Journal of Organizational Ethnography

Verbal, visual and affective work when chairing digital meetings: a micro-ethnographic study

Anna Uhlin and Lucia Crevani
Department of Organization and Management, Mälardalen University, Västerås, Sweden

Received 8 June 2025
Revised 17 September 2025
18 November 2025
22 December 2025
Accepted 9 January 2026

Abstract

Purpose – Given that digital meetings are common, it is concerning that we still largely lack knowledge of how digital meetings are sociomaterially performed in assemblages of humans and technologies. This article advances our understanding of how digital work meetings unfold in practice. In particular, we zoom in on the practice of chairing, which makes meetings different from other interactions at work. The study therefore more broadly contributes to advancing our understanding of what kind of sociomaterial work is done in digitalized workplaces.

Design/methodology/approach – To this end, we mobilize a sociomaterial practice lens to surface the ongoing accomplishment of work meetings. To come close to the enactment of the practice of chairing, we adopted a digital micro-ethnographic approach and focused on series of digital meetings in the support units of a global organization.

Findings – We show that verbal, visual and affective work is performed when chairing digital meetings. These three types of work are done simultaneously and constitute the premises for each other. We also identify six characteristics of chairing in digital meetings: sociomaterial stiffness, dilution, glitches, blindness, conformity and amplification. In addition, we show that observing the "micro" enables us to study the unfolding of practice and the doing of digital meetings in their own right, thereby producing a different kind of understanding of digitalized workplaces.

Originality/value – The approach mobilized enables us to go beyond understanding new digitalized work practices merely in light of traditional work practices and provides one way of instead understanding them on their own terms.

Keywords Digital meetings, Sociomateriality, Chairing, Micro-ethnography

Paper type Research article

Introduction

A colored circle with your initials, your waist-up body with a blurry image of your kitchen in the background, your voice, and your strings of text in multiple meeting chat conversations are just some of the many modalities in which you as human participants make yourselves present in work meetings nowadays. In contemporary digitalized workplaces, the work meeting is no longer mainly a co-located meeting but rather comes in different forms enabled by different kinds of assemblages of humans and technologies. Although there is a rather extensive amount of both quantitative and qualitative research on the introduction of digital technologies in meetings, not least from experiences and research conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (see for instance Hall *et al.*, 2024; Standaert *et al.*, 2025) we seem to be stuck understanding digital meetings in light of co-located meetings rather than on their own terms – that is, in relation to the assemblages of humans and technologies that perform a digital meeting. This also means that the digital meeting is often portrayed as lacking compared to co-located meetings.

© Anna Uhlin and Lucia Crevani. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at Link to the terms of the CC BY 4.0 licence.

This paper forms part of a special section "Organizational Ethnography and Practice Theories in the Digital Transformation of Work", guest edited by Katja Schönian and Diana Ayeh.

Funding: This work was supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (award number: P21-0235).

Journal of Organizational Ethnography
Vol. 15 No. 2, 2026
pp. 187-200
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2046-6757
p-ISSN: 2046-6749
DOI 10.1108/JOE-06-2025-0079

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Given that digital meetings are now common – for some categories of employees, even the norm rather than the exception – it is concerning that we still largely lack knowledge of how digital meetings are sociomaterially (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) performed in assemblages of humans and technologies. Few researchers have to date started to unpack the digital meeting in this way (exceptions are Alotaibi, 2015; MacLeod *et al.*, 2019; Uhlin, 2022). Whereas, for instance, issues of zoom fatigue (Döring *et al.*, 2022) and multitasking (Cao *et al.*, 2021) have received considerable attention, the issue of how the important practice of chairing is accomplished in the digital space, where there is no obvious spatial position, such as the high end of a table, or artifact, such as a chairman's gavel, that supports the chair in doing the chairing, has remained largely unanswered. This is quite surprising given that the practice of chairing – that is, of facilitating a group movement through a more or less explicit agenda during a limited period of time – is claimed to be central to work meetings, making interactions in meetings different from interactions in other kinds of conversations at work (Angouri and Marra, 2010).

In this article, we therefore aim at advancing our understanding of what kind of sociomaterial work is performed in the accomplishment of digital work meetings, particularly in the enactment of the practice of chairing. More specifically, the research question we want to answer is: what kind of sociomaterial work is involved in the practice of chairing digital meetings? We attend to this question by mobilizing a sociomaterial practice lens to surface the ongoing accomplishment of work (Barad, 2003, 2007; Gherardi, 2015; Orlikowski and Scott, 2016) and, more specifically, chairing.

To develop knowledge on the sociomaterial work performed for accomplishing the practice of chairing, we need to come close to the doing of the work itself, and we therefore mobilize an ethnographic approach. More specifically, we zoom in on the enactment of the practice of chairing in digital meetings in the support units of a global organization in which digital meetings are vital for performing work, since these units are organized in teams that span several countries. Hence, in this context, purely co-located meetings are often not an option. Rather, it is the digital meetings that enable the performance of work in the digitalized workplace. In such a context, conventional ethnography is challenging, and there is a need for considering the paradigmatic shift in the epistemology of ethnography that the study of such contemporary workplaces entails (Grigoryan, 2024; Karhapää *et al.*, 2025). We therefore adopted a digital micro-ethnographic approach (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022) and focused on series of recurring fully digital and hybrid work meetings (here referred to as *digital meetings*).

The contribution of the paper is twofold: first, we develop a novel understanding of digital meetings beyond comparing them with co-located meetings, detailing three kinds of sociomaterial work through which chairing is enacted and what characterizes them. Second, we connect a micro-ethnographic approach with the shift in the epistemology of ethnography in digitalized workplaces (Grigoryan, 2024; Karhapää *et al.*, 2025), contributing to the discussion on ethnographic research practices suitable for studying the contemporary workplace.

The article is structured as follows: in the next section, we introduce the meeting as a phenomenon with particular focus on the practice of chairing. A section presenting our theoretical approach follows, after which our methodological choices are discussed. Next, in our analysis, we bring to the fore the sociomaterial work done in enacting the practice of chairing in digital meetings. Finally, we conclude by discussing our contributions.

Chairing as a central practice in digital meetings

The work meeting is a pervasive communicative practice gathering humans for a purpose (Schwartzman, 1989; Boden, 1994) and enabling focused social interaction (Hall *et al.*, 2019, 2024) in which a common focus of attention is established and maintained through talk and body language (Goffman, 1963). van Vree (1999) argues that such a practice springs from the need to organize collective action when larger numbers of people become mutually dependent and power differences become less prominent.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

The literature has brought to the fore the work done by the chair as distinguishing meetings from other communicative work events (Angouri and Marra, 2010), functioning as a "switchboard" (Boden, 1994) with institutional authority to facilitate interaction (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). The assumption has been that chairing is a practice performed by a chair. In this article, we instead consider the issue of who and what enacts the practice of chairing as an empirical question. This means that other human and nonhuman actors may also participate in such an enactment. Activities constituting the practice of chairing that make people realize a meeting is going on are the managing of opening and closure, task management, agenda management, floor management or turn allocation and sanctioning inappropriate conduct (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009; Angouri and Marra, 2010; Abram, 2017). Chairing can thus be conceptualized as being about *facilitating a group movement through a more or less explicit agenda during a limited period of time*. Moving from rather unruly parliamentary meetings toward what we might call business and workplace meetings (van Vree, 1999; Hall *et al.*, 2019), chairing has also come to encompass ensuring that participants behave according to the demands of the meeting order (van Vree, 1999). For instance, as suggested by Weller (1960), quoted in Hall *et al.* (2019):

> The chairman [sic] may look at his watch manifestly, then pass the speaker a note with a reminder, and when this still does not work, interrupt and give him a very short time to finish his speech / . . . / This should be said by the chairman courteously and with an expression of regret.

As brought to the fore in the quote, the practice of chairing has affective dimensions (Gherardi, 2009), in the sense that there are bodily mediated capacities to affect and be affected at play (Gherardi, 2019). Affect is that which is sensed when we encounter humans and nonhumans – when we inexplicably sense an atmosphere (Brennan, 2004; Fotaki *et al.*, 2017). It elicits from bodily experiences and is contagious but unspoken (Fotaki *et al.*, 2017). The practice of chairing is thus always a matter of situational, contextual and relational unfolding.

We see this, for instance, in the accomplishing of turn-taking in formal meetings, which comprises self-selection by speakers, allocation of turns by the chair, and co-authoring through extending on previous speakers, thereby overriding a formal speakers list (Boden, 1994). Traditionally, nonverbal actions directed toward the speaker, such as eye contact and nodding, have been used for clearing the space for one's turn (Ford, 2008). Turn-taking in meetings includes, in other words, both verbal and bodily expressions: more or less subtly raised hands, or a slight nod in combination with eye contact, for instance.

Chairing has also traditionally been enacted from a specific position in the physical room. The chair stepped down from an often exalted position, distanced from the table to a chair placed at the table as meetings became less formal and the responsibility for moving the meeting forward became more collective (van Vree, 1999; Hall *et al.*, 2019). The placement of participants around the table has, however, often been significant, with the end traditionally a place of authority where the chair sits (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). This kind of arrangement becomes less consistent in hybrid meetings and disappears completely in digital meetings. Chairing is no longer supported by spatial configurations that direct participants and enable the chair to be in a privileged position. How, then, is chairing enabled?

Understanding chairing as a sociomaterial practice

In order to develop knowledge on the sociomaterial work performed for enacting the practice of chairing, we lean on practice-based studies and conceptualize practices as what constitutes work and organizing: not only patterns of actions we can observe but also what performs the ongoing reproduction of the world (Gherardi, 2009). Further, in building on a sociomaterial understanding of practices, we acknowledge that both humans and technologies produce realities (Gherardi, 2019), and meeting practices are accomplished in the entanglement of the social and the material (cf Orlikowski and Scott, 2008, 2016). Few meeting scholars have mobilized such a framework for researching meetings, with exceptions being, for instance,

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Alotaibi (2015), MacLeod *et al.* (2019), and Uhlin (2022). Alotaibi (2015) in particular shows the local emergence of human and technological agency, thereby highlighting how mobilizing the same meeting technology does not necessarily result in similar meeting practices. MacLeod *et al.* (2019), in the context of medical education, discuss how different forms of exposures in digital meetings and videoconferences can be conceptualized as sociomaterial practices, which, they argue, demand an understanding of digital meetings as more than just an extension of the traditional meeting. Uhlin (2022) also mobilizes a sociomaterial framework, showing how digital meetings are continuously enacted sociomaterial spaces where assumed frames for the meeting (for instance, shared space and purpose) are not matters-of-fact but rather a matter of continuous sociomaterial work. In addition, Laube's (2025) recent article on synthetic involvement brings forward the importance of the materiality of places and (human) bodies for understanding the performance of digital co-presence in meetings. Together, this literature highlights the benefits of a practice perspective for researching digital meetings and, not least, the importance of taking matter and materiality seriously in research on digital work practices.

As argued by Ford *et al.* (2017), "[m]atter is not mute and inert but agentive, immanent and lively", which also means that "objects and materials often bite back at us and resist our attempts to envelope them with our discourses" (Nicolini, 2012). We more specifically focus on sociomaterial assemblages performing the meeting rather than analyzing how the social and the material in a meeting affect each other. We pay attention to which assemblages or, as expressed by Barad (2007), which configurations, out of a world of relations, emerge and with what effects. We thereby refrain from treating digital meeting technologies as tools (Döring *et al.*, 2022) and instead view them as co-producers of the meeting (Barad, 2003, 2007; Gherardi, 2015; Orlikowski and Scott, 2016).

Method

To explore what kind of sociomaterial work is done in accomplishing the practice of chairing, we turned to a micro-ethnographic approach to "develop a rich understanding of how the particular [sociomaterially] unfolds" (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022). In such an approach, intense multimodal fieldwork is performed in close dialogue with theory to produce high-quality empirical material (for instance, not only detailed but also focused and directed observation notes and recordings that capture the aspects of the phenomenon that are of interest, such as its materiality). Ethnographic research conventionally leans on principles of "being there" (Geertz, 1988; Burawoy, 1991) and that "we cannot really learn a lot about what 'actually happens' or about 'how things work' in organizations without doing the intensive type of close-observational or participative research that is central to ethnographic endeavour" (Watson, 2011). However, studying digital work such as digital meetings entails a specific kind of endeavor (Karhapää *et al.*, 2025) that combines traditional ethnography with a new sensibility to the sociality and materiality of the digital when producing and analyzing the empirical material (Grigoryan, 2024). Hence, in order to understand "how things work," we engaged in digital spaces (Grigoryan, 2024; Karhapää *et al.*, 2025) and studied series of repeated meetings that enabled us to reach an understanding of what those specific series of meetings were about and how they were performed. The choice of what to observe was therefore not dictated by the digital or the nondigital being more or less real but rather by wanting to be present where the phenomenon – chairing digital meetings – unfolds (Grigoryan, 2024) in a way that enabled us to give a rich account of the particular thanks to enough understanding of the context in which it takes place (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022). Hence, we opted for series of digital meetings that had something in common but also were different in some respect (see Table 1).

The intention with this design was not to compare the meetings as such but rather to be able to see contrasting performances (for instance, the effect of the use of cameras) that could function as a springboard for theoretical reflection and rich conceptualization (Bell *et al.*,

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Table 1. The teams at multiCorp

	Team alpha	Team omega	Team gamma	Team delta
Responsibilities	Develop and facilitate internal training for managers	Recruitment and talent management	Internal training and competence development	Global strategic and operational learning and development
No of members incl. mgr	Five	Approx. 18	Four	Approx. 27
Type of meeting	Weekly team meeting	Weekly team meeting	Extended daily management meeting	Bi-monthly extended community meetings
Level of meeting digitalization	Fully digital	Hybrid	Fully digital	Fully digital
Meeting hardware	Laptops, phones	Laptops, phones, speakers, projector and screen	Laptops	Laptops
Meeting software	Skype	Skype	Teams	Teams
Use of cameras	Only the manager	Seldom	Always, with few exceptions	On and off (except chair, who always use camera)

2022). To be noticed is that "micro" refers to several aspects of this ethnographic approach (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022): an interest in observing the "micro" (meaning interactions in which work is done), engagement in fieldwork during a short time (in our case the effective time is short, while the duration of fieldwork stretches over a total of five years), limited but comprehensive empirical material produced, detailed accounts of actions and interactions, close analysis of practices and finally also writing the analysis reproducing vignettes as short but comprehensive stories.

The duration of fieldwork was therefore determined by the aim of the study. We observed the selected series of meetings until we felt that we had reached a good understanding of what was done in the meeting and how, noticing that observations were no longer adding variation to how chairing was accomplished and that what we had already observed was further repeated. We also performed analytical work in parallel with fieldwork in that we started reading and thematizing our thus far collected material, and hence our observations were informed by our ongoing reading and analytical work.

In our fieldwork, the first author followed three teams at the multinational company MultiCorp in their respective weekly department meetings, and the second author followed a fourth team at the same company in their bimonthly meetings (that became quarterly meetings after a while). We gained access to these meetings by asking one employee we had previously collaborated with for possible series of meetings to observe and by subsequently explaining to the meeting participants our wish to develop a deeper understanding of digital meetings and obtaining their consent. The ethnographic material we produced consists of a total of 36 meeting observations (documented via video recording when possible, otherwise audio recordings), with the duration ranging from 30 to 130 min. In addition, the material includes 20 interviews and notes from training sessions and other events hosted by different members of the teams. In a micro-ethnographic approach, the observations are the crucial part of fieldwork – interviews and other material provide a complement to better understand what happens in the meetings (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022). The meetings were either fully digital – Team Alpha, Gamma and Delta – or organized in hybrid format with some people participating together from a physical room and others connecting via digital platforms – Team Omega. Besides recordings and transcriptions from meeting observations and interviews, the material also includes detailed reflective notes taken during the meetings [1].

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

In our fieldwork and analysis, we paid attention to what was achieved through doings, thereby refraining from focusing only on actors and objects, or on language alone (Mol, 2002). We explored "a story of practices" (Mol, 2002) by focusing on how humans, technologies, objects and discourse in entanglement reproduce a practice (Gherardi, 2019).The multimodality of the meetings (being fully digital and hybrid, and mobilizing different technologies) challenged the traditional ethnographic methodology and in practice highlighted the epistemological shift for ethnographic research toward combining traditional ethnography with a greater sensibility to the sociality as well as the materiality of the digital as discussed by Grigoryan (2024).

For our analytical work, we were inspired by reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as described by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2020). In line with the reflexive TA framework, we understand themes as actively created by us in the interplay of theoretical underpinnings and empirical material, and not as passively emerging from our material. This meant that we carefully read the detailed observation notes and the transcriptions, looked and listened to recordings, and noted what doings contributed to the practice of chairing in the absence of a common physical room with a table around which to sit and interact. We then discussed how to categorize the different doings that contribute to chairing and concluded that we could divide them into doings related to three different spaces, resulting in three different kinds of work. Then, looking further at how digital technologies play out, we noted that there were instances in which the practice was enacted in ways that were peculiar given the assemblages of technologies and humans that performed the meeting and that affected the moving of the meeting forward. We categorized such instances and labeled them in ways that could portray how they affected the moving of the meeting forward in the three identified kinds of work.

We present our analysis with short vignettes constructed from our observational material (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022). Material from different observations has been combined into consistent stories in a dialogue between fieldwork and theory development. Since we have compressed our rich empirical material into vignettes in which actual events are woven together, the reader is presented with the material needed to understand and value the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Sociomaterial work enacting the practice of chairing

In this section, we focus on the sociomaterial work enacting the practice of chairing, including what characterizes such work due to the meeting being performed digitally. In our analysis, we identified three kinds of work, each with two specific characteristics. First, *verbal work* with the characteristics sociomaterial stiffness and dilution. Second, *visual work* with sociomaterial glitches and blindness. Third, *affective work* with sociomaterial conformity and amplification. For each of them, we start by presenting a vignette constructed from our empirical material.

Verbal work enacting the practice of chairing

> As is often the case in this large global team, there are a couple of newcomers also at this meeting. I find it fascinating how there seems to be a rather rigid structure to how newcomers are introduced during these meetings: first, Alison articulates the need to introduce someone by saying phrases such as "we would like to welcome Sarah to the team", whereby she verbally hands over to the person leading the recruit (often the local team leader), and this person also acknowledges that someone new is to be introduced. Then the recruit, in this case Sarah, presents herself, with a PPT slide visualizing what she says. This presentation ends with expressions of excitement at becoming part of this team and how Sarah looks forward to working with the team. Other participants in different ways welcome Sarah - by written messages in the meeting chat, including emojis, and by differently shaped emojis flying across the screen.
>
> After this introduction, Alison shares on screen an excel file with cells showing the perceived workload of each participant (green for good, yellow for unbalanced, and red for too high). It is time to

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

update it, starting with the participants whose name is on the upper left corner in the document. When Alison says 'let's start', Mustafa knows it is his turn and starts by saying 'green' – he is followed by the person with the name on the cell next to his and this goes on until everyone has given a colour. At this point, Alison opens her MS Planner that visualizes ongoing projects, and the people with projects in Planner reports progress (this time too, the first to start is the one whose project is in the upper left corner of the screen).

As the meeting continues, time is dedicated to longer presentations of different ongoing projects. Shashmi presents an ongoing evaluation project, and for this purpose she has put together a PPT that she shares while speaking. At the end of the 20-minute presentation, there is room for questions. Suddenly there is a lot of activity: someone just speaks out, a couple of people raise their virtual hands, yet others have posted questions in the chat while Shashmi was presenting. When Alison fails to see Aisha's raised virtual hand, Aisha writes a message in the chat. This starts a parallel discussion that Alison notices only after the next presenter has started his slideshow. Alison raises her eyebrows and writes in the chat 'apologies for not noticing you wanted to speak! This is an important topic but not the one we are supposed to focus on today and it seems you have posted many things at once. Let's take this offline later this week'.

Chairing is about facilitating a group movement through a more or less explicit agenda during a limited period of time. Using words to communicate is one prominent way of accomplishing movement in a meeting, and, in our analysis, we saw that facilitating such a movement is accomplished by orchestrating how that which is to be communicated is materialized in talk, in writing or in symbols – that is, by orchestrating the verbal space of the meeting. We call this *verbal work*.

As the vignette shows, the verbal space is orchestrated by granting someone the right to talk when organizing turn-taking. Eye contact and a nod of the head have previously been brought forward as embodied ways of accessing turn-taking (Ford, 2008) – in virtual and hybrid meetings, they may still be performed, but they do not achieve what they used to. Rather, other ways of facilitating movement by orchestrating the verbal space are used. As the vignette shows, the use of the digital hand-raising function is one way of orchestrating the verbal space by making the queue of humans waiting to speak visible and thus organizable by a "first come–first served" principle when chairing. Moreover, documents and their content (a Planner view with tasks, or an Excel file with cells for visualizing individuals' workload) can also drive the talk, moving the meeting forward by orienting the conversation to specific topics and enabling each participant to say something about them. This may support participation if there are cells to fill for everyone or tasks in which people are involved.

Once a participant is granted the right to talk, the microphones, loudspeakers and the meeting applications enable only the sound captured by one microphone at a time to be reproduced [2]. This means that it is not possible to talk over each other, and turn-taking therefore becomes discrete when only one person or one room at a time can talk and be heard. We may conceptualize such discreteness as *sociomaterial stiffness*, meaning that a feature of verbal work enacting the practice of chairing in digital meetings is that there is a certain level of rigidness in how meeting advancement unfolds and how smoothly chairing may be enacted. As in the case with Alison and her team, the person chairing the meeting thus often explicitly gives the word to a certain participant and may also feel the need for technological support to keep track of whose turn it is to talk.

Interestingly, access to the verbal space in digital meetings is enabled in multiple ways. The chat function provides the means for accessing the verbal space without needing permission from the human chairing the meeting. Writing text and symbols in the chat thus gives rise to a feature of digital meetings that we may call *sociomaterial dilution*, as it dilutes the condensed underpinnings of the meeting practice into a more blended practice. As the vignette shows, chats can become troublesome when chairing, given that it is difficult to keep track of what is going on there and at the same time also be in control of the oral turn-taking. The conversation going on in the chat is also moved forward in a different way, since it can focus on something other than what the oral conversation is about and may proceed at a different pace than the oral

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

conversation. In addition, and in contrast to the oral conversation, the written chat allows multiple "voices" at the same time, with the flow of written posts in the chat not necessarily building on each other and hence requiring some level of rework and interpretation.

Summarizing so far, we have shown how one kind of sociomaterial work enacting the practice of chairing is verbal work, which is performed by orchestrating the verbal space. When meeting digitally, artifacts such as digital hands or shared screens play a role, whereas small gestures between participants are used less. In the assemblage of humans and meeting technologies such as microphones and written chats, verbal work is constituted as characterized by sociomaterial stiffness and dilution.

Visual work enacting the practice of chairing

> The meeting starts with a 'round the table' with updates from everyone. Stefan is chairing the meeting and gives the word to Marit, who has joined through her phone and who tells us about an event she has been running. As she speaks, I see Stefan on full screen. Marit's icon does not appear when she speaks, so when she talks, we look at Stefan instead. He occasionally looks into the camera and says 'hmm' as Marit talks about her week. As she mentions an achievement, Stefan raises his cup of coffee in a toast. As the round continues with Hanna (who has her camera off), what I see on the screen switches between Hanna's photo and Stefan's live video; since Stefan does not mute his microphone, the sounds produced in his location are occasionally picked up by the software, rendering him visually foregrounded. Hanna then shares her screen and shows a presentation of recent developments. When Hanna mentions a prioritization made, Stefan posts an applaud icon. I see it first as clapping hands underneath the shared slides, after which it appears across Stefan's video image. Hanna looks pleased as the others follow Stefan and post thumbs-up emojis.
>
> After one hour, Stefan announces that it is now time to connect with another team working on similar issues in another location to exchange experiences. The other team is sitting in a physical meeting room [we will call it "the room"] and Stefan calls the room. Someone in the room switches the room camera on, and I see a camera shot of a corner of the floor. Stefan greets Robert who is supposed to chair this extended meeting. Robert enters the camera spot (walking), commenting something like 'I can stand here' and waves. I can hear laughter in the room. They try to adjust the camera for a while but eventually leave it as it is, and the meeting continues. During the remainder of the meeting, every time someone in the room speaks, a piece of grey carpet fills my screen.
>
> Once Robert ends the meeting, Stefan and I linger in the digital meeting, and he tells me about his frustration with how the camera was used by Robert. He says that he, as participant to a meeting, experiences "greater ability to focus and see who's talking [when cameras show the people talking] and [can] interact, than when I don't see anyone . . . Then, I know . . . if I say something, I will always be too late . . . I have already almost missed that discussion . . .".

In the many meetings we observe in our studies, we note how the person formally chairing the meeting almost always puts his/her camera on, as Stefan does in the vignette. In general, this renders the face and upper part of the body visible to all participants throughout the whole meeting, meaning the person chairing is always visible to the others, irrespective of whether he/she is leading the conversation on the current topic or not. For example, whereas other participants go on and off camera throughout the 90-min Team Delta meetings, the team leader usually keeps her camera on, and we see her nod, smile and lean back and forth during the meeting. With camera and audio continuously mobilized, she is made visible to the meeting participants on the screen throughout the meeting, thereby ensuring her space "at the table" is continuously reproduced.

Digital applications for meetings often provide the same kind of squared box in the shape of a framed rectangle of equal size for all participants. Despite that, in our observations, the person leading the meeting did not place him-/herself in a particular position (the "spotlight" function was not used), the potentially equally distributed visual space was in practice not evenly distributed. This was due to cameras being switched off, partly due to participants choosing not to put them on (for a variety of reasons, possibly connected to other work

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

practices with which the meeting was entangled) but also due to different affordances of the technologies in use (including, for instance, poor Internet connection).

Hence, although the software used for digital meetings allows for equal occupancy of the visual space, such equality is often not performed in practice. Rather, chairing means *visual work* in terms of occupying the visual space. Such work makes the human doing the chairing present for the other humans participating in the meeting, enabling him/her to facilitate the team's movement through the meeting agenda. This work may, however, have unexpected effects due to the different technologies (such as laptops and phones) and their affordances (such as foregrounding the last person that made a sound), and given that the meeting does not happen in a vacuum but rather is intertwined with other work the participants are doing (such as answering emails or traveling to customers). In the vignette above, for example, Stefan, formally chairing the meeting, is who the participants see when Marit talks. Visual work done when chairing may therefore lead to what we call *sociomaterial glitches*, granting visual space to the person chairing at the expense of other participants in the meeting, as noted in the vignette.

Physical and digital artifacts also take part in enacting the practice of chairing: a cup lifted in a toast visually materializes attention to what is being said and contributes to facilitating the interaction. An emoji of clapping hands flying across the screen also materializes recognition for what is being said and contributes to directing the conversation. Moreover, as the vignette we presented in the verbal work section shows, visual work is also performed in assemblages constituting the "sharescreen" function. Here, artifacts (a presentation, an excel file, MS Teams apps, etc.) are most often actually granted a central and larger space onscreen than the humans once the "share" button is pressed. As they occupy the visual space for a time that ranges from a brief moment to the entire meeting, they orient participants toward certain topics as well as pushing the advancement of the conversation in certain directions, thus also enacting the practice of chairing.

Hybrid meeting technologies, to some extent, come with different affordances. The vignette, for instance, shows what happened in Team Omega with the flawed focus of the camera in the physical room and the effects it had on other participants (as Stefan's reflection reveals). This means that whereas the human chairing may have a specific position in the room that enables him/her to occupy the visual space in the room (such as by sitting at the end of the table), the visual work done in the digital space may be disrupted by what we, in alignment with Uhlin (2022), call *sociomaterial blindness* – that is, participants experiencing a form of blindness given that they cannot see the person chairing due to how the sociomaterial assemblage performs the meeting. As Stefan's complaint shows, when the visibility of the person chairing is not secured, that person may experience he/she is chairing, but chairing becomes skewed toward participants in the same room, and inclusion in the interactions in the meeting for all participants is not secured.

Summarizing, we showed that visual work is performed by occupying the digital space, something that grants a human chairing or an artifact chairing a guaranteed spot in the visual space of the meeting, enabling her/him/it to move the conversation forward. Visual work is achieved by an assemblage including cameras, the meeting software, screens, microphones and rooms as well as humans. Such assemblages may lead to sociomaterial glitches and sociomaterial blindness, which may therefore be considered characteristics of visual work in digital meetings.

Affective work enacting the practice of chairing

> I have connection problems and feel rather stressed and embarrassed about being late as I finally manage to connect to the meeting. The meeting has already started, and Eileen, a new employee, is introducing herself. I see her shared presentation and hear her say: "I am new to this team, getting to know things along with my team and also to learn from all of you and work along with you. Thank you so much for that". I see chat messages welcoming Eileen accompanied by hearts and other emojis, and a celebration emoji moving across the screen.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Next Cecilia makes a presentation of a new initiative whereby Bonnie raises her digital hand. Alison acknowledges it and passes the word over. Bonnie unmutes and quite energetically asks a critical question concerning the culture promoted throughout the company and how it fits with part of what has been presented so far. Cecilia starts responding but is interrupted by Alison, who says "maybe it is ok that we take it offline to discuss", giving a short and quite harsh justification of why what has been presented has been done (by saying: "first . . ." , "and second . . ."). Alison asks if it is ok that Bonnie sends an invitation to Cecilia and herself to discuss this offline, whereby Bonnie says "fine, no problem", and Alison thanks her for that. Cecilia continues her presentation.

Close to the end of the meeting, Alison invites Daphne to say a few words as she is about to leave her current role. Daphne switches her camera on and unmutes. She says: "I think that I should just thank each and every one because everyone supported, appreciated my thoughts. A lot of new energy. Thanks to each and everyone. My special thanks to Alison, Eileen, Cecilia, Fred, especially Bonnie. Always been so kind, appreciated my thoughts. Thank you so much, I will cherish this". She laughs, and Alison posts a heart that appears across her face. Alison suggests taking a group photo through the Teams-function 'together-view'. All the participants put their cameras on and are arranged in an 'assembly room' by Teams, and then screenshots are taken. Some people make the victory sign with their fingers, Alison makes a heart with her hands. Everyone smiles. The screenshots are then shared in the chat. Emojis of hearts are given to the screenshot posts.

The meetings we studied did something to us researchers: we laughed, we experienced frustration, we became bored, engaged, annoyed. We felt and sensed. In our interviews, when we asked the participants about the meetings, they also talked about what we interpreted as affect – that is, as a bodily mediated capacity to affect and be affected (Gherardi, 2019). Although participants' and researchers' bodies may not be gathered in the same physical room, being part of a digital meeting is still an embodied experience (De Paoli *et al.*, 2014). Humans and nonhumans encounter one another, and the sensing of the atmosphere that elicits from bodily experiences is unspoken but contagious (Fotaki *et al.*, 2017). Facilitating a group movement through a more or less explicit agenda during a limited period of time also included ensuring a certain affective mood, which, as exemplified in the vignette, requires *affective work*: the way utterances are articulated, the use of voices and tones, and the shared emojis are part of such work.

The ongoing performance of politeness is apparent in the vignette and also emerged as important in the doing of other meetings. This includes the use of polite language and tone and a generally polite and encouraging affective mood. It is found in interaction between two or more participants, as well as between the human chairing and the participants, and it is done with words and with digital symbols. Since it is difficult to see people's body language even during the instances when they do have cameras on, politeness is instead expressed through gentle language and tone as well as through emojis. The digital images of hearts and thumbs-up that are mobilized both substitute spoken words and body language and reinforce what someone has said.

In the episode with Cecilia and Bonnie, the question posed is formulated in a polite fashion but is critical of what has been done, or not done, and this leads to one of quite a few instances where a more sensitive question is moved to another setting, resulting in the gentle atmosphere being preserved. Efforts are made to create and maintain a certain affective mood, and what may disrupt it is moved outside the meeting. This may be due to the challenge of dealing with certain kinds of affect when bodies have no direct access to each other in a physical space. We could characterize this in terms of *sociomaterial conformity*, meaning that in order to move the meeting forward, chairing tends to limit the affective register to keep the conversation organized and under control. The vignette also shows another characteristic of the affective work done: *sociomaterial amplification*, which means affect can be produced through different modalities that may also reinforce each other – flying emojis and reactions to chat messages, for instance.

One example of both sociomaterial amplification and conformity is the farewellsession for Daphne in the vignette. Sociomaterial amplification made this moment different from what it

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

would have been in a co-located meeting where another assemblage may have afforded an applause or people hugging each other to express a mixture of gratitude, good wishes and sadness – rather than using screenshots, emojis, hand symbols and chat messages. Moreover, although we could sense affect during such episodes, we could also see sociomaterial conformity enacted (everyone tuned to the same affective tone).

Summarizing, we showed that emojis, screenshots and chats are elements that in continuously changing assemblages do affective work that enacts the practice of chairing. We have also brought to the fore sociomaterial amplification that is enabled by the diversity of modalities through which affect can be expressed or may impact participants. In addition, the assemblage of technologies, including the available emojis and chat functions, together with the type of language mobilized and the tone used by the person chairing may also lead to sociomaterial conformity.

Concluding

In this article, we focused on what kind of sociomaterial work is enacting the practice of chairing in digital meetings. By means of a digital micro-ethnography (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022), we have come close to the doing of digital meetings and shown that verbal, visual and affective work is performed in the enactment of the practice of chairing in digital meetings. These three types of work are performed simultaneously and constitute the premises for each other. For instance, although someone may be orchestrating the verbal space, if that person is not occupying the visual space, participants may experience sociomaterial blindness. Sociomaterial blindness is one of the six characteristics of digital meetings that we identify in our analysis, the others being sociomaterial stiffness, dilution, glitches, amplification, and conformity. These characteristics all imply challenges as well as possibilities, and they are constituted in the assemblages of technologies and humans enacting the practice of chairing in the digital meeting. These assemblages differ from those that shape other kinds of meetings, and therefore, the identified characteristics are specific to digital meetings. For instance, although even in co-located meetings one may experience some form of having missed something in the interaction and not being able to get into the conversation at the right moment, the sociomaterial blindness we describe emerges through an assemblage that is different from the one in a co-located meeting and that enacts chairing differently. Sociomaterial blindness is therefore not a characteristic of co-located meetings, and digital meetings are thus constitutively different from co-located meetings.

Our first contribution is therefore an advancement of our understanding of digital meetings. We add to extant literature by showing not only how human and technological agency is a matter of local emergence (Alotaibi, 2015), and how the enactment of the meeting is continuous sociomaterial work (Uhlin, 2022) or sociotechnical performances (Laube, 2025), but also specifically how three particular kinds of sociomaterial work enact the practice of chairing in digital meetings. The literature on chairing based on co-located meetings may also be revisited in light of our study, and it is possible to see how even in co-located meetings verbal, visual and affective work is done when chairing. Importantly, however, the characteristics of these kinds of work are specific to digital meetings since they are the result of the particular assemblages of humans and technologies that in entanglement (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) perform the practice. We thereby add to MacLeod *et al.* (2019) in their understanding of the digital meeting as more than merely a digital version of the co-located meeting. To be noted is that we have analytically distinguished the six characteristics and presented them separately, but in the unfolding of a digital meeting, they are entangled. Sociomaterial amplification may, for instance, be mobilized as a way of compensating for sociomaterial stiffness in an effort to energize the meeting, and sociomaterial dilution may mitigate sociomaterial blindness as conversations develop in parallel to each other. This means that being aware of these characteristics may provide the means for trying to engage and take part in digital meetings.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Our second contribution is methodological. In particular, two methodological choices allowed us to bring out the specificity of the digital meeting: the micro-ethnographic approach we selected (Alvehus and Crevani, 2022) and the choice to engage with the digital space in alignment with the paradigmatic shift in the epistemology of organizational ethnography toward a new sensibility to the sociality and materiality of the digital (Grigoryan, 2024; Karhapää *et al.*, 2025). This way, we were able to produce a different kind of understanding since observing the "micro" digitally enabled us to study the unfolding of practice and the doing of digital meetings in their own right. It is first when approaching the phenomenon in this way that we may understand how it is sociomaterially achieved and which characteristics are constituted in such an achievement. Whereas our study was limited to the practice of chairing digital meetings, we suggest that the understanding of digitalized work more generally may suffer from too few studies mobilizing an ethnographic approach (in relation to the large number of studies that do not) and therefore from a tendency to understand new digitalized work practices in light of traditional work practices. To get closer to understanding new digital work practices on their own terms, we invite scholars to engage to a larger extent in ethnographic approaches.

Notes

1. In addition, we have included some notes and reflections from meeting observations in other projects. Attending meetings (also our own work meetings) inevitably provides experiences that we reflect on and that inform our experiences of the studied meetings and how we come to notice certain aspects and not others.
2. At the time of writing, some applications enable an overlap of two microphones, but it is still hard to hear two voices simultaneously.

References

Abram, S. (2017), "Learning to meet (or how to talk to chairs)", in Sandler, J. and Thedvall, R. (Eds), *Meeting Ethnography: Meetings as Key Technologies of Contemporary Governance, Development, and Resistance*, Routledge, New York.

Alotaibi, A. (2015), "IT-enabled performative spaces in gender segregated work", Doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham.

Alvehus, J. and Crevani, L. (2022), "Micro-ethnography: towards an approach for attending to the multimodality of leadership", *Journal of Change Management*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 231-251, doi: 10.1080/14697017.2022.2081245.

Angouri, J. and Marra, M. (2010), "Corporate meetings as genre: a study of the role of the chair in corporate meeting talk", *Text and Talk*, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 615-636, doi: 10.1515/text.2010.030.

Asmuß, B. and Svennevig, J. (2009), "Meeting talk: an introduction", *The Journal of Business Communication*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 3-22, doi: 10.1177/0021943608326761.

Barad, K. (2003), "Posthumanist performativity: toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 801-831, doi: 10.1086/345321.

Barad, K. (2007), *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Bell, E., Harley, B. and Bryman, A. (2022), *Business Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Boden, D. (1994), *The Business of Talk: Organizations in Action*, Polity Press, Cambridge, MA.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019), "Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis", *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 589-597, doi: 10.1080/2159676x.2019.1628806.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2020), "One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 1-25, doi: 10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Brennan, T. (2004), *The Transmission of Affect*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

Burawoy, M. (1991), *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, University of California Press, London.

Cao, H., Lee, C.-J., Iqbal, S., Czerwinski, M., Wong, P.N., Rintel, S., Hecht, B., Teevan, J. and Yang, L. (2021), "Large scale analysis of multitasking behavior during remote meetings", *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 1-13.

De Paoli, D., Ropo, A. and Sauer, E. (2014), "Disappearing bodies in virtual leadership?", in Ladkin, D. and Taylor, S.S. (Eds), *The Physicality of Leadership: Gesture, Entanglement, Taboo, Possibilities*, Emerald Group Publishing.

Döring, N., Moor, K.D., Fiedler, M., Schoenenberg, K. and Raake, A. (2022), "Videoconference fatigue: a conceptual analysis", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 19 No. 4, 2061, doi: 10.3390/ijerph19042061.

Ford, C. (2008), *Women Speaking Up: Getting and Using Turns in Workplace Meetings*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Ford, J., Harding, N.H., Gilmore, S. and Richardson, S. (2017), "Becoming the leader: leadership as material presence", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 38 No. 11, pp. 1553-1571, doi: 10.1177/0170840616677633.

Fotaki, M., Kenny, K. and Vachhani, S.J. (2017), "Thinking critically about affect in organization studies: why it matters", *Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 3-17, doi: 10.1177/1350508416668192.

Geertz, C. (1988), *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Gherardi, S. (2009), "Practice? It's a matter of taste", *Management Learning*, Vol. 40 No. 5, pp. 535-550, doi: 10.1177/1350507609340812.

Gherardi, S. (2015), "How the turn to practice may contribute to working life studies", *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 3a, pp. 13-25, doi: 10.19154/njwls.v5i3a.4831.

Gherardi, S. (2019), *How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study: Problems and Methods*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham.

Goffman, E. (1963), *Behavior in Public Places*, The Free Press of Glencoe, New York.

Grigoryan, T. (2024), "Short essay: current issues in digital ethnography: is all ethnography digital?", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 19-28, doi: 10.1108/joe-02-2024-0008.

Hall, P., Leppänen, V. and Åkerström, M. (2019), *Mötesboken: Tolkningar Av Arbetslivets Sammanträden Och Rosévinsmingel*, Égalité, Malmö.

Hall, P., Åkerström, M. and Cederholm, E.A. (2024), *Why Meetings Matter: Everyday Arenas for Making, Performing and Maintaining Organisations*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham.

Karhapää, A., Pöysä-Tarhonen, J., Rikala, P. and Hämäläinen, R. (2025), "Being an ethnographic researcher in a modern workplace: advantages and challenges of digital ethnography", *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 233-247.

Laube, S. (2025), "Synthetic involvement: digital Co-presence in the flesh", *Sociology*, Vol. 59 No. 5, pp. 962-979, doi: 10.1177/00380385251342211.

Macleod, A., Cameron, P., Kits, O. and Tummons, J. (2019), "Technologies of exposure: videoconferenced distributed medical education as a sociomaterial practice", *Academic Medicine*, Vol. 94 No. 3, pp. 412-418, doi: 10.1097/acm.0000000000002536.

Mol, A. (2002), *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Nicolini, D. (2012), *Practice Theory, Work, and Organization: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Orlikowski, W.J. and Scott, S.V. (2008), "Sociomateriality: challenging the separation of technology, work and organization", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 433-474, doi: 10.5465/19416520802211644.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026

Orlikowski, W.J. and Scott, S.V. (2016), "Digital work: a research agenda", in Czarniawska, B. (Ed.), *A Research Agenda for Management and Organization Studies*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham.

Schwartzman, H.B. (1989), *The Meeting: Gatherings in Organizations and Communities*, Plenum Press, New York.

Standaert, W., Ulm, M., Castro, K.C. and Allen, J.A. (2025), "Unpacking the meeting load paradox: impacts on engagement and burnout across work arrangements", *Management Research Review*, Vol. 48 No. 6, pp. 940-965, doi: 10.1108/mrr-05-2024-0315.

Uhlin, A. (2022), "'You are on mute...': enabling coming together in digitally mediated meetings", Doctoral Thesis, Mälardalen University.

Van Vree, W. (1999), *Meetings, Manners and Civilization: The Development of Modern Meeting Behaviour*, Leicester University Press, London.

Watson, T.J. (2011), "Ethnography, reality, and truth: the vital need for studies of 'how things work'in organizations and management", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 202-217, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00979.x.

Weller, M. (1960), *Ich Bitte Ums Wort*, Econ-Verl, Dusseldorf.

Corresponding author
Anna Uhlin can be contacted at: anna.uhlin@mdu.se

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: **permissions@emeraldinsight.com**

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/joe/article-pdf/15/2/187/11219115/joe-06-2025-0079en.pdf by guest on 25 June 2026