Conflict chatnography: Instant messaging apps, social media and conflict ethnography in Ukraine

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Abstract
Social media and instant messaging are fast becoming an integral part of contemporary life, and subsequently of ethnographic research. As ethnography is essentially a process defined by relations between people, this article investigates how online interaction influenced my relationships with the people I studied: Ukrainian volunteer battalions. Framed in a broader context of conflict ethnography, the resulting chatnography made access to informants tremendously easier, and allowed for remote data collection. Chatnography nevertheless exacerbated ethical challenges posed by study of armed conflict. The blending of offline and online also led to despatialization, and the blurring of personal and professional. This questions the traditional notion of the ‘field’, while more immediately threatening to limit my private life. While not a magic bullet, the convenience of chatnography means that it will be here for years to come. This article offers an attempt to investigate what this entails in practice.

Keywords
chatnography, conflict ethnography, digital ethnography, methodology, militias, social media, Ukraine, volunteer battalions, war

Introduction
I was enjoying a long breakfast and a book when Vadim needed to talk. He had been sick and miserable for a few days, but now the enemy had been lucky and scored a direct hit on their positions with a mortar round. One of Vadim’s comrades was seriously wounded in his throat. While he would likely survive, the prognosis was that he would be paralyzed for life. While Vadim drew comfort...
from the fact that enemy tanks with their 125mm guns had not been sighted, the casualty served as a reminder of the constant unpredictability and danger of war.

Every so often such interactions interrupted my everyday life, which I had not anticipated would include casualties or indirect fire. How could I have done so, considering that while Vadim was fighting the war in an undisclosed place in eastern Ukraine, on this particular day I was sitting in my kitchen in Uppsala, Sweden? I have never met Vadim, nor have I physically accompanied him in the trenches and battlefields of Donbas. Yet we have talked – often on a daily basis – about life in a Ukrainian volunteer battalion, about politics and our personal lives for hundreds of hours during the past 15 months through instant messaging apps. At the time of this writing, our discussion log encompasses 66,000 words.

As of 31 December 2017, Facebook with its inbuilt Messenger had 2.13 billion monthly active users around the world (Facebook, 2018). As social media and instant messaging are becoming an increasingly integral part of contemporary life, they also provide new opportunities for ethnographers. Their prominence in my attempts to study Ukrainian volunteer battalions made the endeavour significantly different from the 15 months I had spent with former combatants in Liberia during the previous six years. With communication increasingly conducted through instant messaging apps on smart phones that both I and my volunteer interlocutors constantly carry with us, the difficulties of accessing informants became significantly easier. In comparison, traveling to southeastern Liberia where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork required significant investment of money and time, as well as crossing several physical boundaries. Yet even in this peripheral region improved access to cellular networks and smartphones is slowly changing the prospects of continued interaction with informants thanks to instant messaging apps.

The aim of this article is to investigate what I call chatnography in the context of studying armed conflict. Chatnography forms the online dimension of a broader ethnographic approach, and refers to interaction through instant messaging apps and social media. As with other methods, it appears wise to heed the call for reflexivity regarding the ways chatnography influences research (Davies, 2002). Considering the centrality of relationships in ethnography, I investigate the methodological consequences when interaction with informants is predominantly conducted through instant messaging apps in general, and in the context of armed conflict in particular.

This article argues that chatnography carries much promise, especially at the early stages of ethnographic research, due to its seemingly low costs. While part of the appeal of chatnography is the way physical proximity becomes unnecessary, many of its benefits also become its weaknesses in the long run. To begin with, the ease of communication easily leads to constant communication, which may at times appear like a time thief. The virtual also gives rise to a plethora of ethical issues, which become aggravated in a conflict context to the point that questions the whole endeavour. Finally, and as encouraged by the demand that the long tradition of fieldwork ‘must be aggressively and imaginatively reinterpreted to meet the needs of the present’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 39–40), chatnography raises questions
regarding the notion of the field as something out there. The increasing blurring of the online and the offline and the ease of communication brought about by modern technology suggests that ethnography is ultimately not about a place – as the notion of the field suggests – but about a process defined by relations between people. As the internet is unlikely to disappear, it may well be impossible to put the genie back in the bottle. Considering these issues will at least make us aware of some of the inherent possibilities and problems of chatnography.

This article continues as follows. The next section situates the discussion of chatnography to my study of Ukrainian volunteer battalions and the wider context of conflict ethnography. The rest of the paper focuses on thematic issues that emerged in the process. The third section discusses the way the structure of social media as ‘concentric circles’ was helpful when I began conducting chatnography in Ukraine, followed by the fourth section that focuses on snowballing through social media and instant messaging apps. The fifth section presents problems of ghosting and mirages, or losing contact with informants and the consequences of online anonymity. The sixth section takes up ethical problems inherent with chatnography, followed by the question of how such a method influences the notion of the field, central to ethnography. The eighth section summarizes the findings.

The context: Conflict ethnography in Ukraine

The war fought by the Ukrainian volunteer battalions began in the spring of 2014, which followed a tumultuous winter. The events that led to the Maidan revolution and the toppling of President Viktor Yanukovych had started with a Facebook post that noted that ‘‘Likes’’ don’t count’. Yet merely weeks after Yanukovych’s escape in late February, Russia occupied and annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Because of the chaotic state of affairs in Kyiv, little was done about this flagrant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. Soon after violence flared in the southeastern Donbas region. This time militias – some supported by the government, others by local powerbrokers, the rest by themselves and other volunteers – mobilized to protect the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine. Some of these groups were formed by people who wrote on Facebook about their intentions to do something about the worsening situation in the east. Recruits, funds and other kinds of support were subsequently mobilized and collected online. Online methods thus helped the volunteer battalions’ efforts to the point that they became a critical stopgap measure that bought time for the state to become organized. This is also recognized in the subtitle of what can be considered an official history of some of these units, ‘a heroic deed of battalions that saved the country’ (Hladka et al., 2017; see also Käihkö, 2018a).

During the summer the Ukrainian forces launched an offensive against the separatists, who were only saved by an intervention by Russian regular forces. This began a stalemate formalized by the Minsk protocols. While systematically broken by both sides, heavy fighting has since ceased. The war nevertheless continues at the
time of writing, with no immediate end in sight. While it is clear that the volunteer battalions played a central role in the chaotic early days of the war when the state was too weak to protect itself or its territory, there is naturally much more to the story of the volunteers than simple celebration. That they were needed in the first place was the result of not only Russian intervention (Wilson 2016), but even a polarized society with divisions the volunteers have been accused of deepening (Kudelia, 2017; Matveeva, 2018).

I had briefly encountered someone involved with the battalions in late 2014 in the United States and possessed some basic knowledge about the phenomenon. It nevertheless took until late 2016 before I began researching them. Theoretically, the volunteer battalions offer an interesting contemporary case in exploring the relationship between war, state and nations – in a context of an ongoing war in Europe, which to date has been scantly researched (Kääkö, 2018). It took me six months before I could visit Ukraine for the first time in late April 2017. In the meantime, I resorted to social media and reached out to volunteer fighters either through my existing networks or through their public social media profiles. My situation as a post-doctoral researcher with a limited and by then spent travel budget contributed to my adoption of these new technological opportunities.

At the time of writing my research comprises four trips and a total of 36 days in Ukraine between May 2017 and June 2018. During these forays I have lived with my key informants who include volunteer battalion fighters, civil society reformers and a family of internally displaced persons from Donetsk and Luhansk. I have interviewed 78 people both online and offline, mostly in Ukraine but even in Sweden and the United States. Aside from those mentioned, these people include top-level politicians, Maidan activists, journalists, lawyers, security officials and students, but especially 15 members of volunteer battalions. In addition to interviews and informal discussions with individual volunteer fighters, I have on several occasions met other volunteers through my informants and thus benefited from observing interaction between them. While the emphasis in ethnographic studies lies on depth rather than breadth, this study admittedly pales in comparison with my past work in Liberia, where I not only interviewed over 300 former combatants but was also able to follow many life trajectories during the past six years. Yet in some ways the chatnography aspect of my study in Ukraine has during the past 13 months allowed a much faster start and a continued and often more focused interaction with volunteers than the more intermittent one in Liberia. With some (but not all) volunteers, chatnography also resulted in more information about the volunteer battalions than face-to-face interviews in Ukraine.

In my study chatnography is situated within the broader phenomenon of conflict ethnography. Briefly introduced elsewhere (Kääkö, 2016), conflict ethnography argues that conflict contexts pose new and exacerbate old methodological problems to the point that makes the prefix worthwhile. Until recently, research in conflict zones was commonly believed to be outright impossible (Vlassenroot, 2006). These obstacles previously considered unsurpassable have to do with what has been called the nature of war, which gives rise to three issues that permeate even the study of
conflict: use of force (violence), polarizing interaction between actors, and instrumentality (as armed conflicts are seen to be connected to politics) (Clausewitz, 2004).

To begin with use of force, conflicts include violence, which inevitably leads to physical and psychological trauma, and hence a plethora of methodological issues. It is difficult to discuss and outright irresponsible to study conflict without reference to ethics. At minimum, any study of conflict comes with the ethical necessity to protect informants and researchers from all kinds of harm (Howell, 1990; Sriram et al., 2009). Violence also contributes to uncertainty, which adds to the notion of chaos as a defining feature of war (Nordstrom, 1995: 131). Polarizing interaction lies behind the notion that the first casualty of war is truth. As a result, few sources of data will be left unbiased in such contexts (Wood, 2006: 373). Polarization may also necessitate taking sides in a conflict in one way or the other (Nash, 2007). For instance, accessing informants – especially across frontlines – may become difficult, and research may lead to accusations of spying (Sluka, 1995). Finally, the instrumentality means that there are potentially high stakes in play. This not only contributes to the other two issues, but also links the phenomenon to macro-level sociological factors. It is ultimately these factors which distinguish conflict ethnography from a narrower ethnography of violence (Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004): war is not mere violence and warfare is not an individual but a collective act. It is hence impossible to understand war without the consideration of macro-level factors, such as nation, society and state. While war is influenced by these factors, it also historically bears influence on them (Centeno and Enríquez, 2016; Hall and Malešević, 2013; Hutchinson, 2017; Malešević, 2010).

If the first victim of war is truth, its second victim is ambiguity (Leed, 1979). The pairing up of conflict with ethnography offers the promise of rediscovering nuances in such settings. In other words, conflict ethnography suggests that ethnographic methods can alleviate some of the inherent problems that arise from the nature of war. Admittedly use of force, polarizing interaction between actors and instrumentality are not necessarily limited to war. Two specific examples come immediately to mind. The first one concerns autocracies, where the three factors are part of everyday politics. Nevertheless, these states employ violence precisely as a political means to control underlying conflicts in an environment that is almost certainly characterized by polarization between groups. More generally, Charles Tilly (1985) has argued that warfare, state building and organized crime are comparable activities. The second example is crime. Because of the lack of dedicated methods literature, ethnographers of armed conflict have often resorted to literature on crime and gangs (Utas, 2003), and for instance relied on Phillippe Bourgois’s idea that that it is necessary to have long-term relations with informants – if not becoming ‘best friends’ with them – before they can convey their experiences (Bourgois, 2003: 11, 13; Whyte, 1993). Yet while use of force, polarizing interaction between actors, and instrumentality are inherent in armed conflict, this need not be the case with crime: criminality is not necessarily violent, nor do many important macro-level sociological factors present in war necessarily play an obvious role. These
sociological factors are also connected to the perceived legitimacy of some armed actors, whereas the term criminal itself suggests marginality and illegitimacy. In the end, recent research on violent gangs in contexts where the three issues connected to conflict are clearly present has questioned whether the fighting between violent gangs and state security forces is simply ‘war by any other name’ (Muggah, 2017).

There are many ways to describe ethnography. As the word itself suggests, it amounts to writing about people. This, however, can be done in many ways, but in this paper the core of ethnography is seen as participant observation, or studying with interlocutors with whom one has long-term, organic and open-ended interpersonal relations. As David Mosse has noted, anthropological knowledge is ‘essentially relational’, in the sense that ‘what anthropologists know is inseparable from their relationship with those they study’ (Mosse, 2006: 937). These relations not only help in the process of writing about these people by adding sensitivity to their specific contexts, but also the broader socio-cultural environment necessary to contextualize these relations. Finally, long-term and open-ended relationships offer the promise of a more ethical way to conduct research in a less extractive manner: most research relationships are inherently asymmetric because of researchers’ dependence on interlocutors for information. Relational depth can help to level this asymmetry, as well as to change the terms of exchange. Yet such relationships require that researchers put themselves into the endeavour in a manner that makes it inherently untidy, at least if compared to the annals of social science methods that offer seemingly neat paths to success (Howell, 2017; Ingold, 2014; Shah, 2017). As Bourgois (2003: 13) argues, ‘in order to collect “accurate data,” ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study’. Yet this works both ways, as the people we study also become involved with us. In what makes it difficult to replicate ethnographies, researchers and interlocutors in practice choose each other (Bernard, 2006: 196).

This emphasis on relationships between people marks the main difference between chatnography and other online ethnographic methods. With chatnography, the focus lies on how the presence in other people’s lives offered by social media and instant messaging apps influences these relationships. This is the topic investigated in the next section.

“‘Likes’ don’t count’: Chatnography and the structure of social media

In recent years conflict studies have increasingly relied on remote methodologies because of politicization and increased state capacity (Fisher, 2015), as well as limited access and the decline of area studies (Duffield, 2015). Simultaneously, a plethora of concepts connected to online ethnographic methods have emerged. These include cyberethnography (Robinson and Schulz, 2009), digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), ethnography in virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012), expanded ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, 2011), netnography (Kozinets, 2010), and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), to name only a few. While they all
contribute to understanding of the effects of new technology to social lives, as Roser Beneito-Montagut (2011: 720) argues, ‘ethnographic studies on the internet usually tend to define the field of research in terms of specific services, applications or sites’.

Unlike these concepts, this article does not investigate virtual spaces or online social life, but the methodological consequences of the medium itself. This conservative focus becomes only more important as even those who argue for ‘following the medium’ to find new methods have not given much weight to the implications of the fact that much of our everyday communication is now conducted through social media and instant messaging apps (Rogers, 2013). While I employ a digital medium as a part of my investigation, this was at first not a conscious choice, but rather a natural continuation of contemporary forms of communication. This reflects the fact that the internet is now literally carried with us, rather than restricted to stationary computers, and taken for granted as a part of our social relations. As Hine (2015) argues, the internet is ‘embedded, embodied and everyday’. That it and the forms of communication it enables carry into research practices should hardly be surprising. Yet while it has been argued that boundaries have diminished to the point that ‘there is no difference between online and offline interpersonal communication’ as they ‘are often intrinsically linked’ (Beneito-Montagut, 2011: 717), on closer investigation this appears an overstatement. At least when it comes to ethnography, the medium does matter.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2009), social media is defined as ‘websites and applications which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking’. Instant messaging apps such as Instagram, Messenger, Telegram and WhatsApp are programs that offer real-time text (as well as voice, photo and video) transmission over the internet. Colloquially their main use however remains chatting – hence the idea of chatnography, a somewhat playful term which draws attention to this medium of ethnography. The immediate benefits of such opportunities for research are undeniable. For instance, Thiago Fontes and Michelle O’Mahoney chose to employ instant messaging as the medium for in-depth interviews because of five reasons: First, instant messaging is cheap in terms of money and time. Secondly, interviews conducted through such apps are automatically transcribed. Thirdly, interviews could be conducted from a distance. Fourthly, this distance created detachment in the situation helpful with especially sensitive topics. Finally, posing questions this way required less effort from both parties, allowing the interviewer to concentrate on the process while increasing participation rate. In comparison to email interviews, they saw instant messaging as more dynamic and engaging for the respondents (Fontes and O’Mahoney, 2008: 2–3). To this list should be added the opportunities of receiving links to newspaper articles and similar media, the possibility to instantly translate them online, the instant access to informants, as well as several other benefits further elaborated below.

The structure of many social media sites means that they are essentially networks of networks. For instance, Facebook has been called a ‘walled garden’ of a
‘series of concentric circles’, as well as an echo chamber: Not only must a user have an account to gain access, but in a way that gives definite form to relationships it is also necessary to friend others to view more content published by them and their networks (Rogers, 2013: 25). Yet depending on secrecy settings applied, after gaining access it becomes easy to connect with people and to observe connections within these networks. Other circles, such as private and hidden groups, in turn constitute deeper circles more difficult to access. The same, for instance, applies for WhatsApp groups.

According to Alessandro Caliandro (2017: 16), several studies ‘have shown that people generally have loose relationships on social networks . . . and use them not so much to interact and discuss with others in a strict sense but rather as a means to maintain and manage their own social networks, both offline and online . . . through self-presentation strategies’. The same structure of social media plausibly contributes even to giving these loose relationships a more stable form, which questions ideas that social media spaces are characterized first and foremost by fluidity. This is acknowledged even by Caliandro when she notes that online platforms not only allow communities to flourish, but their members play seemingly fixed social roles in them (2017: 16). Yet even within online fora various media result in different outcomes. Twitter, for instance, is hardly meant to be a ‘walled garden’ like some aspects of Facebook and all WhatsApp groups. The position of different online media thus varies on the scale between public and private. Many users adjust their own behaviour accordingly, and create content tailored for varying degrees of public and private consumption. For instance, while it was rare to see volunteer battalion members create and maintain active Twitter accounts where they discussed the war, many of them continued to portray themselves as volunteers in the more private Facebook. While this made their initial identification easy, it is clear that it is a specific group of people who can be accessed through social media in any given context. Not everyone uses social media, and cultural differences too play a role. While foreign volunteers were more likely to tweet, the Russian VKontakte was more popular in Ukraine than Facebook – at least until the Ukrainian government blocked it in mid-May 2017, accusing Russia of using it as a weapon of war. My linguistic poverty in both Ukrainian and especially Russian also meant that I could only employ social media to meaningfully engage with people who knew English, and who were more likely to use Facebook in the first place.

**Snowballing in ‘concentric circles’**

The scarcity of previous research in English about the Ukrainian volunteer battalions perhaps first and foremost reflects the methodological problems connected to accessing and researching the phenomenon, discussed by Karagiannis (2016). Volunteer fighters are a hidden population in the sense that volunteers were either on the frontlines or otherwise wore civilian clothes, and were hence typically indistinguishable from anyone else (Singer, 2013). In order to identify such
informants, researchers often employ snowball sampling that departs from personal contacts. Snowballing does not only concern chain referrals to potential informants, but also identifying which of these informants are most useful for the purposes of one’s study. This sampling again requires awareness regarding the context but is essential as informants’ utility for researching specific issues is not equal.

Most of my first encounters with volunteers were achieved through messages sent to previously unknown people like Vadim, who had public virtual presence. The structure of social media helped considerably both in identifying potential informants and the subsequent attempts of Vadim and others to connect me with further informants. After initial introductions, I sought to establish trust through transparency about myself and my research. I believe it to be reasonable to assume openness is reciprocal. As ethnographic research builds on the personal relationship between the researcher and those researched, it is necessary to be mindful of the expectations and needs of both parties and act accordingly. While my sincerity may at times have conflicted with what Gerald Berreman (2007) has called impression management, I believe it was fair. That said, I gradually found how these relationships began to influence my personal online behaviour in ways that I will return to later.

After some familiarity and trust had been established, the relationship focused on interaction. While potentially useful data had been collected from the start, it was at this stage that some kind of normality became established in the relationship, which made it possible to query even about sensitive topics. Even further, it was now when informants could be asked to extend handshakes to other informants, who could help with other topics of inquiry. I was early on worried that since most of my early informants had fought in the same battalion and knew each other, my research results would be limited to this particular unit. Yet this worry soon faded because of new introductions to different circles.

Another significant factor with new introductions was that after a while handshakes initiated by one person began to involve people with whom I already shared friends on Facebook. Again, the structure discussed above played a role, as it changed the first question from my identity to how I knew our common acquaintances. The common friends were clearly understood as proof of some kind of quality on my behalf, and could – if needed – be used to check who I was (something I always recommended). As a rule of thumb, I more often than not faced limited need to explain about myself. New introductions thus reduced friction and in turn led to an increasing number of new acquaintances.

Connected to the structure of social media, even the forms of self-presentation present became a source of information. According to Caliandro (2017: 16), the form of the public image users adapt in online communities can help in constructing an understanding of a shared culture. As Angela Garcia and her colleagues (2009: 64) note, analysis of visual material is potentially an important part of ethnographic study online. I collected photographs and videos sent directly to me, but also browsed the Facebook walls and Instagram and Twitter feeds of
my contacts to obtain first-hand descriptions of their war experience in both images and words. Comments from their friends (not all of whom I know) also provided interesting perspectives and could often be taken as a sort of peer-review of stated arguments. Aside from public images, even actions, such as sharing memes, news and videos and commenting and liking posts that use a certain symbolism or convey a certain view, abetted in understanding and contextualizing the volunteer phenomenon. Most importantly, several of my informants reposted old status updates from the wartime, first adding a layer of contemporary interpretation, and then often elaborating issues in ensuing comments. Owing to the structure of social media and my informants’ shared status as volunteer battalion members, these interactions took place between what can be compared to bounded communities of classic ethnography.

These uses offer examples of the opportunities of remote data collection offered by social media. Another example how chatnography helped in this regard was the investigation of the nationalizing efforts of the Ukrainian state. As it is redefining holidays, I could, for instance, connect with a large number of people on these occasions to check what they were doing and to hear their thoughts on the day, when such questions were immediately relevant to their lived lives. In a similar manner I could express my condolences when comrades died, while simultaneously learning something about them, and about attitudes towards issues like death and sacrifice.

While it was a similar kind of snowballing that I had resorted to in Liberia, these opportunities were qualitatively different. After some years a few key informants began to introduce me to people who they believed I would benefit from meeting. Even then, these interactions were rarely planned and usually required the physical presence of all three parties. For instance, I was repeatedly told that a person who just passed had been fighting for a certain unit during the civil war. More often than not, these introductions led nowhere, nor did opportunities for chatnography ever materialize in the Liberian case as the war was virtually never discussed in such fora. One reason for the lack of these opportunities comes from the limited literacy rate and poor access to smartphones and mobile internet access. Deeper cultural issues might also have played a role, as even discussions about seemingly mundane and insensitive issues through these apps remained brief and shallow. Finally, it is difficult to not ascribe some of this unwillingness to the fact that those in Liberia who participated in the war were often perceived to lack legitimacy, and the war’s lack of relevance for everyday life 15 years after its end. After experiencing these realities, I was positively surprised how easy my initial attempts to reach out to informants in Ukraine felt. Even discussions with potential informants involved in the war who ultimately did not want to discuss their experiences always resulted in some useful information. More importantly, chatnography appeared as a way to avoid some of the existing barriers of classic ethnographic research, especially those connected to hidden populations. Chatnography thus offered a shortcut that considerably shortened setting up the stage for a continued ethnographic study.
Ghosting and mirages

In early September 2017 I grew worried. It began to take days for Vadim to answer my messages. Even worse, when he did, he did so with a smiley or a thumb – if at all. First, I thought that he was occupied with something else, perhaps a new job. Increasingly, I got the nagging feeling that he was ghosting me.

Ghosting is a colloquial word that refers to the way personal relationships are unilaterally ended without explanation, and in a way that cuts all communication. That ghosting became a worry was the result of several factors. Most generally, the word itself is the outcome of the process that has made establishing contact with people outside our immediate life spheres easier. While the phenomenon is hardly new in either everyday life or ethnographic studies (Utas, 2003: 81–83; Whyte, 1993: 330–1, 347–8), it has become more pronounced as communication technology allows us to communicate with almost anyone, anywhere and at all times. What is easy to start may also be easy to stop; with no great investment and the prospect of continuously finding new relationships, why cling to less than perfect old ones? As Sherry Turkle (2011: 288) notes about these unprecedented environments, ‘Real people have consistency, so if things are going well in our relationships, change is gradual, worked through slowly. In online life, the pace of relationships speeds up.’

Vadim’s behaviour suggested that our relationship had changed. I hoped that this derived from the fact that he had recently left the frontlines. With new prospects and everyday problems, he perhaps felt it less important to talk about the war. Yet if this was the case, perhaps his passivity and silence also highlighted the asymmetry in our relationship. Whereas I was to some extent dependent on people like him, he perhaps thought that he had little to gain from talking to me. Then again, all human relations are fickle, and subject to change from both within and without. Perhaps the online relationships were just fickler and hence subject to quicker change.

While my relationship with Vadim later regained its previous degree of exchange, my anxiety illustrates a more general reality that touches all ethnographers, as relationships remain our main source of information about the phenomena we study. Yet the fickleness of these relationships – especially because they tend to be asymmetric in nature – leaves much to chance in a manner uncomfortable to those who seek laboratory-like efficiency in their choice of methods. While until recently limited research about the formation of new relationships online existed, studies suggest that the more long-term relationships formed online tend to transition to offline: people seek broader methods of interaction (Boase and Wellman, 2006: 716), and relations which are maintained through multiple media are stronger (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

These findings also explain why I sought to meet my informants as soon as possible in order to enable us to get a feeling for each other. On the one hand, I believe this to amount to cutting to the chase in Berreman’s impression management – either there is something to the relationship that justifies continued investment in it, or not. On the other hand, I felt that this too contributed to my attempt
to play with as open cards as possible, which appeared like the most sensible and sincere thing to do.

Another reason to meet in person concerns the anonymity and distance offered by virtual settings, which potentially affects research in several ways. In what goes squarely against Bourgois’s argument about the importance of relational depth, it has been argued that anonymity may increase detachment between those communicating, and hence make it possible to ask sensitive questions (Fontes and O’Mahony, 2008). Yet as García et al. discuss (2009: 67–8), while anonymity may decrease restrictions and result in more honest answers, it also enables fabrications. The context of conflict also influenced these questions and raised new problems about them. Polarization clearly raised emotions and made some more willing to interact with me, as they believed themselves to be on the right side of history. Yet at the same time, I was constantly worried that some of these accounts merely resulted in shared common polarized narratives. While impossible to avoid in many conflict settings and important to understand, researchers should never uncritically repeat these often simplistic narratives, as this could be taken as legitimizing them. In this situation I again found ethnography important, as it appeared as the only way to rediscover nuances and ambiguity, hidden under and within the official narratives. That said, I found that it was the length of interaction and deepening relationship rather than switching to face-to-face interaction alone that helped in this process.

One of the main problems with anonymity is that it made verifying authenticity of accounts difficult. After all, these accounts might constitute no less mirages than many of the politicized narratives used to justify conflict in the first place. This is exemplified by the way Ukrainian fighters followed a more general norm of limiting discussion of certain issues within their armed groups. Deriving from fears that any information posted could be used for detrimental purposes, it is not uncommon for soldiers and combatants around the world to pose behind fake Facebook accounts. This is the reason my own account bears a fake name, and why both sides in Ukraine followed suit. They were subject to a race to ‘dox’ – to discover and reveal in order to shame or worse – their identities, which was stressful because of the potential social, legal and safety issues involved. I encountered narratives of fighters who called the relatives of people they had just killed, as well as more mundane stories of how they had received death threats. Many foreign fighters in particular were worried about doxing. While several separatist volunteers have been arrested in Western Europe, foreign volunteers on the opposing side lamented that everyone leaving to fight on behalf of the Ukrainian government forces was labelled as a neo-Nazi. While especially those from Belarus and Russia could face legal consequences, in other countries threats were posed by activists from the extreme left. Doxing might not only threaten volunteers’ safety at home, but also bring negative attention from security officials, employers and neighbours alike. In this context my own use of an account with a fake name became perhaps more understandable. Yet it posed initial problems as I had to introduce myself through references to my university website and other web pages where my identity could be verified.
Just as my informants could reply on the network structure of social media sites to get an idea of who I was and whom I knew, the converse was also true. Because of the structure of social media and my snowballing, many of my volunteer informants knew each other, which meant that their anonymity was never complete. Having fought together, communication resulted in narratives where these people were often mentioned. Independently of each other, several people also framed one informant as unreliable in a manner that suggested that they wanted me to get ‘correct’ information. This of course prodded me not only to talk to this person but also to take his accounts with a pinch of salt.

In the end, it needs to be emphasized that Vadim is an extreme case in the sense that he is one of the few fighters that I have worked together with for a long time, but whom I have yet to meet. In almost all other cases I have combined the use of instant messaging apps with a face-to-face meeting, or at least a Skype call if the physical distance was too long.

Chatnography and ethics

Maksym, another of my main informants, had promised to pick me up from the airport. A few days before he suddenly became very busy with something. I soon understood that he was unwilling to reveal what he was up to and stopped asking questions. As soon as we met a few days later, he stated in a matter of fact manner that he believed that the security services were monitoring his communication. As a result, there were things he could not mention online. While this appeared to be obvious for him, this realization immediately raised questions about all the things related to the war that cannot be discussed through virtual media, as well as other ethical issues connected to chatnography. When later one informant answered my initial declaration of intent with a kindly formulated refusal to participate in the study, my first reaction was to wonder why more people do not do the same in harsher terms.

The most important consideration of all responsible research is that no harm comes to those who participate in it. As mentioned briefly earlier, these considerations are emphasized in conflict ethnography because of the subject matter alone. The polarization brought by conflict contributed to the financial, legal and security-related difficulties working across the frontlines would pose. As a result, I would in all likelihood need to choose a side I wanted to work with. While the study of the separatists in Donbas would likely have been theoretically more interesting, practical reasons alone made this alternative impossible. Not only would I break laws as soon as I entered the separatist-controlled areas, but I also lacked points of access and institutional backing that would protect me from accusations of being a Western spy. This could expose me and anyone around me to physical risk, which was ethically indefensible.

From the perspective of ethics, many of the benefits of chatnography become threats. For instance, while accessing networks may be simple, this also makes it easier to discover who a researcher has been in contact with. Similarly, while chat
logs mean that no transcription is necessary, accessing a social media account allows reading and copying all of them. The same goes for photos and videos sent by informants. In the worst case, all these can be accessed through the researcher’s smartphone. From this perspective, physical fieldnotes that are locked away compare favourably.

One simple way to tackle these problems offered in previous literature is the creation of a research profile that is deleted at the end of research (Fontes and O’Mahony, 2008: 4). A decade later even this solution appears insufficient, as the initial laissez-faire approach to social media has become under increasing criticism. While deletion of research profiles erases data accessible to those who participated in the communication, it is less certain that the data has been removed altogether. The revelation that Facebook has not only amassed a wealth of information regarding users and their friends but also shared data with private companies serves as a warning of how data privacy issues have for too long been neglected. It is not necessary for companies to be evil (something the simultaneously comforting and ominous corporate code of conduct of Google warns against) for bad things to happen.

The same goes for researchers, who in some respects have become prisoners of the new online realities. Adapting instant messaging and social media as research instruments pose us and our informants to the risks of deficient data privacy. Any interaction between individuals over social media can link them together and pose risks, especially if they become formal friends or followers of each other (required for improved access to each other’s data). Photos uploaded on social media have been used for public intelligence, including directing air strikes in Syria. Then again, interaction over social media can in other cases be less risky than interacting face-to-face, which suggests that no perfect solution exists in the study of conflict. Increased awareness to privacy issues brought by technology has also resulted in solutions offered by new technology: while more recent apps promise increased encryption and self-destructing messages, the convenience of digital communication always leaves the reasonable suspicion whether the data will still be stored somewhere.

Opting out from the use of social media altogether isolates us from our informants and leaves us blind to one increasingly important part of everyday social realities. The use of fake research profiles is one alternative (even if forbidden by some social media platforms) to dissolve the obvious links between the researcher and the informants. Yet while this makes a lot of sense in theory, the open-ended nature of ethnographic relationships makes this more complicated in practice. As ethnography encourages – if not requires – the researcher to invest one’s own persona, compartmentalization of personal and research lives becomes difficult, if not impossible. These are again considerations that I hardly needed to think about in Liberia in 2012, but which in 2018 left me in a situation where I felt that I was damned if I do and damned if I don’t.

Facebook’s sharing of data to third parties also highlights the ethical concern regarding the opportunities for remote data collection discussed above. By participating in social media we almost inevitably engage in unobtrusive observation,
which can be understood as one-way ‘lurking’ (Garcia et al., 2009: 58–9). How does one relate to observations of people who have not consented to be researched and who have some reason to believe their actions to be of private nature? One alternative is to consider all material not posted publicly for all net users or not directly received as private. On several occasions I have reproduced this material after receiving informed consent, but even then, in ways that would not violate my informants’ anonymity. Yet admittedly lurking greatly helps with contextualization of the phenomenon, necessary to render any observations understandable in the first place. In the case of volunteers, in-group communication provides cues not only about language use, but also about prevailing narratives and norms of a bounded community. When it comes to the use of such information I hence draw a difference between public communication on discussion boards and platforms such as Twitter, and private communication, both instant messages and Facebook walls and Instagram feeds that that cannot be accessed by any internet user. While private communication is difficult if not impossible to use as direct data, access to these discourses nevertheless remains valuable addition to more traditional interviews.

**The place and the field**

As Bourgois (2003: 14) discusses, the ‘methodological logistics of participant observation’ alone require researchers to become not only personally but even empathetically involved in research. This also influenced my own use of social media, which was becoming a research instrument in a manner that blended personal with professional. I realized this when I was about to show my interest on an event for newly arrived refugees in Sweden. At the last moment I refrained from ‘participating’ online as I realized that doing so might reflect badly with some of my informants. While several researchers working with conflict settings have in private discussions noted that they have engaged in self-censorship for the sake of future access and security, I still felt uneasy about this invasion of something I had always considered private.

As the online is increasingly a presence taken for granted in our everyday lives, it becomes difficult to differentiate between online and offline. This is not least the case with research relationships, as they are often both. This has immediate consequences for understanding space. According to Beneito-Montagut (2011: 719), ‘virtual ethnographers try to fit the traditional meaning of “fieldwork” to the internet, although recognizing large differences to the traditional “real word [sic] settings”’. As a result, many ethnographic studies of online issues have concentrated on space. Yet the merging of online and offline makes the idea of a separate space problematic, as our lives online are merely continuation of our lives offline.

This despatialization also carries on into the notion of the field, central to ethnography. After all, the classic Malinowskian understanding of ethnography is based on a spatial separation between ‘the field’ and ‘home’, or the place where data is collected through fieldwork and subsequently written up (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 12–13). This difference is especially significant for anthropologists,
for whom ethnographic fieldwork is perceived to be the core of their discipline (Robben and Sluka, 2007). As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997: 1) argue, ‘truly anthropological knowledge is widely understood to be “based” (as we say) on fieldwork’, and ‘the single most significant factor determining whether a piece of research will be accepted as (that magical word) “anthropological” is the extent to which it depends on experience “in the field”’. While anthropologists have done much to question our Eurocentric views and to criticize the underlying exoticism in the notion of the field, these issues have been less prominent in other social scientific methods literature. The idea of the field as a mystical place out there remains common, as does equalling any fieldwork that includes observation or participation as ethnography. As a result, it is hardly surprising that some argue that the term has suffered an inflation to the point that ‘to characterize encounters, fieldwork, methods and knowledge as ethnographic is positively misleading’ (Ingold, 2014: 385).

David Mosse has gone as far as to call fieldwork a ‘dubious category’. Tracing our common notions of fieldwork to Malinowski, whose ‘fieldwork was a method of dislocation rather than of “immersion”’, Mosse (2006: 936–7) argues that:

What we have inherited is not so much a particular practice of fieldwork, as an ethnographic method premised on the division of field and desk – the social and the anti-social – experienced by every returning researcher. The changing nature of fieldwork – its closeness – both intensifies this division and surrounds it with tension.

In Mosse’s view ‘fieldwork has changed beyond recognition – becoming ever more intensely social’. On the one hand, this closeness means that it is difficult for us to ‘exit’ from the field to write as it is difficult to separate ‘field and desk’. On the other hand, this closeness also means that when we write about our relationships, these relationships with those we objectify continue. Whatever we write thus remains in the realm of social (Mosse, 2006: 937), but can also result in immediate anti-social consequences for these relationships (Scheper-Hughes, 2000). To this must be added a decade’s worth of technological advancements in the form of instant messaging apps and social media, after which much of my work with volunteer battalion members can hardly be described as ‘fieldwork’ at all. As both my informants and I are accessible almost around the clock, it becomes difficult to justify any meaningful demarcation between there and here. While it is true that researchers and those we study with for the most part live our lives in different locations, the elevation of relationships above place not only helps to emphasize what is important in ethnography, but also to dispel unnecessary exoticism. Simply put, ethnographic research is about a process and not a place, as the term field suggests. Yet because of this accessibility brought by new communication technology, research is also something that cannot easily be separated from one’s everyday life – which is again something that the glorification of ‘the field’ proposes, as offering an exciting escape from the everyday academic burdens.
This process is not always fun, and chatnography is not a magic bullet that can solve all problems in the world. Despite its benefits, Beneito-Montagut cautions against any ideas that research through a digital medium is cost-effective, as the inclusion of online elements potentially produces much data, and hence incurs high costs if sample size is not kept limited (Beneito-Montagut, 2011: 729). As the ease of communication with my informants often led to constant communication, the whole endeavour risked turning into a time thief. Combined with the uncertainty of ghosting, chatnography causes anxiety not contained in the notion of field as something separate from everyday life. The blending of the professional into private in social media also limited my behaviour and public communication online. At the same time chatnography allowed me to amass a wealth of material, which I am unlikely to ever have time to properly analyse.

Conclusions

Social media and instant messaging apps played an important role in mobilizing Ukrainians first to revolution, and later to war. While it was in hindsight only to be expected that the same media would be used to study these phenomena, little in my previous research in Liberia had prepared me for this task. Yet a year into my research of volunteer battalions, I had enrolled into a Ukrainian language course and significantly reduced my chat activities. After three trips to Kyiv and the environs I had managed to establish a good group of informants. Some were former volunteer battalion members, whom I met in their homes or went to have one or more beers with. Others were people who could help me find answers to specific questions. I also lived with a family of refugees from Donbas, which allowed me an insight into the civilian costs of the conflict. The research was nevertheless hardly limited to the time I spent in Ukraine. Whereas early in the project the main difficulty had been finding informants, chatting soon began to take anywhere from 30 minutes to a few hours, seven days a week. This came to an abrupt end when a family member was hospitalized, and I simply did not have the time for anything beyond the immediate concerns. This pause did not appear to have any immediate negative consequences for our relationships, suggesting that they had found some stability. After I resumed these activities, the renewed degree of exchange ebbed and flowed, finally settling on weekly, rather than daily basis. As is to be expected, some informants had become closer than others, while the expectation of interaction varied considerably between individuals. A few months later Vadim extended a new invitation for me to visit him after my first attempt a year earlier had failed due to an accident. Maksym in turn deleted his social media accounts, which prompted us to start calling each other on instant messaging apps.

In her critical book, Turkle notes that ‘connectivity . . . disrupts our attachments to things that have always sustained us – for example, the value we put on face-to-face human connection’. Ultimately, she sees that online relationships consist of informal weak ties, which doom us to live ‘alone together’ (Turkle, 2011: 284–5). If ethnography is indeed a process defined by relations between people and our social
interaction continues to shift online, Turkle’s view is nothing short of dystopian. While chatnography may appear appealing because of its seemingly low costs in terms of money and time, no single method is a magic bullet. While lack of physical proximity and investment can be counted as the main strengths of chatnography, they also become its major drawbacks. While chatnography offered a valuable shortcut for establishing the foundation for a broader ethnographic study, the ease of communication soon equalled to constant communication. This resulted in wealth of information that I struggled to keep up with. I also increasingly began to understand that there were limits with communication was limited to written words on a screen. Beyond typed words, there were many other important things to observe offline. In any case, I needed a context for interpreting these words. After establishing an initial group of informants, I decided to invest more on face-to-face time with them in the future. Simultaneously, my elevation of relationships to the core of ethnography meant that my work could not be isolated to a ‘field’ out there but would continue to be a part of my life where-ever I was.

Yet as the internet is unlikely to disappear, it may well be impossible to return the genie back to the bottle. It is thus reasonable to expect that chatnography will continue to play an important role in future ethnographies. In my case, physical distance between me and my informants means that chatting remains a convenient way to maintain relations, and to connect with new people. In the end this only reflects how much of our lives take place online, and how much we communicate through instant messaging apps and social media. As long as we do so, considering the inherent possibilities and problems of chatnography is the least we can do. This article has offered the first attempt to do so in the context of conflict ethnography.

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