3 Doing Ethnography I: Constructing Research Fields[1]

The last few decades have brought with them several major developments and challenges for ethnographers in conducting fieldwork. The most prominent of these have been increased mobility, and the growth and spread of information and communication technologies. Before introducing the reader to the actual fields and samples of this research study, I therefore discuss the three main challenges I encountered during this research project: the spatial boundaries of research in both online and offline fields, the temporalisation of field work, and the blending and blurring of originally dichotomous concepts of *home* and *field* within the ethnologic research process.[2]

It appears more difficult than ever for cultural anthropologists / European ethnologists to constitute or to clearly demarcate the boundaries of their fields.[3] Today, the scientific community typically considers field sites as changing, shifting, and being in a constant state of flux, as opposed to our predecessors, who

1 This insertion entitled "Doing Ethnography" is the first of three throughout the book. These insertions precede the three key chapters on research fields, methodology, and analysis. The aim here is to condense meta-commentary and my reflections regarding the topics to come.

2 As I found out after writing this section, Michi Knecht also identified and discussed these three challenges in her 2012 article "Ethnographische Praxis im Feld der Wissenschafts-, Medizin- und Technikanthropologie".

3 The full name of the discipline I located myself in is cultural anthropology/European ethnology (as taught at Göttingen University). Generally, the debate about names and what they are about appears a constitutive element of the discipline after 1945 (cf. Bendix and Eggeling). In this study, I will for simplicity's sake use the name cultural anthropology.

conceived of research sites as static and geographically confined.[4] Today, cultural anthropologists rarely study cultural phenomena strongly tied to one, confined locality. As Michi Knecht stresses

> Das Feld der Gegenwartsethnografie hat seine früheren ‚naturalistischen' Konnotationen weitgehend verloren. Es wird nicht mehr bloß aufgesucht. Die Definition dessen, was das ethnografische Feld in einem spezifischen Forschungsprozess ausmacht, welche Orte und Beziehungen zu ihm gehören, wie seine Grenzen beschaffen sind, diese Fragen und Aspekte sind Teil des Forschungsdesigns, das sich in der Zusammenführung theoretischer Interessen und empirischen Wissens im Verlauf des Forschungsprozesses immer mehr konkretisiert. (88f.)

> The field of contemporary ethnography has mostly lost its earlier 'naturalistic' connotations. Researchers do not just go there anymore. The definition of what makes an ethnographic field in a specific research process, which places and relationships belong to it, the conditions of its boundaries – those questions and aspects are now part of the research design. By bringing together theoretical interests and empirical knowledge, the research design becomes increasingly concrete throughout the research process.

As Ulf Hannerz stresses, cultures "as collective systems of meaning […] belong primarily to social relationships, and to networks of such relationships. Only indirectly, and without logical necessity, do they belong to places" (39). Referring to the most prominent symptoms of globalisation, enhanced mobility and the spread of information and communication technologies, Hannerz notes that "the less people stay put in one place, and also the less dependent their communications are on face-to-face contacts, the more attenuated does the link between culture and territory become" (39). Or, as danah m. boyd poignantly sums it up: "Mobility complicated matters […], but mediated technologies changed the rules entirely" (27). Here, boyd directly addresses the role of digitalisation and medialisation of the everyday life of both researched subjects and researchers alike, which to her have "completely disrupted any simple construction of a field site" since "in a networked society, we cannot take for granted the idea that culture is about collocated peoples. It is not a question of mobility but of access to a hypertextual world. Geography can no longer be the defining framework of culture; people are part of many cultures including those defined by tastes, worldview, language, religion, social networks, practices, etc." (27). Already in the 1990s, US-American social

4 In the neighbouring field of anthropology, the "criteria to define 'the field' by geographic location, a language different from one's own and a clear separation of home from the field" seems to remain even stronger (Caputo 28).

anthropologist Sarah Strauss had recognised the same trend: "a field site can no longer be seen merely as a geographical location, but rather may be viewed as an intersection between people, practices and shifting terrains, both physical and virtual" (171f.).

Some have argued that the challenges and difficulties of constituting one's field(s) or field site(s) multiply when researching on, in, with, and through the Internet. For example, Heike Mónika Greschke identifies the potentially premature assumption of the research field's boundaries as "(o)ne of the challenges of ethnographic research on the Internet"(44). However, I believe that defining the boundaries of a research field/project is complicated by definition, whether research is predominantly about the Internet or not. I do, however, agree with Greschke's assertion that "(d)efining the boundaries of the research project […] becomes an ongoing task during the whole research process. It requires taking a set of decisions during fieldwork, regarding entrance and starting points, the traces to follow and when to stop fieldwork" (44). However, I do not see how these challenges apply solely to ethnographic research projects focusing on the Internet; rather, they are relevant to most research projects in today's globalised and interconnected everyday life – indeed, I would suggest that these challenges are not restricted to ethnographic research projects.

Nevertheless, ethnography in virtual contexts may appear challenging because of the potential methodological novelty it entails. Indeed, Gisela Welz stressed the lack of theorisation on the effects of ICT upon their usage in ethnographic fieldwork (cf. 'Lernkulturen'). It is significantly more challenging for researchers to master the methods of virtual ethnography, as they evolve parallel to the researchers and the researched subjects' ever changing social media practices in everyday life, and are thus intertwined with them or are overlapping with "private" uses of the Internet (cf. Boellstorff et al. 27f.). The digital has, in other words, become "a field in which we practice as much as we analyse" (Pink et al. 6f.).

Nancy Baym points out that online realms "are no longer contained within their own boundaries (if they ever were). What appear to be single online groups often turn out to be multimodal" ("Call for Grounding" 721). She criticizes communication studies, her own discipline, for having produced many tightly focused "studies of single web boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, social network sites" which have neglected to study "how individuals and groups link these contexts to one another as they traverse the Internet and meet the same individuals across multiple domains" (721). In this thesis, I try to put Baym's critique into practice: although I take the individual websites *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* as vantage points for my research, I then follow people's patterns of information, deliberation, and participation practices from there, through online and offline scenes, and back.

While Knecht argues that the field must not be simply visited, I agree with British sociologist and social anthropologist Vered Amit who goes a step further:

> The notion of immersion implies that the 'field' that ethnographers enter exists as an independently bounded set of relationships and activities that is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered. Yet in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, pulled apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred. (6)

Similarly, Katharina Eisch argues that the field is primarily constituted only within dialogue and the personal willingness of researcher and the researched to become involved (cf. 35). In addition, Vered Amit points to the important but often forgotten fact that "the process of construction [of the field] is inescapably shaped by the conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities and resources accessible to the researcher" (6). In other words, both scholars indirectly suggest that the idea of objective field work completed by a neutral researcher is a chimera, and that this is rightly so, for an uninvolved researcher would ultimately produce little relevant data.

Scholars have adopted different strategies to enable them to construct research fields despite the inherent challenges and difficulties this entails. Perhaps the most prominent strategy is George Marcus' idea of a multi-sited ethnography. He suggested that rather than remaining bound to one field site, researchers should actually *follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor*; *follow the plot, the story, or allegory; follow the life or biography; follow the context* (cf. 106ff.). Heike Mónika Greschke argues that "[m]ulti-siting […] becomes crucial in terms of moving around sites, relating sites of production and use, online and offline, and following traces across social networks and different media" (Home in Cyberspace 44). Here, the plural use of the word (field) sites hints lexically at the impossibility of constituting a research field strongly confined to one locality. Today, fields overlap and constantly refer to one another, drawing inspirations and influences from each other.[5]

Whereas novel modalities like multi-sited, mobile research have become widely established and become conventional within the spatial organisation of ethnographic fieldwork, this has not been the case for the new temporalisations of fieldwork.

5 Following Christine Hine's suggestion, I use only the term "field" and not "field site". As Hine argues that the term "field" "is diffuse and only occasionally constituted as a whole and certainly not a place", it rather corresponds to my understanding ("Boundaries" 12).

There has been a trend towards temporally discontinuous fieldwork in recent years, but this is toward shorter, sequential stays in the field (cf. Welz, 'Pragmatik' 41).[6] There appear to be various reasons for this trend. One key reason comes from the possibilities and pressures on academia in today's neoliberalist world itself, with scholars today only rarely receiving funding for long-term research stays. At the same time, the structure of researched societies or social situations today favour, or even require shorter, more frequent field stays, since many research fields manifest themselves only temporarily or are ephemeral (cf. Welz, 'Pragmatik' 41).

Swedish social anthropologist Helena Wulff refers to this alternation between states of on- and off-fieldwork as *yo-yo-fieldwork*. Indeed, Wulff sees many advantages in this method, as it allows researchers to publish or present interim findings at conferences in between field visits, and to discuss with colleagues and experts of the research field or subject (cf. 122). However, temporally discontinuous fieldwork can also be demanding of researchers. Katharina Eisch, for example, points out that the empathetic involvement of the researcher is even more important in temporally discontinuous fieldwork than in single rounds of stationary data collection. According to Eisch, the researcher that gathers data in a temporally discontinuously manner must pay special attention to and deal with a lot of changes, be they in the field itself, in the living situations and living conditions of informants, or in the relationships between the researcher and actors in the field. The researcher therefore has to continuously maintain friendships and contacts in the field (cf. 35).

Moreover, as British social anthropologist Virginia Caputo recalls about the early stages of her research process, she felt insecure and self-conscious about her difficulties in keeping "the field and home conceptually separate and distinct in practice", because her research experience "was of continually coming and going to and from the field, to the point where, at times, the field became indistinguishable from home" (26). It was only as her research progressed that she realized that the difficulties she had in separating field and home were "an important part of the progress of research itself. Indeed, the interruptions experienced in practice became part of the resulting ethnography" (26).

As Wulff points out, even when the researcher "is temporarily physically away from the field, she is not so mentally" (122). Most often, "fieldwork is still going on through information and communication technologies when […] at home" (122). However, the views on usage of information and communication technologies during fieldwork and its implications differ widely among ethnographers. For example, upon comparing his field stays in Sri Lanka in the 2000s with those of

6 In my opinion, the idea that a researcher needs spend a full year's cycle in the field in order to understand it remains strong in European Ethnology – although not to the extent that it does in Social and Cultural Anthropology (cf. Götz 102).

30 years earlier, British social anthropologist Bob Simpson found that the usage of information and communication technologies today made it more difficult to experience the distance between here and there, near and far which had once been a vital caesura within the research process: "In ever more powerful manipulations of time and space, what is far away can, at any point, seem to be more immediate than what is in front of one" (2). Simpson finds that research and his ability to engage in it are interrupted by *Skype*, email, and the interactive homepage of his home university:

> in order to experience fully the sensitive and subtle communications of those worlds [his research fields], other 'noise' – the daily routines of home and work […] – has to be screened out. Part of the attraction of fieldwork for me, then, is that it is a kind of experiment with selfhood – wiping the slate as clean as possible in order that others might write afresh on it. Yet this 'tuning in' seemed to remain elusive. Yes, I could have switched off all means of communication – but I didn't, and I began to wonder just how clean one can get the slate when it is so easy for the world 'back there' to intrude into 'the world out here', and what the implications are for the kinds of knowledge we might then go on to produce. (ibid.)

Not only access to computers and the Internet potentially interrupt and distract the researcher in the field. Virginia Caputo reminds us that already the use of earlier versions of ICT[7], like fax machines or even telephones, occasionally resulted in blurring of the boundaries between field and home: "my fax machine connected me with a supervisor overseas, and telephones calls at home connected me with key informants after I had left the field. At times, I did not need to physically travel to the field to be able to reach my key informants or for them to reach me" (26). So is it wrong to attribute the blurring of boundaries between field and home largely to the pervasiveness of the Internet? Have we succumbed to a tendency to ascribe things to technologies that "are better attributed to novelty and the ways in which cultures project their concerns onto technology", as Baym diagnosed in her "Call for Grounding in the Face of Blurred Boundaries" (720)? There is little question that the spread of the Internet in the 1990s

7 As Nancy Baym reminds us, it is important to recall "that technology need not mean computing nor be digital. We have other precedents, and other technologies. Human communication and technology begins with the invention of writing. It includes pigeon training, ink, woodblocks, 16th-century books, and 17th- and 18th-century pamphlets. It includes photography, audio recording, radio waves, moving pictures, the telegraph, television, and countless other technologies, more of which have been forgotten than remembered" ('Call for Grounding' 720).

> produced an extraordinary array of hyperbolic proclamations about its potential impact on the world. The Internet, prognosticators stated, would solve long-standing problems of education, make bureaucracies function better, create a global community through increased connectivity, empower the disenfranchised, and forever alter the roles of consumer and producer. (Sturken and Thomas 1)

Nevertheless, I believe that the Internet and ICTs developed over the last two decades have certain characteristics that hold the potential to interrupt conventional sequences within research processes more than other technologies have done in the past. First, ICTs have become increasingly portable through the development of laptops, smartphones, tablets, and in so doing, have allowed access to the increasingly omnipresent Internet. Whereas many previous technologies were localised, physical things – a caller on a landline would simply miss you when you were out –, today, being able to reach someone any time of day or night is common in many societies, as are expectations that one will reply instantly to emails or *WhatsApp* and *facebook* messages. Second, information and communication have become increasingly multi-directional: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many (cf. Kneuer, 'Potential' 37). In that way, the researcher also receives masses of information and communication from individuals which is not personally addressed to her. The researcher sees *facebook* posts from field contacts in her timeline, regardless of relevance for her research or whether she is in the office or at home on the weekend. Third, information and communication have become increasingly concurrent and non-chronological. While you could only receive one fax at a time from one sender (in Caputo's example this was a supervisor), it is no problem to receive several emails or chat messages simultaneously from several senders, be it supervisors, friends, insurance agents, parents, or field contacts. Together, newer ICT like the Internet or smartphones blur boundaries of work and private spheres most especially through their omnipresence. Potentially, and more imminent and pervasive than ever before, the field is always *with* us – in the form of the Internet-enabled smartphone in our pocket.

In any case, ethnologic research fields no longer appear 'secluded' or 'far away', but have indeed become frequently intertwined with the everyday (working) lives of ethnologists (cf. Hess as cited in Knecht, 'Nach Writing Culture' 90). This has certainly been the case for me in this research project. Through ICT, the fields have become much more visible in my everyday life at home, especially through *facebook*. Through friendships with informants as well as subscriptions to various media outlets, citizen initiatives, and political parties, and even when I was away from them, the fields became highly visible in my *facebook* timeline.

Still, it was not always easy to keep up-to-date on the latest news from the fields without being there and purposefully doing research. On a number of occa-

sions, for example, paragraphs that I had just written were rendered obsolete or even factually false by *facebook* posts. Here, the question of when to end fieldwork becomes an act of self-discipline even more delicate than had once been the case. Similarly, Greschke argues that "(e)asy access to the field can lead to an endless extension of the researched period with the danger of generating a mass of data that becomes too large to cope with" (58). Once the ethnologist has declared the research period over, she must actively resist incorporating newer information that comes to her through ICTs.

The challenges detailed in this chapter were those that bothered personally me most during this individual research process. Of course, other researchers in other research fields and with other research questions will naturally encounter other challenges. Even someone attempting a replication of this study would likely face other problems than I had to. Nevertheless, I believe the challenges I faced are likely to be applicable to a wide range of researchers and research projects today. Globalisation, and with it increased mobility, as well as the spread and development of ICTs, have brought marked changes in how ethnography can, must and is being done. *Traditional* concepts of the "field" have been questioned, challenged, and redefined (cf. Hess and Schwertl 25). Amongst others, Hannerz has helped to change the persistent myths of fields as static and geographically confined, stressing that cultures are based on social relationships, and not geographical places (cf. 39). We have had to learn that even in online realms – where one may have initially expected a naturally confined field around an individually identifying URL to exist –, fields are no longer contained within their own boundaries, but refer to other websites, media, and people (cf. Baym, 'Call for Grounding' 721; cf. Miller et al. 211ff.).

As the spatial organisation of ethnographic fieldwork has been questioned, challenged, redefined – so too has the temporalisation of ethnographic fieldwork. Increasingly, the process of data collection has become temporally discontinuous, stringing together several shorter research stays in the field. This development has brought with it distinct challenges for the researcher, one of which is the blending and blurring of formerly dichotomous concepts of *home* and *field* within the ethnographic research process.