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Special Section – From the Field: Editorial

## Accessing and Understanding the Field: Methodological Reflections and Ethnographic Approaches

**Mira Keßler**

### **Author information:**

Mira Keßler is a PhD student at the Graduate School MEDAS21 – Media Development Assistance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – funded by Volkswagen-Foundation. Her research examines how individuals in journalism training connect with one another in light of their differences. While conducting her research in Europe, India, and Nepal, Mira seeks to contribute to solving problems of practical relevance. Her research interests include journalism training, teaching, (cross-cultural) communication, postcolonialism, de-westernisation, and qualitative methods. She holds an M.A. in Media Studies from Eberhard-Karls-University Tübingen. Mira also worked as a filmmaker, media educator, and journalist. For more information about the author, please follow this link: <https://www.medas21.net/fellows/>  
E-Mail: [Mira.Kessler@rub.de](mailto:Mira.Kessler@rub.de)

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## **What role does it play to get meaningful (field) access?**

Entering different life and work contexts is fundamental to the practice of ethnographic researchers, journalists, and media development practitioners working in a globalized world. Especially the question of how to get access to their field is something they must find answers for. It is precisely this access that could enable them to get to know, understand and deal with other local contexts. Yet, different barriers, such as language, culture, or power imbalances might be challenging. Thus, possible conflicting perspectives of those from foreign contexts and those local on-site need to be reflected. Furthermore, the so-called “western” perspective and approach of doing things appears to dominate the academic and the professional field of media as well.

Another barrier that especially ethnographic researchers have recently encountered as a result of the ongoing pandemic are the disruptions caused by closed borders and travel bans. However, it must be noted that these barriers existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – though reasons might have been different. The most relevant question remains, how researchers can get in touch with people whose life contexts they are investigating without physically being present on site. Often, ethnographic researchers learn certain methods on how to get field access from books and how to conduct them in an ideal environment. However, contacting potential research participants, earning their trust, and understanding their different contexts are very practical challenges. Hence, junior researchers might want to broaden their research repertoire by employing different methodologies derived directly from practical experiences.

## **Methodological considerations based on practical experiences of ethnographic researchers and media practitioners**

Whether distances of localities or distances of life-contexts, both make it necessary to (re)think about how to gain access to the field. According to the motto “thinking out of the box,” this special section of *Notes From the Field* starts a dialogue between ethnographic researchers and media practitioners, such as journalists and NGO workers. They have comparable ways of working in a field and are confronted with similar challenges, such as travel necessities, getting involved in new life contexts, developing an understanding of it, finding contacts, as well as gaining their trust and confidence.

All three contributions of this special section offer critical reflections of accessing and understanding a field, but also aim at giving recommendations for working and researching in different life and work contexts. These recommendations include turning to critical (self-) reflection, putting all actors on an equal footing, and using creative ways to access a field.

The first article “How ‘insiders and outsiders’ perceive media development work – reflections on their relationship and cooperation” by Mira Keßler reflects on the collaboration between media development practitioners from foreign contexts with local actors on-site. Media development work is part of international cooperation (Drefs & Thomaß, 2019), or so-called “foreign aid” (Lugo-Ocando, 2020). Here, fundings and offers are often provided by countries of the so-called “global North,” such as the US, Japan, Germany, and other European countries. The recipients are frequently located in countries of the so-called “global South,” with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Cauhapé-Cazaux & Kalathil, 2015; Mayers & Juma, 2018). In this context, the reflection of different perspectives of “northern” and “southern” actors (Ashman, 2001), mistrust in their collaboration (Drefs, 2021; Elbers et al., 2014), and possible power imbalances (Elbers & Arts, 2011; Higgins, 2014) seem to be essential. Especially for actors from the “global South”, the outside view and impositions from the “global North” can become challenging (Elbers & Arts, 2011; Elbers et. al., 2014). In this article, South Asian media development professionals offer illustrative insights into their challenges working with foreign (aid) personnel. It is important to note here that this article deliberately focuses on their side to provide food for thought. It focuses less on the perspectives of funding organizations, which of course face challenges and constraints, too (Ashman, 2001; Waisbord, 2008). Overall, as an outcome this article suggests constructive approaches for international cooperation to work on an eye-level and with mutual understanding.

The second article of this section “Remotely accessing the field and building trust with distant sources – perspectives from journalism practice for ethnographic research” is based on an exchange between interdisciplinary researchers Laura Guntum, Mira Keßler, and Anna Varfolomeeva with practitioner Jignesh Patel. As a journalist and fact-checker Jignesh Patel shares his approach on how to reach out to people remotely, and his collaboration experiences with stringers, activists, and others. Here, trust plays a big role as the energy of in-person interaction needs to be conveyed through remote work. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic this became even more challenging for ethnographic researchers when they must contact researched persons, potential research assistants, or gatekeepers via text message, video chat, or telephone (Arya & Henn, 2021; Favilla & Pita, 2020; Kumar, 2020). Taking inspiration from social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, who compared journalists and anthropologists as “neighboring groups engaged in a somehow parallel pursuit” (2004, p. 226), this article explores what researchers may learn from practitioners who gather information without being on-site. Here, the relevance of these methods for accessing a field remotely goes beyond the limitations imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and can be of interest in general to all those who face difficulties with field access of any kind. Ultimately, this article reflects on corresponding ethical challenges that may arise while conducting research remotely.

The third article “Media ethnography in China – ethics, access and interviews in a non-Western context” by the UK-based researcher Tianyu (Sophia) Zhang discusses

the specific challenges of doing fieldwork in China. In this case, the ethical guidelines from UK research associations were found to be inapplicable. As a result, the question of how a Chinese researcher (or someone who conducts research in China) might apply “western” ethical guidelines in this different context became pertinent. During her interactions with television production teams and gatekeepers, Zhang had to make many compromises. She had to reshape her research focus until the end of her data collection. More importantly, the need for informed consent presented her with difficulties concerning cross-cultural contexts (Ryen, 2004, p. 5). Referring to Chinese scholars, the author firstly discusses that it is not always suitable to adopt Western guidelines in a Chinese context and secondly, she argues for the necessity to follow culture specific approaches (Pan et al., 2011; Hu, 2011; Zhai, 2020). Here, the best anthropologists might be those who can tolerate the moral ambiguities characterising a discipline that involves “cross-cultural inquiry...at an interface of ethical systems” (Appell, 1978, p. 3). As a result, Chinese researchers utilizing Western methods may need to comprehend the social contexts for their studies, maintain independence, and engage in creative thinking (Xie, 2018).

Each of the three articles aims to initiate a discussion on the value of reflecting on different work and life contexts and on the contribution of various perspectives. This approach seems to be the most efficient way to identify and address different barriers. Thus, they are not simply challenges but recognition of differences and the need for contextualization. We hope that our methodological considerations for working and researching in different contexts of life and work can assist both researchers and practitioners to better access and understand a field.

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