrust among informants towards researchers and, in doing so, increase the value and impact of scholarly research more broadly.

## Following links

In this section, I argue that links that can be considered as empirical data sources enable us to diagnose online/offline socio-cultural dynamics and transformations. Xavier, a London-born thirteen-year-old ‘Portuguese guy’ is the third hero of this chapter. He shares with his mother and sister a cramped apartment on the fifth floor of a council flat in London. He is a gamer but also plays the violin and guitar. Moreover, he loves football, and he gave me a demonstration of his excellent keepie uppie skills on the balcony of the flat. Xavier described how he relates to different groups: ‘I’m like the only kid in my school that is from Portugal, and I show off as much as I can. I fit in with the rest of the kids of my age. I try to fit in more than being a bit odd or different than anyone else’. Earlier, I discussed the Hyves groups where Midia linked to her personal profile page. Midia’s profile page showed how she tries to relate to multiple communities around her, such as her faith community but also her peer group consisting of young people from different backgrounds. Her digital self-presentation is indicative of how Moroccan-Dutch youth combine categories which are generally considered incompatible, such as Dutch nationalism, Islamic beliefs, gender, sexuality, Moroccan clothing and food preferences, global youth culture and political activism. In the case of Midia, I analysed the workings of hyperlinks and associated digital representations. In the case of Xavier, I follow his hyperlinks used to connect with people living locally and overseas.

The second figure shows a visualization of Xavier’s Facebook friendship network. The visualization displays the interpersonal relationships he maintains on that social networking site. Building on the adage ‘you are what you link’ (Adamic and Adar 2001), it can be said that his friendship network shows micro-political decisions: with whom and where does he want to associate, and with whom and where does he not link? Xavier connects with the Portuguese diaspora, with relatives and friends residing in Bagueixe, a town in northern Portugal. In particular he links with young, second-generation Portuguese living in London. He is a member of the ‘Bagueixe’ Facebook group, where people get in touch with those who originate from this village and those who currently live there. Xavier feels digitally connected to the village by looking at the status updates and photos

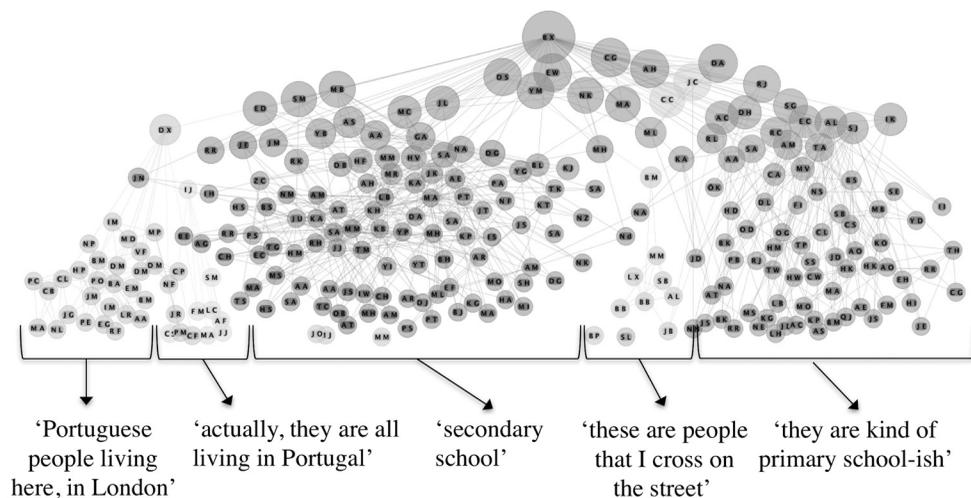


Figure 17.2 Visualization and analysis of Xavier’s Facebook friendship network

and videos that are posted on the group page, 'it's quite nice to see how the village is doing, with us being here. It's kind of like being there, without actually being there. So it's kind of like a virtual world'. When labour, postcolonial and forced migrants take up opportunities to stay digitally connected to their 'homeland', they are often criticized because these practices apparently hinder integration and could lead to segregation and possibly radicalization (Scheffer 2007).

However, it is important to take into consideration the other side of the coin. Research shows migrants keep a 'connected presence', as they connect both with people from their homeland and with the local community (Diminescu 2008). This is the example par excellence of the fragmented, discontinuous, multiple and assembled functioning and aesthetics of hyperlinks (Odin 2010). The majority of contacts in Xavier's Facebook friendship network (around 80%) consist of friends from football, primary and secondary school, who all live in London. In London, so-called 'ethnic minorities' are in the majority. Xavier's description of his friendship network reflects London's super-diverse demographic:

Chinese, Nigerian, Caribbean, Nigerian, from Jamaica, he is from Somalia, Eritrea, she is from Wales, he is from Zimbabwe, all kind of different, she is from Colombia, he is the only English person that I know, there is more, but I just don't remember, he is from Ghana, Thailand, she is from Saudi-Arabia, there is a lot, Algeria, Kazakhstan, he is from there. There is just so much.

In marked contrast with the assumption that transnational connectivity would lead to segregation and distancing, young people like Xavier express that they learn about cultures, beliefs and practices of local others through status updates, selfies and videos 'from what I know and what my friends say, we can like learn. there is so much [sic] different like countries you can't really say anything about them. Cause you don't know. That's why I prefer to learn'. Informants are young connected migrants, maintaining transnational links and connecting with fellow members in the diaspora, but they also develop a cosmopolitan stance towards cultural differences they encounter among their friends.

During our interview, Sarah, the ambitious young woman I introduced earlier, described that she maintains two Facebook accounts. Her digital practices show how users and technologies mutually shape each other. Sarah expanded her radius of action by strategically using the medium-specific characteristics of the platform. She uses one profile to stay in touch with her family living in Pakistan. She uses the other account to link up with her friends in London. Her family does not know of the existence of this second profile, and according to Sarah, they do not know what she posts there nor what she is talking about with her friends: 'they don't need to know my business kind of'. Through photos, videos and status updates about music, sports, faith and food, Xavier and Sarah highlight their respective Portuguese and Pakistani backgrounds on their personal profile pages. They do so to ask for recognition of their cultural and religious backgrounds, to distinguish themselves from their multicultural friend groups, but also to contest possible stereotypes that prevail. For example, Sarah stresses that she describes her religion explicitly on her Facebook page:

I have put it up, and I have even specified what sect, because people can confuse my sect because of my surname, that's quite annoying... I'm a Sunni Muslim and

because my surname is a Shia surname I get called a Shiite, but I'm not a Shiite, I'm a Sunni Muslim, yeah.

Sarah stressed she considers it important to maintain contacts with Pakistani friends and family who reside in the UK and overseas, but she feels strongly about her friendships with other London youth:

I think you'll get really narrow-minded [if you don't link with local people, KL], and then you are not really open towards things, and I like to kind of engage with people from different backgrounds cos it makes you open-minded.

This example illustrates how hyperlinked intercultural Facebook friendships can lead to a cosmopolitan form of self-reflection. Such a 'cosmopolitan imaginary' 'occurs when and wherever new relations between self, other and world develop in moments of openness' (Delanty 2006: 27). Midia's linked self-representation showed that her belongings include a variety of relationships between herself and several other communities. This practice of cosmopolitanism should be distinguished from top-down public policies of inclusion and diversity. The linking practices observed confirm a bottom-up 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Werbner 2006) which reflects everyday routines characterized by multicultural exchanges (Gilroy 2005).

## Conclusions

Midia, Sarah and Xavier, three of my heroes, took centre-stage in this chapter. All three are research participants who made a lasting impression on me during my fieldwork. Our exchanges focused on the everyday lives of young people online and offline. Even though some of these conversations took place a few years ago, rereading the interview transcripts evoked very strong feelings and memories. I remembered immediately the faces, places, circumstances, smells, temperature, ambient sounds, atmosphere and feelings. Reflecting on these encounters, I realize I have formed a profound link or click with all three. I hold no illusions: they did not see me as a proper friend, but I feel the click was to some extent mutual. Following Haraway, we can study the link – or in this context, the hyperlink – from many perspectives to grasp its multi-layered functioning, '[this] being [...] can – and often should – be teased open to show the sticky economic, technical, political, organic, historical, mythic, and textual threads that make up its tissues' (1997: 68). By taking a few steps back and engaging in dialogue with the literature, I used the link to reflect on theoretical, methodological and empirical challenges to the contemporary feminist, postcolonial digital humanities.

First, I argued that hyperlinks are illustrative for how identities and digital technologies are mutually constitutive in everyday power-laden contexts. In particular, I theorized Midia's hyperlinks to show how (digital) identities can best be seen as a dynamic multi-spatial assemblage. Secondly, I underlined the risks associated with research within the digital humanities that focuses on quantified, abstract, detached and impersonal data. This way, the human side and contextual dynamic meaning-making of data circulating at the crossroads of geographic location, gender, race and social class can be easily forgotten. Also, distanced data-driven research raises questions about its suitability for social-justice oriented research and a host of ethical concerns. Based on my experience with participant-centred creative, participatory and digital fieldwork techniques, I called for greater

accountability for hierarchical power relations and self-reflexivity. Finally, I showed how hyperlinks can be seen as complex empirical data sources. At certain points, the online and offline world overlap or augment one another, and at others they collide, providing room for re-signification. Young people's voices are rarely heard and their social media use is not commonly taken seriously, but Midia's linked Hyves groups and Xavier's and Sarah's Facebook friendship networks show how these young people establish new but quotidian ways to navigate growing up in a changing urban and multicultural society.

## Notes

- 1 I generated this compilation on the basis of Midia's personal profile page on Hyves on 15 April 2009. At that point, Hyves was by far the largest social networking site in the Netherlands. From the summer of 2011, Facebook users outnumbered Hyves users. In December 2013 Hyves was transformed into a games platform.
- 2 This research was financially supported by an EU Marie Skłodowska Curie 'Intra-European Fellowship grant' (FP7-PEOPLE-2012-IEF), project reference 332318, 'Urban Politics of London Youth Analyzed Digitally' (UPLOAD) and a Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) Veni Grant: 'Young Connected Migrants', project reference 275-45-007.
- 3 During my PhD research, conducted as part of the interdisciplinary Wired Up project ([www.uu.nl/wiredup](http://www.uu.nl/wiredup)), I combined surveys among 1,408 Dutch youth, in-depth interviews with 43 Moroccan-Dutch youths and a virtual ethnography of instant messaging, forums, social networking sites and YouTube (Leurs 2015) and during my postdoctoral research titled UPLoAD I interviewed 84 young people from working-, middle- and upper-class families in London (Leurs 2014). As part of my Veni research (2016–2019), I am interviewing young connected migrants from expatriate and refugee backgrounds in the Netherlands. In doing so, I operate at the intersections of 'objective' empiricism of social scientists and the rejection of fieldwork, statistical generalizations and essentialism prevalent among postmodern scholars. On the one hand, I am convinced that the methodological fetishism of numerical and quantifiable data should be countered, as pure objectivity does not exist since each investigation is coloured in some way by the chosen frameworks, methods and analytical frameworks. On the other hand, the focus on textual representations rather than empirical fieldwork among humanities scholars does not acknowledge personal motives, meaning-making and cultural repertoires of distinctly situated individuals. In addition, the lack of reflection on methodology in many theses and peer-reviewed articles in the humanities can be misleading.
- 4 TouchGraph no longer works after Facebook changed its policy on data access and its application programming interface (API) in May 2015. This change again illustrates the volatility of digital culture and the great impact software and platforms have on research and everyday practices.

## Questions

1. To what extent can we understand the online and offline world as separate entities?
2.  what extent do you use social media platforms to relate to cultural difference? Research your friendship networks on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and assess whether they reflect your neighbourhood, school or city. Are you connected with people who share your background (gender, age, race, social class, religion, location) and interests? Or are you in touch with people who are unlike you? Or both?
3. What are the pros and cons of empirical fieldwork with research participants, and what are the pros and cons of digital data driven research?