

# From field sites to field events

Creating the field with information and communication technologies (ICTs)

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## Abstract

The incorporation of various information and communication technologies (ICTs) in ethnographic methods mandates a reconsideration of the understanding and practice of fieldwork. In this article, we explore how the ‘field site’ may be reimagined in today’s highly mobile, ICT-facilitated world. Based on our research among Indian transnational families and young migrant workers from Malaysia, we argue that the field may be conceived as a collection of ‘field events’ that are co-created by ethnographers, their study participants, and ICTs. As ICTs are increasingly intertwined with people’s lives and thereby feature importantly in ethnographic fieldwork, we encourage ethnographers to carefully consider how these devices and platforms actively shape their ethnographic data as well as their relations with study participants.

## Keywords

ethnography, ICT, field event, field site, methods

## Introduction

Late one evening in 2014, Tanja Ahlin was sitting at the kitchen table in a home in Kerala, South India, enjoying a quiet moment after dinner, when the sound of an incoming Skype call came from one of the bedrooms. As she was doing research on information and

communication technologies (ICTs) in caring relations among Indian transnational families, Ahlin found the event exciting, a highlight of the day. This particular family was indeed dispersed: in the home lived the two parents and the youngest of their three daughters, Mary.<sup>1</sup> The two elder daughters were both nurses and working in the United Kingdom. When the ringing sound came from Mary's room, indicating someone was calling on Skype, Mary brought her laptop to the dining table. Mary excitedly encouraged Ahlin to talk to her middle sister Susan's husband, whom Mary referred to according to a kinship term, '*achacha*'. Feeling she had little choice, Ahlin spoke to him for about half an hour, among other things about his views and experiences on caring for parents and in-laws at a distance.

The conversation was a seemingly uneventful affair, similar to many other Skype chats Ahlin had had in the past with her own family members, friends, and colleagues. Yet, when the call was completed, she felt something strange had happened that called for further investigation. Ahlin had left her home country and traveled to India to spend time with her study participants, to 'be in the field'. But once she reached the country that was supposed to represent her field site, she found herself spending time with her study participants online, as they were physically situated in yet other parts of the world. Suddenly, her 'field site' encompassed more than the countries she had specified in her research plan, in which she had proposed visiting India and also Oman as major destination countries for migrating nurses. Instead, ICTs helped her reach Keralite nurses and their families who lived in numerous countries around the globe. Ahlin found herself wondering: what kind of field was this, after all, and how did ICTs shape it?

1 All personal names are pseudonyms.

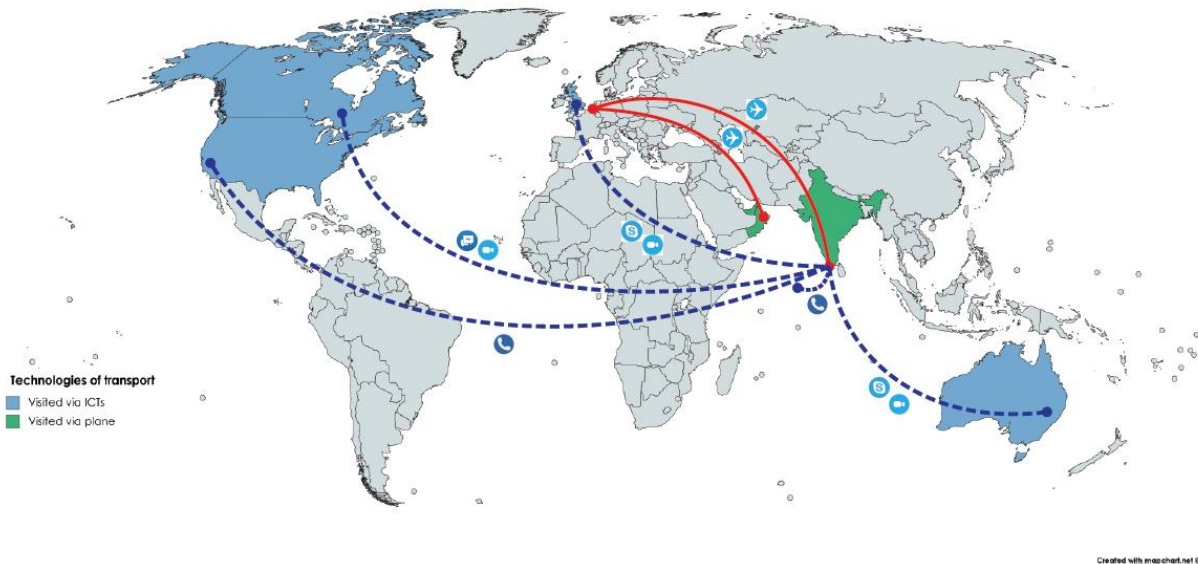


Figure 1. This is not a field site. Graphic by Ahlin.

Note: The solid lines could represent the ethnographer's physical travel from the Netherlands to Kerala and Oman, and the dotted lines could represent her travel via ICTs to reach people in various geographical locations around the world. But if the field is imagined as a collection of field events, where is the field in this image?

In this article, we explore what may become of the field when the ethnographer follows her study participants by traveling to some of them and by interacting with others via ICTs. To describe this type of fieldwork, the term 'multisited fieldwork' – in the sense of encompassing several geographic sites that could be added together by 'being there ... and there ... and there' (Hannerz 2003, 201; see also Marcus 1995) – was imprecise, since the ethnographer did not visit all the locations in person. According to Marcus (1995, 102), multisited fieldwork encompasses 'different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation'; these sites may be understood as geographic or as various social 'spheres', for example the spheres of everyday life, legal institutions, mass media, or policy discourse. However, in ethnographic practice, especially in migration research, multisited fieldwork

commonly involves following people across geographic sites (see, for example, Hage 2005). But as it was conceptualized over two decades ago, ‘multisited fieldwork’ did not account for technologies such as ICTs and how they might impact the field site. ICTs, especially the internet and social media, have been used more recently in ‘virtual’ or ‘digital’ fieldwork. But these terms were also not the most suitable descriptions for our fieldwork, since we did not focus exclusively on studying websites and forums (Hine 2000) or virtual worlds as places where people socialize (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Miller et al. 2016). How, then, could our fields be best described?

We propose answering this question with the concept of ‘field event’. The term ‘event’ has been used in previous efforts to reconceptualize space/place. Doreen Massey (2005, 4), for example, argues that space should not be understood simply as a surface with people and places ‘on’ it, but should be imagined in terms of ‘spatio-temporal events’. Building on Massey’s idea, Sarah Pink (2011) proposes a theory of ‘visual-place-event’ to suggest that images are better understood not as static moments of places or things, but as always being produced and consumed in movement. Since the production and consumption of images is intertwined with ‘the trajectories of moving perceiving bodies’, images emerge from and are simultaneously implicated in the making of place as an event (Pink 2011, 9). Furthermore, Christine Hine (2000, 50) coined the term ‘Internet event’ to describe a particular event as it unfolds in the media, which can be analyzed without the ethnographer physically traveling to any particular location. Here, we propose the notion of ‘field event’ to shift the focus from the field as something that is situated in geographic and social spaces (‘site’), whether physical or digital/virtual (Marcus 1995; Hine 2000; Pink et al. 2015), towards understanding the field as a collection of ‘events’ that are co-created within specific practices by ethnographers, their study participants, and ICTs.

Based on two research projects that we conducted individually among South Asians, namely Indian transnational families of nurses (Ahlin; see also Ahlin 2018a, 2018b) and Malaysian highly mobile youth (Li), we argue that the notion of ‘field events’ may help to understand various ways that ICTs and people collaborate in ethnographic work. We suggest this is a more fruitful approach to understanding the role of ICTs in fieldwork than approaching these devices and platforms as communication tools that facilitate contact between people without influencing it, or as tools through which traditional ethnographic methods are translated into a digital context (Krieg, Berning, and Hardon 2017, 23; for an example see Crichton and Kinash 2003). We draw on material semiotics, a theoretical approach from science and technology studies (STS), that facilitates exploration of how people and technologies become what they are through the relations they form with each other, and to investigate what these heterogeneous actors enact together and how their identity is shaped in the process (Law 2009; Haraway 1991; Mol 2002; Pols 2012).

Importantly, the material semiotics approach, including actor network theory, emphasizes the agency of material entities within relations. Thus, relations are heterogeneous in that they ‘produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors, including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, “nature”, ideas, organizations, inequalities, scales and sizes, and geographical arrangements’ (Law 2009, 141). Thus, relations form not only between people but are also formed with and shaped by objects that are thereby ‘active and co-creating’ (Asdal, Brenna, and Moser 2007, 31; Haraway 1991; see also Akrich 1992; Latour 2005). We draw on this approach to technologies as ‘agents’ to explore how field events may be created through relations between people and ICTs that are possible to observe within specific practices.

After outlining the background of our respective projects, we examine some of the ways that ICTs helped shape field events in our research. We start by looking at how webcams and smartphones influenced field events according to what they afforded the ethnographer to see. We continue by exploring how ICTs were embedded in their locally specific relations, including institutions of different levels, from states to companies and families. Finally, we discuss the temporal aspects of field events, particularly in terms of managing and ending fieldwork.

## Two ethnographic studies, one methodological issue

We build our analysis upon two separately conducted ethnographic studies with transnational migrants from Asia that share significant methodological commonalities. Ahlin gathered her ethnographic material among transnational families of nurses from the South Indian state of Kerala, where she studied how ICTs actively participate in and shape elder care in Indian transnational families (Ahlin 2018a, 2018b). Focusing on migrating professional caregivers and their family members who remain in their origin country, the project builds on and complicates the notion of ‘global care chains’ (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2009). This term describes economic migrants providing professional care to people abroad while their own family members who may also require care remain at home. In 2014 and 2015, Ahlin conducted research in Kerala and also in Oman, one of the important migration destinations for Keralite nurses (Irudaya Rajan and Percot 2011; Percot 2006). Additionally, she conducted interviews via phone and Skype with nurses living in Canada, Australia, the Maldives, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Ahlin conducted conversations in English or, with a translator’s assistance, in Malayalam.

Li examined food and nutritional practices among young Chinese migrants from two neighboring villages in rural Malaysia. These youths traveled frequently to urban Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan for higher education or temporary jobs. Her longitudinal

ethnographic research examined the changing trajectory of food habits among young migrants during their frequent travels. Between 2014 and early 2017, Li followed thirty-three young people moving between the countryside and cities, spending time with them at different stages of their journeys and at various destinations where they temporarily resettled. In addition to face-to-face interactions, Li kept in touch with her study participants via smartphone and online social media platforms. She conducted her interviews in Mandarin Chinese or English, and in some cases in Cantonese or Bahasa Melayu, Malaysia's national language.

The two studies are different in terms of research topics, migrants' origin and destination countries, their demography and mobility, and how ICTs featured in their lives. In the case of Indian nurses and their elderly parents, the ICTs involved included mobile phones, webcams on laptops and personal computers, and tablets, while among young Chinese migrants smartphones were prominent. In Indian transnational families, the nurses had year-long or permanent employment contracts abroad, and their work obligations influenced their patterns of calling their parents in India (Ahlin 2018a). In contrast, the Chinese youth had no permanent employment and traveled frequently in search of work. This constant movement was reflected in their dynamic, sporadic interaction via smartphones and social media, which was, much like themselves, constantly 'on the go'. Thus, we both conducted fieldwork with transnationally mobile people who were savvy ICT users.

Neither of us had planned to include ICTs in our research design before starting fieldwork. However, different interactions we had with our study participants led us to develop ways of incorporating ICTs into our methods while in the field. In both studies, the particular interactions between study participants and ICTs had to be taken into account methodologically, with the ethnographers adapting to, and adopting, the practices that involved their study participants and ICTs. For both of us this issue was also conceptually important, as it prompted us to think in greater depth about what we were doing when we included ICTs in our methods.

### Creating images: Webcams shaping field events

In ICTs, images are created through a combination of a webcam, integrated into a smartphone or laptop, and a platform that supports visual communication. While Ahlin mainly interacted with her study participants via video calls through Skype, Li used a variety of social media, including Instagram, Facebook Messenger, and WeChat. The choice of a particular type of ICT depended on the personal preferences of our study participants, which also fluctuated as they navigated the polymedia environment with its numerous possibilities (Madianou and Miller 2012). Ahlin's study participants were most willing to engage in

meaningful, in-depth conversations with her when speaking on Skype. By contrast, Li's study participants avoided phone or video calls. The young people in her study often had little privacy, as they usually worked and lived together with other people in small spaces. Li was hesitant to ask them to make phone or video calls when they had six or seven roommates. But textual 'chats' are fairly private. Thus, some study participants sent texts or direct messages to Li while at work, in cases where their workplace (such as cafes) allowed them to use their smartphones and provided wireless internet.

In our fieldwork, ICTs enabled us to follow our study participants to places that would otherwise not be accessible to us, and they did so in different ways. Originally, Ahlin did not plan on visiting the United Kingdom or any other countries except for India and Oman due to limited financial resources and time. However, the use of webcams enabled her both to observe online interactions in Indian transnational families and informally interview family members living abroad. In comparison, smartphones allowed Li to follow her study participants wherever they went, around the clock. In Li's study, youth moved frequently among homes, schools, internships, temporary jobs, and careers, often situated in different countries. Thanks to the relatively manageable distances between their localities, Li was able to physically follow most of her study participants for limited periods of time. But when traveling was not possible, Li applied the method of a 'digital food diary', created with the help of a smartphone that affords the taking and sharing of photographs.<sup>2</sup>

Using digital food diaries, the youth recorded their daily food intakes with their smartphones and shared these photos with Li through various social media platforms. For example, Lily moved every few days between Malaysia, Singapore, and the outskirts and the center of Kuala Lumpur for her studies, part-time jobs, and family visits. Throughout Lily's travels, Li interacted with her regularly through social media. Lily enthusiastically kept up with her digital food diary. Almost every day, she took pictures of herself searching for food, having meals, and shopping for groceries in different places at different times of the day. She shared her photos of these practices instantly with Li via WeChat, WhatsApp, or Facebook Messenger. Additionally, Lily used her phone to make short videos on Instagram that Li could also access. For instance, while waiting for a take-away meal in front of her condominium in Kuala Lumpur, Lily filmed how a migrant worker from Bangladesh prepared and cooked her food.

Through the photos and short videos obtained in this way, Li tracked not only Lily's food behavior but also her geographic shifts among Malaysia, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur as

2 On photography as an anthropological method of researching mobility, see Vium (2017).

well as her daily movements among the various locations where she purchased, prepared, and consumed her food. The smartphone made it possible to capture the everyday moments related to eating, providing a rich dataset that would be otherwise impossible to obtain. Using such digital diaries, she traced Lily and other study participants continuously for more than two years. The digital food diary method is similar to ‘photovoice’, a method in which research participants take photographs on a particular topic and then discuss them in focus groups (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice has been described as particularly useful in exploring people’s experiences of place (Raffaetà 2015). Similarly, the digital food diary can help us reconsider the place and practice of the field itself.

Rather than merely serving as a means of virtual transportation to the various locations that we could not visit physically, ICTs shaped the data we gathered through them in different ways. Specifically, the type of ICTs participating in each field event influenced the kind and quality of data we were able to obtain. As STS and media scholars have shown, there is no such thing as a universal technology, but rather many different technologies with their specific characteristics and affordances (Pols 2016; Costa 2018). Digital and sensory anthropologists have discussed how ICT devices, media, and content shape embodied and sensory experience, and how this, in turn, influences the production of ethnographic knowledge (Pink et al. 2015).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the particular ICT device that is involved in co-creating a certain field event shapes ethnographers’ and study participants’ sensory perceptions. It is not possible to touch, smell, and taste via ICTs, a nonaffordance we considered when sharing a coconut *dosa* (crepe-like pancake) with our study participants in Kerala, a lamb *shurma* (rice dish) in Oman, or a plate of *satay* (marinated meat) in Malaysia.

Furthermore, whether image- or voice-based, ICTs shape field events by exposing certain things and hiding others from the ethnographer’s view. For example, on the phone, it is only possible to talk, so people have to rely on the information gathered through sound, including words as well as nonverbal communication cues such as silence (see Ahlin 2018c). When Ahlin had a phone interview with a nurse living in the United States, she recorded the conversation, but she could only imagine what her interviewee might look like, what facial expressions she was making at various points of the interaction, or what the surroundings of her home were. On the phone, then, the material environment of the interviewee, from which an ethnographer may also draw relevant inferences, remained out of reach.

3 This discussion has been further shaped by anthropologists’ questioning of the universality of human perception and sensory categories (Pink 2009, 2011; Geurts 2003; Howes 2005).



Visual ICTs may help ethnographers see more than what can be ‘seen’ over the phone. However, we also found that image-based ICTs also shape the ethnographer’s view in specific ways. In the case of digital food diaries, images taken with smartphones enabled the ethnographer to gain better insight into the food practices of her study participants, but at the same time these images limited what she was able to see. The images that study participants took offered glimpses into their food consumption, but did not represent everything that an ethnographer would be able to observe had she been physically next to the study participant. So a snippet from a food diary raised a number of questions: Were the items in the photograph staged specifically for the photograph? Did the pictured food indeed end up in the study participant’s belly or did any of it end up in trash bins? Was any of the food shared with others, and if so, what, how much, and with whom? Smartphone photographs alone could not provide answers to these questions, as they only conveyed snapshots without the broader context of the situations they represented, such as lunch, dinner, or a bus ride filled with snacking. Thus, whenever possible, traveling to and even traveling with study participants remains crucial as ways to ‘follow ethnographically the (dis)continuities between the experienced realities of face-to-face and social media movement and socialities’ (Postill and Pink 2012, 124). Not only does the ethnographer gain additional information through face-to-face interactions, but the kind of data gathered may be different from that obtained through field events.

Photographs are usually considered static representations of particular moments, while events involve some sort of action. How, then, might digital photographs contribute to the creation of field events? As Pink (2011, 9) argues, photographs are ‘a complex coming together of humans and technologies in movement’ or ‘visual events’ that illuminate multiple ‘sensory modalities and qualities’ in both production and consumption. Still photographs are ‘anything but still’ (Radley et al. 2010, 37). They are produced through a complex interaction of humans and technologies in movement, and as such participate in the co-creation of field events. In digital food diaries, this coming together occurred within specific practices, such as the study participants taking photos and sharing them via social media with the ethnographer. Study participants sent their photos to the ethnographer so frequently that Li could hardly treat them as individual images. Instead, these digital photos created a stream of images through which the study participants ‘shared their lives’ on the move with the ethnographer (see also Ahlin 2018a).<sup>4</sup>

4 For a discussion about how a series of photographs can give the viewer an ‘experience of movement’, see Pink (2011, 11).

Social media afforded Li's study participants the ability to add commentaries to photos, and the chat function permitted her to elicit additional information about the content they shared. Through the use of emojis and icons that enable users to 'favor' or 'like' comments and pictures, social media allowed Li to capture a variety of feelings, thoughts, and attitudes that her study participants expressed about their meals and social occasions featuring food. An exclusive affordance of social media, icons and emojis transpired as important 'communicational actors' (Bucher and Helmond 2017). Moreover, the instantaneous, unstructured, and personalized texts and images revealed the study participants' relation to the various environments through which they moved as well as their dietary constraints during their travels. While the primary purpose of digital food diaries was to gather visual accounts of study participants' food practices, it also stimulated them to be creative and self-reflective. Through all these affordances, smartphones and the social media platforms that operate through them helped to yield a rich set of data and allowed Li to better understand her study participants' diet and body transformations as well as their traveling narratives. By affording the ability to take photos, film videos, share them, and comment on them via social media, smartphones co-created specific field events, which was not possible with other types of ICTs or even through in-person observations.<sup>5</sup>

What is excluded from images shown via ICTs may even be fundamental to the very creation of field events. The field event that Ahlin co-created with a webcam and Achacha, described in the introduction of this article, serves as a good example. While Ahlin was chatting on Skype with Achacha, his parents-in-law in Kerala were not interested in talking to him; the father discreetly disappeared to his room while the mother chose to wash the dishes. They both inconspicuously avoided being captured by the webcam and thereby drawn into the conversation. Towards the end of the discussion, Achacha offered to call his wife Susan to join, too. As Susan was eight months pregnant and had looked tired during an earlier Skype event, Ahlin suggested letting her rest. In this way, the field event was created by Ahlin, Achacha, and the webcam, while other people who were present in both houses were absent from it. However, without them, this event would not even have occurred or would have been quite different. The personal relations among these people made this webcam conversation possible. In STS, the term 'absent presence' (Law 2002) describes that which is involved in the making of technology but which is not immediately visible. In this particular event, Susan and her parents were such 'absent presences', not appearing on the webcam image and yet participating in the field event co-creation. Spending time with study participants face-to-face is valuable for detecting such absent presences that might otherwise slip the ethnographer's attention. Detecting them may help the researcher better understand

5 For another example of 'digital photo elicitation', see Walton (2017). For sharing photos as a participatory ethnographic practice, see Pink (2011).

what elements are required for a creation of a field event and consider how that may even be data in itself.

'Field events' are contingent on the polymedia environment in which contemporary ethnographers are bound to find themselves, especially when conducting research in the context of migration/mobility. As the theory of polymedia acknowledges, people, specifically transnational migrants, rely on 'a range of different media in parallel with one another' (Madianou and Miller 2012, 103). Beyond offering a wide variety of communicative opportunities, different types of ICTs shape interaction in different ways. Our comparison of field events that were co-created with phones and webcams, using computers and smartphones, and functioning through a variety of internet platforms, illuminated what these devices allow the researcher to see, what practices of data sharing they enable, and how they influence the event in terms of particular spatiotemporal circumstances (in other words, by requiring the ethnographer and the study participants to be present simultaneously and at certain places, or not). Field events, then, 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.

### Situating field events: Locally embedded ICTs

Technologies such as ICTs 'never stand alone, because they must always be connected with existing infrastructures' (Jensen and Winthereik 2013, 5). Technologies, then, are embedded in their local physical as well as sociopolitical environment, including its infrastructure, which supports or limits how they work (see for example Larkin 2008). ICTs need the infrastructure of the electric grid to provide them with electric power, and they depend on telecommunication infrastructure to establish connections between phones, smartphones, or laptops. Like technologies, infrastructures are not universal; they differ from one location to another, and are subject to the regional forces of nature and to the local communities at various scales (Edwards 2003). By extension, field events depend on how ICTs are locally situated within these infrastructures and communities. Just as infrastructures support ICT-co-created field events, they may also disrupt or limit them, and so 'the inability of technologies to perform their functions must be subject to the same critical scrutiny as their achievements' (Larkin 2008, 219). Technological breakdowns of infrastructures impact the functioning of ICTs, for example, through poor connectivity, insufficient credit on the phone or internet prepaid card, or interrupted electric current due to weather events. Such breakdowns, or 'interferences' (Pype 2018), may occur more commonly in some countries than in others, making field events relatively easier or more difficult to create.

ICTs are embedded in and dependent on local sociopolitical configurations in complex ways. In our fieldwork, field events were most significantly influenced by various national ICT legislation and workplace regulations. In Oman, the use of Skype and some other internet-based calling services was prohibited at the time of Ahlin's fieldwork (Aziz 2012). Thus, she could only communicate with her study participants in that country through the phone or by driving her rented car across the desert to visit them. During one of her stays with Indian nurses in an Omani town, Ahlin learned about the impact of local telecommunication regulations on how migrants contacted their family members in India via ICTs. One of her study participants, Benny, became suspicious when Ahlin started taking notes about Benny's use of internet calling applications, worrying that he might be violating the law if any of the applications he had mentioned happened to be illegal. In Oman, telecommunication regulations can change quickly, and Ahlin's study participants were not always even aware of which ICTs were allowed or prohibited at any given moment. However, a number of calling applications, such as Rounds, Imo, MoSIP, MyPeople, Viber, and Talkray, were still available. These options had easy-to-use platforms at no or low cost. This polymedia environment enabled the migrants to manage the unpredictable changes in regulations by switching among various applications regularly, depending on which ones were currently allowed. To learn about all this, it was crucial for Ahlin to visit Oman in person, as trying to create field events in such circumstances would be rather difficult if not impossible.

In Li's fieldwork, ICTs were also regulated, but at a different scale, by the factories where her study participants worked. This regulation impacted her options for creating field events with them at certain times. Li wrote in her field notes about one such occurrence:

I'm trying to follow up with Kevin, who works as a storage assistant for a shipping company in Singapore, but the company doesn't allow him to use his personal phone during work hours. Now it's almost 8pm in Singapore (2pm Amsterdam time). I have been waiting for Kevin to come online since 5pm as we initially planned, but he didn't show up. This is certainly not the first time I experienced this. While waiting and wondering what happened, I frequently check my message boxes and find no messages from him; I check the time difference between Amsterdam and Singapore a couple of times to ensure that I didn't miscalculate our meeting time and date; I also check our last conversation a few weeks ago to confirm once again that we were scheduled to talk today. ... It's 9 pm now. Despite all my waiting, it looks like we have to postpone our talk again.

When Kevin was not reachable for several hours, Li assumed he was still at work and not allowed to use his smartphone. In any other case, they would be able to communicate and she would find out what was happening. But in this case, no amount of effort on Li's part, and no amount or type of ICTs available, could help. Kevin appeared online again two days

later and apologized for ‘not showing up’, adding that he was obligated to stay at work overnight to replace his colleague who had fallen sick. With his access to ICTs restricted, access to the field event was also denied to the ethnographer. However, these very regulations might have served Kevin in a different way. ICTs allow their users to ignore other people’s efforts to contact them, as calls and notifications can be muted or simply left unanswered. It was impossible for Li to know for sure whether Kevin indeed had to stay at work or whether he used his workplace ICT regulations as an excuse to postpone his meeting with her.

As our fieldwork further showed, ICTs are not only contingent on their local environment but may also influence it in certain ways. In the context of families, we observed how ICTs both supported as well as subverted local kinship hierarchies within specific field events. In Kerala, despite the widespread ‘matrilineal ethos’ (de Jong 2011, 17) that has deep historical roots among certain Hindu groups, the patriarchal kinship system remains strong among Syrian Christians with whom Ahlin mostly worked (see also Jeffrey 2004; Philips 2003). In this context, men are the head of the family, having the most power, authority, and respect among family members (Osella and Osella 2006, 24). Such power relations were obvious, for example, in Tara’s family, particularly in how her father, and his mobile phone, influenced the creation of the field event. Tara was an unmarried nurse, working in the Maldives, when Ahlin visited her parents together with Binny, who interpreted the conversation between Ahlin and Tara’s parents. During their home visit, Tara’s father led the conversation, but more importantly, he was the key person in establishing a field event together with his mobile phone. As Ahlin wrote in her field notes:

We sit in the living room of Tara’s parents, chatting, when Tara’s father suddenly asks if he should call Tara on the phone. Tara is supposed to call her father at one o’clock, after her morning sleep following her night duty. He has his mobile phone ready on the table. Because Tara is not calling at the arranged time, he starts fiddling with the phone, and then I realize he’s writing her a text message. She calls back immediately after receiving it. Tara’s father talks to her excitedly about our visit, then passes his phone to Binny. Binny introduces herself, then introduces me and gives me the phone. We talk for about twenty minutes, with a break due to a broken phone connection. Afterwards, I pass the phone back to Tara’s father [who eventually] ends the call.

As the family explained, this event was different from the usual communication between Tara and her parents. Tara reportedly typically talked to her father on the phone only briefly, while she daily spent a half to a full hour chatting with her mother. Such daily interaction indicated a strong emotional relationship and support between Tara and her mother, which

was common also in other families (see also Rastogi and Wampler 1999). In this field event, however, Tara's mother did not even take the phone into her hands, but stood, rather silently, by her talkative husband. As in a typical formal visit, Tara's father as the head of the family had the most influence over the field event, controlling it by influencing who was contacted, if at all; when the event would occur; and who would talk to whom at which moment. His mobile phone, by virtue of belonging to him, supported his position of power. In this particular field event, then, interaction was guided by the local patriarchal kinship structures, which the ICTs sustained.

However, ICTs could also have a different influence on power relations within families and thereby on field events. Different types of ICTs require specific knowledge and skills from people. Because of this, ICTs can shift family hierarchies in terms of gender and age. For example, in Mary's family, the person with the most influence over the field events was Mary herself, the youngest member of the family, and a woman. This field excerpt describes how Mary set up one of the field events with the family laptop:

Mary tries to call her sister Susan and Achacha on Skype several times. It doesn't work, so she tries calling her oldest sister once. No reply either. Then finally Achacha picks up Mary's call from his mobile phone. Mary has positioned the webcam so that he can see me [she made me sit in front of the computer] and her [she is sitting on the bed]. A few minutes later, Mary's mother and father join us in the room, and Mary stands up to give them place to sit on the bed. The mother sits in the center and the father next to her.

In this case, Mary's power over the field event was based on her skillfulness with the laptop that enabled the webcam meeting. The laptop, provided by Mary's sister, was intended for the whole family's use, so Mary, her mother, and her father had equal access to it. However, the device required particular knowledge that only Mary possessed. In this way, the laptop gave considerable control to Mary over this particular field event as well as over the daily webcam interactions the family members had with Mary's sisters abroad. ICT skills were thus more important than gender, age, and even individual ownership of the device for the creation of field events.

Field events in our fieldwork were shaped by the specific ways that ICTs were situated in their local context at various scales, at the levels of household, work, and state organizations. Within the described field events, this influence was mutual: telecommunication regulations set by companies and state laws impacted which ICTs could be used and when, while ICTs influenced their environment in terms of gender and age hierarchies within households. These shifts in control, however, were related to the creation and dynamic of particular field events; whether ICTs may stimulate significant, long-term changes in social power structures

at large remains an issue to explore. The situations that we analyze here illuminate the mutual relations among ICTs, people, physical infrastructures, and sociopolitical contexts, and how they may influence each other, thereby becoming not only inter-related, but ‘intra-related’ (De la Cadena 2015, 32; Strathern 2004; see also Pols 2012, 17; Law 2009). Field events, then, are contingent on the intra-relatedness of the involved heterogeneous actors and their situatedness within particular social, political, and historical contexts.

## Temporal engagements: The times of the field event

In any sort of fieldwork, setting meetings with study participants is an intricate practice, as the ethnographer has to adapt to people’s work, family, and other obligations (see, for example, Spradley 2016, 51–52). Including ICTs in the interactions among people adds other dimensions to this challenge. One of them is managing communications across time zones. ICTs enable the formation of field events across two or more time zones, which means that scheduling may be additionally complicated due to time differences between the locations of the ethnographer and her study participants. For instance, Ahlin encountered the following difficulties with scheduling meetings by phone with a nurse living in the United States:

Jancy is a nurse working in California, US. Her parents gave me her phone number, so I call her a few days after meeting them, in the morning my time [in Kerala]. I assume that might be a good time, as it would be evening on her side of the world. But her husband answers and tells me she is at work. A few days later I try again and the same story repeats: Jancy’s husband answers the phone and informs me she is at work, doing her night shift. This time, however, he takes my number and says Jancy would call me back. I don’t have high hopes about that, as I realize it takes some effort to call. To my surprise, however, Jancy calls me the next evening, at about 9 pm my time. I’ve had an intense day in the field already and I need to gather myself for this additional impromptu interview. For her, the situation is no easier: she has just returned from her night shift, called her parents first, and then immediately me. I ask if she would like to schedule a particular time to talk with me, assuming that she might be too tired to have a lengthy discussion right then. But she insists she has enough energy left. Then she tells me, with a laugh that reflects both relief and satisfaction, that she has just saved someone’s life in the hospital.

Beyond ICTs unlocking the challenge of time zones, this field note illuminates several other issues related to the temporal aspects of field events. When is a good time to call for an interview? As the example with Jancy shows, ICTs make it possible to create field events at any time of the day. Li’s fieldwork confirmed this, as she received photos from her study participants day and night. ICTs thus require a great deal of flexibility in terms of time from

all the people involved. Furthermore, different types of ICTs allow for different levels of synchronicity. Ahlin's experiences in constructing field events were based on webcam or phone interviews, which means that the field events were synchronous, bringing the ethnographer and the study participant together at the same time. In Li's case, however, the field events were co-created through smartphones and various social media platforms, which allowed for both synchronous and asynchronous field events. The asynchronous character of certain ICTs is convenient for communicating across various time zones. But asynchronous communication may also cause time lags for a variety of reasons, including technological breakdowns, workplace regulations, or personal conscientiousness, as Li's experience with Kevin showed. This can create uncertainty and thereby impair trust on both sides of the relationship (see also Pauleen and Yoong 2001).



Figure 2. Late night visit to the market with a study participant as a field event. Photo by Li.

With their different affordances in terms of (a)synchronicity, ICTs also influence the dynamics of initiating contact between the ethnographer and her study participants. For example, Ahlin was at first not hopeful that Jancy would return her call, as she realized that this involved a certain effort; it was the work of fieldwork that the ethnographer should do, or so she thought. Yet Jancy carried out this work, not necessarily to please the ethnographer, but rather as a filial duty. Jancy's parents had already informed her of Ahlin's visit to their home and asked her to talk to Ahlin, a request that Jancy, being a 'good daughter', could not refuse. So, not only did ICTs enable the ethnographer to reach her



study participants across the world but they also made the ethnographer more readily available to her study participants at any time of the day. Finally, Jancy's example shows how, despite different time zones, scheduling field events was not always necessary, as field events could be created without previous planning. Thus, Ahlin was surprised by Jancy's call and her willingness to talk immediately, without any hesitation or negotiation about scheduling a phone interview. The spur-of-the-moment character of ICT-shaped field events meant that the ethnographer had to be adaptable and responsive, ready to gather data when she had least expected it.

While ICTs posed challenges in terms of time in specific field events, their impact was even more significant in relation to the fieldwork overall. For both of us, the exact moment our fieldwork started was crystal clear: the date was printed on our airline boarding passes. But the involvement of ICTs made the ending of fieldwork much less clear-cut. Li's study participants continued sending her their digital food diaries even after she no longer requested them, making her field feel temporally limitless. Li had to 'cut' (Strathern 1996) the field short and explicitly halt regular interaction with the youths by determining a point in time when she would no longer count the received photos as data. As ethnographers may never actually 'leave' the field (Stebbins 1991; see also Watts 2008), Li's 'cutting' her fieldwork did not imply her final exit. Rather, she and her participants remained in contact, although much more sporadically, after she ceased gathering their photos as data.

Similarly, Ahlin maintained online connections with her study participants after leaving Kerala and Oman. This asynchronous connectivity included remaining 'friends' on Facebook with her study participants, chatting occasionally through social media, and exchanging email. In this way, she continued to collect data for months and even years. However, immersion in the field via ICTs was not 'total' (Carsten 2012) compared to when she was physically in one of the two countries of her study, and she cannot claim to have been doing her fieldwork continuously ever since 2014. The field events that Ahlin has been creating via the internet have been short, lasting for about several minutes to half an hour, and very sporadic. Nevertheless, these connections proved to be significant. For example, they enabled Ahlin to reconnect and conduct a follow-up interview with a study participant via WhatsApp in 2018, four years after her visit to India. If the field site of Kerala was, at least temporarily, unreachable for the ethnographer, field events via ICTs with her study participant were just a couple of Facebook and WhatsApp messages away.

Doreen Massey (2003, 75) argues that 'there is no such thing as total immersion', as ethnographers essentially overlook certain things while in the field and thus the knowledge they produce is always particular, or, as Marilyn Strathern's (2004) writes, 'partial'. The opposition between being totally immersed in the field for a certain period of time and being

totally removed from it afterwards is then a false opposition. Field events, created with the help of ICTs, make this all the more obvious, as they may sporadically punctuate the time since the beginning of the fieldwork until the ethnographer decides to ‘cut’ it. Rather than being associated with spending a specific amount of time in a particular geographic location, ethnographic research is shaped by the quality of data gathered both through face-to-face fieldwork encounters and ICT co-created field events.

## Conclusion

The notion of the field event, which we propose to refer to any situation of ethnographic importance that is co-created among ethnographers, their study participants, and ICTs, theoretically conceptualizes the influence of everyday ICTs on fieldwork and particularly on ‘the field’. STS scholars have asserted that technologies function not as neutral, inert tools, but instead actively shape relations with and among the people who interact through them (Akrich 1993; Latour 2005; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003; Pols 2012). ICTs are certainly not the first or only technology to influence ethnographic fieldwork. Books and articles included in literature reviews shape ethnographers’ perception of the research matter, their choice of methodology, and their analysis; similarly, the technologies they adopt – from paper and pen to digital voice recorders, photography, and film – influence data collection in different ways.<sup>6</sup> However, ICTs complicate the ‘*placeness* of ethnography’ (Haverinen 2015, 82) as well as its temporality and the quality of data collected. As such, ICTs exert a rather specific influence over the field, and this specific influence calls for a new term.

The field site in the classical sense was understood as limited in space and time, yet if we speak in terms of field events rather than sites, the focus shifts from geographic locations to the relations between people, ICTs, infrastructures, and their sociopolitical contexts. Such a focus makes it possible to see how different types of ICTs, together with the ethnographer and her study participants, shape ethnographic work. We found ICTs to play an active role, for example, in shaping what the ethnographer could see and in influencing the local social hierarchies of authority within families. ICTs’ involvement in field events also challenges the practice of leaving the field. Writing about the impact of the internet on the practice of ethnography, Anne Beaulieu (2004, 151) suggests that “‘leaving the field’ will either be reinvented ... or else ethnography will develop a more ongoing character’. Our fieldwork illustrates that both of these two options apply. The notion of field events mandates a reconsideration of not only the spatial but also the temporal boundaries of fieldwork. Research length, which has been one of the defining features of ethnographic fieldwork, may

<sup>6</sup> We thank the anonymous reviewer who highlighted this point.

have to be reconceptualized in terms of what is needed to collect ICT co-created field events. But relying only on such field events would be tricky: how many events would be enough to make fieldwork valid? This question might be impossible to answer. Perhaps, then, a better method would be, as it was for us, to add such events to the time spent doing face-to-face fieldwork and use them to enhance the quality of data rather than to entirely substitute one kind of fieldwork with another.

Finally, does the prospect of ICT co-created field events mean that ethnographers can simply stay at home and carry out their fieldwork from behind their laptop, as has been suggested for researching 'internet events' (Hine 2000, 50)? We argue the answer is 'no', as local environments shape field events via their impact on ICTs. Access, availability, and reliability of ICTs depend on infrastructures that differ from one country to another, as do the broader social, political, and historical contexts in which people and ICTs are situated. Given the importance of localities in shaping field events, it remains crucial for ethnographers to drive a car, sit on a plane, or sail aboard a ship in order to carry out face-to-face fieldwork. Being physically situated in one site, or more, makes it possible to look outside the frame of the image provided by a smartphone or laptop camera, and to explore the complexities that ICTs are not able to transmit.

In a world where ICTs represent an intrinsic part of the everyday lives of study participants of various demographic backgrounds, ignoring these technologies does not seem an option anymore, yet entirely relying on ICTs may also not be the right answer for most research questions, either. The question, then, is not whether ethnographers can rely on ICTs when choosing their methods, but rather how to include them and to what degree. This issue demands special attention to the practices within which particular field events are created. Specifically, it is important to consider which human and non-human actors participate in the creation of field events, how, and under what conditions, and with what consequences, both for the ethnographic data and the ethnographers' relationships with their study participants.

## About the author

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