Online, offline, hybrid: Methodological reflection on event ethnography in (post-)pandemic times

Nona Schulte-Römer
Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt-University Berlin, Germany

Friederike Gesing
University of Graz, Austria

Abstract
This paper develops a methodological framework for event-ethnographic research in online and offline settings based on the authors’ ethnographic experiences in the fields of environmental governance and sociotechnical transition before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on empirical event studies, we outline the particularities of organized events as ethnographic research sites, identifying key challenges related to the spatio-temporal ephemerality, socio-material infrastructures and interactive unboundedness of events. We address these challenges along three axes of reflection, asking how we (1) attend, (2) infrastructure, and (3) take part in organized events. The framework we propose promotes a co-constructive understanding of organized events and raises broader methodological issues regarding power dynamics, our role as ethnographers in transdisciplinary contexts and fair and transparent ethnographic data collection. The framework is designed to explore how the (post-)pandemic transition from real-world to virtual event interactions affects both our research fields and our ethnographic research in transdisciplinary contexts.

Keywords
Event ethnography, field-configuring events, environmental governance, sustainability transitions, virtual ethnography, transdisciplinary research, co-construction, COVID-19 pandemic

Corresponding author:
Nona Schulte-Römer, Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt University Berlin, Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Str. 41, 10117 Berlin, Germany.
Email: nona.schulte-roemer@hu-berlin.de
Introduction

It might seem ironic to write about event ethnography in the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures have fundamentally transformed existing event formats, perhaps forever. An abundant stream of online meetings challenges us to fight our fear of missing out, to focus our attention and develop healthy attendance strategies. Our online infrastructuring skills have much improved. Many people and organizations who attended or hosted their first virtual conferences during the spring of 2020 are by now well familiar with information and communication technologies (ICTs) and online moderation. Some event organizers and companies are thinking about fundamentally redesigning their complete event strategy, for example, by reducing their participation in large conferences or exhibitions and organizing small, exclusive real-world events only for their most important stakeholders. Attending from your desk saves valuable time, costs, and energy; yet, we also miss the inspiration and serendipity of face-to-face interactions.

Before the pandemic, we frequently traveled to conferences, workshops, and trade fairs to meet key actors and observe events and event series constitutive of our research fields—the emerging field of reactive nitrogen governance (Gesing, 2022) and the transitioning field of urban lighting (Schulte-Römer, 2015). In these settings, events offer their heterogeneous groups of participants rare, if not the only, occasions to meet in person, directly interact and recognize each other as stakeholders in the same transdisciplinary action fields. This mode of transdisciplinary exchange and research has changed since March 2020 as we are now observing and participating in virtual events (Arya and Henn, 2021; Howlett, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Lupton, 2021; Vadrot et al., 2021).

Hybrid event formats and the hybridization of “event ecologies” (Schüßler et al., 2015) will likely accompany us into the post-pandemic future. Against this background, this article raises methodological questions of how to perform ethnographic research within virtual and hybridized transdisciplinary action fields where scientists and non-scientific stakeholders interact beyond professional and disciplinary boundaries (Barry and Born, 2013; Holmes and Marcus, 2008). The pandemic state of exception is our starting point for addressing challenges in ethnographic research including the ephemerality of events and the different infrastructures of virtual events. The lost opportunities for co-present interactions have made us more sensitive to the empirical insights we miss when we are socially distanced in front of our computer screens. At the same time, virtual events also reduce the potentially overwhelming complexity that we have encountered in live events such as large conferences, international trade fairs, science-policy workshops, or urban festivals.

These changing modes of participation affect not only self-reflexive ethnographers but all event participants. To address this, we put forward a transdisciplinary approach that considers events as co-constructed by all their attendees, including event ethnographers. We provide a framework that applies to both face-to-face offline and virtual online events and allows us to consider the implications of hybridized research fields with regard to challenges of attending, “infrastructuring” and taking part in events. While these
reflexive axes are applicable to ethnographic fieldwork in general, we use them to highlight event-specific research challenges. Our reflexive framework is also generic enough to be shared with, applied to and used by all event attendees trying to make sense of their experiences, not only other event ethnographers.

The article is structured as follows: To outline event-specific methodological challenges, we draw on existing research on field-configuring effects of organized events (1). We then highlight event-related challenges along three axes of reflection based on our own research experiences at international trade fairs, transdisciplinary conferences and smaller stakeholder workshops (2). We discuss our methodological contribution along practical questions raised by applying this reflexive framework to interactions in increasingly hybrid event ecologies (3). We conclude with an outlook (4) on event-ethnographic research in post-pandemic times.

Challenges and chances of event ethnography

As ethnographers, we strongly rely on mapping observations and data gathered during transdisciplinary events as part of our situational analyses (Clarke, 2005). Nona Schulte-Römer has visited numerous large-scale industry trade fairs, festivals of light, increasingly virtual conferences and stakeholder workshops when they studied the ongoing socio-technical transitions in urban lighting. Friederike Gesing attended inter- and transdisciplinary workshops and conferences on three continents to witness the emergence of a new field of environmental governance around reactive nitrogen. These heterogeneous events have in common that they are organized to assemble key actors from different disciplines, professions, policy domains, and geographical locations to facilitate exchange, decision-making, and institutional change in the face of pressing environmental challenges or disruptive sociotechnical innovation.

To better understand the unique function and relevance of organized events, it is worthwhile to look at a social-scientific research strand that focuses on a great variety of “field-configuring events” (FCE), including large-scale scientific conferences, trade exhibitions, climate summits, music competitions, or small but high-stake meetings. The FCE literature explores how organized events and event series configure industry, policy, or cultural fields by transforming and producing shared meanings, and by maintaining or undermining power relations (Schüßler et al., 2015)—they provide unique hubs where discourses, people, and things convene to test, stabilize, and reflect on their relationships, the value of things, the framing of issues, and their positions of power (Meyer et al., 2005; Schüßler et al., 2015). As such, they offer ideal occasions not only for ethnographers but for all participants to witness and shape developments and decision-making (Schüßler et al., 2014a): “If the whole field were to be contained in a nutshell, a conference would be its most likely manifestation” (Garud, 2008: 1084). These findings remind us once again that we are not alone in constructing our research fields. Instead, we conduct our ethnographic research in co-constructed event situations that have a field-configuring momentum of their own and raise event-specific methodological challenges as outlined in the following.
First, organized events are *per definition ephemeral*, involving “temporary and spatially bounded live interactions” (Lampel and Meyer, 2008). In our research fields, participants often arrive from all parts of the world to meet and mingle, network and negotiate. Yet, despite their ephemerality, events such as the trade fairs, international conferences, and workshops we have studied can become part of institutionalized “cyclical clusters” (Power and Jansson, 2008). Economic geographers have argued that such “temporal clusters” function as “global knowledge pipelines” (Maskell et al., 2006). Nevertheless, each event is unique. For event ethnographers, the ephemerality of our research settings is both a chance and challenge. While it offers us the opportunity to witness meaningful interactions and meet many key stakeholders within a span of hours or days, it also forces us to make difficult, deliberate choices as to how to focus our presence and attention in the face of simultaneous interactions or just too many events to cover. In our reflexive framework, we indicate this as a *spatio-temporal challenge of attending*.

Second, organized events are *socio-materially structured* (Moeran and Pedersen, 2011), creating live situations that can be overwhelming and produce sensory overload (Power and Jansson, 2008). Taking notes on the spot can be difficult as live interactions continue incessantly and simultaneously, and are not equally accessible and observable. Most events are designed—“infrastructured” (Le Dantec and Di Salvo, 2013)—for specific audiences and participants while excluding others (Schüßler et al., 2014a). The “backstages” where actors mingle, negotiate, and make deals behind the scenes (Goffman, 1956) can be just as important for making sense of a field as the “public” presentations, displays, and presentations that happen on the front stage (Schüßler et al., 2014b). While event organizers strategically build these event spaces, grant and deny access, ethnographers and their co-participants develop tactics to gain access to event sites that appear most relevant to them. We conceptualize these efforts as a *socio-material challenge of infrastructuring* organized events.

Third, events can—to a greater or lesser extent—allow extraordinary interactions (Schulte-Römer, 2018) in informal and open-ended situations that partly free participants from everyday routines and organizational constraints. Although planned and scheduled, events nonetheless offer spaces for spontaneous, informal, and more unconventional interaction beyond institutionalized modes of exchange (Lampel and Meyer, 2008). Indeed, standing next to a high-ranking person in a coffee queue, we need no longer ask ourselves how to get past her secretary but rather: Is that really her, do I have the guts to talk to her, what do I need to know, how do I present myself and how do I explain what I am doing here? The fluid boundaries between observation and participation provoke situations where ethnographers, like all event participants, are challenged to position themselves, share views rather than observe and lay open their interests (Moeran, 2007; Wacquant, 2010)—“as people who not only *take from* but also *take part* in the social universes they study” (Seim, 2021: 2). We describe this as an *interactive challenge of taking part*.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplifies and also transforms these methodological challenges by adding methodological questions that relate event ethnography to virtual and digital ethnographies (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2000; Pink et al., 2015). As real-world event ecologies are translated into virtual and hybrid formats, they now involve
different modes of co-constructing events and engaging in event interactions with fellow participants (Arya and Henn, 2021; Vadrot et al., 2021). As digital platforms facilitate event interactions and presentations in virtual space, the role of technological infrastructure and mediation gains importance and calls for methodological reflection (Ahlin and Li, 2019). In the following section, we systematically address a variety of methodological issues by positioning them along the three reflexive axes outlined above. Importantly, these challenges do not only concern event ethnographers in online and offline contexts but all event participants and even organizers as we, together, co-construct events as sites for business and policymaking—through our interactions, seating orders, presentation schedules, the design of virtual platforms, or actual floor plans.

Translating methodological challenges into reflexive practices

Will the event be held online, offline or be hybrid? This has become a key consideration for event participants during the COVID-19 pandemic cycles. As we continue to shift and switch between online and offline formats, we found it important to develop a reflexive framework that is suited for addressing event-ethnographic methodological questions that apply irrespective of whether we attend virtual or face-to-face events. We further assume that event ethnography is only one, and a particularly reflexive way, of preparing for and making sense of event dynamics. Since we do not draw a strict boundary between ethnographic and other forms of preparing for and making sense of events, the framework is not only intended for the structuring of event-ethnographic work but can assist various participants interested in reflecting on the co-constructive dimensions of events and their contributions to the configuration of transdisciplinary fields.

Attending: Field construction through spatio-temporal choices

It is common sense among ethnographers that our research fields are not “out there” waiting to be explored and described by us. Instead, we more or less consciously construct them through our research decisions (Amit, 2000; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Event ethnography makes this construction more obvious but also more complex as it implies multi-sited modes of field construction (Marcus, 1995) with strong temporal dimensions. While all research sites constantly change—“you cannot step into the same river twice” (Hastrup, 2013: 19)—ephemeral events simply cease to exist after they have taken place and you cannot revisit what you may have missed. This spatio-temporal ephemerality forces us to consciously decide on and justify the allocation of scarce resources such as time, money and attention. Events or event cycles also impose their own rhythm on our research. We can rarely attend all events that might be interesting to us. In addition to time and budgetary constraints, private duties or visa requirements might interfere with our research interests. Asking why and how long, often and well-prepared we are able to attend organized events is therefore key to a reflexive understanding of how we construct our field by choosing to be physically and/or consciously co-present with others at a certain time and in a certain event space.
Here, offline or online makes a crucial difference. While reflecting on these socio-spatial challenges of attending should be a standard methodological operation in event ethnography as our decisions and choices—which inevitably include resource-related decisions and prioritizations—affect how we construct our field and interact with stakeholders. For instance, during her PhD research, Nona Schulte-Römer (2015) was in the privileged position to have the resources to visit numerous events related to her sociotechnical research field across the globe. Her strategy was to follow an innovation through very different event types including trade fairs, scientific and professional conferences and public art events (Schulte-Römer, 2018). This broad construction of the research field allowed her to trace the effects of the innovation from production to application and beyond established policy and industry perspectives. The approach also revealed that events, and especially event series, can have a stronger or weaker “field mandate” (Lampel and Meyer, 2008: 1028), meaning that stakeholders consider them more or less important for their activities and hence more or less important to attend. Ethnographic field construction uses or subverts such hierarchies as we focus on events that key actors consider “important” or events with and for marginalized actors that feature minorities and suppressed voices.

That this field construction is actually a co-construction became apparent in another project, when Schulte-Römer followed a transdisciplinary group of key actors who organized stakeholder events to “green” an entire industry. Yet, despite this transformative claim, most non-governmental organizations (NGOs), while invited, remained absent from stakeholder events. One person explained that they rather spent their scarce resources on established lobbyism than investing in visionary conferences with uncertain outcomes. The example illustrates that the absence of invited participants is telling not only with regard to the perceived importance of events or event series but also with regard to their performative potential of creating transformative momentum in a field, which reflects on their decisions to attend or not attend a meeting.

Moreover, socio-spatial limitations of event attendance challenge us to rethink the idea of full immersion in our research fields. “Good anthropology will always take time,” writes Faubion (2009: 163), but it depends on the research question and design how long is long enough (cf. Knoblauch, 2005). Organized live events can be perfect sites for an intense short-term immersion in the live interactions and buzz of a conference or trade fair while studying real-time meaning making and closure “in a nutshell” (Garud, 2008; Zilber, 2011). Repeated attendance in the same “event ecologies” and “event cycles” (Power and Jansson, 2008; Schüßler et al., 2014a) can also allow for an immersion in intervals as a salient alternative to month-long research stays.

The abundance of virtual events in the course of the pandemic highlights novel issues, such as the relation between cognitive and physical presence, conscious attention and bodily attendance. As face-to-face events require our physical presence and involve travel and absence from home, virtual events using ICTs are much easier to attend. This can reduce resource-related inequalities, expanding the ethnographic operation space of researchers in remote places and from the Global South and facilitate access to the field, as “reaching the field no longer requires entering it in a physical sense” (Howlett, 2021: 12–13). On the downside, online events also create new inequalities related to digital divides.
as internet capacities vary and not all attendees are familiar with the required ICT (Kim et al., 2021). For those who possess the necessary infrastructural means, the extended possibilities to digitally attend all sorts of events via mouse click also intensify the “fear of missing out” (FOMO syndrome). The greater the number of promising and accessible events, the more likely it is that events will be missed or simply overlooked—and the greater the need for a responsible management of personal resources and self-care (Boynton, 2020). Saying “no” and justifying absence—vis-a-vis oneself, the field, peers, or supervisors—can be more challenging when event attendance is possible at low costs and without travel time. Howlett (2021: 10) argues, “the assumption that immersion and engagement in field research requires co-location with our participants in a geographic space no longer appears entirely accurate, or even realistic, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.” At the same time, online events constitute very different “attention ecologies” (Citton, 2017). In our research experience, being attentive and cognitively present in virtual events very much depends on how we prepare for our virtual attendance, how well we master the required ICT and how disciplined and consciously we focus on the virtual interaction, which competes with new home office tasks such as self-catering or homeschooling. Being physically present does not automatically produce ethnographic data unless we couple it with the scarce resources of our cognitive presence. In this regard, the cognitive challenge of attending virtual events while sitting in front of a screen does not compare to the physical challenge of moving one’s body through busy conferences with simultaneous parallel sessions or crowded festivals or trade fairs, which force us to be selective, since we cannot be present everywhere at the same time.

Similarly, attributing attention calls for decisions as to who and what we want to follow through the event. Do I pay attention to event-related activities, for example, twitter hashtags and discussions, or to protests outside the formal event spaces? Do I follow the crowds and the “mainstream” attention or do I focus on what is going on at the margins and in the periphery, before and after an organized event? Where does my event ethnography start, and where does it end? In offline events, one salient and established empirical strategy is to “shadow” (Delgado and Cruz, 2014) or “follow the actors” (Latour, 1987; Marcus, 1995) and their attention by going “where the action is” (Delgado and Cruz, 2014: 47; Garsten, 2010: 66). Co-attendees as such not only co-construct the event but also our research field as their attention affects our own focus. Furthermore, they create a sense of continuity as they bring in experiences from previous meetings that “travel” with them and further expand the spatio-temporal boundaries of the studied event (Campbell et al., 2014: 10; cf. Massey, 2003). Following event audiences’ “joint attention” is also an approach that transcends the observation of individual actions and interactions. As Schmidt and Volbers (2011: 426) argue, joint attention creates a social publicness that transgresses the spatio-temporal boundedness of live situations and “is not [only] founded in the co-presence of participants, but supported by artifacts and practices across time.”

Online events make it difficult, if not impossible, to follow the joint attention and action in a self-determined way. The discrepancy between joint attendance and joint attention is nowhere greater than in an online meeting where people switch off their cameras and might not even sit in front of their screens while their avatars and photo icons
are “attending” the event. However, there are also new information sources, such as chat functions or virtual reactions in the form of “clapping-hands,” that allow us to get a sense of the social dynamics (Pink et al., 2015). And, if we are lucky, the copy function is not disabled so we can even paste the entire chat into our digital research notes (but mind the need to anonymize such scavenged data properly!). We might also gain better insights into who else is attending if the software and user settings offer information about the other participants in the form of pictures, names and personal profiles.

The joint experience erodes even more when virtual events are recorded and hence appear reproducible and no longer temporally bounded. Our pandemic experience is that conference and workshop organizers increasingly offer recorded versions of events, allowing participants to revisit their platform after the event and watch contributions at a later point by themselves. This new practice is likely to have yet unknown effects on the co-construction of events as live situations and on the co-construction of (research) fields and decision-making through simultaneous action and joint attention. Moreover, in our experience, the availability of recordings not only affects the physical but also the cognitive presence negatively when the possibility to come back another time and watch the recording more attentively is always, theoretically, a given. Another event-ethnographic implication is that it affects how we set an end to our data collection as “returning from the field does not mean leaving the field in an absolute sense” (Knott, 2019: 148). Accordingly, Ahlin and Li (2019: 17) argue that ICT facilitates an “open-endedness of fieldwork” as we can always keep contact with informants via the same internet technologies that have enabled our hybrid research designs.

To conclude, given the new abundance of online research opportunities, it seems vital to carefully balance pragmatic considerations and research-driven arguments when attending events. Our choices will inevitably impact on the construction of our research fields. We also need to account for the fact that some events, actors and activities are more accessible and observable than others because they are highlighted, echoed and amplified by event participants, organizers and media or, simply, microphones. Finally, the great variety of event formats challenges event ethnographers to reflect on how they and other event participants attend in and attend to event-based interactions and how these potentially field-configuring interactions co-produce our research fields as well as other stakeholders’ action fields.

**Infrastructuring: Access to and observability in socio-material settings**

Events vary greatly in terms of accessibility and observability, offering us more or less occasions for participant observation and data collection. As ethnographers, we are trained to acknowledge the socio-material settings that shape our possibilities to access and observe interactions, bodily expressions, practices, and atmospheres in the field. Related to the idea of co-constructedness, we assume that events are messy and heterogeneous achievements shaped by actors, silent audiences, ideas, and artefacts as they interact in predefined and carefully designed time spaces, but in unpredictable ways. We propose the notion of *infrastructuring* events to reflect on these dynamics. Infrastructuring (Blok et al., 2016; Latour, 2004; Le Dantec and Di Salvo, 2013; Marres, 2007: 242) refers here to the
heterogeneous process of organizing, forming audiences and forging attachments, dependencies, and commitments during events. It highlights that access and observability are closely intertwined with the specific socio-materiality of event settings—including ticket control barriers, seating orders around meeting tables, exhibition designs, or ICT functionalities in a virtual conference space (Ahlin and Li, 2019; Power and Jansson, 2008; Schuldt and Bathelt, 2010). Event programmes, too, create legibility and sort out messy event situations by scheduling event activities, sorting them thematically and assigning them to specific event spaces. By socio-material means, infrastructuring facilitates or hinders access—to the event, to good seats, to meaningful information and backstage areas (Goffman, 1956)—and observability of people and things on stages, in the lime light, on the speaker screen and behind closed doors or in the virtual backend of event architectures.

Gaining access can be as low-key as subscribing to a mailing list or might require contacting gatekeepers or becoming members of relevant associations or stakeholder circles. Performing ethnographic research on the emerging global policy arena of sustainable nitrogen management, Gesing first had to build personal contacts with the nitrogen experts’ community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which is small enough to rely on personal acquaintances and informal structures, to be granted access to official meetings. Access requirements can be both formal and informal; for instance, while UN climate conferences (UNFCCC-COPs) require formal accreditation of observers, access may also involve informal selection processes, for example, by NGOs that may endorse ethnographer participants. Inside the conference space, the observer badge will allow access to those areas that are not exclusive to government delegations. Material designs and event architectures are another factor that structures access and observability. Event organizers plan and build event spaces in ways that prevent the participation of some people and grant access to others. Exclusive events prevent the access of uninvited participants at solid entry gates or through virtual pass codes. Within an event, not all participants have access to and gain visibility on stages or exhibition spaces and only insiders are allowed behind the scenes.

Event organizers are key actors in infrastructuring event audiences and interactions by choosing event locations and ICT options, selling and attributing exhibition spaces, inviting speakers and press, channeling information and scheduling event activities. Typically, their infrastructural work tends to remain in the background. This is particularly true for agencies that organize events for profit. When Schulte-Römer conducted ethnographic research during an industry trade fair, she found that most Chinese manufacturers, who, at the time, challenged European competitors with cheap but sometimes qualitatively dubious products, presented their innovations in one exhibition hall, far away from the main entrance, in a hall dedicated to Asian exhibitors, whereas the other exhibitors presented their products in thematic halls and much closer to the main entrance (Schulte-Römer, 2018). The physical remoteness made it unlikely that visitors passed the Asian exhibition by chance. Entering the trade fair at the city gate, it required a deliberate decision to jump on a shuttle bus or walk a long way to the other side of the fair ground.

In virtual events, the socio-material aspects of infrastructuring can be even more powerful. Whether conference participants meet and mingle in a virtual space or only individually watch a presentation without any audience interaction very much depends on
the features, set-up and limitations of virtual platforms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, event participants were collectively forced to acquire new ICT and virtual interaction skills. We think that it is fair to say that most of us have become routinized in attending and possibly also organizing virtual meetings, in sharing our screens and discussing in breakout groups. Nevertheless, our socio-material options are substantially reduced as ICT configurations define which online interactions we can follow while surrounded by the familiar environment of our (home) offices. If we are lucky, virtual name tags and the internet search engines only one tab away make it easier to identify fellow audience members and the authors of chat comments with the option to contact them after the event. However, this is impossible when participants choose to stay anonymous or organizers prevent audience interactions, for example, to ensure data protection or limit data traffic. In some events, observability and interaction are very limited as the audience waits in a virtual waiting room before and are cut off after the official parts of the meeting, while those facilitating may continue the meeting or discuss its outcomes. The organizers’ power to mute attendees, camera pre-settings that only show the panelist and suppressed personal chat functions can also prevent any kind of interaction offstage. At the other end of the spectrum, we find elaborately designed virtual platforms populated by avatars that each represent a conference participant (see Figure 1). These platforms make it very likely that participants literally bump into someone else’s avatar as they make their first steps in maneuvering through the virtual event space. If they can then also handle their voice and

![Figure 1. Avatars moving through a virtual conference space (Gather.town environment designed by Virtual Chair for the eALAN conference 2021).](image-url)
camera settings, they might end up in a spontaneous video conversation or even unwillingly overhear the interactions of others when passing their conversing avatars, as witnessed by Schulte-Römer.

It is important to note that, while event infrastructures tend to be invisible by design (Star, 1999), they are less so by habit. In this regard, they differ from permanent infrastructures such as the floor plan and IT system in our offices, which we are used to and take for granted in our everyday work lives. In contrast, as event participants, we first need to familiarize ourselves with the event location and master the ICT settings. During event ethnographies, this is not only tiresome but also offers us a chance to consciously consider the effects of event infrastructures on access and observability. Bowker’s notion of “infrastructural inversion” (Bowker, 1994) seems well suited for these kinds of reflections. “Infrastructural inversion” can be understood as a “struggle against the tendency of infrastructure to disappear,” a focus on the “technologies and arrangements which, by design and by habit, tend to fade into the woodwork” (Bowker and Star, 2000: 26). Due to their ephemerality, event infrastructures tend to be more visible and less taken for granted than everyday office settings, making infrastructural inversions more likely. This affects not only our ethnographic fieldwork but also the socio-material tactics performed by other event attendees. As they try to gain access to information and build new contacts, they not only adopt registration procedures, floorplans and ICT settings but might also adapt them (Akrich, 1992), work around or undermine the event organizers’ infrastructuring, mobilize personal connections, find prime observation spots or sneak in under the cover of the crowd.

As a mode of ethnographical reflection, infrastructural inversion can foreground not only event organizers’ infrastructuring work and socio-material event settings but also shed light on how we ourselves infrastructure our research sites. While we are used to reflect on our field access, data collection and sampling strategies, we are less used to asking ourselves how having lunch (sandwich on the move or sitting down with informants?) and choosing an accommodation (near or far from the event) affects our ethnographic encounters. Importantly, infrastructural inversion is not only an ethnographic mode of reflecting on the socio-material event settings but also a form of co-constructing events in which material designs, social dynamics, and mediated interactions are foregrounded by the participants themselves. A recent virtual conference on the social study of science and technology (4S 2021) offers a striking example of infrastructural inversion as a way of co-constructing an event. During the conference, participants repeatedly failed to access their virtual panels or properly interact with peers due to non-intuitive ICT settings. As technical problems forced all attendees to engage with the conference infrastructure, the platform software became a hot side topic in almost every session, adding an emotional vibe to the virtual event. At first, participants posted numerous technology-related questions in the chat, expressing their helplessness through emoticons and sarcastic comments. As the technical access problems continued, they became a running gag until, during a plenary session, one attendee gave the infrastructural inversion a new twist: “Despite all the difficulties, thank you so very much for choosing an open source platform and resisting the collection of our data for corporate gain.” This was immediately echoed and applauded in the chat and a renowned member of the association...
even gave the shared access problems a community-building momentum: “If 4S doesn’t experiment with platforms who should?! Thanks to the organizers for their vital energy.” Eventually, even the software providers seized the chance to make the best of the involuntary visibility of their work: “our small team is trying super hard to build a great platform for the future of virtual conferencing. Please do leave comments via the feedback button.” The example shows once again that infrastructures have politics (Suchman, 1997; Winner, 1980) and that infrastructural inversion can well enhance event-ethnographic research (Niewöhner, 2015).

To conclude, the focus on infrastructuring and related questions of access and observability seems methodologically relevant for two reasons. First, researchers have pointed out that field-configuring effects not only depend on discursive exchange during events but are mediated through carefully designed socio-material settings (Garud, 2008; Zilber, 2011). Ethnographers are not immune to these socio-material powers, so we should consider how we are drawn into or kept out of events. Second, the reflexive approach of infrastructural inversion allows us to not only better understand the invisible but powerful work that enables and shapes event spaces, schedules and interactions but also reflect on the socio-material tactics we develop as we structure our event research, invert event infrastructures and work with, around or against them. Finally, socio-materially mediated access and observability also impact on how we present ourselves before the eyes of co-participants. What Howlett describes in relation to ICT-facilitated expert interviews also applies to video conferences. Like virtual interviews, virtual events establish new forms of online “co-presence” and “remote embeddedness” (Howlett, 2021) where participants access event spaces from home and need to consider new techniques of presenting themselves—for example, be well-illuminated in front of representative background situations while hiding messy corners. Thus, infrastructuring directly relates to how we take part.

**Taking part: Interacting and intervening as an “observant participant”**

Event ethnography typically takes place in extraordinary situations where people spontaneously interact and informally exchange, often without knowing each other’s positions, backgrounds, and/or even names. Event researchers have described such event interactions as functionally unbounded and freed from field pressures (Lampel and Meyer, 2008; Moeran and Pedersen, 2011), while events are, at the same time, often characterized by an asymmetric co-presence of publicly introduced actors in the limelight and silent, potentially less engaged or critical and sometimes unknown observers. This asymmetry and plurality of scheduled and spontaneous encounters raises issues of positionality (Rose, 1997; Haraway, 1988) and possibilities to intervene, which have also been thoroughly altered by the new virtual modes of participating in events. To address these crucial questions of how we position ourselves in event situations in our transdisciplinary research settings, we start with reflecting on our own pre-pandemic research experiences.

During our ethnographic fieldwork, we have attended big conferences and busy trade fairs with large participant numbers and diverse groups of attendees that made it easy to blend in with the crowd to silently participate and observe. In small expert workshops, in
contrast, we were asked to take more active parts or felt the need to intervene. We have also encountered situations where event participants approached us to learn who we were. Schulte-Römer recalls a situation during fieldwork where another conference attendee approached her with the words: “I don’t know who you are, but you show up everywhere.” The spontaneous and unexpected request to introduce herself and explain her research interest made her feel uncomfortable as she was insufficiently prepared for playing her researcher role in public. During another occasion, Gesing was better prepared when she registered for an expert workshop stating her ethnographic interest as reason to participate. Yet, instead of simply inviting her, the event organizers first wanted to learn more about her research. After a first online meeting, they came to the decision that an ethnographer was welcome and immediately invited her to share her empirical reflections in a presentation on the last workshop day. Instead of just quietly observing how the scientific expert panel discussed and framed their environmental issues, Gesing was drawn into the joint effort of reflexive engagement with and framing of the issues at stake in the workshop.

Being prepared to take up one’s part is particularly relevant in transdisciplinary settings, where ethnographers may suddenly be on the speakers’ list during a workshop or be called out to pitch their “social science perspective” in front of their informants. Delgado and Cruz (2014: 51) describe it as a “turning point” in their fieldwork when they began to actively support a group of Indigenous representatives whose work they accompanied and observed during meetings related to the UN Convention on Biological Biodiversity (CBD). Initially, the researchers felt uncomfortable about intervening in their field. However, they could not stay passive as they had already positioned themselves to a certain degree through their decision to follow marginalized actors. The Indigenous representatives were constantly struggling with a lack of resources and time constraints so the researchers eventually felt obliged to support them. Of course, the intervention affected the research. It strengthened the researchers’ relationships with the group and also provided a way of getting additional insights and ethnographic data (such as unofficially circulated texts, Delgado and Cruz, 2014: 55). Moeran (2007: 147, 153) describes a similar intervention in his research as an ethnographic “rite de passage” and shift to “observant participation” that has direct consequences for the quality of empirical data. This can support our understanding not only of what people say as part of their “impression management” but of what they actually do. Taking an active part in events can thus enhance data collection and open a door from the “front stage” to the “backstage” of social situations (Goffman, 1956; Schüßler et al., 2014b).

While we do not subscribe to the assumption that there is a clear-cut line in the field that ethnographers need to cross in order to obtain truly authentic information (Moeran, 2007: 148), we can still take away three relevant points for event ethnography in transdisciplinary settings. First, the live interactions during events make it very likely, albeit unpredictable, that we have to publicly position ourselves through an active intervention. This underlines the importance of reflecting on one’s own positionality in the field (Cook I. et al, 2005) with a special regard to one’s role(s) in a specific event. Second, our contributions define our status as observant participants within an event but are also likely to impact on our status within the field. This is especially important in expert-dominated
transdisciplinary fields where ethnographers “study up” (Boyer, 2008; Nader, 1974) and mingle with powerful actors. Here, the alleged unboundedness of “free” and informal event interactions stands in contrast with asymmetrically distributed symbolic capital that structures event interactions in subtle but powerful ways (Gross and Zilber, 2020; McInerney, 2008; Moeran and Pedersen, 2011). From our own experience in environmental governance research, we know that having a PhD title or professorship or not can make a difference and affect the ways in which we are perceived as observers or participants in our research fields—especially when all event participants are equipped with name tags that prominently feature academic or professional titles. Our lesson learnt is that we, as event ethnographers, should be aware of the expectations we might evoke among co-participants and always be prepared to contribute from a well-reflected research position.

Third, observant participation during events also raises ethical issues related to ethnographic methods. To us, coffee break conversations and gossip are often as valuable as the official presentations or plenary discussions. However, our co-participants will most likely be unaware of the fact that the ethnographer at their table will recollect and interpret every insight and impression they can get. While they might call us out to explain why we are there, they are most likely unfamiliar with qualitative research practices. And, while we will be well-prepared to speak about our research interests, we most likely will not explain how exactly we observe in the event and collect our data, even while having these coffee break conversations. The trust or trustfulness of co-attendees comes with the responsibility to protect their privacy regardless of their power or position in the field. It is therefore also an ethical question to position oneself with regard to fair and transparent data collection, even more so as event ethnography makes it impossible to always seek informed consent of co-participants and casual conversation partners (cf. Bell, 2014).

The transition from offline to online events intensifies the need to rethink how we take part and position ourselves as the interactional challenge of taking part and positioning oneself is fundamentally different in online formats (cf. Kim et al., 2021). In virtual spaces, it seems easier to escape confrontations, to remain in the background and just observe. Most online formats prevent the above-described lucky coincidences of almost forced interventions that facilitate field access and observant participation. Another major downside is that the reduced and mediated co-presence of online interactions makes it difficult to observe body language, tacit exchanges and reactions. This is particularly true for “listening only” events, which are limited to the speakers’ virtual input and possibly written comments in a chat or Q and A, leaving few opportunities to observe the reactions of others or informally engage with fellow event participants. In our experience, public role play is much reduced in online formats and chat contributions become a key means for all participants to positioning themselves. From an ethnographic perspective, starting meaningful interactions can be difficult unless one has already established contacts and relationships with co-participants at previous (offline) occasions.

We conclude that the interactional challenge of taking part is profoundly different when comparing online and offline events. In real-world events, ethnographers can position themselves in relation to co-participants by observing how stakeholders move around and present themselves in an event space. In contrast, the technologically mediated
co-presence during online events offers little insights about the bodily presence and habitus of a person, making it more difficult to engage in and position oneself in unbounded and informal exchanges. At the same time, online event settings reduce the risk of being called out as a participant observer and give ethnographers more control over whether they want to intervene or not. Some events are even deliberately infrastructured in ways that reinforce invisible boundaries and protect actors from possibly unwanted interaction. As event ethnographers in hybrid worlds, offline and online, our challenge is to reflexively deal with this increasing lack of immediacy, mutual observation, and serendipitous encounters—for example, during coffee breaks and in all sorts of queues—and actively enter virtual spaces—via chats and social media platforms—as we reconsider our roles as participants and observers.

**Co-constructing events—towards a reflexive framework**

The years of the COVID-19 pandemic have sensitized us to the value of real-world encounters during organized events as well as opened up conceptual space to consider the ethnographic challenges of both offline and online events. As many real-world events have temporarily migrated into virtual spaces and hybridized event ecologies still emerge, we propose a framework that allows us to reflect on event dynamics and their effects on our research and action fields more systematically. We intend to do so without (re)introducing binary distinctions such as real and virtual or actor and observer, as we conceptualize the events that characterize our transdisciplinary research settings as co-constructed, relational, spatio-temporal phenomena (Massey, 2003). Our proposition is to explore event-specific challenges with regard to the trajectories and intersections of the three heuristic axes developed above: how people attend, infrastructure and take part in events. This framework can be employed to prepare fieldwork and facilitate robust data production strategies, as well as be a means to recollect and structure the event-specific experiences of attending, infrastructuring and taking part during and after fieldwork, for example, in the form of an extended table (see Table 1). It can help with reflecting on, also together with co-participants, how they attend, infrastructure and take part in events. Along and across the three axes, we can then systematically raise questions on how ethnographers, as well as other participants, co-construct events online and offline, how event ecologies and field sites have changed with the pandemic, and how this affects the ethnographic encounter, empirical data collection and analysis (see Figure 2).

For instance, starting with the spatio-temporal challenge, the event-ethnographic question is not so much, “How much time do I spent in the field?” but rather “Which events will I attend and were does my research start and end before, during and after the event?” Regarding the socio-material challenge, we can ask ourselves: How do I tactically respond to the infrastructure settings that facilitate or prevent my access to meaningful interactions? In terms of taking part, transdisciplinary events question our traditional roles as participant observers as everyone is observing everyone and every participant might be called out to contribute more actively in the co-construction of an event. We therefore need to ask ourselves how we want to position ourselves and perform our research in fair and transparent ways. These questions are only exemplary of a long list of issues that can
Table 1. A selection of event-ethnographic experiences and reflections along three reflexive axes in the authors’ (A1 and A2) respective research fields.

| Event types and research fields | Attending: Field construction | Infrastructuring: Access and observability | Taking part: Interacting and intervening |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| **Workshops**                   |                               |                                            |                                           |
| A2: International nitrogen management system (INMS) workshop on nitrogen scenarios, New York city, USA, one-time event within multi-year outlook (Jan 2018) | Filled out online registration form stating ethnographic interest as reason to participate. Get invited after an e-mail and extended skype call with the organizers. Venue: Small overheated seminar room in NY university building (familiar surroundings). | Show up at ice-breaker meeting at local pub without knowing anyone personally, make positive impression on field contacts, trust building over beer, chance to explain ethnographic approach to natural scientists. After the event: Take part in de-brief at joined lunch with INMS chair and senior UN environment programme (UNEP) representative—gain insights into organizers’ own framing of the event, also from different institutional points of view. | Prepare input on ethnographic project and STS perspective on knowledge co-production for last workshop day; however, most participants rather focused on ending the meeting. Extensive fieldnote taking commented on by participants, jokes on being observed. |
| A1: Sustainable chemistry workshop, Leipzig, Germany, one-time event (Dec 2018) | Act and attend as co-organizer to gain better insights into recent activities and framings of sustainable chemistry and to establish new relationships with key stakeholders in this emerging field. Event co-organization feels like a means of active field construction. | Planning process: Discussions on locations (spaces for panels, presentations, lunch, coffee breaks, dinner) and even seating arrangements. Organizing team invited only some participants to an exclusive dinner to facilitate informal exchange with our guests. | Write introductory paper for facilitating the discussion about what constitutes sustainable chemistry as a field of research and sociotechnical transition. Feedback confirms social-scientific assumptions. My co-organizing and moderator role seems more visible than researcher role. |

(continued)
Table 1. (continued)

| Event types and research fields | Attending: Field construction | Infrastructuring: Access and observability | Taking part: Interacting and intervening |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| A2: UNECE task force on reactive nitrogen TFRN-13 meeting, Ottawa, Canada, annual meeting in alternating UNECE member states (Oct 2018) | Meeting advertised on official website, but event participation only on invitation by expert panel chair. Partly familiar (mostly scientists’) faces, but unfamiliar setting of convention on long-range transboundary air pollution (CLRTAP) meeting including some official country delegates from Germany, feel the need to explain and justify my attendance. | Formal set-up of meeting under mandate of CLRTAP Working group of strategies and review—but informal access to TFRN expert panels granted by panel chairs. After meeting: Joined fieldtrip to INMS North America Demonstration site, joined plane ride and late-night waiting for taxi. Good opportunity to gain informal insights. | Speak at plenary and offer to work on the role of trust for the uptake of nitrogen management measures by various actors in the field on initiative of TFRN chair who put this idea forward on the way to joined dinner on the first evening. Feel excited about the possibility to contribute own experience but also like saying “no” is no option. Realize that talking people into doing things is exactly how this very charismatic leader pursues his mission to put nitrogen management on the international agenda. Need to prepare input for the plenary in very limited time consumes much of my attention on the 2nd day of the meeting. Plenary eventually endorses “tools & trust” initiative. |

A2: First e-briefing for the UNEP nitrogen working group, online, kick-off event of planned regular event series (June 2020) | Receive details via mailing list. After the event: Do not receive update on further events of the series, which presumably are only advertised to a closed group of active people. | All presentations and country statements with speaker details published by UNEP—publicly accessible also for non-participants. | Good availability of authorized materials, but interaction during meeting possible only for speakers, so few possibilities to collect further data and intervene. |

Conferences (continued)
### Table 1. (continued)

| Event types and research fields | Attending: Field construction | Infrastructuring: Access and observability | Taking part: Interacting and intervening |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| **A1: Conference on Artificial Light At Night (ALAN), in Sherbrooke, Canada, biennial event (May 2015)** | Refund my transatlantic journey and travel expenses by writing a conference report for a professional journal on lighting. Use the opportunity to stay two nights in the nearby city of Montreal before the conference to explore the local LED-lighting situation. | Evening bus trip to an observatory in a remote “Dark Sky Park.” When the bus breaks down, the side programme turns into an unforgettable experience and makes this conference unique. Walking up the hill in the dark in little groups, all participants can experience with their senses what conference presenters have discussed earlier: The value and beauty of a dark night under the starry sky. | Attend as a presenter and researcher, journalistic engagement is secondary. Conference breaks offer perfect occasions for meeting stakeholders from North America who do not attend European events. Have drinks with two colleagues in the informal atmosphere of the conference lounge—the conversation flows, the idea of a joint project is born—the start of a 3-year transdisciplinary collaboration. |
| **A2: INMS annual project meeting INMS-3, Edinburgh, Scotland, annual event held over 6 years in different cities (April 2018)** | E-mail contact with organizers, online registration. Venue: Fancy, expensive hotel in the middle of town, feels like holiday. | Large project meeting combines conference-style plenary sessions with smaller workshops for project sub-groups. | Arrived late because of train delay, greeted on arrival by many known faces—feel included and welcome. Noticed that people forget I am doing participant observation when small-talking over nibbles during coffee breaks. |
| **A2: International nitrogen initiative conference: INI-2020, online (May 2021)** | Registration as conference participant. Postponed from May 2020. Prerecorded talks with joined live panel discussions, keynotes live with chat function enabled. | Scientific conference, mostly natural science dominated. Ask student assistant to watch parallel sessions live. | Give talk on ethnographic approach to manure transport. Keynote speaker highlights importance of social science and ethnographic approaches, but I miss the opportunity to discuss this in an informal space. |
Table 1. (continued)

| Event types and research fields | Attending: Field construction | Infrastructuring: Access and observability | Taking part: Interacting and intervening |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| A1: Virtual conference on Artificial Light At Night (eALAN), online due to the pandemic, biennial (June 2021) | Sitting in my kitchen finding it difficult to stay focused on the event, feel less attentive during the live presentations as I know they are recorded and will be available online after the event. Thanks to the inviting virtual space, I nevertheless attend poster sessions and also stay for the virtual party at the end of the event—a surprisingly sociable experience! | Amazing and very playful virtual conference space (Figure 1). It is fun choosing a hair and skin color for my avatar, learn to navigate it through the virtual event space. Virtual infrastructure really enables spontaneous encounters. Find it remarkable but also problematic that I can overhear co-participants’ conversations when passing their avatar groups—feels like eavesdropping in a real-world conference space. | Little risk of being approached or exposed by other event participants as it is possible to signal via the avatar whether one is ready to talk or wants to listen only; met new people during virtual poster session. After the event: Virtual encounters lead to follow-up virtual meetings with a natural scientist and artist. |

Trade fairs

A1: National trade fair LumiVille, first annual, later biennial, Lyon, France (June 2010) | Easy to participate in the event as I am already in town due to my 3-month ethnographic research stay in Lyon. | Only special guests have access to the VIP lounge in the exhibition hall. I am allowed into the space after interviewing the event organizer. Interesting to observe how key actors in the field meet and mingle. | Informal conversation with very “down-to-earth” municipal light planners at the bus stop in front of the venue. They share their professional views in exchange for my social-scientific observations. |

A1: International trade fair Light + Building, biennial, Frankfurt/Main, Germany (April 2012) | Second time I attend the event, better prepared this time to navigate through the huge trade exhibition and choose between the many events within the event. | Register for guided tours through the trade exhibition led by lighting designers. Their selection of relevant innovations and product displays in their professional field structures my observations. | Have to position myself and explain what I am looking for every time I stop at an exhibition booth; learn to always bring enough business cards as exhibitors ask for it in exchange for answering my many questions. |
be addressed along these axes of reflection, irrespective of the size, purpose and online or offline formats of an event.

We assume that the hybridization of existing event ecologies will continue to severely affect the ways in which we, as ethnographers, conference organizers, presenters, and audiences, jointly make sense of events and their temporally and spatially bounded interactions. The reflexive framework we propose therefore does not come with a fixed set of questions but should rather be understood as an inspiration for event ethnographers to carefully consider and meet the challenges of event research in times of social distancing and beyond. The framework allows us to highlight the impacts of hybridization across and between different axes as well. One key aspect, for example, is how events and their participants reproduce or resist the power dynamics at work in their institutional fields when certain socio-material and infrastructural aspects change. For instance, how does it affect the participants’ attendance and attention when a regular expert panel no longer meets behind closed doors in a national ministry but in international video conferences? How do industry players signal and maintain their incumbent market position when trade fairs cannot take place and product exhibitions cannot easily be migrated into virtual space? How does the missing co-presence in online event formats limit our options to gain insights into power relations and undermine them by positioning ourselves? Do we feel more at ease when positioning ourselves and presenting our research interests and perspectives while sitting in our home offices rather than standing in a conference hall, or do we feel distracted and stressed as our children are waiting next door? To tease out these new inequalities is but one of the challenges of event ethnography in online events and hybrid worlds.

---

**Table 1.** (continued)

| Event types and research fields | Attending: Field construction | Infrastructuring: Access and observability | Taking part: Interacting and intervening |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| **Festivals**                   |                             |                                           |                                         |
| A1: Luminale, festival of light, Frankfurt/Main, Germany, biennial event (April 2012) | I am already in town as the event takes place in the week of the light + building trade fair (see above), and so are thousands of professional visitors, presenters, and potential sponsors. My attention goes with the flow, following the crowds of festival visitors to popular light installations. | An event for everyone, outside in the public realm, free of charge, easily accessible. Festival buses take visitors to the main festival sites, gratis programmes available everywhere. I search and study artistic installations that deploy innovative LED technology and attract masses. | Get invited by a lighting expert to participate in an exclusive expert round on light and cities, great opportunity to test and exchange ideas with other scholars, designers, and urban planners in an intimate setting despite the buzz of the urban festival around us. |
The framework also facilitates a systematic reflection on how the altered spatio-temporal, socio-material and interactional dynamics of virtual and hybridized event ecologies impact on how we collect, handle and co-produce data. As Ahlin and Li (2019: 11) argue, events “are shaped not only by how ethnographers and study participants engage with ICTs but also by how ICTs influence the kind and quality of data that may be exchanged as well as when and how this may be done.” The digitalization of events raises questions as to how to handle ever-larger collections of shared materials, including video presentations and chat conversations, in digital format. Our proposition is that we should not consider these questions as purely academic, research-related methodological problems but acknowledge that other event participants deal with the same issues even if they might develop different solutions. Finally, from an ethical point of view, we need to ask ourselves whether and how we can and want to intervene as reflexive social-scientific observers by highlighting new inequalities in the process of hybridization in our research fields and helping to make event interactions more reflexive, inclusive and just. This might entail that we investigate and problematize the consequences of lacking informal exchange during virtual events and highlight new inequalities and power imbalances that facilitate or prevent event attendance, access to event spaces and participation in event-based interactions.

**Conclusion and outlook: Post-pandemic event ethnography**

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the methodological challenges associated with event ethnography. Facing the current hybridization of event ecologies and its yet unknown field-configuring effects on research and action fields that rely on event-based stakeholder interactions, it seems worth revisiting the role of event ethnography. In this paper, we have proposed a reflexive framework for systematically

---

**Figure 2.** Framework for addressing event-specific challenges along three reflexive axes.
reconsidering event-ethnographic fieldwork for the emerging post-pandemic world by zooming in on the co-constructive practices of attending, infrastructuring, and taking part in events. While these axes can be used as a reflexive frame for ethnographic work in general, we have further specified how they address event-specific challenges: How we attend events informs how we deal with the spatio-temporal problem of ephemerality. Infrastructuring strategies shape access and observability through temporary socio-material settings as subtle expressions of more permanent power structures. How we take part in events and accept the challenge of positioning ourselves informs how we reflexively fill our roles as expert observers in transdisciplinary interactions and intervene or give feedback.

Furthermore, our methodological framework allows us to reflect on event-based practices in online, offline, and hybrid formats through the same methodological lens. Our rationale was to overcome binary distinctions of event situations, such as online/offline, staged/spontaneous, or passive observation/active intervention (Howlett, 2021; Moeran, 2007). Accordingly, we developed a framework that is general enough to be applied to different event formats and hybrid event ecologies, and that is attentive to transdisciplinary research contexts as it raises questions that apply to all event participants alike. While it still remains an open question how the increase in virtual interactions in (post-)pandemic times will affect the socio-political processes in our research fields and our ethnographic practice (Lupton, 2021), our framework is also open to methods of virtual and digital ethnography (Hine, 2000) and “situational analytics,” which use data mapping strategies and tools (Marres, 2020). While virtual settings offer radically different data collection opportunities, digital methods can help us to open-mindedly explore virtual event interactions (Lindemann and Schünemann, 2020). Yet, we still consider our event-ethnographic approaches as “non-digital-centric” (Pink et al., 2015: 10) in the sense that even virtual interactions relate to the real-world governance of sociotechnical transitions and environmental issues. Hence, we consider virtual events not as “virtual worlds” (Boellstorff et al., 2012) but as arenas for real-world politics, governance, or technology development. As such, the challenge of positioning oneself and remaining conscious of one’s own agenda remains crucial, especially for ethnographic practices in transdisciplinary fields where social-scientific perspectives are explicitly welcomed or demanded. The question of positionality is therefore key to a reflexive way of doing transdisciplinary event ethnography, regardless of online or offline events. It challenges us to express our own viewpoints and ask ourselves how far we can and want to get involved, respond to expectations from the field, share our social-scientific viewpoints and contribute.

This approach allows us to consider and describe ethnographic research practices in relation or contrast to what co-participants and co-organizers do. It can be used to reflect on the impacts of our interventions into transdisciplinary fields but also to think through the shifting relations if we change roles and act as conveners or event co-organizers ourselves. It also enables us to enter into exchange with fellow event participants and to make sense of events in transdisciplinary and transparent ways, and ponder where our insights can contribute to more inclusive and just event-based interactions and event ecologies. Thus far, ethical discussions on transdisciplinary online formats tend to focus
on research settings with strong civic engagement, asking how virtual meetings could be more inclusive, just and sustainable, and addressing issues such as the global digital divide, access to technology, different time zones and opt-out options for participants who only want to listen rather than be forced to speak in breakout groups (Overzee, 2021). What seems to be lacking still are discussions about how we, as social scientists, might take on new roles as we attend or help organize transdisciplinary events as part of our multi-modal methods (Robinson and Schulz, 2009). By offering more instantaneous feedback, sharing preliminary insights and inviting co-participants and co-organizers to reflect with us, we might contribute in real-time and more transparently to the co-construction of field-configuring events.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Nona Schulte-Römer https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7600-1657
Friederike Gesing https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6405-0355

References

Ahlin T and Li F (2019) From field sites to field events: creating the field with information and communication technologies (ICTs). Medicine Anthropology Theory 6(2): 1–24.
Akrich M (1992) The de-scription of technical objects. In: Bijker WE and Law J (eds) Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 205–224.
Amit V (2000) Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World. London: Routledge.
Arya D and Henn M (2021) COVID-ized ethnography: challenges and opportunities for young environmental activists and researchers. Societies 11(2): 58.
Barry A and Born G (eds) (2013) Interdisciplinarity: Reconfigurations of the Social and Natural Sciences. Abingdon: Routledge.
Bell K (2014) Resisting commensurability: against informed consent as an anthropological virtue. American Anthropologist 116(3): 511–522.
Blok A, Nakazora M and Winthereik BR (2016) Infrastructuring environments. Science as Culture 25(1): 1–22.
Boellstorff T, Nardi B, Pearce C, et al. (2012) Ethnography and Virtual Worlds. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Bowker GC (1994) *Science on the Run: Information Management and Industrial Geophysics at Schlumberger, 1920–1940*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bowker GC and Star SL (2000) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences. Inside Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Boyer D (2008) Thinking through the anthropology of experts. *Anthropology in Action* 15(2): 38–46.

Boynton P (2020) *Being Well in Academia: Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected*. Insider Guides to Success in Academia. New York, NY: Routledge.

Campbell LM, Corson C, Gray NJ, et al. (2014) Studying global environmental meetings to understand global environmental governance: Collaborative event ethnography at the tenth conference of the parties to the convention on biological diversity. *Global Environmental Politics* 14(3): 1–20.

Citton Y (2017) *The Ecology of Attention*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Clarke AE (2005) *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory Mapping after the Postmodern Turn*. London: Thousand Oaks.

Cook I et al. (2005) Positionality/situated knowledge. In: Sibley D, Jackson P and Atkinson D (eds). *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*. London: Tauris, 16–26.

Delgado NA and Cruz LB (2014) Multi-event ethnography: Doing research in pluralistic settings. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 3(1): 43–58.

Faubion JD (2009) The ethics of fieldwork as the ethics of connectivity, or the good anthropologist (isn’t what she used to be). In: Faubion JD and Marcus GE (eds) *Fieldwork is Not What it Used to Be: Learning Anthropology’s Method in a Time of Transition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 145–164.

Garsten C (2010) Ethnography at the interface. In: Melhuus M, Mitchell JP and Wulff H (eds) *Ethnographic Practice in the Present*. New York: Berghahn Books, 56–68.

Garud R (2008) Conferences as venues for the configuration of emerging organizational fields: the case of cochlear implants. *Journal of Management Studies* 45(6): 1061–1088.

Gesing F (2022) The material politics of slurry: mobilisations and transformations along the waste–fertiliser continuum. *Political Geography*, Submitted for publication.

Goffman E (1956) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.

Gross T and Zilber TB (2020) Power dynamics in field-level events: A narrative approach. *Organization Studies* 41(10): 1369–1390.

Gupta A and Ferguson J (eds) (1997) *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Haraway D (1988) Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–599.

Hastrup K (2013) Nature: Introducing anthropology on the edge. In: Hastrup K (ed) *Anthropology and Nature*. London: Routledge, 11–36.

Hine C (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

Holmes DR and Marcus GE (2008) Collaboration today and the re-imagination of the classic scene of fieldwork encounter. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1: 81–101.
Howlett M (2021) Looking at the ‘field’ through a Zoom lens: methodological reflections on conducting online research during a global pandemic. Qualitative Research 22: 38–402. DOI: 10.1177/1468794120985691

Kim JJ, Williams S, Eldridge ER, et al. (2021) Digitally shaped ethnographic relationships during a global pandemic and beyond. Qualitative Research. 146879412110522. DOI: 10.1177/14687941211052275

Knoblauch H (2005) Focused ethnography. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research 6(3): 44.

Knott E (2019) Beyond the field: ethics after fieldwork in politically dynamic contexts. Perspectives on Politics 17(1): 140–153.

Lampel J and Meyer AD (2008) Guest editors’ introduction. How conferences, ceremonies, and trade shows constitute new technologies, industries, and markets. Journal of Management Studies 45(6): 1025–1035.

Latour B (1987) Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour B (2004) Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Le Dantec C and Di Salvo C (2013) Infrastructuring and the formation of publics in participatory design. Social Studies of Science 43(2): 241–264.

Lindemann G and Schünemann D (2020) Presence in digital spaces. A phenomenological concept of presence in mediatized communication. Human Studies 43(4): 627–651.

Lupton D (2021) Doing fieldwork in a pandemic. Crowd-sourced document, revised version. Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmq9B6P0NvMgVuiHZC18/edit# (accessed 19 April 2022).

Marcus GE (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system. The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. Annual Review of Anthropology 24: 95–117.

Marres N (2007) The issues deserve more credit: pragmatist contributions to the study of public involvement in controversy. Social Studies of Science 37(5): 759–780.

Marres N (2020) For a situational analytics: an interpretative methodology for the study of situations in computational settings. Big Data & Society 7(2): 1–16.

Maskell P, Harald B and Malmberg A (2006) Building global knowledge pipelines: The role of temporary clusters. European Planning Studies 14(8): 997–1013.

Massey D (2003) Imagining the field. In: Pryke M, Rose G and Whatmore S (eds) Using Social Theory: Thinking through Research. London: Sage, 71–88.

McInerney P-B (2008) Showdown at Kykuit: Field-configuring events as loci for conventionalizing accounts. Journal of Management Studies 45(6): 1089–1116.

Meyer AD, Gaba V and Colwell KA (2005) Organizing far from equilibrium: Nonlinear change in organizational fields. Organization Science 16(5): 456–473.

Moeran B (2007) From participant observation to observant participation: Anthropology, fieldwork and organizational ethnography. In: Ybema S, Yanow D, Wels H, et al. (eds) Organizational Ethnography Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life. London: Sage, 139–155.

Moeran B and Pedersen JS (eds) (2011) Negotiating Values in the Creative Industries: Fairs, Festivals and Competitive Events. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nader L (1974) Up the anthropologist – Perspectives gained from studying up. In: Hymes D (ed) Reinventing Anthropology. New York: Vintage Books, 284–311.

Niewöhner J (2015) Infrastructures of society, anthropology of. In: Wright JD (ed) International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. 2nd edition. Oxford: Elsevier, Vol 12, 119–125.

Overzee J (2021) Making online meetings just and sustainable. In: Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Available at: https://www.eur.nl/en/news/making-online-meetings-just-and-sustainable (accessed 12 March 2022).

Pink S, Horst H, Postill J, et al. (2015) Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice. London: Sage.

Power D and Jansson J (2008) Cyclical clusters in global circuits: Overlapping spaces in furniture trade fairs. Economic Geography 84(4): 423–448.

Robinson L and Schulz J (2009) New avenues for sociological inquiry: evolving forms of ethnographic practice. Sociology 43(4): 685–698.

Rose G (1997) Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. Progress in Human Geography 21(3): 305–320.

Schmidt R and Volbers J (2011) Siting praxeology. The methodological significance of ‘public’ in theories of social practices. Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 41(4): 419–440.

Schuldt N and Bathelt H (2010) International trade fairs and global buzz. Part II: Practices of global buzz. European Planning Studies 19(1): 1–22.

Schüßler E, Grabher G and Müller-Seitz G (2015) Field-configuring events: Arenas for innovation and learning? Industry and Innovation 22(3): 165–172.

Schüßler E, Rüling C-C and Wittneben B (2014a) On melting summits: The limitations of field-configuring events as catalysts of change in transnational climate policy. Academy of Management Journal 57(1): 140–171.

Schulte-Römer N (2015) Innovating in public. The introduction of LED lighting in Berlin and Lyon. Dissertation. Berlin: Technical University Berline. Available at: https://depositonce.tu-berlin.de/handle/11303/5211.

Schulte-Römer N (2018) Extraordinary LED installations: events for user–innovation interaction. Industry and Innovation 25(7): 699–727. doi: 10.1080/13662716.2017.1345678.

Schüßler E, Dobusch L and Wessel L (2014b) Backstage: organizing events as proto-institutional work in the popular music industry. Schmalenbach Business Review 66(4): 415–437.

Seim J (2021) Participant observation, observant participation, and hybrid ethnography. Sociological Methods & Research. 004912412098620. DOI: 10.1177/0049124120986209

Star SL (1999) The ethnography of infrastructure. American Behavioral Scientist 43(3): 377–391.

Suchman L (1997) Do categories have politics? The language/action perspective reconsidered. In: Friedman B (ed). Human Values and the Design of Computer Technology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 91–106.

Vadrot ABM, Langlet A, Tessnow-von Wysocki I, et al. (2021) Marine biodiversity negotiations during COVID-19: a new role for digital diplomacy? Global Environmental Politics 21(3): 169–186.

Wacquant L (2010) Participant observation/observant participation. In: Giddens A and Sutton PW (eds) Sociology: Introductory Readings. Cambridge: Polity Press, 69–73.

Wenger E (1998) Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.
Winner L (1980) Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus* 109(1): 121–136.
Zilber TB (2011) Institutional multiplicity in practice: a tale of two high-tech conferences in Israel. *Organization Science* 22(6): 1539–1559.

**Author biographies**

Nona Schulte-Römer is currently guest professor and researcher at the Institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt University Berlin. Her ethnographic research focuses on socio-technical transformations in the field of urban lighting and sustainable chemistry as well as environmental and health concerns about the new 5G mobile radio standard and LED lighting. Conceptually, she draws on science and technology studies (STS), transition research and historical accounts of her research fields.

Friederike Gesing is currently an Assistant Professor in human geography and posthuman studies at the University of Graz, Austria. Her fields of interest are political ecology, more-than-human and relational geographies and science and technology studies (STS). She specializes in qualitative environmental research and has conducted ethnographic work on coastal protection and restoration, transnational climate politics and nitrogen management on different scales.