5 Doing Ethnography II:
Methods and Translating Them into Practice

It's late on the evening of Tuesday 8 October, 2013, and I'm sitting next to Susanne Engstler at her desk in her home. Together, we are staring at her computer screen. "Or rather like this?", she asks and looks at me. I don't know how to answer. In fact, I'm completely stunned. This evening, events come thick and fast. Only a moment ago, we were comfortably sitting on the couches in her living room, talking about LiquidFriesland *and how she used it. And now she is asking me for suggestions on how to word the initiative she wants to start on* LiquidFriesland*. In the initiative, she demands "complete access for scientists", or rather, complete access for me. Having herself completed a PhD, Engstler was furious upon hearing that I had to make do with guest access to the platform. Immediately, she got up and had us go upstairs to craft an initiative demanding full access to* LiquidFriesland *for scientists. So much for preferably having no influence on the field you're studying!*

How could I have guessed that a focused interview with a user of *LiquidFriesland* could end this way? Only an hour later, there was already a counter-initiative started by another user of the platform, arguing against Engstler's initiative. In the end, the idea did not reach the necessary quorum to qualify for discussion by the city council. Even if it had, the power to decide over access policies lies with the programmers of *LiquidFriesland*, and the city council could have done nothing to change it. Still, this incident perfectly illustrates the manifold layers of social situations ethnographic researchers are confronted with.

This vignette also illustrates how the researcher can, intentionally or not, influence her research. Since "(e)thnography is a lived craft rather than a protocol which can be separated from the particular study or the person carrying it out" (Hine, *Ethnography* 13), the usage of methods like elaborating research theses, constituting research fields, and collecting and analysing data is highly dependent

on the person of the researcher and is heavily shaped by her world views and attitudes, diverse social criteria (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 55), and "the conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities and resources accessible to the researcher" (Amit 6).

According to Tom Boellstorff et al., it is only natural that "all science contains strong elements of subjectivity in the sense that science results from the work of *subjects*, that is, scientists. Subjectivity is an inescapable condition of science" (41). Boellstorff et al. further stress that "no pure realm of objectivity exists in which the interests, biases, predilections, concerns, attitudes, dispositions, conceits, judgments, axioms, and presuppositions of investigators are absent and without impact", neither in qualitative nor in quantitative studies (41).[1] Subjectivity is not perceived as contradictory to the practice of science, rather, it is the meaningful implementation of cultural anthropology in practice, as Massmünster points out (cf. 536).

My own research is influenced by the fact that I did not get to know Iceland as a research field, but as a place of residence, as I had moved there in 2009 to study at the University of Iceland. I arrived little more than a year after Iceland had been first shaken by the effects of what was to become a severe financial crisis. After returning to Germany, I followed events in Iceland through media coverage and personal contacts. My way of addressing the field and engaging within it is thus inseparable from the experiences and knowledge that I gained about it long before I started doing the research.

Digital Ethnography?

Readers may wonder that the methodology-chapter of an ethnography that is investigating two online participation platforms is lacking distinct segments on the methods of so-called *virtual* or *digital ethnography*. Since the alleged dichotomy

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1 Consequently, thinking of quantitative research as objective is also a chimera in my opinion. A survey questionnaire is as influenced by the social and cultural background of the researcher creating it as an interview guideline, as is every piece of material and every finding interpreted from the survey. The homogeneity of the findings of quantitative research as opposed to the common heterogeneity of the findings of qualitative research is predominantly due to the limited and the predetermined answer options within a survey. However, this homogeneity is a simplistic fallacy since interviewees are not given the possibility to differentiate their statements as part of their complex everyday lives. The apparent objectivity of quantitative research and indeed all research for that matter, including natural-scientific research, has long been questioned, cf. Karin Knorr-Cetina, Epistemic culture: how the sciences make knowledge (cf. 241ff.), Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (cf. 1ff.).

of "*real* world vs. *virtual* world", of "*offline* practices vs. *online* practices" continues to lose relevance in people's everyday life, it also does so in its investigation. Ultimately, the same set of methods are employed in all ethnographic research, regardless of whether it is conducted in predominantly physical or in predominantly virtual research situations.

I am not in any way suggesting that guides and textbooks concerning the methodology of virtual ethnography have not been useful. On the contrary, I have heavily relied on them, and very much appreciate the work of authors like Christine Hine, Gabriella Coleman, Gertraud Koch, Robert Kozinets, alongside countless others, and what they have done for the establishment of research in virtually mediated fields. However, I do think they are mistaken in establishing a completely new methodology of virtual ethnography, and thus failing to identify the key-methods they describe for what they have been all along, the cornerstones of ethnography. The authors mentioned above have indeed begun to see that themselves, as some of their more recent publications show (Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*; Kozinets, *Netnography Redefined*).[2] Similarly, Nancy Baym warns us not to rashly "take the stance that, since the Internet is new, old theory and methods […] have nothing to offer in its exploration" ('Qualitative Internet Research' 180), when in fact "old theory and methods" are all we need to be equal to the exploration of our multi-faceted research fields today.

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2   Even the titles of these works hint at this increasing consciousness. Hine stood back from her Virtual Ethnography (2000) and turned towards an Ethnography for the Internet (2015), and Kozinets felt the need to "redefine" (2015) his thoughts on Netnography (2010).