Abstract
This commentary provides critical reflections on a number of challenges related to research methodology and ethics when studying organized racism in online environments. Based on ongoing fieldwork of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR) in Sweden, I ask three critical questions about researching the neo-Nazi organization and organized racism more generally: (1) How do we produce valid knowledge of these ‘closed’ groups in their ‘open’ online spaces? What are the limitations of our research on hidden social life when we only have access to what they want us to know? (2) Why and for whom are we producing research on these groups? Or, put another way, what ethical considerations and problems related to intent and research agendas arise in studies of neo-Nazism and other forms of organized racism? (3) What is the emotional labour involved in studying these groups for the researcher and how might it be used in a productive manner?

Keywords
emotional labour, media practices, neo-Nazism, Nordic Resistance Movement, organized racism, research ethics, violent extremism

This commentary provides critical reflections on a number of challenges related to research methodology and ethics when studying organized racism in online environments. Based on ongoing fieldwork of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR) in Sweden, I ask three
critical questions about researching the neo-Nazi organization and organized racism more generally: (1) How do we produce valid knowledge of these ‘closed’ groups in their ‘open’ online spaces? What are the limitations of our research on hidden social life when we only have access to what they want us to know? (2) Why and for whom are we producing research on these groups? Or, put another way, what ethical considerations and problems related to intent and research agendas arise in studies of neo-Nazism and other forms of organized racism? (3) What is the emotional labour involved in studying these groups for the researcher and how might it be used in a productive manner?

In posing these questions, I am heavily inspired by the work of US ethnographer Kathleen Blee who has dedicated decades of her academic life to studying the women of Ku Klux Klan and committed herself to continuously reflecting on the dilemmas, emotional undergirding and personal costs of doing this. I draw on her ethnographic writings to help me reflect on the reasons and implications of finding myself in a situation in which I am reluctant to start writing about the collected empirical material, and instead continuously find myself writing about having to write about the material.

My reflections take their starting point in an ongoing case study of the online media practices of the militant neo-Nazi organization NMR, which forms part of a broader interdisciplinary project on violent extremism and digital media in Sweden. They are articulated at the end of an intensive 6-month period of conducting fieldwork in the online universe of the organization. Studying NMR through methods inspired by digital ethnography has so far involved reading the organization’s news articles, literature and manifestos; listening to and watching its leaders and members in weekly podcasts and webcasts; following members and supporters on Twitter; and habituating myself with the music – both the traditional genres and new expressions of White power music – that saturate the wide repertoire of online media currently operating under the NMR banner. Fieldwork has been conducted only in open online spaces. To remain anonymous and avoid direct interactions with interlocutors – an inherent contradiction to the principles and ethos of ethnography which I develop below – the choice was made not to seek access to and collect data from digital spaces that require fake accounts or requesting access to closed communication channels such as VK and Telegram. I focused my efforts on getting inside the online universe of the organization in an attempt to understand the cultural, political and social expressions and practices inhabiting this field while staying at a distance. The fieldwork was structured around a weekly, in some periods daily, engagement with the field – a process involving the routinized online practices of up-dating, exploring, tagging and archiving (Postill and Pink, 2012) and of keeping a field diary of the observations made, while I, for reasons unpacked below, needed to break these routines and take time-outs from the fieldwork on a regular basis. Finally, I consider the research undertaken in the study to dovetail on a broader shift in research on the nexus between media and social movements towards the study of media practices and ecologies (Mattoni, 2017; Stephansen and Trerè, 2019). Such an approach asks us to complicate what we understand to be the object of analysis in our research and to consider this as something else or more than multimodal ‘texts’. It is thus worth noticing that the object of analysis in the study informing these reflections was not racist discourse or representations in online spaces but rather the media practices of organized racists online. Examining routinized media practices across media ecologies requires spending
time among the actors who inhabit this field and in the ‘natural environment’ where such practices unfold and evolve. The mix of qualitative methods put to use in the project can thus also be considered an extension of digital ethnography in the sense there is an element of long-term immersion involved.

The limited yet growing body of empirical studies focusing explicitly on ultranationalist and neo-Nazi movements is predominantly externalist in the sense that it tends to rely on textual analysis of publicly available data such as social media content, newsletters, speeches, flyers or police and criminal records (see, for example, Author removed 2015; Ekman, 2018; Kompatsiaris and Mylonas, 2015). Only to a limited extent do we see studies that are grounded in ethnographic inquiry and the internalist perspectives we gain through interviews, life history methods and participant observation, whether in covert or overt form (for exceptions, see Linden and Klandermans, 2007; Kimmel, 2007; Virchow, 2007, that all follow the tenets of ethnography). We might also understand the work of Wåg (2010) based on a dataset of hacked emails as a variety of internalist research with an explicit anti-racist agenda. Examples of covert research in which the researcher infiltrates communities and poses as sympathizer are scarce (see, for example, Lauder, 2003). Overt participant observation, on the contrary, underpins the work of Blee (2002) and Ezekiel (2002) who in their long-term engagement with white supremacists in the US remained open about their anti-racist research agendas and personal political orientations with respondents. A recent and notable exception to the rule that researchers tend to forego direct contact with actors on this political vector is the work of Benjamin Teitelbaum (2017) who with his collaborative ethnography with actors on the neo-nationalist music scene in the Nordic countries provides a rare insider perspective. Contrary to Blee, Teitelbaum rejects the anti-racist research agenda and sets out to understand rather than undermine his subjects. He argues that by writing about radical nationalists in a way that is free from condemnation and admonitions, for example, avoiding labels such as ‘racist’ or ‘fascist’, he is ‘denying readers their expectations and challenge them to approach the topic with curiosity’ (p. 12).

If neither of these options seem feasible or attractive, online observations might usefully be considered as part of the cocktail of different qualitative methods, which together can be seen to constitute a digital or ‘remote ethnography’ (Postill, 2016) to study those we dare not or do not wish to have direct research rapport with. Ethnographic observations offer us a systematic and in-depth mode of inquiry into what in some cases constitute both violent and dangerous groups and a means of conducting our ‘fieldwork safely from afar’ (p. x). In this regard, we might raise questions as to what insider-positions are on offer drawing on this method and what ‘lurking’ or ‘observing from the margins’ (Virchow, 2007) mean in a context where radical national groups and networks have made the journey from alternative media in obscure corners of the Internet to mainstream social media (Author removed 2017). And in the context of a political climate around the world in which researchers of these groups increasingly have no choice but to turn to remote or covert forms of engagement to ensure personal safety (Postill, 2015; see also Lauder, 2003, for a discussion of research areas in which deceit and covert research might be justified). Qualitative ethnographic research in general, but perhaps studies on violent groups and movements from such a perspective in particular, are fraught with methodological and ethical dilemmas. The dilemmas of open/closed and inside/outside are at the heart of the first question I wish to pose.
Studying closed groups in open online spaces

How do we produce valid knowledge of these ‘closed’ groups in their ‘open’ online spaces? Unless venturing into the closed-off territories of the dark or deep web or making our ways into private conversations and threads on Telegram or VK, we have access only to public discourse sanctioned by the organization, and thus only to that which is deemed appropriate for public spaces. In the case of NMR, this includes, for example, articles and discussions on Nordfront.com, videos on one of the organization’s YouTube channels or radio programmes within the wide repertoire of podcasts operating under the NMR umbrella available, for example, on Spreaker.com. Discourse in these spaces represents what Blee (2007) has referred to as ‘a sanitized version of Nazism’ (p. 15). In the case of NMR, content has been polished and tailored to dodge allegations of illegal hate speech and their shows are carefully edited to avoid being censored and removed. In the various podcasts run by the organization, heiling (Nazi-saluting) and other expressions that would fall under hate speech are ‘beeped’ in post-production. We see this joshing and conscious play around hate speech most explicitly in the podcast *Mer än Ord* (More than words). In this show, which is hosted by and feature the ‘foot soldiers’ of the organization, those undertaking the day-to-day activism in the streets such as handing out flyers and organizing events in the various nests, the tone is considerably harsher and more unruly compared with many of the other shows. In this live pod, the hosts explicitly push the limits of what can and cannot be said on air carefully toeing the lines of legality in Sweden. By engaging an ‘intern’ whose only job is to beep in real time, they claim their right to express and profess what the establishment considers hate speech and at the same time stretch the limits of their freedom of expression. The presence of hate speech, although inaudible, thus takes a very central role – it is performed for us as listeners and turned into a waggish game of jamming the system.

The podcast *Ledarperspektiv* (Leader perspectives) provides another, yet different, example of a ‘sanitized’ and strategic communication effort from the organization. The podcast, which is dedicated solely to one-way and top-down education on the political programme and plans of the organization from the very top of the organization to the members, is rife with inflammatory, ‘extremist’ and dare I say exhilarating discourse, skilfully veiled in mainstream political rhetoric and form that we might as researchers of communication and the power of language find ourselves attracted to.

But what does such empirical material allow us to examine except for self-representations and the nature of parroted slogans and rehearsed rhetoric carefully crafted and tailored for existing and potential members? What is the quality and validity of the material we collect from such digital spaces and what can we infer from ‘texts’ intended to persuade and provoke? These questions confront us with the limitations of our research when we only have access to publicly available data and perhaps most unsettling when we have access only to that which they want us to know and even strategically aspire to communicate to political opponents/enemies, researchers included. Not rarely do the activists in NMR’s podcasts, for example, signal that they are aware of the presence of journalists, researchers or police listening in on their shows. Occasionally, the hosts even take the opportunity to thank the Swedish Intelligence Services (SÄPO), the Defence Research Agency (FOI) or journalists and researchers who they consider to, through
their work, help raise awareness of the organization and national socialism more generally to the broader population.

Traditionally, researchers have had difficulties accessing ultranationalist communities as ‘extremists want to hide their identities and obscure the activities and goals of their movements, wary of arrest or of being attacked by antiracist activists’ (Blee and Creasp, 2010: 278). It seems, however, that this is of little concern to NMR. On the contrary, in the opening sections of the first episode of More than Words (4 February 2018), each host provides detailed information – full name, city of residence, position in the organization as group leader, number of years they have been member, and so on. At the end of episode 2, the hosts communicate their mobile phone numbers in order for people to make donations. In the various shows, activists discuss the pros and cons of this level of transparency arguing that in order to gain the trust of the Swedish people, for them to put their faith in NMR, they need to demonstrate the courage to identify themselves: ‘You can take it to the books, we are honest, which make us trustworthy’ (Mer än Ord #2). Others base the decision to come forward on the assumption that they have nothing to fear anymore. This openness and boldness is a significant shift from how Lööw (2015) only a few years back described SMR as anonymous and surrounded by secrecy (p. 69). Conducting research in this area today is therefore not about revealing that which is hidden or exposing extremist beliefs and actions as NMR members fully, publicly and proudly adhere to the ideologies of Hitler and the Third Reich in a strong belief that their time has come once again.

We might therefore ask ourselves whether we are ultimately assisting a largely marginalized and until recently relatively unknown group in gaining wider attention and end up hosting what NMR members themselves refer to as their ‘coming out party’ of the 2018 election year in Sweden. Academic research as such might not produce widespread attention or necessarily draws the attention of those we study, especially if we publish only in academic journals behind pay walls. This might be more likely, however, when we as academics give public talks and interviews on our research areas or author state public reports (SOU) in efforts to pursue the so-called third task of public engagement as stipulated by Swedish law regulating universities’ activities. Do we as researchers add to the process of making that which is marginal, mainstream? This prods questions around the intended and unintended audiences of our work and writings on these groups.

**Research ethics and agendas**

*So, why and for whom* are we producing research on these groups? For whom do we generate knowledge or, put another way, what ethical considerations arise in studies of new forms of organized racism? Are we providing these groups with yet another platform for visibility and attention? How do we avoid becoming megaphones or mouthpieces for the organization? Surely, the answer to this question depends on the stance taken. But while Teitelbaum’s non-judgmental ‘understanding approach’ might be considered particularly open to this risk, I want to argue that shedding light on NMR and similar groups come with a host of unresolved ethical dilemmas regardless of what motivates and drives our research.
For example, a seemingly insolvable ethical dilemma pertains to how we through our research risk providing activists with coherent stories and narratives that ultimately encourages and strengthens their commitment. Literary theory suggests that people make sense of events in their lives and the historical past by placing these in narratives. At what point then might studies of racial or religious intolerance help those committed to such beliefs construct a narrative that makes sense of their own participation? (Blee, 2003: 20). Our narratives about them and the attention and resources we dedicate to their activities indicate or affirm activists in their own ideas of their importance in making history and their place in history. Is it possible that, although we may seek to disempower and point to the contradictions, inconsistencies and dangers of their ideologies that the mere act of eliciting and singling them out in our research is empowering in itself?

This question prods reflections as to our rapport with and obligations towards those we bring into view with our scholarship. In the case of NMR, a relatively small and easily identifiable group of men constitutes the top of the organization. Their names and faces are regularly published by journalists and far-right monitoring organizations in the country such as Expo. But when it comes to research, to what extent does the anonymity, consent, reciprocity, transparency and respect for the dignity and well-being of subjects apply when writing about groups who so clearly disavow the dignity and humanity of others? If we forego basic ethical principles such as anonymity and informed consent, our research is underpinned by the implicit assumption that a different ethics operates when studying racists compared with studying, for example, the victims of racism. Lauder (2003) argues that when studying groups on the fringe of society, and the racist right in particular, we need to carefully weigh the needs of society versus the needs of the individual. In some cases, he asserts, if the research produces results that can be used to rectify a harmful social situation, such as reducing violence or abuse, ‘we are morally obligated to conduct studies that encourages positive change towards egalitarianism’ (p. 193).

Violent extremism, processes of radicalization and how this relates to media are currently ‘hot topics’ with funding bodies. In Sweden, new research centres dedicated to these issues, such as the Segerstedt Institute at Gothenburg University, are popping up just as state bodies such as the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) are earmarking funding schemes for mapping and researching anti-democratic groups and their propaganda. But what happens to critical research if or when this interest diminishes? Or maybe the question needs to be turned around and we should instead be concerned with how to remain critical independent researchers in a time when research money is actually to be found in this area and hence also less so in others. When our research is funded and focused by a state apparatus whose threat assessment and definition of what constitutes extremism and anti-democratic forces we inevitably buy into, we might ponder whether we are ‘fighting enemies of democracy’ or lending ourselves to the production and reproduction of the kind of fear and sentiments of societal instability and threat that ultimately undermines democracy.

As funding is increasingly channelled in this direction, we therefore also need to ask uncomfortable questions as to the personal reasons and agendas we have for producing texts on these groups and how to produce research that benefits more than our own publication records and careers. For what purposes and what audiences are we publishing on these matters? The state? Police authorities? Or anti-fascist/racist organizations and
activists? Is it ‘enough’ to be driven by an imperative to understand, not undermine as proposed by Teitelbaum? If we disagree, questions then follow as to how we, perhaps not as individual researchers but as a research collective, can or even have an obligation to create a research agenda that is of direct use and relevance to anti-racist efforts.

**The emotional labour of conducting ‘risky research’**

Blee (1998, 2003) describes how the emotional labour involved in studying organized racism over time is raw and on the surface. Critical reflections of this dimension of our work are important as the emotional and personal life of the researcher ‘form the hidden substructure of research’ (Blee, 2003: 21). Despite being a stable of informal conversations among researchers, at least in some research environments, issues around the emotional work and personal exhaustion of studying organized racism are rarely brought centre stage or discussed in our writings. According to Blee (2003), all researchers, but especially those drawing on qualitative methods, ‘need to consider and discuss with colleagues, students and friends the anger, resentment, fatigue, indignation, annoyance, aggravation, outrage, and irritation that are evoked by entanglement with their subjects, whether alive or long dead, whether anonymous or known personally’ (p. 21). We need to do this as we are more honest as scholars when we acknowledge with many different ways in which emotions are ‘intertwined with who, what and how we study’ (Blee, 2003).

In my own experience, aspiring to stay in the field, to spend time immersing myself in the life world of national socialists, to hang out purposelessly in their online spheres to get a sense of the everyday dynamics that play out here – all of which are considered essential elements of online ethnography (see, for example, Postill, 2016; Postill and Pink, 2012) – was a surprisingly uncomfortable and emotionally vexing experience that proved hard to commit to over time. Over the 6-month period, I tried out different strategies of organizing the fieldwork along the double axes of being alone/private or in public and of by short but deep engagement (condensed engagement over shorter time periods) or constant but fragmented engagement (a continuous/sustained flow but in small doses). Yet, regardless of how I tackled task, I ended up feeling caught between a rock and a hard place.

I tried isolating myself for longer periods of 5 to 7 days at a time to allow myself to dig into the field site and work with the data without any disturbances, thus ‘removing myself physically from everyday tasks and responsibilities that would otherwise compete for my time’ (Boellstorff et al., 2012). But ‘staying with’ the material, and immersing myself fully and undisturbed in the field as prescribed by the principles of ethnographic research left me despondent, uninspired, intimidated and alone. Instead, I tried out a strategy in which I made the field site part of everyday life, embedding it into my daily routines of commuting and going about my daily business – watching NMR videos, listing to podcasts and music on the bike, on the train, in the office or while doing the dishes. Instead of isolation and solitude, I tried talking to colleagues, friends and family and essentially everyone who cared to listen to my two cents on neo-Nazis in Sweden and their activities. However, I found that letting their voices and vocabulary seep into my everyday life and personal space affected both my personal life and general outlook on the world to the extent that it
became numbing and yet again analytically unproductive. Ultimately, exposing yourself on a daily basis to hateful, racist, anti-Semitic, misogynist and despotic language and imagery, in the podcasts often presented in a jokingly and intendedly entertaining manner with catchy jingles and jokes as interludes, is, in the long run, hurtful on a personal level. This sense of exposing oneself to hurt was in turn propelled and reinforced by a sense of having blurred the boundaries between what Bengtsson (2014) calls ‘traveling to the field’ and ‘leaving the field’ and consequently of having voluntarily invited national socialists into my home and my everyday life.

Stina Bengtsson (2014) argues that ethnographic work in online environments always ‘takes place in two simultaneously present contexts: the examined culture online and the everyday life of the researcher’ (p. 866). Closeness and proximity to the culture studied represent ideals in ethnographic methods. Traditionally, ethnography has involved travelling to ‘foreign cultures’ as researchers leave their everyday lives behind to obtain closeness to and deep understandings of distant field sites. Yet, one of the key dimensions of online ethnography is the fact that the researcher ‘does not have to (physically) leave his or her home environment’ (p. 867) but have the opportunity through a journey that is experiential rather than physical (Hine, 2000) to create closeness to that which is distant and to do so from the settings of the office desks, the home, or elsewhere and thus, in essence, basically everywhere. This, Bengtsson (2014) argues, requires us to consider the importance of distance in fieldwork and ethnographic methods in addition to the much-emphasized dimension of closeness (and proximity). When being in the field becomes possible all the time and everywhere, leaving or ‘travelling from’ the field becomes as important as travelling to your field site. Taking the principles and ideals of ethnography with us into the study of online environments thus potentially creates a research context in which our everyday lives and offline social worlds as embodied researchers, situated in a particular physical and emotional context, constantly interfere with the online fieldwork and vice versa. Instead of hiding or seeking to eliminate this dimension of our research, we might look for what possible new insights meditations on the interplay between these two simultaneously present contexts might bring. Without disregarding the limitations of such a dual or in-between position and discussing how it might impair our abilities to truly immerse ourselves, we should consider what it might add to our research and look for ways of sharing and using these insights productively.

The dimension of emotional labour in this area also involves fear of personal safety and that of those close to you. With increasing demands for visibility of social science research and for researchers to publish in open access journals and communicate their research in online media in order to reach an audience beyond the academy, researchers also become more vulnerable and susceptible to harassment from the groups and networks they study. No doubt scholars of violent and confrontational groups face very real physical risks (Blee and Creasp, 2010; Virchow, 2007). In Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries, we have seen a rise in threats, rape threats, online harassment, (cyber)stalking, personal attacks and smear campaigns against researchers across disciplines engaged in various forms of sensitive, controversial or so-called ‘risky research areas’ (Marwick et al., 2016). In Sweden, the subject areas most likely to produce hate towards journalists and researchers alike are gender equality, integration and migration policy (Bladini, 2017).
Although we might be studying and writing about these ‘risky research areas’ from behind our desks, as scholars of contemporary neo-Nazi mobilization in Sweden at least, our objects of analysis consist of groups, networks, organizations and grassroots politicians who are present and increasingly visible in our immediate local environment. This is true not least of the NMR whose public ‘events’ on squares and in front of supermarkets are all the more frequent and whose marches are increasingly well attended. Within my subject area, media and communication studies, a growing number of scholars are engaged in empirical studies of the media practices and strategies of ultranationalist groups whose presence not only online but also in the streets has become customary across the country. Many of these groups have made it one of their primary concerns to monitor, map, ridicule, harass and target researchers and journalists who publish or give public talks on the subject matter.

We therefore also see a trend towards making research and researchers invisible. When, for example, the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI, 2007) in January 2017 chose to anonymize all contributing authors in a report on hate speech in digital environments, they set an ominous precedent for publications strategies in this area. One might argue that there is a certain symbolism involved when FOI – a public institution built to orchestrate resistance and defend Swedish society – resorts to protective anonymization instead of standing up to online hate and harassment and supports those who participate in the public conversation on this sensitive topic. Soon after FOI’s decision, another important administrative authority under the Ministry of Defence, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), followed suit and released a report encouraging journalists reporting on these issues to stop using bylines.

Such developments add additional layers to the emotional labour involved in studying hate groups and organized racism. It risks signalling to those who wish to openly take part in the debate that doing so – even when working for the state – is a personal choice and responsibility and consequently that potential harm is of one’s own making. The question is how we, once we acknowledge that these emotionally taxing dimensions may be part of a research process, instead of turning such reflections into a narcissistic navel-gazing exercise, might use this as a productive force and perhaps even a collective endeavour to address and discuss together in our research community. We need to make the emotional labour and not least the dimension pertaining to fear for one’s personal safety a common matter for university departments and managements, and not a problem for the individual researcher or research team to deal with. The fact that researchers conducting sensitive or risky research are increasingly susceptible to online harassment and related threats or merely face the constant fear of harassment have a chilling effects on the type of research that is conducted (Marwick et al., 2016). It may also, however, impact on whether research is produced on these issues in the first place and who undertakes this work. In the current research (and political) environment, who chooses to opt out and abandon this research topic altogether, who are silenced and at what point and with what consequences are we self-censoring ourselves?

**Funding**
Notes

1. Information removed.
2. VK is a Russia-based social media platform. Telegram is a security-enforced messaging system (notorious, for example, for providing Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters with a communicative platform).
3. Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR) is tied to a string of attacks on ethnic and religious minorities, homosexuals and antifascists and anti-racist activists. Most recently, NMR members have been charged with arson attacks against refugee centres and politicians and convicted for a series of bomb attacks against a left-wing venue in Gothenburg.
4. The deep web refers to the parts of the Internet that cannot be indexed by traditional search engines, whereas the dark web refers to online spaces that require specific software, configurations or authorization to access.
5. The strictly hierarchical organization is structured around seven geographical zones, so-called nests.
6. Prior to becoming NMR in 2016, when the organization was banned in Finland and more or less dissolved in Denmark, the Swedish branch of the organization was called the Swedish Resistance Movement (SMR).

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References


