Embracing the ‘inverted commas’, or How COVID-19 can show us new directions for ethnographic ‘fieldwork’

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Abstract
Qualitative researchers often refer to the sites they study as a ‘field’ and the work they do there as ‘fieldwork’. Setting both terms in inverted commas implies that their meaning stretches beyond clean categorisation of places or methods. Taking the example of ethnographic research during the coronavirus pandemic, I argue that embracing this excess meaning opens new research perspectives when fieldwork gets disrupted. As a more hopeful intervention into a debate currently focused on lost access, immobility and professional frustration, this article puts forward alternative readings of ‘fieldwork’ as a relational and emergent process in which proximity and knowledge production are bound to sensitive research practice more than to physical (co)presence. By tragic serendipity, I argue, COVID-19 has the potential to normalise such readings against the traditional gold standard of fieldwork as extended (and often expensive) research stays in places far-away from ‘home’.

Keywords
Fieldwork, ethnography, Covid-19, disruption, serendipity, diplomacy, hope

Introduction
Qualitative researchers often refer to the sites they study as a ‘field’ and the work they do there as ‘fieldwork’. Setting ‘field/work’ in inverted commas implies that the term stands for more than the clean categorisation of places or methods, and frees it from its literal...
meaning to pre-empt comments like Max Weber’s ‘I am not a donkey, I don’t have a field’. The practice is widely used across the social sciences, including in research published in this journal (Beneito-Montagut et al., 2017; Howlett, 2021; Mannay and Morgan 2015; Sampson 2019; Soni-Sinha, 2008; Trigger et al. 2012).

In this article, I discuss how embracing the imprecision implied by the inverted commas can open new research perspectives when fieldwork is disrupted. Imprecision should here not be read as a derogatory term. To the contrary, it points to interpretive openness and adaptability as a basic characteristic of qualitative research. I focus this discussion on one form of qualitative research, ethnography; and in the context of one rupture, the coronavirus pandemic. Asking What does COVID-19 reveal about the conduct of ethnographic ‘fieldwork’, I rethink claims that ethnography is at ‘an impasse’ or has becomes ‘virtually impossible’. Especially in the early days of the pandemic, there has been a large stream of op-eds, articles, and online debates on how to conduct fieldwork ‘remotely’, ‘from home’ or ‘in lockdown’. Focussing mainly on immobility and inaccessibility, fieldworkers across disciplines argued that ethnography needs to be ‘reinvented’ (Lems, 2020), that hands-off modes need to be found to ‘replace’ face-to-face research (Howlett 2021), or that ethnographers need to ‘reskill’ as they shift their research away from in-person interactions (DeHart, 2020; Hjalmarsn et al., 2020).

I propose an alternative, more hopeful intervention. Inspiration for it – and for my title – comes from the work of the anthropologist Annelise Riles. In her 1998 paper Infinity within the brackets, Riles focuses on a specific stylistic textual practice – the inclusion of [squared brackets] in UN negotiations documents – to bring the multi-layered process of negotiating diplomatic texts into view. My ambition is similar in that I focus on the work done by the ‘inverted commas’ to foreground the serendipitous process of making research ‘fields’. While Riles wrote about negotiation practices at the UN in 1995, I illustrate this idea through research on diplomatic practice in the EU in 2020. Rather than going into the substantial findings of this research (see Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 2021), I focus on the methodological and epistemic lessons of continuing fieldwork in the early months of the pandemic (March–December 2020).

Through a round of reflections, I argue that the pandemic further reveals – and may liberate us from – outdated ideas on what it means to do ‘fieldwork’. We knew before Covid to speak of a fieldsite rather than the field as place, and arguments about multisitedness were already commonplace. Yet, it was only now that many of us could first-hand observe how research fields break down, move and re-settle. By tragic serendipity, COVID-19 has underlined the merits of treating research fields as methodological and epistemic compositions. If we accept this about the ‘field’, and if we take the ‘inverted commas’ to indicate this, two implications follow.

The first is methodological and relates to debates on access and doing ethnography ‘abroad’ or ‘at home’: if the field is a construction, no one sits forever ‘in the middle of it’ (Wallman et al., 1980: 6) and working in (and on) any field will bring both challenges and opportunities. At times, fieldwork will feel straight and calm thanks to a positionality of relative proximity and access. Other times, it will feel bendy and rough in contexts of alienation or rapid change. As I will show, these conditions are at least as
determined by the fieldworker’s attitude and inventiveness as by (not) being in any particular place. Rethinking fieldwork not only as an embodied craft but also a mental state opens up new paths of interaction and immersion. These paths can go two-ways, simultaneously leading the ethnographer deeper into the world(s) they study and those worlds deeper into theirs. During the pandemic, the boundaries researchers and participants draw between work–life and life–life moreover set new boundaries to the field. This leads to renegotiations of method and positionality that I will discuss in relation to the rising importance of informal communication tools and the formation of new professional intimacies.

The second implication is epistemological and relates to debates on knowing by ‘being there’: if the field is in flux, there is no stable ‘here’ or ‘there’ and the struggle over finding it may itself becomes substantively productive. 26 years ago, George Marcus invited ethnographers to follow different (epistemic) objects – like metaphors, people, or conflicts – to learn something about a field. What COVID-19 has revealed is that it is time to follow the field itself to learn about what we deem it to be a field of. Epistemically, I will discuss, a better question than have I found the field? may therefore be have I learned something about following my research (t)here?

Taking these ideas together – to approach the field as a process and to being methodologically and epistemically open as to where it may lead – can help us develop a more positive vocabulary when fieldwork gets disrupted. Indeed, this vocabulary has the potential to outlive the current crisis and aid the normalisation of immersion strategies that do not require extensive (and expensive) travel far from home. As COVID-19 has forced researchers to evade, it has also opened possible detours for ethnographic work. The most treaded path has led many deeper into virtual sites, wondering how fieldwork can be conducted ‘on zoom’ or through a screen (see Howlett 2021). Next to (perhaps reluctant) methodological innovation, this move also bears epistemic opportunities. Practically speaking, the move online was shared by many of our research participants and by going online we follow the field. More fundamentally, finding ourselves in new settings makes us rediscover ethnography’s ethos of curiosity, flexibility and serendipity – all characteristics that make it so strong an approach to study complex social developments (like a pandemic) in the first place. The more hopeful intervention proposed here is thus akin to a methodological logic of ‘when one door closes another opens’ and an epistemic curiosity of really wanting to know where it leads. Below, this is exemplified in my attempt to follow the ‘field’ of EU diplomacy through this time of crisis.

I develop my argument in four parts. I first consider the main challenge COVID-19 has presented to ethnographic fieldwork. Second, I introduce the Brussels diplomatic field and describe my ethnographic involvement with it. Third, I illustrate how I tried to do ‘fieldwork’ during COVID-19. I find that while the performance of core ethnographic methods – observing and interviewing – needed to be adjusted, the interpretive sensibilities these methods imply stayed the same. Also from a distance, through computer screens, or over the phone, doing ethnography was ultimately about showing interest, engaging empathetically and committing (over) time. These attitudes showed themselves as the backbone of fieldwork, which leads to the argument that the ‘gold standard’ of ethnography may not lie in being physically present somewhere for an extended
period of time but in a serious commitment to the ethnographic ethos. I close the paper by arguing how embracing the ‘inverted commas’ embraces this ethos. There are, of course, important exceptions, especially for fields that are geographically confined, informal, or less digitalised. Yet, following and paying close attention to the (un)making of those fields too can productively bridge times of waiting. Even more, it may teach us something new, accelerate a more inclusive research approach, and push ethnographic inquiry to finally sign the divorce papers on already half-abandoned notions of the ‘field’ as a singular place to be.

COVID-19 and ethnographic ‘fieldwork’

In qualitative research, the coronavirus pandemic has produced methodological challenges linked to lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing. These challenges are especially pressing for approaches primed on physical proximity, such as ethnography, which has traditionally been ‘marked by the encounter as its principle methodological feature’ (Hickey and Smith, 2020: 3). Usually, this encounter is an immediate one, in which ‘representations from the field [are] filtered through the researcher’s embodied experience of having “been there”’ (ibid: 3). Attempting to see the world from the perspectives of others, ethnography requires engaging, intervening or even taking on the ways of the world one studies (participant observation). The main instrument of ethnographic research is the (body of the) ethnographer themselves, who immerses themselves into (un)known sites to make strangeness familiar or familiarity strange.

The gold standard of ethnography has traditionally been long-term ‘fieldwork’ for which the researcher leaves home and stays with their subject(s) until they reach interpretive saturation (Amit 2000; Pachirat 2018: 114–15). There are implicit spatial and temporal expectations linked to this understanding. On the one hand, ‘the field’ has traditionally been imagined as a site that is geographically and spatially separate from ‘home’; a bounded, foreign, exotic place where ‘local’ practices can be found and collected. On the other hand, fieldworkers are expected to spend a considerable amount of time cut off from their usual lives, fully immersed into life on site. ‘One year’ has long been considered the necessary threshold; an inheritance of the rural locations of the first ethnographic studies in anthropology, as a year allowed ethnographers to experience the cycle of all four seasons (Pachirat 2018: 126).

It is this place-bound, far-away, on-site understanding of fieldwork that seems cracked by COVID-19. In a debate centred on immobility and lost access, ethnographers worry that their craft needs to be ‘reinvented’, that ‘hands-off modes’ need to be found to replace face-to-face research, or that ethnographers need to ‘reskill’ as they shift away from in-person interactions (Howlett, 2021; Witt and Schnabel 2020). While empathetic and collegial in itself, this debate has - perhaps involuntarily - turned back the clock on two core debates on the ‘field’ that have matured in qualitative research circles over three decades. The first is an ontological debate, which can be broadly summarised as place-vs-process. The second concerns the relative (un)importance of ‘being there’ and the overemphasis on particular ways of applying ethnographic methods at the expense
of the ethos at the heart of the approach (Mannay and Morgan 2015). It is useful to briefly consider both debates and the alternative readings of ‘field/work’ they offer.

**From place to process**

Almost 30 years ago, George Marcus argued for a fundamental re-thinking of the ethnographic ‘field’ (Marcus 1995; see also Amit, 2000; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Equally inspired by debates on globalisation and methodological reflexivity, Marcus diagnosed a false dichotomy between ‘global’ and ‘local’ in ethnographic research. As most social dynamics are globalising, it is not insufficient to study everyday life within ‘local’ contexts. What is moreover needed is a mapping of that context, a contextualisation. This second step, which he called multi-sited ethnography, is ‘designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations’ (Marcus, 1995: 105). The field, seen from this view, is no longer a place but the connections made between places, their people, practices, plots, things, or (hi)stories. The force holding these ‘multiple sites’ together is ‘the ethnographer herself’ (Marcus, 1995: 105). As the object of the ethnographer’s attention, the field is constructed through ‘pre-planned or opportunistic movements’ and ‘circumstantial commitments’ to the theme of the fieldwork that ‘provide a kind of psychological substitute for the reassuring sense of “being there”’ (ibid: 113).

After and with Marcus, most ethnographers today ask not whether but how their studies are multi-sited, and over time the idea of multi-sitedness has been extended beyond multiple locations to include multiple people, multiple jobs, multiple things, multiple relations and multiple epistemologies (Pachirat, 2018: 85–95; Soni-Sinha, 2008: 515–18). The core idea here is that it is the process of making connections that constructs the field, replacing geographical ideas of co-presence with sociological ideas of performative links and shared attention.

Two recent empirical studies exemplify this reading. One is by the political scientist Felix Anderl (2016), who studied global norm diffusion by conducting fieldwork in ‘local’ political organisations. Anderl eventually finds that ‘the local’ – a spatial category central to ethnographic analysis – is a ‘myth’. By tracing how an intergovernmental organisation in Bangladesh adapts and uses a rhetoric of ‘global norms’, he finds that the ‘local field’ is not a place but a form of rhetorical action. Accordingly, the field becomes a rhetorical category in a process that constructs local places and their meaning to begin with (Anderl 2016: 214). A second example comes from the anthropologist Daryll Stellmach (2020), who investigates the meaning of the ‘field’ in humanitarian action. Accompanying a group of aid workers on their mission from London to the Netherlands and South Sudan, Stellmach notices that wherever he went, ‘the field was ever further’. In each place, he describes, ‘I found a field beyond the field. I may have been “in the field”, but there was always another field, a bit further away in space, time or mind’ (Stellmach 2020: 2). Based on these observations, he calls the field a ‘space of deliberate, nurtured uncertainty’ that cannot be found, accessed and left, but that is brought into being by being thought, spoken and written about (ibid: 2–3). Like Anderl (and initially Marcus), Stellmach comes to think of the field as a process: an expression and realization.
of method, and the transformation of experience into memories, sketches, drafts and, eventually, academic output.

From being there to being aware

Such ontological re-thinking of the field is inseparable from debates on how to work with(in) it. If we accept that the field is a composition first made by being acted on, the methodological and epistemic demands of ‘fieldwork’ change too. It transforms from a logic of ‘being there’ to a logic of ‘being aware’, from collecting data in pre-set sites to mapping connections yet to be determined (Grabher et al., 2018; Günel et al., 2020). Given the latter’s geographic openness, the traditional demand of physical co-presence is joined by an intellectual demand of attentive research practice. The ‘aware’ in being aware, in other words, is just as flexible as the ‘there’ in being there. What many fieldworkers experienced during COVID-19 may be a sense that access has been lost to the site of their research they had been most aware of. But ethnographic research has always required a strong stomach for dealing with uncertainty. Doing ethnography, Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973: 10) argued some 50 years ago, ‘is like trying to read…a manuscript foreign, faded, full of ellipses’; Vered Amit (2000: 11) suggests that in ethnography ‘it is the circumstance which define [s] the method rather than the method defining the circumstance’; and Paul Rock elevates the fact that you cannot know what you are exploring until it has been explored to be ‘the prime ethnographic maxim’ (Rock in Atkinson et al., 2001: 7).

In addition to the instability of the field itself, however, come the unstable relations the ethnographer has to it. Trying to demystify ethnographic positionalities and the process of fieldwork at large, Michael Agar described the job of the ethnographer as that of a ‘professional stranger’. Caught in the ‘paradox of professional distance and personal involvement’ (Agar, 1980: 7), fieldworkers seek intimate understandings without losing epistemic distance. They must, in other words, ‘be there’ but avoid ‘going native’. This inherent tension presents an ‘involvement paradox’ that places the ethnographers in a range of unresolvable relations including participant-observer; away-home; insider-outsider; chronicler-activist and apologetic-critical. To first recognise and then learn to manage these ‘hyphen-spaces’ (Langley and Klag 2017: 4) requires the development of an ‘ethnographic sensibility’, ‘a learned way of being, seeing, and apprehending, involving the cultivation…and refinement of emotional response’ (McCargo 2017: 91).

Taken together, the fact that the ‘field’ itself cannot be pre-known and the fact that the researcher has to manage her relations to it make ethnography an unruly and improvisational craft. In business speak, it is full of ‘known unknowns’ that also hide in the inverted commas. To practically deal with imperfect knowledge of where research may lead, ethnographers often evoke serendipity as a central characteristic of their work. Working serendipitously means to ‘embrace the chance component of research as being central to the collection and interpretation of data’ (Endres 2018: 222; Mannay and Morgan 215: 170). While often equated with lucky coincidences, Bill Endres reminds us
that ‘[s]erendipitous events are as likely to emerge from tragedy’ (ibid: 222). Accordingly, it may be moments of adversity and difficulty that end up producing new insights.

COVID-19 presents such a moment of tragic serendipity. With the pandemic, the ‘field’ no longer behaved as we expected – or wanted – it to. This rupture has not only affected the whereabouts of the field and hence the means of ethnographic access, but also the howabouts of the field and hence the means of ethnographic involvement and knowledge generation. So far, most reactions to this rupture have been just that: reactive. What I want to suggest is an alternative. As the pandemic consolidates and medical professionals speak of new waves and long-term restrictions, ethnographers should do what they have always done best: carefully adapt their methods to shifting research environments and make their awareness and involvement in these shifts part of their emerging arguments.

The ‘field’ of EU diplomacy and Covid-19

The ‘field’ of EU diplomacy is a methodological and epistemic construct involving a set of political institutions, diplomatic representations, their staff, practices and relations. In everyday language, the public, media and academia use ‘Brussels’, the Belgian capital, as a shorthand to describe this field. ‘Brussels’ is also the place where most EU scholars go, when they do ‘fieldwork’.

When the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, I was knee-deep into a 5-year research project on the impact of digital technologies on EU diplomacy. Until then, I did this work by ‘being there’ (in Brussels), observing, shadowing and interviewing diplomats, spending time in libraries and archives and hanging out in cafes and parks around the Quartier Européen. This research had been largely explorative, and my primary methodological strategy was to seek ‘personal encounters’ (Hickey and Smith, 2020: 3). A fieldnote from March 2019 exemplifies this:

“it is 7a.m., Monday morning. I am sitting at Gate D1 waiting for my flight to Brussels….Most interviews are in the second week. I’ll use my time before to just hang out around Schuman, read POLITICO, look at Twitter, watch some streams from the Council…So far the plan, let’s see.” (Fieldnotes 18.03.2019)

With COVID-19, this strategy cracked. Unable to travel, the pandemic seemed to make the field inaccessible. This reaction is based on the traditional interpretation of fieldwork outlined above. But had I, indeed, travelled to Brussels during this time, I would have found the field empty rather than closed. There would have been few meetings to observe, few possibilities for interviews, few opportunities for informal hangouts. Instead, ‘Brussels’ too was going digital. Crucially, this is not to say that the physical ‘field’ seized to be important. Rather, it is to say that it was moving deeper into virtual spaces most of which, indeed, predate the pandemic. Already in March 2019, I considered reading (online) news and watching online ‘Council streams’ part of doing fieldwork.

What had changed in 2020 is that I was not doing this work from Brussels, but from my living room. On 3 June 2020 I wrote in my fieldnotes: 'I am not sure if I work from
home or live at work’. Taken out of context, this may actually capture the goal of ethnographic immersion. As James Scott (Scott 2007: 362) argued: ‘as ethnographers you’re working from the moment you open your eyes in the morning until you close them at night’. What was different now is that this work no longer happened in discrete places or times, but around the clock and from home. Some months into the pandemic, my flat resembled a field office with extra screens on the dining table and multiple sockets plugged into the wall. Rather than being inaccessible or closed, the field, it seemed, had moved in. But was this an extreme case of ethnographic immersion? No. It rather seemed to be a reverse process in which the field dissolved into my everyday life. All the sudden, the ‘field’ was no longer ‘there…and there…and there!’ (Hannerz, 2003) but also here and here and here! This move had both methodological and epistemic implications. Methodologically, I had to rethink and improvise new means of engaging the field. Epistemically, I learned how important empathy and affect are for knowledge generation and got a chance to follow the diplomatic field deeper into my participants’ lives. The latter is especially interesting in the context of diplomacy, where the ‘home’ has long been recognised as a place of official state business (see e.g. Neumann’s 2012 work on diplomatic functions at ambassador residences). During the pandemic, I got to see how international politics extended into the private kitchens and living rooms of (also lower ranked) diplomats, adding new substantial insights to the public/private divide in diplomatic practice.

EU ‘fieldwork’ during COVID-19

In the spring of 2020, the EU diplomatic field was moving into my computer, my phone, my apartment and my everyday life. With no alternative but facing deadlines and job pressures, I tried to embrace the dissolution of the anyways rather ‘artificial distinctions between fieldwork and deskwork, between research site and site of analysis, between researcher and researched, and so on’ (Schatz, 2009: 6). I tried to trust the literature sketched out above that the field is actively constructed in researcher-participant relations and the hyphen-spaces ‘in between’ (Mannay and Morgan, 2015: 170–71). But engaging with EU officials while sitting in my bedroom still felt strange. Waiting for one participant to call me back, I wrote the following fieldnote:

“I guess this is how the field enters your personal-digital and private-analogue space. Before speaking on WhatsApp, I deleted the profile picture of me and Henry [a big black dog] so it looks a bit more professional” (Fieldnotes 27.03.2020).

As argued above, balancing proximity and distance between the researcher and her subject(s) is central to the production of ethnographic knowledge. With COVID-19, previously important parts of this relationship shifted. There were, for example, no more secretaries arranging meetings, no more lobbies to wait in, no more access badges to wear and no more small talk before interviews. Instead, both the form (texting, emailing and video-chatting) and situatedness (online but often at home) of fieldwork changed, reshaping not only how but also what could be done and thus made known. Next to
epistemic facts (that diplomats juggle work and childcare too, for instance), these new methods also affected the ethos of ethnographic research, in my case particularly the empathetic dimension of understanding more clearly what live conditions my research participant were working out of.

**Observing, from afar**

According to Angus Vail (2001), doing research ‘from afar’ presents one of many tools in a well-rounded ethnographer’s toolkit as it may help to ‘achieve novelty’ and ‘detect changes’ (Vail 2001: 711). Physical distance, he suggests, allows to once again take on the role of the apprentice and look at one’s field afresh. Unable to travel, this fresh look has meant paying attention to the non-physical, textual, electronic and virtual sites in which the field shows up. Just like analogue sites, such sites are best approached without a pre-determined strategy of where ‘to go’ (consider the names of the original internet ‘browsers’ Explorer, Safari or Navigator). For me, three methods stood out as particularly useful: *reading newsletter, listening to podcasts and attending webinars.*

**Reading newsletters.** I started my working-from-home fieldwork days by reading two sets of newsletters delivered to my email inbox every morning between 7 and 8 a.m. Both are compiled by Brussels journalists and provide fast-paced information on daily political happenings. In my case, both are published by POLITICO Europe, a newspaper specialised on EU affairs. The first, is the ‘Brussels Playbook’ a daily newsletter I first subscribed to in the autumn of 2018. Back then, one participant had characterised the outlet as ‘containing a bit of gossip here and there..a sort of “tabloid” for the EU bubble’ (Fieldnotes 14.11.2018). Over the years, others have spoken about the Playbook as ‘setting the tone for the day’ (Fieldnotes 19.03.2019). While still in Brussels it indeed seemed to me that some interviewees ‘were just retelling what the Playbook said in the morning’ (Fieldnotes 12.12.2019). Reflecting on one interview, I wrote in my fieldnotes: ‘…when she was giving me examples, she was telling me that all of this was also written about in the Playbook. So, reading POLITICO in a more focused way would probably bring much rich data to the fore’ (Fieldnotes 13.12.2019). A few months later, this is exactly what I started to do. The second newsletter I subscribed to was a new one, especially set up to cover how Brussels deals with COVID-19. On 19 March 2020, POLITICO launched the ‘Coronavirus Daily Update’. Over the next weeks and months, what was talked about here guided my explorations through the covidious-Brussels-field, and became a basis for ongoing conversation with research participants. The rolling updates kept me motivated and feel connected, and on some days when I did not know what to do or where to look, I started my remote field-days by rhetorically asking myself: ‘What’s the Playbook about today?’ (Fieldnotes 19.05.2020). In terms of remote observation, the newsletters also pointed me to other things going on in the field that I could attend (to) from a distance like podcasts or webinars.
Listening to podcasts. Podcasts have become a popular medium to spread information, knowledge and opinions, academic and otherwise. At the time of writing, countless podcasts populate the Brussels diplomatic field and one could probably conduct a field-study just through them. One podcast series I subscribed to (already pre-COVID-19) is POLITICO’s ‘EU-Confidential’, which is based on a weekly newspaper column of the same name. Under COVID-19, listening to podcasts allowed me to remotely attach myself to the heels of Brussels’ journalists and follow them around in their everyday work-life by proxy. One episode was especially relevant, as its topic almost exactly mirrored my research question at that time. In episode 149 of EU-Confidential on 24 April 2020, three Brussels journalists did a behind-the-scenes tour of the European Council, explaining ‘how things typically work and how that’s changed in the coronavirus era’. I listened to it over and over again, took extensive notes on the content, as well as on where the journalists laughed, sounded ironic or hesitated, tried to link it to what I already knew about the workings of the Council and used it as an opportunity to add new participants to my pool of contacts. In my fieldnotes, I wrote: ‘I listen to Episode 149 of the podcast and a lot of things stood out: [t]he first part is about “going behind the scenes of EUCO meetings, in normal times and in the coronavirus era” – the conversation starts with a virtual tour around Brussels and what it looks like at the time of the pandemic…their description is detailed, but…quite romanticized. After I closed the SoundCloud tab on my screen I try to contact the journalists… It could be cool to ask them our questions directly’ (Fieldnotes 24.04.2020). Remotely listening to the field thus became a way for me to triangulate ideas, collect ‘live’ impressions and get new ideas to expand my fieldwork-network.

Attending webinars. A few months into COVID-19, everyone has screen fatigue because everyone is in videoconferences all the time. This applied both to me and my participants. ‘We spent a lot more time in videoconferences now’ (Fieldnotes 21.04.2020), ‘I was in a videoconference with 27 ministers last week. It was quite an experience’ (Fieldnotes 26.04.2020) and ‘we have gotten much better in doing videoconferences’ (Fieldnotes 19.05.2020), but ‘everyone is getting increasingly tired of it’ (Fieldnotes 21.04.2020), diplomats report. Of course, it is impossible (if not illegal) to join the official videoconference of the European leaders or diplomats themselves. Like ‘in real life’, those meetings are confidential and happen behind closed (virtual) doors. With a majority of meetings moving online, however, it has become much easier to join the broader range of third-party gatherings that have always framed the Brussels field organised by journalists, lobbyists, or academic institutions. For instance, pre-COVID-19 I often joined events hosted by the College of Europe that would generally feature high-ranked EU politicians and “bring together an interesting crowd in mid-town Brussels hotels to mingle and build new connections” (Fieldnotes 09.12.2019). With COVID-19, such events moved online. One evening in May 2020, for example, I attended a webinar with Federica Mogherini, former High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In the meeting, Mogherini gave background insights into how the EU institutions are preparing for ‘living with the pandemic long-term’. ‘While she was talking, my Zoom quadrant is only centimetres away from hers. We will probably never be closer’ (Fieldnotes 20.05.2020).
What these examples show is that there are many sites in which the field can ‘show up’ and ways to ‘get close’ to it. Online research, of course, has long been a popular and fast-growing branch of qualitative research; but the disruption of COVID-19 goes deeper than ‘digital ethnography’ or ‘netnography’ where the focus is on understanding digitally native practices. What I experienced rather resembles what Munk (2013) has called ‘techno-anthropology’: a technologically-mediated form of ethnography at the intersection of the online and offline world. Think of this as the difference between texting on an online dating platform and keeping a long-distance relationship alive via digital tools. In the former, the relationship is ‘born digital’, in the latter, the digital is a means of (temporarily) suspending distance. In virtual ethnography, the field is a digital site. In my research, the field was a blended performance. This is important in relation to the ontological discussion above and to distinguish this argument from those of others. Howlett (2021), for instance, writes about ‘looking at the field through a zoom lens’, a formulation that tacitly reproduces the idea of a field ‘over there’ to be looked at through a lens. What I am suggesting is that both analogue sides of the (zoom) screens are part of the field, as well as the interface of the application itself. The field thus stretches from the living room of the diplomat into mine, mediated by a screen that – ironically – seems to bring us closer. Methodologically, this alternative intimacy allowed for different uses of ethnographic methods (e.g. replacing interviews with texting); while also, epistemically, teaching me new things about the diplomatic field (e.g. diplomats being working dads or the professional norms of working on the weekend). As the field transformed from place to process, is boundaries blurred. This blurring was most evident in the partial collapsing of the private/professional space for both me and the participants, which ‘worked the hyphen’ and, in effect, changed how and what I could know about diplomacy during the pandemic.

Interacting, from afar

In Researching from Afar, Vail further argues that distance pushes us to find new ways to map and relate to the sites and communities we study. In mid-March 2020, I sent out approximately 20 ‘checking-in’ messages to diplomats I had been in close contact with in the years before. In the next week or two, about two thirds replied, and about one third stayed engaged over the next months via emailing, texting, and speaking on the phone. In these connections, we extended the research field by making what Postill and Pink (2012) have called an ‘ethnographic place’; a place constituted through emergent relations clustering around common interests and attention.

Emailing. If one sends an email to a Brussels official, one gets in line with hundreds of others vying for that person’s attention. Pre-COVID-19, a number of participants gave me their phone numbers straight away, saying ‘just call me when you are here’ (Fieldnotes 28.03.2019); or ‘give me a call rather than email me, that is just easier’ (27.03.2019). Indeed, the swarm of emails they receive annoys them. Still face-to-face, one participant told me: ‘last September I started all my days with deleting, forwarding
and sorting through useless information. The only thing I wanted to do was to get rid of it… at some point I had 3880 unread emails in my inbox. Do you want to know what I did? I just deleted them all’ (Fieldnotes 19.03.2019). A year later, emailing had transformed into one of the main ways to stay in touch. ‘Substantially, we try to do what we did before it is just almost all over email now’, one participant said during our first COVID-19 exchange. ‘I am worried now’ he continued, ‘that someone is missing a piece of information so we…have a much bigger traffic of emails. I don’t know how many, maybe 200 a day’ (Fieldnotes 21.04.2020). Somehow, I had become part of my participants’ Email stream, regularly receiving forwarded messages or links to newspaper articles or tweets they have seen with informal comments like ‘fyi’, ‘you might enjoy this’ or just a smiling emoticon (Fieldnotes 22.04.2020; 28.09.2020). Many moreover started sending information from on the go (visible in the ‘sent from my phone’ caption at the end of a message), signing emails with their initials or altogether dropping greetings and salutations, transforming a once formal means of engagement into a fast and informal stream of updates. Similar impressions are reported by Howlett (2021: 7), who reports that communicating digitally left her ‘participants feeling much more relaxed than when we shared material space’.

Speaking on the phone. ‘I suggest that we set up a phone call tomorrow or the day after, that will just be easiest’, is the first reply I got to the initial round of emails I sent out (Fieldnotes 26.03.2020). The next day, we spoke ‘for just under 30 min on a WhatsApp video call, my phone leaning against my computer screen and his phone resting on his desk in his office. I am at my office, he starts out, “I just got here”– I ask him to (audio) record the chat, he agrees, just like before with our interview back in January, I say. He smiles, nods, and starts talking…’ (Fieldnotes 27.03.2020). Over the next weeks and months, phone calls with diplomats and other EU staff happened in many different moments and under different conditions. In general, we spoke to each other from our respective homes, which often provided additional insights into the contours of the diplomatic field. One morning in May, I was preparing to speak to a participant I had met a number of times in Brussels: ‘I am starting to ease into the fieldwork part of this week by texting [name] back, asking him to let me know what time would be good for him to talk on the phone today’ (Fieldnotes 04.05.2020). The participant replied asking me to delay for a bit as he has to take care of his kids while his wife is working. No problem, I replied and waited on standby for some hours. Later in the afternoon, he texts back: ‘How about in 1° minutes? Sure. When we speak, the conversation is interrupted three or 4 times, “my bad – bad wifi on my end”, he says. We laugh about it and move on’ (Fieldnotes 04.05.2020). The diplomats too were working from home, dealing with bad internet connections, or taking care of their children. The uncertainty of the overall situation gave us a ‘shared experience…to build solidarity’ (Hjalmarsön et al., 2020: 8), which transformed our exchanges into conversations rather than rigid ‘interviews’. Qualitative researchers often confess that some of the most valuable things are said on the margins of formal research activities, right before and right after recorders are switched on and off (see for instance Trigger et al., 2012: 514–517). Under COVID-19, all research felt like it was happening in the ‘margins’.
Texting. Texting was accompanying emailing and speaking on the phone as an unexpectedly insightful way of immersion and exchange. Pre-COVID-19, texting was limited to cancelling a meeting or announcing one will arrive late. Now, it was becoming an actual way of talking to each other, and a way to get live updates and insight into the backstage of the field. Two examples illustrate this: ‘I text with some people in Brussels over the weekend. [name told me] that he was going to attend a virtual summit meeting on Friday afternoon. So I write: “Hope that will go well today. How does it work? 20 ministers and their 20 supporters? that sounds messy …”’. Around 5 p.m., he replied: ‘Exactly! 20 ministers + ministers from invited countries and a few international organisations. The good thing with diplomacy is that people don’t interrupt each other (or when they do it’s a really bad sign...) so I guess there’s more discipline than in other virtual meetings’ (Fieldnotes 27.04.2020). Here, I got a recap of a participant who had just attended a high-level diplomatic meeting. Through a text message, I learned something about the translation of diplomatic protocol and offline diplomatic procedures into online settings. But texting brought me even closer, indeed, it even brought me into the negotiation room. For months pre-COVID-19, I had been studying how diplomats use technologies – like phones – when working. Now, texting me was part of this use. One Wednesday in mid-April, I got the following message form one diplomat: “Check the council media info, they are recording us! To show that Europe goes on...”. I look on the Council Web site but can only find a livestream scheduled for noon. I reply: “yes! it says “filming” on the press Web site. Is there a livestream that I can access?” “No, the meeting is not streamed. Just one clip”... a few minutes later, he writes again: “Oh Jesus i did not realize they filmed me! Greasy trousers and my hair looks horrible”’ (Fieldnotes 22.04.2020).

These ways of interacting with the field, of talking to participants, catching up and looking at the things they suggest became ways to continue fieldwork from afar. In many ways, this engagement became much more informal, and the additional layers of distance (geographic remoteness and the screen) relaxed professional posturing. Pre-COVID-19, one diplomat explained the importance of face-to-face meetings by saying that ‘you simply don’t call strangers on their cell phone’ (Fieldnotes 20.11.2018). Six months later, another told me that ‘talking to strangers is really an essential skill of a Brussels diplomat’ (28.03.2019) and another 6 months later I heard that ‘every now and then, researchers come and you have to explain yourself to them’ (Fieldnotes 15.11.2019). With COVID-19, these relations have fallen into new ‘ethnographic places’ in the form of webinars, podcasts or WhatsApp chats that moved the field beyond Brussels into alternative encounters, methods and sites.

Conclusion: Embracing the ‘inverted commas’

In its traditional interpretation, the ethnographic ‘field’ is a distant place where isolated researchers engage in long cycles of ‘fieldwork’ until they have come to see the world from the perspective of another. At the core of this interpretation are the twin ideas that the field is a place to enter, be in, and leave again, and that when ‘you are actually there...you enter the world of the people you’re working with rather than bringing them into your [s]’
(Agar, 1980: 9). In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the first part of this interpretation (‘being there’) broke down and the second (leaving ‘home’ to enter ‘the field’) got inverted. Quickly, voices became loud that ethnographic fieldwork had become ‘virtually impossible’ and was facing ‘an impasse’ due to travel restrictions, social distancing, and limits to mobility. Driven by the emotionality and uncertainty of the situation, these reactions – perhaps involuntarily – re-packaged the practice of ‘fieldwork’ in an old gown of place-bound logics demanding physical co-presence and a divorce from the researcher’s own life.

In this article, I have written against this interpretation of fieldwork, and suggested an alternative reading by picking apart both ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’ as emergent, relational and attention-bound processes. I discussed how COVID-19 has further exposed already existing cracks in traditional conceptions of ‘fieldwork’ and argued for what can be done and learned when we follow the field into new directions from afar, online, or by technological mediation. I summarised this argument in the invitation to ‘embrace the “inverted commas”’ and mean with that the making explicit of why we have long put ‘field/work’ in inverted commas to signal that it stands for more than clean and pre-determined research categories. To illustrate the usefulness of this stylistic move in terms of research practice, I used reflections and descriptions of my efforts to continue fieldwork with ‘Brussels’ during the early months of the pandemic. This discussion has included the outline of concrete examples what in-depth qualitative research can look like in times of restrictions to immediate encounters. Concretely, the inability to ‘be there’ has pushed me to follow the field into new, mainly virtual, spaces and refocus my attention through different tools (computers and phones), media (radio, internet and emails) and relations (former connections and new networks). The ‘field’, this way, transformed from a place to be travelled to into a process of engagement, empathy, and time commitment. It became a process ‘slowly worked together’ (Riles 1998, 386) that was no longer only out ‘there’ but also in ‘here’.

In addition to altering the ontology of the field, its apparent collapse – and subsequent re-composition – also shook the already delicate balancing act of paradoxical relations (like participant-observer) that shape ethnographic researcher. With the pandemic, I suddenly found myself (at least) virtually in the everyday lives, living rooms, and private WhatsApp chats of my research participants. Through such alternative intimacies, I learned new things about them that would have remained hidden if we had met in a government office. It also allowed for collecting timely examples of a long-studied phenomenon in diplomatic studies: the blurring of the private/public realm of state representation in places such as diplomats’ homes. While physically immobile, the research field became epistemically broader, telling me more about my participants’ lives and the conditions that shape their work. Without yet knowing how (un)sustainable such new inroads may be (footpaths, after all, tend to overgrow when the main road is re-opened), they put new flesh on the old claim that the body – and mind – of the ethnographer are her main research tools. With COVID-19, researchers’ and participants’ bodies, homes and personal lives have become more pronounced anchoring points of the research field (Eggeling and Adler-Nissen, 2021), a legacy that will likely outlive the pandemic and teaches us the long-term importance of taking them seriously.
While ideas of multi-sited, affective, and serendipitous research have been present in methodology debates for years, the pandemic has lifted them to the forefront of everyday research practice. It has also shown that ethnographic fieldwork is more than the execution of research techniques and the march through a pre-set research design. Instead, COVID-19 has underlined how the ethos of sensible research practice and the ability to adapt and make the struggles of adaption part of our emerging arguments are key characteristics of ethnography. In a world increasingly characterised by geographic fragmentation and digital mediation, recognizing how research fields are moveable and emergent requires the development of innovative strategies of immersion. A first step to doing this is embracing the substantial, methodological and epistemic openness already implied by placing ‘field/work’ in ‘inverted commas’.

Acknowledgements

When I was writing this paper, Covid-19 was wrecking the world. I was lucky to spend some time at my parents’ house to escape solitary social distancing. One evening, we were watching ‘A star is born’, you know, the musical drama in which Bradley Cooper falls in love with Lady Gaga. Towards the beginning of the film, Cooper sings a song called “maybe it’s time to let the old ways die”. I wrote this piece in the hidden hopeful message I found in its lyrics: that it is, after all, possible to change one’s plans, set one’s mind to new things, and find a way out of difficult situations. Thank you, Bradley, for that. Thank you also to my parents for giving me comfort and love; and to all the diplomats and professionals working in Brussels for sharing their experiences with me. Without them, there would be no paper to write. For encouraging and constructive comments on earlier drafts, moreover, I would like to thank my colleagues Larissa Versloot, Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Patrice Wangen, Amalia Charlotte Pape, Frederik Carl Windfeld, Anna Helene Kvist Møller, Ann Towns, Katarzyna Jezierska and Birgitta Niklasson.

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) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Work on this manuscript was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) grant number 680102 (DIPLOFACE).

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