
Ethnography of Open Cultural Production: From Participant Observation to Multisited Participatory Communication

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In recent decades, qualitative research has been challenged by the increase in social and cultural practices that take place in mediated contexts. Older and newer technologies of mediation have, with different intensities, been layered on each other, invented, abandoned, reappropriated, modified and recombined, forming cultures through communication (Carey 2009). Media convergence, mediated identities, redefinition of social boundaries and the transcendence of geographical boundaries are just some of the major transformations that have become increasingly entwined in people's lives (Markham and Baym 2009, x). While technological change and, more recently, the Internet have exposed many practices previously unthinkable for qualitative research, they have also made them very complex to study and sometimes difficult even to locate.

The particular area that this chapter is concerned with is the ethnographic study of alternative forms of organizing media production. More specifically, it focuses on the question of the value of ethnography for studying cultural practices and meaning-making processes that emerge

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22 in the contexts of media projects that are made predominantly in medi-
23 ated contexts, by geographically dispersed individuals, through asyn-
24 chronous communication, and in which the production frameworks are
25 based on principles of openness and sharing. Typical examples of such
26 projects include Wikipedia and the Linux operating system. Both have
27 become strong cases in point to illustrate the new possibilities opened
28 up to media users through technologies of communication in order to
29 articulate alternative discourses, create their own media and infrastruc-
30 tures, and form networks of ‘self-communication’ (Castells 2009, 42).
31 Some scholars have regarded these projects as emancipatory, function-
32 ing as demonstrations of viable alternatives for more democratic ways
33 of organizing media production and of sharing knowledge (Hess and
34 Ostrom 2011; Lievrouw 2011, 177–213). Others have seen in them an
35 increasing trend of blurring the boundaries between media producers
36 and consumers, forming novel forms of social organization and more
37 horizontal power structures (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2012; Noveck 2009).
38 These projects are therefore strongly anchored in a discourse that posi-
39 tions them as drivers of social change. Critical voices have, however,
40 pointed out the need to regard them in more nuanced terms. On the
41 surface, these projects may appear to be decentralized and democratic,
42 but ethnographic studies have shown that, internally, they are often
43 centralized, full of inner contradictions and regulated in complex ways
44 by both technologies and people (Bilic 2015; Coleman 2013; Kelty
45 2008; Niederer and van Dijck 2010). Taking inspiration from the lat-
46 ter critique, this chapter aims to expand the methodological discussion
47 about the ways in which we can address the complexities of contempo-
48 rary media production, particularly in cases of non-conventional forms
49 of organizing production and circulation that carry potential for social
50 change. Specifically, I discuss multisited ethnography and participatory
51 communication as fruitful approaches, which I illustrate empirically
52 through the case of an ambitious open animation film project organized
53 in a town in southern Siberia, Russia, and dispersed over multiple spatial
54 and temporal contexts.

55 To contextualize the methodological discussion, I first give a brief
56 overview of the ongoing debates that surround ethnographic fieldwork in
57 online settings. Then I describe the methodological approach proposed
58 here and illustrate it empirically in the remaining sections.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK IN CONTEXTS OF MEDIATED 59
 COMMUNICATION 60

The primary, though not only, method by which ethnographic accounts 61
 are constituted is participant observation. Its centrality and importance 62
 for developing an ethnography has made it synonymous with fieldwork. 63
 Starting in an unstructured way and without predefined categories, partici- 64
 pant observation is both a method and an intervention ‘of engaging 65
 with the phenomenon to gather information/data or to analyze practices 66
 in situ’ (Markham 2013, 435). It leads to categories of interpretation that 67
 are not strictly defined in advance but that emerge in the course of the 68
 research. In practice, participant observation meant that the researcher 69
 would physically become part of a field in which they would be collecting 70
 “naturally occurring” discourse ... by listening and then later recalling in 71
 writing what was said, when, and to whom’ (Markham 2013, 439). 72

With the increase in social practices that take place in mediated contexts, 73
 the role, meaning and significance of participant observation have been 74
 complicated. Today, social interaction happens across multiple temporal 75
 and spatial boundaries, affecting individual and collective experiences while 76
 being increasingly more difficult to grasp (Markham and Baym 2009, xi). 77
 A traditional way to begin ethnographic fieldwork is to select one space 78
 to be explored. In digital contexts, this would mean choosing a website, 79
 a mailing list or a larger digital ecosystem such as a computer game or 80
 a virtual world. An immediate problem that arises from making such a 81
 discrete selection is the risk of privileging certain ‘cultural locations’ over 82
 others (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Such an emphasis could foreground 83
 ‘well-defined groups over alternate forms of collectivity’ (Coleman 2010, 84
 490), limiting our understanding of the diversity of practices, conflicts and 85
 imaginaries that are expressed through digital media. 86

Attempts to think about ethnography beyond the boundaries of one well- 87
 defined field, specifically in the contexts of digital media, have been made 88
 by media scholars and anthropologists since the mid-1990s (Baym 1995; 89
 Garsten 1994; Kendall 1999; Turkle 1995). Many of these empirical stud- 90
 ies have articulated the need to bridge divisions of mediated/non-mediated 91
 contexts (online–offline). They have foregrounded the difficulties in deter- 92
 mining what it means to be a participant in mediated settings as well as what 93
 kind of observation is possible in each one of them. Observation in online 94
 settings, for example, has to a large extent become equivalent to watch- 95

96 ing text and images on a screen rather than observing people in real situa-
97 tions (Garcia et al. 2009). Participation has meanwhile increasingly become
98 associated with lurking in forums or social media channels in which the
99 researcher does not necessarily actively participate or reveal their presence.
100 Indeed, lurking has been considered increasingly legitimate, or even a nec-
101 essary precondition, prior to entering into more active forms of participant
102 observation later on in research (Hine 2011). The legitimization of lurking is
103 part of a larger trend in which participant observation in mediated contexts
104 has increasingly been taking the form of passive, action-free observation.¹

105 At the same time, the researcher's own position in mediated settings
106 has increased the demands on the researcher. As Stina Bengtsson (2014)
107 convincingly argues, doing an ethnography in mediated or virtual settings
108 requires co-presence. However, being present in digital media does not
109 put the researcher in a physical remove from other spheres of public and
110 private life. As a result, she argues, the researcher is constantly challenged
111 by not engaging sufficiently online while being split between obligations
112 and events that occur at the same time in their life offline.

113 As a consequence of the realization of the difficulties associated with
114 conducting participant observation in mediated and, in particular, online
115 settings, many academics have voiced the need to redefine ethnographic
116 fieldwork and adapt it to better fit the complexities of these new settings
117 (Hine 2011; Markham 2013; Wittel 2001). However, instead of advanc-
118 ing renewed methods, the debate has grown into a larger discussion about
119 the relevance of anthropology for studying mediated communication.
120 Some have insisted on preserving participant observation in its unaltered
121 form, while others argue for the opposite. For example, media researchers
122 have attempted to argue for shorter periods of participant observation. In
123 some cases they have considered justifiable the replacement of participant
124 observation with qualitative interviews 'as long as they can satisfy the goal
125 of understanding the people's experiences' (Rothenbuhler and Coman
126 2005, 1). Such attempts have been strongly condemned by anthropol-
127 ogists who see serious limitations to the insights that could be reached
128 through simply interviewing people rather than by observing them for
129 prolonged periods of time (Boellstorff 2012). When combined with
130 shorter and not always really 'participatory' observations, such approaches
131 are accused of being unable to provide 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973).

132 Some ethnographic projects have intentionally drawn on classical
133 anthropological methods in studies of virtual worlds in order to dem-
134 onstrate their relevance in online settings (Boellstorff 2008). The latter

has been countered by anthropologists who have argued that in other mediated contexts, such as social network sites and platforms, participant observation can rarely go beyond the form of archiving and have justified lower degrees of involvement (Markham 2013). As a remedy, some have argued for the need to remain distant from the centrality of participant observation and instead focus on the goals of ethnography, in particular on the importance of being co-present with the aim of revealing context and complexity (Wittel 2001). That is, the question should be about how to make sense of ‘what cannot be archived or sorted because it leaves no digital trace or is tangled in a dense network of unfathomably meaningful data trails’ (Markham 2013, 439).

The above debates illustrate the conflicting points of tension between anthropology and other disciplines about how to do participant observation in mediated settings, whether it should be done at all and what is considered to be a legitimate ethnography. Media scholars have been trying to stretch the boundaries of ethnography, whereas anthropologists have insisted on traditional approaches.

One way to find a middle ground is through multisited ethnography, a method proposed by anthropologist George Marcus (1995). The approach is highly useful to reconcile some of the above debates and is relevant for studying cultural production dispersed over multiple contexts. The next section briefly reviews the approach and extends it with ideas from the field of communication for development—namely, participatory communication. Then I illustrate how the approach could be used in practice by presenting a real case study in which it has been applied.

MULTISITED ETHNOGRAPHY AND PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION

The essence of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus 1995) is that instead of focusing on one place or a set of places in which practices and interactions are ethnographically explored, understanding of cultures is built through tracing the changing nature and use of ‘things’ in different contexts. The approach implies that the researcher uses one entity—a person or a thing—as a starting point, and by following it in its movements from context to context, a process of tracing ‘the social life of things’ (Appadurai 1986), the researcher also engages in the practice. This process allows researchers to analytically follow details that otherwise may remain obscure and ‘trans-

171 late people and objects along various networks ... not implying a delinking
172 from totalities or global processes' (Coleman 2010, 497). The concern
173 with delinking has indeed been one of the primary driving forces that gave
174 birth to the idea of multisited ethnography as a result of the realization
175 of anthropologists in the 1980s that place-centred approaches were fail-
176 ing to take into account macroforces that shape microcontexts (Marcus
177 and Fischer 1986). Today, this concern is reactualized in ethnography in
178 mediated settings.

179 A particular feature of multisited ethnography is the emphasis on trac-
180 ing connections among seemingly disconnected practices rather than
181 working within well-defined boundaries:

182 [W]ithin a multi-sited research imaginary, tracing and describing the con-
183 nections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate
184 is ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts
185 of significance (Marcus 1998, 14).

186 The point Marcus is making is that the knowledge emerging from this
187 approach stems from connections, relations, topologies and maps that
188 are not given but 'found' (Hine 2007). A peculiarity of this approach is
189 that the agency of the researcher is removed as determining the focus;
190 it instead takes on the role of 'circumstantial activism' (Marcus 1995).
191 The latter, Marcus clarifies, does not mean that the researcher is affiliated
192 with a particular social movement or carries a political agenda; rather, it
193 implies an adjustment to the circumstances and situations in each context
194 through which the researcher moves while 'renegotiating identities in dif-
195 ferent sites as one learns more about a slice of the world' (Marcus 1998,
196 98). This kind of dislocation and perpetual adjustment disrupts earlier
197 ethnographic conventions of 'being there', and simultaneously 'evokes
198 ethnography itself as composed of networked, rhizomic, viral knowledge
199 processes' (Marcus 2007, 1132).

200 One of the major difficulties with this method is in identifying and
201 getting into each of the individual sites that the researcher may come
202 across; this may allow less time for actual research (Wittel 2001). Another
203 challenge is the constant feeling of uncertainty that arises from working in
204 sites in permanent flux featuring new actors who are constantly emerging.
205 An additional change in contexts of mediated communication is that what
206 one can join in practice is not an actual site, but rather is the communi-
207 cative practice that occurs over various platforms and channels. In these

contexts it may be fruitful to engage in ‘participatory communication’ 208
rather than in archiving. 209

The term ‘participatory communication’ has historically been equated 210
to a two-way sharing of information among communication equals 211
(Servaes 2001). In particular, it has been connected to agenda-setting 212
practices by international organizations for promoting democratic ide- 213
als and social change. Yet the concept is useful beyond international aid 214
community projects. The value of ethnography comes from the knowl- 215
edge that the researcher gathers by being an actual participant in different 216
contexts, or by being in ‘participative mode’ (Czarniawska 2007, 8–12). 217
Communication is then an indispensable tool in making this possible. As 218
Servaes has argued, ‘Participation is impossible without communication. 219
However, what has not been so obvious is that not just any kind of com- 220
munication makes genuine participation possible’ (Servaes 2001, 5). The 221
main goal of participatory communication is to create symmetry between 222
the different parties involved in the communication, and in this way cre- 223
ate new knowledge. In international development contexts, it represents: 224

an approach that ... allows the sharing of information, perceptions and 225
opinions among the various stakeholders and thereby facilitates their 226
empowerment, especially for those who are most vulnerable and marginal- 227
ized. Participatory communication is not just the exchange of information 228
and experiences: it is also the exploration and generation of new knowledge 229
aimed at addressing situations that need to be improved. (Tufte 2009, 17) 230

The explicit focus on knowledge production on equal terms and on 231
dialogue focuses research on the importance of action that arises through 232
strategic interventions in communication. From this perspective, multi- 233
sited ethnography and participatory communication could fruitfully com- 234
plement each other to denote an exploratory and multisited engagement 235
with participants in a social practice where the premises for action are set by 236
them rather than by the researcher. The integration of both concepts into 237
one approach that I choose to call ‘multisited participatory communica- 238
tion’ requires negotiating a tension that arises from the different historical 239
and disciplinary traditions from which they have emerged. If multisited 240
ethnography aims to decrease the agency of the researcher in determining 241
the scope, nature and settings of social interactions to get involved in, par- 242
ticipatory communication implies creating a political agenda that stresses 243
the agency, responsibility and strategic power of the researcher. For the 244

245 purposes of using participatory communication in ethnographic field-
246 work, I consider it valuable to drop the political component and instead
247 strengthen the focus on assuring that communication and engagement
248 take place within symmetric contexts and on terms defined by the partici-
249 pants rather than by situations created by the researcher.

250 In sum, multisited participatory communication could be a useful
251 approach in researching cultural practices across multiple contexts, some
252 of which are mediated and others not, involving geographically dispersed
253 individuals who communicate often asynchronously. In cases where the
254 starting point of the research may be difficult to define by locating a site
255 to *observe* (e.g. How could we observe a telephone conversation and cap-
256 ture both sides while only being at one end of the line?), engaging in
257 participatory communication by becoming a co-participant could be more
258 beneficial.

259 In the remaining space of this chapter, I illustrate how this approach
260 has been applied in practice in the study of a case of open cultural produc-
261 tion that took place over multiple contexts, mediated and not hidden and
262 public, synchronous and diachronic.

263 THE MOREVNA OPEN-SOURCE ANIMATED FILM PROJECT

264 In the period between 2013 and 2015, I studied (ethnographically) the pro-
265 duction of a volunteer-driven animated film as part of the Morevna Project
266 (hereafter Morevna). It was launched in 2008 by a self-taught animator,
267 Konstantin Dmitriev, in the town of Gorno-Altaysk, Siberia, Russia. The
268 idea behind Morevna was to make a feature-length original animated film
269 in anime style. The study was part of a larger research project on computer
270 cultures and the cultural significance of practices that are centered on pro-
271 ducing media content and technologies in the domain of digital commons.

272 Morevna was initiated with no financial or institutional support, out of
273 the strong wish of its creator to find a way to exercise what anthropolo-
274 gist Gabriella Coleman (forthcoming) calls ‘craft autonomy’, or autonomy
275 to work in technical frameworks of one’s own making. Gorno-Altaysk,
276 Konstantin’s home town, is a geographically isolated post-Soviet city with
277 limited possibilities for self-realization in the sphere of digital media pro-
278 duction, especially animation. Since this is Konstantin’s main interest, he
279 has been trying to find ways to make animated film projects with lim-
280 ited resources and through affordable technology that would be flexible
281 enough to allow for projects of different scales. For Konstantin, Morevna

was his way to find meaning and place in the context in which he lives— 282
 an act of self-empowerment and proof that he does not need to leave his 283
 town, as many others do after finishing school, to find work and profes- 284
 sional realization: 285

I want to show that if someone wants to do something—you can do it, even 286
 if it is very hard. It is not like—someone can come and tell—go to Moscow... 287
 It does not matter that there are no animators in Gorno-Altaysk—they 288
 will appear. I don't want to move somewhere else. (Konstantin Dmitriev, 289
 Morevna Project producer, interview, 24 May 2014) 290

The limitations of the context in which he lives—the lack of economic 291
 resources to purchase software for professional media production and the 292
 general shortage of other collaborators with whom to realize his ideas 293
 about animation projects—led him to experiment with unconventional 294
 models of producing animation that he called open-source animation. He 295
 decided to use solely open-source technology for the technical production 296
 of Morevna—mainly the animation program Synfig for two-dimensional 297
 vector animation. He valued it because it was free of charge, possible to 298
 adapt to use for professional media production and made him independent 299
 from the frameworks of large-scale digital media software manufacturers. 300
 He made the production process public online through a blog. He also 301
 shared all of the digital assets that were produced, such as music, concept 302
 art, graphics, animations and technology as digital commons that allowed 303
 further use. In this way, he was simultaneously developing a film project 304
 and the technology for it, and was educating people in how to work with 305
 it by the public nature of the project. This model of work has largely been 306
 inspired by a Dutch film studio, Blender Institute,² but transferred to the 307
 different cultural and economic context of Siberia. 308

From a communication for development perspective, this project can 309
 be seen as evidence of the imaginaries and practices that access to com- 310
 puter technologies, and to the Internet, can prompt in young people to 311
 develop autonomous technologies, skills and media in an attempt to nego- 312
 tiate their creative autonomy in the contexts in which they live. 313

The Public Communication of Morevna 314

I started studying Morevna as a cultural practice in 2012 when it was 315
 in the final stages of completing its first milestone: the release of a four- 316

317 minute-long demo. In trying to understand the organizational forms,
318 social imaginaries and meaning-making practices that informed the pro-
319 duction of the film, I tried to find a site, a context to get immersed in,
320 and explore it ethnographically. A natural starting point was the public
321 blog of the production. Getting familiar with the content there revealed
322 that there were very few project participants who were located in Siberia,
323 and they were not really visible on the production website. The major-
324 ity of the contributors, artists and technicians were dispersed throughout
325 Europe and were not continuously collaborating with each other. Hence
326 communication between them was not public or organized through easily
327 accessible channels such as forums or chatrooms, but primarily through
328 email, telephone and Skype—channels of mediated communication that
329 were difficult to observe.

330 One artist could work on a drawing from her home in Italy and then
331 email it to the film director in Siberia, who would integrate it into a scene
332 or ask for modifications. Despite the fact that summaries of the production
333 process were frequently communicated online, collaboration and social
334 interaction seemed to be taking place in non-public, mediated and non-
335 continuous settings. I could observe all of the public texts and produc-
336 tion reports online, but this would not give a full enough picture of the
337 sensibilities, processes and cultural contexts that informed the work of
338 each of the participants. Another complexity emerged when I realized that
339 besides the production blog, Morevna was also on YouTube, MySpace,
340 Facebook, Twitter, Google+, a wiki, a file-sharing platform and a number
341 of other platforms, all of which were communicating the project outwards
342 to a seemingly existing, but unspecified, audience. Morevna was situated
343 simultaneously in multiple contexts, but the multitude of sites and online
344 contexts made it difficult to estimate which ones were more important
345 than the others and which would represent an appropriate starting point
346 for observation. At the same time, they all lacked actual opportunities
347 to engage in participation, to understand the production context and to
348 observe communication among project participants. I considered doing
349 participant observation in situ in Siberia, but at the beginning of my
350 research there were only two individuals out of about 15 collaborators
351 who were located there. This fact, in addition to the largely mediated
352 form of their collaboration, was causing doubts about the outcomes of
353 such engagement. Faced with these difficulties and the complexity of con-
354 ducting participant observation across multiple, yet invisible, contexts, I
355 resorted to multisited ethnography and participatory communication that

could enable me to access the environments that remained hidden. The 356
 first step involved getting on equal terms and into a symmetric communi- 357
 cative relationship with Konstantin, the project producer. The next section 358
 outlines the main steps in this process. 359

SETTING THE SCENE OF MULTISITED PARTICIPATORY 360
 COMMUNICATION: CREATING SYMMETRIES 361
 IN COMMUNICATION 362

Getting access to sites of research and establishing trust with informants is 363
 a premise for conducting ethnographic research. Having established that 364
 there was no obvious initial setting in Morevna that would allow me to 365
 engage in participant observation, I attempted to align myself with the 366
 same communicative terms as the other participants would have had to 367
 when joining the project. I started by emailing Konstantin. I explained 368
 at first my interest as a researcher and asked whether I could participate 369
 in Morevna by helping out with some tasks that would not involve draw- 370
 ing or artwork production, for which I lacked the necessary skills. In a 371
 response by email and a subsequent brief discussion over Skype, we talked 372
 in more detail, and I was briefed about the current status of the project, 373
 which was in the last months of finalizing a four-minute-long demo that 374
 would be used as a way to seek funding. During this conversation I was 375
 assigned the task of improving the English version of the film script, which 376
 had originally been written in Russian. In accepting this assignment, I had 377
 to commit myself to the communication practices applied by the project 378
 and agree to publish my work on the script, my research in progress as 379
 well as potential research publications about the film under a creative com- 380
 mons license, allowing others to use, share and build on my work. This 381
 license was used extensively on all of the media produced within Morevna. 382

Accepting the terms of communication of the project can be regarded 383
 as a first step in achieving participatory and more symmetric terms of 384
 collaboration with the project while negotiating access to it. This exam- 385
 ple illustrates how the researcher can, as part of ethnographic research, 386
 become a collaborator—a scholar who works with counterparts on more 387
 equal terms. 388

Another round of steps to align with the communicative practice of 389
 the project involved my learning to use some of the open-source pro- 390
 grams, which all of the Morevna participants used for different tasks. For 391

392 example, in order to work on the script, I was asked to use only non-
393 proprietary software and to publish my contribution in an online wiki in a
394 specific format. This highlighted how participants joining the production
395 had to be able to handle technology, potentially develop specific skills in
396 some computer programs and align themselves with the general produc-
397 tion framework of the project. Doing things in a particular way illuminates
398 individual practices of meaning-making. In this case, for example, the spec-
399 ific requirements posed to the licensing frameworks of the technologies
400 and content used and produced revealed Konstantin's commitment to the
401 liberal values of the freedom of technology and knowledge that inhibited
402 the production framework. It meant that Morevna was conceived through
403 sensibilities and values similar to some forms of hacker cultures that are
404 committed to autonomy and expertise development (Coleman 2013).

405 At a later point in time, Konstantin invited me to dub a set of video
406 lessons explaining Synfig Studio, the main animation production software
407 used and developed by the project, in English. I had to quickly learn new
408 technologies, such as how to work with the open-source audio recording
409 software Audacity, and how to use several web services for file exchange.
410 These engagements with technology represented an additional step in the
411 process of aligning with the same communicative and participatory terms
412 as other participants in Morevna.

413 My involvement in producing the training course took place in an
414 entirely Internet-mediated setting, thus representing a context that was
415 visible to only the two of us. Konstantin was located at his home in Gorno-
416 Altaysk, and I was at my home in Gothenburg, Sweden. We were separated
417 by six time zones and different personal life situations: I was on parental
418 leave, which placed limits on the time that I could dedicate to participat-
419 ing. This circumstance forced the producer to adjust and organize the
420 audio recording process during very inconvenient and late-night hours at
421 his end. In the same way as I had to adapt to the production framework
422 of Morevna, Konstantin had to adjust to the limits of my participation.
423 These adjustments illuminated the increasingly symmetric communicative
424 relationship that was established between us in our common interest in
425 the project.

426 Importantly, these adjustments did not result in flattened hierarchies.
427 Konstantin had a very authoritative voice and clear idea about what kind
428 of training course he wanted to make and how he wanted to make it. I was
429 able to propose changes to the course material in terms of grammar, sen-
430 tence construction and so on but was unable to influence the contents or

the main structure. I could express my opinion about some of the content, such as the length and the potential difficulty in following some parts of the course, but my proposals were not always accepted. This emphasized a crucial difference in how participatory communication works in development communication contexts and in ethnographic research. In the former case, the researcher or participant has a strategic goal of shaping the outcome of a mutual collaboration. In the project I was not allowed to let a personal agenda or my own opinions influence the substance of our collaboration. Even if the emergence of Morevna could be regarded as an act of self-empowerment in which a local producer with no resources took control of the problem of how to make an ambitious open-source animation film, participation in the project was very structured and hierarchical, a detail that would have remained invisible if I had not been attempting to align with the same terms as the other participants in the project.

Reaching the same communicative terms as other participants in the project triggered my move between different sites and contexts that constituted the production context of the film project. In the next section I illustrate some of these moves through examples from the early stages of my research.

MOVING BETWEEN SITES, OBSERVING AND ENGAGING IN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS

Site A: Skype, the Space Between Computers

The first context in which an actual ‘live’ interaction between Konstantin and I occurred was on Skype, through which we recorded the online video training classes and got to speak to each other for the first time. In qualitative research, Skype is usually used as a tool to perform interviews and, more rarely, for mediated collaboration. In the latter case, it is regarded as ‘a form of collaborative knowledge construction that creates a new digital discourse’ (Gallagher and Freeman 2011, 367); it expands the possibilities for engagement. In my interaction with Konstantin, Skype was not a context through which to talk but it was a place to work together. As such, it represented a technology that helped to establish a form of a ‘virtual workshop’ constituted between the producer and me. During a period of ten days, we met each day for two hours in this virtual space and recorded the video training classes. In this workshop we could communicate and

466 collaborate, talk and work together. This kind of use of Skype brought our
467 interaction close to earlier notions of ‘cyberspace’ used initially in relation
468 to telephone conversations, one that is constituted in a space ‘between the
469 phones’ (Ronell 1989). Similarly, our mediated communication occurred
470 in the space between computers and was substantially enriched by the possi-
471 bilities for the online exchange of digital artifacts, audio recordings, text
472 and links to videos. A challenge arose from the difference in our access to
473 infrastructure. There were frequent interruptions in the connection due
474 to the producer’s low-speed Internet, which revealed that although com-
475 municatively we participated on the same terms, *infrastructurally* I had
476 an advantaged position. We experienced the fragility of mediated com-
477 munication. Our collaboration often took longer as a result of frequent
478 disruptions in the connection, causing frustration. In addition, the oral
479 communication and my active collaboration posed difficulties in remain-
480 ing focused and reflexive as a researcher. It also limited the possibilities for
481 taking notes while collaborating with Konstantin on a production task.

482 The training course that we produced together was circulated online
483 in three ways: as a commodity sold for USD40 through the online edu-
484 cational platform Udemy (udemy.com); as a pay-what-you want artifact
485 available through another platform, Gumroad (gumroad.com); and as
486 commons that were free to download from the Synfig community’s offi-
487 cial website (synfig.org). These three forms of distribution created addi-
488 tional contexts of relevance to the film production project, allowing me
489 to observe the interaction between Konstantin and other people, and thus
490 unveiling other dimensions of the project.

491 *Site B: Udemy, Following Commodities*

492 As George Marcus suggests, following commodities, their circulation and
493 the commodity chain as part of a multisited approach can be fruitful for
494 studying processes in a capitalist world system (Marcus 1995). With its
495 multiple forms of distribution, the training course represented a hybrid
496 between a commodity and a commons. The platform Udemy is a popular
497 online e-learning web service. The reason for distributing the course via
498 this platform was that it allowed for discussion and increased the popular-
499 ity of the course among other animators. I obtained a login username and
500 password to this site in my role as co-author of the course, a role that I
501 was granted as a consequence of my work on the audio recording. In the
502 period between the release of the course in November 2013 and writing

this chapter in December 2015, the course was completed by at least 230 participants, many of whom expressed their appreciation online:

Glad I found this. It was a pleasure to go through this course, because it was carefully planned and skilfully presented. The folks who prepared this must be professional educators, with good equipment. Sound was good enough that the accented English was not a problem for my poor hearing (Walt Michalik about Synfig course on Udemy)

The course triggered some discussions about Synfig, the practical uses of the course and about difficulties that the students encountered. In this context, my participation was predominantly as an observer. I had the possibility to join and actively engage in the discussions had I wished to do so, but my limited expertise in animation and the clear ownership of the course by Konstantin made such engagements less appropriate. Udemy as a site did not represent a direct way to explore animated film production, but it exposed a context that was less evident—namely, the attempt of Morevna to establish mechanisms for knowledge transfer that may lead to potential expansion of the community of artists and developers, ultimately increasing the potential participants in the project (see Velkova and Jakobsson 2015). Building knowledge capacity and skills in specific media production technologies was crucial for the project since it used unconventional technological approaches for production. Despite the fact that it predominantly used free and open-source software, meaning that anyone could download it, use it and alter it, there was still a very limited number of animators who knew how to work with it.

Site C: Libre Graphics Meeting 2014, Going Offline

At a later stage, the video training course provided a reason for me to move from the online contexts to some of the offline contexts related to Morevna. At the beginning of 2014, Konstantin suggested that I present the workflow we used to create the course at a conference of animators, hackers and computer graphics users who use and develop exclusively open-source graphics software and artwork based on it. Konstantin was unable to attend in person due to the cost of the flight from Siberia to Leipzig in Germany, where the event would take place, and he saw an opportunity in my geographical closeness to the conference. The event, the Libre Graphics Meeting (LGM), was announced as follows:

538 The world's largest gathering of open source projects from the graphics
539 area and developers and users of these programs. They come together to
540 share the newest developments and ideas how to improve their software
541 or to show what can be achieved with it. (<http://libregraphicsmeeting.org/2014/>)
542

543 Developing animation with open-source tools is a common track at this
544 conference. Several individuals who contributed financially and technically
545 to the film production were present. In this context I was supposed to
546 act on behalf of Morevna and the Synfig community by presenting the
547 work done on the training course. The presentations at the conference
548 were streamed, recorded and shared as commons online. My participation
549 granted greater visibility of my research in this community and provided
550 opportunities to connect physically and talk to several participants about
551 their contributions to Morevna. The people whom I interviewed were
552 helpful and curious about my research, and they wanted me to publish
553 notes or thoughts from my involvement with them and the project on
554 a blog or elsewhere online. I tried to fulfil these requests to some extent
555 by creating a blog, nordkonst (nordkonst.org), which became another
556 context related to the project. On this blog I wrote summaries about my
557 work, published reports from talking to or meeting project participants,
558 wrote short public analytical memos and occasionally published some of
559 the recorded interviews with Morevna participants as podcasts. Blogs are
560 often used by researchers to constitute various aspects of ethnographies,
561 from using them as a tool to structure the research work, to communicat-
562 ing with the subjects of the research (Beaulieu 2004). In this case it was
563 more about communicating with than about reporting *back to* the subjects
564 of the research, and creating more symmetric relations. Indeed, reciproc-
565 ity turned out to be a core value for the project and LGM's participants.

566 One of the major challenges in this context came from the need to rec-
567 oncile my participation in several roles. On the one hand, I was the official
568 representative of Morevna and the Synfig software community at the
569 conference. My presentation made me part of the project's knowledge-
570 dissemination strategies and presented me as a person sharing their values.
571 On the other hand, I was there largely in the role of a researcher, and I was
572 supposed to be objective, impartial and simply documenting what others
573 did. My own presentation at the conference became part of the practice
574 and discourse of the project, putting my self-reflexivity under pressure.
575 This particular problem made it very evident that the multisited arena of

fieldwork 'is patterned by very politicized relations of collaboration; and ultimately the inclusion of reception itself as an object or site of fieldwork' (Marcus 2007, 1133).

If in the early phases of the research I purposefully dropped any activist or political agenda, entering the context of LGM in the role of a speaker made me part of the production culture that I was researching as well as politicized my participation. It paradoxically recreated to a certain degree the activist and political dimension of participatory communication, requiring even greater reflexivity and attentiveness as a researcher to maintain a distance.

Site D: Visiting the Production in Gorno-Altaysk, Siberia

Each of the contexts described above were presenting different and important sides of Morevna, but it was hard to connect them without visiting the project in Siberia. In November 2014, I went to Gorno-Altaysk to conduct fieldwork for a period of two weeks. The geographical isolation of the city was apparent after traveling for three days by plane, train and bus in order to get there. In the online contexts, Konstantin was the primary figure that was visible, but in my visit to Gorno-Altaysk, I encountered a small community of youth—Japanese anime fans—who were dedicated both to Morevna and to their own smaller animation projects, but who remained more obscure. In all of the projects, they used the technologies developed and customized within the project by Konstantin. In this community, Konstantin was their animation mentor and teacher.

Indeed, during my stay, Konstantin was split between working on multiple projects. One such was about making stereoscopic three-dimensional animation for a small media company from Novosibirsk, the closest town, located 500 km away. Another was to make a new website for Morevna. He also worked on coordinating Synfig's development with Ivan, a local programmer. Between these tasks, he was giving twice-weekly free animation classes to the small community of teenagers and young adults on the premises of a small local extracurricular art school. The teaching was shared with Nikolai, the art director of the project. In each of these additional contexts, Konstantin used the open-source technologies developed through Morevna, polishing them further through teaching animation, freelancing and working on the project. Connecting the knowledge that I have gained from navigating the online and offline contexts of the project so far, I realized much more clearly the nuances and sensibilities

613 saturating Morevna. I understood that it emerged out of a passion of a
614 small local community for anime, a passion that has gone beyond the
615 mere consumption of media and has pushed Konstantin and other young
616 people in the town into producing their own within frameworks of their
617 own making. The project emerged from an idea about making a particu-
618 lar anime film, one that fills the young people's lives with meaning while
619 developing skills in media production. Embracing unconventional means
620 of production was a response to an everyday reality in which many cannot
621 afford to buy high-class drawing tablets, powerful computers or expensive
622 mobile phones. The animation classes built a community and transferred
623 knowledge about working with open-source graphics instruments locally,
624 helping to create some of the future contributors to the project and hope-
625 fully helping them to find jobs in the media industry in Russia. Morevna
626 was a way to transform consumption and fandom into a culture of making
627 through experimenting with models of sharing in which tools, artwork
628 and knowledge are created.

629 CONCLUSIONS

630 The examples presented above illuminate the diversity of different con-
631 texts, people and practices that can become entangled in an unconven-
632 tional media production practice coordinated from a remote location in
633 Siberia. None of these contexts alone would have given a rich enough
634 picture to understand the sensibilities and sense-making practices that
635 were saturating the project, or illuminate in detail its production con-
636 texts. Navigating these multiple contexts, some of which were visible,
637 others not, some of which were mediated, others not, uncovered the
638 complexity of such projects and of the methodological challenges in
639 researching them. With every move in and out of each context, I as a
640 researcher had to move in and out of different roles and occasionally
641 reconcile several at the same time. The more active my participation was
642 in some of these contexts, the more challenges there were to my ability
643 to be reflexive.

644 What became obvious methodologically from this research is that
645 mediated communication creates cultural layers that overlap in larger
646 production contexts. They are impossible to understand or uncover by
647 prioritizing only one cultural location. At the same time, by engaging in
648 a multisited participatory communication, the researcher can create new
649 contexts that add additional complexity to the practice being researched.

Despite the richness of the account that the combination of multisited ethnography with participatory communication led to, there were also challenges. A substantial one was the temporal dimension of ethnography. My research started in 2012. I recorded the audio for the training course on Synfig in the winter of 2013. I participated in the LGM in 2014. Half a year later, I visited Gorno-Altaysk. It is not always possible to dedicate two years to collecting data about a cultural phenomenon. Mediated communication and long-term production frameworks make research intermittent and unpredictable. Managing the unpredictability of each new site, person and object that emerges in new contexts can be very frustrating. It also required substantial effort in order to adjust to and renegotiate access in each new context.

Taking a more active role in Morevna also transferred certain responsibilities to me. Getting on symmetric communication terms with the project created the need for me to make and actively maintain new online communication channels that I had not initially foreseen, such as my blog and a Twitter account.

Despite these challenges, the attempt to follow principles of participatory communication as a central starting point in an ethnographic study shows how it can be of particular help in mediated contexts that could be difficult to notice or contextualize. I let the producer guide my navigation between the different contexts while I took different active communicative positions in each of them, gradually coming to understand the values, goals and communicative practices of this production practice. In this process, my role of researcher was transformed from attempting 'to create a need for the information one is disseminating to rather disseminating information for which there is a need' (Servaes 2001, 11).

This chapter shows that participant observation has certainly not lost its relevance in research practice. However, increasingly, it needs to be complemented with other forms and sites of engagement, such as through participatory communication that allows for more experimentation, flexibility and adjustment to the increasing complexities of social interaction that occurs in overlapping yet intermittent mediated contexts.

NOTES

1. For a critical discussion of this topic, see Czarniawska (2007).
2. For a more detailed discussion of this kind of film project and its production frameworks, see Velkova and Jakobsson (2015) and Velkova (2014).

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