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Chapter 8

Ethnography of open cultural production: From participant observation to multi-sited participatory communication

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In the last decades, qualitative research has been challenged by the increase of social and cultural practices that take place in mediated contexts. Older and newer technologies of mediation have, with different intensities, been layered upon each other, invented, abandoned, re-appropriated, 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 to even locate.

The particular area that this chapter is concerned with is the ethnographic study of alternative forms of organising media production. More specifically, it focuses on the question of the value of ethnography for studying cultural practices and meaning-making processes that emerge in the contexts of media projects that are made predominantly in mediated contexts, by geographically dispersed individuals, through asynchronous communication, and in which the production frameworks are based on principles of openness and sharing. Typical examples of such

projects include Wikipedia and the Linux operating system. Both have become strong cases in point to illustrate the new possibilities opened to media users through technologies of communication in order to articulate alternative discourses, create their own media and infrastructures and form networks of 'self-communication' (Castells 2009, 42). Some scholars have regarded these projects as emancipatory, functioning as demonstrations of viable alternatives for more democratic ways of organising media production and of sharing knowledge (Hess and Ostrom 2011; Lievrouw 2011, 177–213). Others have seen in them an increasing trend of blurring the boundaries between media producers and consumers, forming novel forms of social organisation and more horizontal power structures (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2012; Noveck 2009). These projects are therefore strongly anchored in a discourse that positions them as drivers of social change. Critical voices have, however, pointed out the need to regard them in more nuanced terms. On the surface, these projects may appear decentralised and democratic, but ethnographic studies have shown that internally, they are often centralised, full of inner contradictions and regulated in complex ways by both technologies and people (Bilic 2015; Coleman 2013; Kelty 2008; Niederer and van Dijck 2010). Taking inspiration in the latter critique, the present chapter aims to expand the methodological discussion about the ways in which we can address the complexities of contemporary media production, particularly in cases of non-conventional forms of organising production and circulation that carry potential for social change. Specifically, I discuss multi-sited ethnography and participatory communication as fruitful approaches, which I illustrate empirically through the case of an ambitious open animation film project organised from a town in southern Siberia, Russia, and dispersed over multiple spatial and temporal contexts.

In order to contextualise the methodological discussion, I first give a brief overview of the

ongoing debates that surround ethnographic fieldwork in online settings. Then, I describe the methodological approach proposed here and illustrate it empirically in the remaining sections.

Ethnographic fieldwork in contexts of mediated communication

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

With the increase of social practices that take place in mediated contexts, the role, meaning and significance of participant observation have been complicated. Today, social interaction happens across multiple temporal and spatial boundaries, affecting individual and collective experiences while being increasingly more difficult to grasp (Markham and Baym 2009, xi). One traditional way to begin ethnographic fieldwork is to select one space to be explored. In digital contexts, this would mean choosing a website, a mailing list or a larger digital ecosystem such as a computer game or a virtual world. An immediate problem that arises from making such a distinctive selection is the risk of privileging certain ‘cultural locations’ over others (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Such an emphasis could foreground ‘well-defined groups over alternate forms of

collectivity' (Coleman 2010, 490), limiting our understanding about the diversity of practices, conflicts and imaginaries that are expressed through digital media.

Attempts to think about ethnography beyond the boundaries of one well-defined field, specifically in the contexts of digital media, have been made by media scholars and anthropologists since the mid-1990s (Baym 1995; Garsten 1994; Kendall 1999; Turkle 1995). Many of these empirical studies have articulated the need to bridge divisions of mediated/non-mediated contexts (online–offline). They have foregrounded the difficulties in determining what it means to be a participant in mediated settings as well as what kind of observation is possible in each and one of them. Observation in online settings, for example, has, to a large extent, become equivalent to watching text and images on a screen rather than observing people in real situations (Garcia et al. 2009). Participation has meanwhile increasingly become associated with lurking in forums or social media channels in which the researcher does not necessarily actively participate or reveal his or her presence. Indeed, lurking has been considered increasingly legitimate, or even a necessary pre-condition prior to entering into more active forms of participant observation later on in research (Hine 2011). The legitimization of lurking is part of a larger trend in which participant observation in mediated contexts has been increasingly taking the form of passive, action-free observationⁱ.

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

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

Some ethnographic projects have intentionally drawn on classical anthropological methods in studies of virtual worlds in order to demonstrate 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 over 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 middle ground is through multi-sited 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.

Multi-sited 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 ‘translate

people and objects along various networks . . . not implying a delinking from totalities or global processes' (Coleman 2010, 497). The concern with delinking has indeed been one of the primary driving forces that gave birth to the idea of multi-sited ethnography as a result of the realisation of anthropologists in the 1980s that place-centred approaches were failing to take into account macro-forces that shape micro contexts (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Today, this concern is reactualised in ethnography in mediated settings.

A particular feature of multi-sited ethnography is the emphasis on tracing connections among seemingly disconnected practices rather than working within well-defined boundaries:

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

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

One of the major difficulties with this method is in identifying and getting into each of the individual sites that the researcher may come across; this may allow less time for actual research (Wittel 2001). Another challenge is the constant feeling of uncertainty that arises from working in sites in permanent flux featuring new actors that are constantly emerging. An additional change in contexts of mediated communication is that what one can join in practice is not an actual site, but rather it is the communicative practice that occurs over various platforms and channels. In these contexts, it may be fruitful to engage in *participatory communication* rather than in archiving.

The term ‘participatory communication’ has historically been equated to a two-way sharing of information among communication equals (Servaes 2001). In particular, it has been connected to agenda-setting practices by international organisations for promoting democratic ideals and social change. Yet, the concept is useful beyond international aid community projects. The value of ethnography comes from the knowledge that the researcher gathers by being an actual participant in different contexts, or of being in ‘participative mode’ (Czarniawska 2007, 8–12). Communication is then an indispensable tool in making this possible. As Servaes has argued, ‘[p]articipation is impossible without communication. However, what has not been so obvious is that not just any kind of communication makes genuine participation possible’ (Servaes 2001, 5). The main goal of participatory communication is to create symmetry between the different parties involved in the communication, and in this way, create new knowledge. In international development contexts, it represents:

an approach that . . . allows the sharing of information, perceptions and opinions among the various stakeholders and thereby facilitates their empowerment, especially for those who are most vulnerable and marginalized. Participatory communication is not just the exchange of

information and experiences: it is also the exploration and generation of new knowledge aimed at addressing situations that need to be improved (Tufté 2009, 17).

The explicit focus on knowledge production at equal terms and on dialogue focuses research on the importance of action that arises through strategic interventions in communication. From this perspective, multi-sited ethnography and participatory communication could fruitfully complement each other to denote an exploratory and multi-sited engagement with participants in a social practice where the premises for action are set by them rather than by the researcher. The integration of both concepts into one approach that I choose to call, *multi-sited participatory communication*, requires negotiating a tension that arises from the different historical and disciplinary traditions from which they have emerged. If multi-sited ethnography aims to decrease the agency of the researcher in determining the scope, nature and settings of social interactions to get involved in, participatory communication implies creating a political agenda that stresses the agency, responsibility and strategic power of the researcher. For the purposes of using participatory communication in ethnographic fieldwork, I consider it valuable to drop the political component and instead strengthen the focus on assuring that communication and engagement take place within symmetric contexts and on terms defined by the participants rather than by situations created by the researcher.

In sum, multi-sited participatory communication could be a useful approach in researching cultural practices across multiple contexts, some of which are mediated and others that not, involving geographically dispersed individuals who communicate often asynchronously. In cases where the starting point of the research may be difficult to define through locating a site to *observe* (e.g. How could we observe a telephone conversation and capture both sides while only being at one end of

the line only?), engaging in participatory communication by becoming a co-participant could be more beneficial.

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

The Morevna open-source animated film project

In the period between 2013 and 2015, I studied (ethnographically) the production of a volunteer-driven animated film called the Morevna project. It was launched in 2008 by a self-taught animator, Konstantin Dmitriev, in the town of Gorno-Altaysk, Siberia, Russia. The idea behind Morevna was to make a feature-length original animated film in anime style. The study was part of a larger research project on computer cultures and the cultural significance of practices that are centered on producing media content and technologies in the domain of digital commons. The Morevna project was initiated with no financial or institutional support, out of the strong wish of its creator to find a way to exercise what anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (forthcoming) calls ‘craft autonomy’, or autonomy to work in technical frameworks of own making. Gorno-Altaysk, which is Konstantin’s home town, is a geographically isolated post-Soviet city with limited possibilities for self-realisation in the sphere of digital media production, especially animation. Since this is Konstantin’s main interest, he has been trying to find ways to make animated film projects with limited resources and through affordable technology that would be flexible 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 – an act of self-empowerment and proof that he does not need

to leave his town, as many others do after finishing school, to find work and professional realisation:

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

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

From a communication for development perspective, this project can be seen as evidence of the imaginaries and practices that access to computer technologies, and to the Internet can prompt

in young people to develop autonomous technologies, skills and media in an attempt to negotiate their creative autonomy in the contexts in which they live.

The public communication of Morevna

I started studying Morevna project as a cultural practice in 2012 when the project was at the final stages of completing its first milestone, the release of a four-minute-long demo. In trying to understand the organisational forms, social imaginaries and meaning-making practices that informed the production of this film, I tried to find a site, a context to get immersed in, and explore it ethnographically. A natural starting point was the public blog of the production. Getting familiar with the content there revealed that there were very few project participants that were located in Siberia, and they were not really visible on the production website. The majority of the contributors, artists and technicians, were dispersed throughout Europe and were not continuously collaborating with each other. Hence, communication between them was not public or organised through easily accessible channels such as forums or chats, but primarily through email, telephone and Skype, channels of mediated communication that were difficult to observe.

One artist could work on a drawing from her home in Italy and then email it to the film director in Siberia, who would integrate it into a scene or ask for modifications. Despite the fact that summaries of the production process were frequently communicated online, collaboration and social interaction seemed to be taking place in non-public, mediated and non-continuous settings. I could observe all the public texts and production reports online, but this would not give a full enough picture of the sensibilities, processes and cultural contexts that informed the work of each of the participants. Another complexity emerged when I realised that beside the production blog, Morevna was also on YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, a wiki, a file-sharing

platform and a number of other platforms, all of which were communicating the project outwards to a seemingly existing, but unspecified, audience. The Morevna project was situated simultaneously in multiple contexts, but the multitude of sites and online contexts made it difficult to estimate which ones were more important than the others and which ones would represent an appropriate starting point for observation. At the same time, they all lacked actual opportunities to engage in participation, to understand the production context and to observe communication among project participants. I considered doing participant observation in situ in Siberia, but in the beginning of my research, there were only two individuals out of about 15 collaborators who were located there. This fact, in addition to the largely mediated form of their collaboration, was causing doubts about the outcomes of such engagement. Faced with these difficulties and the complexity of conducting participant observation across multiple, yet invisible, contexts, I resorted to multi-sited ethnography and participatory communication that could enable me to access the environments that remained hidden. The first step involved getting on equal terms and into a symmetric communicative relationship with Konstantin, the project producer. The next section outlines the main steps in this process.

Setting the scene of multi-sited participatory communication: Creating symmetries in communication

Getting access to sites of research and establishing trust with informants is a premise for conducting ethnographic research. Having established that there was no obvious initial setting in the Morevna project that would allow me to engage in participant observation, I attempted to align myself with the same communicative terms as the other participants would have had to when joining Morevna. I started by emailing Konstantin. I explained at first my interest as a researcher

and asked whether I could participate in the Morevna project production by helping out in some tasks that would not involve drawing or artwork production, for which I lacked the necessary skills. In a response by email and a subsequent brief discussion over Skype, we talked in more detail, and I was briefed about the current status of Morevna, which was in the last months of finalising a four-minute-long demo that would be used as a way to seek funding. During this conversation, I was assigned the task of improving the English version of the film script, which had originally been written in Russian. In accepting this assignment, I had to commit myself to the communication practices applied by the project and agree to publish my work on the script, my research in progress as well as potential research publications about the film under a Creative Commons license, allowing others to use, share and build upon my work. This license was extensively used on all of the media produced within Morevna.

Accepting the terms of communication of the project can be regarded as a first step in getting at participatory and more symmetric terms of collaboration with the project while negotiating access to it. This example illustrates how the researcher can, as part of an ethnographic research, become a collaborator – a scholar who works with counterparts on more equal terms. Another round of steps for aligning with the communicative practice of the project involved me learning to use some of the open-source programs, which all of the Morevna participants used for different tasks. For example, in order to work on the Morevna script, I was asked to use only non-proprietary software and publish my contribution in an online wiki in a specific format. This highlighted how participants joining the production had to be able to handle technology, potentially develop specific skills in some computer programs and align themselves with the general production framework of the project. Doing things in a particular way illuminates individual practices of meaning-making. In this case, for example, the specific requirements posed to the

licensing frameworks of the technologies and content used and produced revealed Konstantin's commitment to the liberal values of the freedom of technology and knowledge that inhibited the production framework. It meant that Morevna was conceived through sensibilities and values similar to some forms of hacker cultures that are committed to autonomy and expertise development (Coleman 2013).

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

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

Importantly, these adjustments did not result in flattened hierarchies. Konstantin had a very authoritative voice and clear idea about what kind of training course he wanted to make and how he

wanted to make it. I was able to propose changes to the course material in terms of grammar, sentence construction, etc., but I was unable to influence the contents or the main structure. I could express my opinion on 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 emphasised 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 Morevna 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 over 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 not attempting to align with the same terms as the other participants in the project.

Getting at the same communicative terms as other participants in Morevna 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 me and Konstantin occurred was in 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 in. As such, it represented a technology that helped establish a form of a ‘virtual workshop’ constituted between the Morevna 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 collaborate, talk and work together. This kind of use of Skype brought our interaction close to earlier notions of ‘cyberspace’ used initially in relation to telephone conversations, one that is constituted in a space ‘between the phones’ (Ronell 1989). Similarly, our mediated communication occurred in the space between computers and was substantially enriched by the possibilities for the online exchange of digital artifacts, audio recordings, text and links to videos. A challenge arose from the difference in our access to infrastructure. There were frequent interruptions in the connection due to the Morevna producer’s low-speed Internet, which revealed that although communicatively we participated on the same terms, *infrastructurally* I had an advantaged position. We experienced the fragility of mediated communication. Our collaboration often took longer due to frequent disruptions in the connection, causing frustrations. In addition, the oral communication and my active collaboration posed difficulties in remaining focused and reflexive as a researcher. It also limited the possibilities for taking notes while collaborating with Konstantin on a production task.

The training course that we produced together was circulated online in three ways: as a commodity sold for \$40 through the online educational platform Udemy.com; as a pay-what-you-want artifact available through another platform, Gumroad.com; and as commons that was free to

download from the Synfig community official website. These three forms of distribution created additional contexts of relevance to the film production project, allowing me to observe the interaction between Konstantin and other people unveiling other dimensions of the project.

Site B: Udemy.com, following commodities

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

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.com 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 the Morevna project 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 Morevna film project (see Velkova and Jakobsson, 2015). Building knowledge capacity and skills in specific media production technologies was crucial for Morevna, since it used unconventional technological approaches for production. Despite 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 the Morevna project and its production. In 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, called the Libre Graphics Meeting (LGM), took place in Leipzig and was announced as follows:

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

Developing animation with open-source tools is a common track at this conference. Several individuals who contributed financially and technically to the Morevna film production were present. In this context, I was supposed to act on behalf of Morevna and the Synfig community by presenting the work done on the training course. The presentations at the conference were streamed, recorded and shared as commons online. My participation granted larger visibility of my research among this community and provided opportunities to connect physically and talk to several participants about their contributions to the Morevna project. The people whom I interviewed were helpful and curious about my research, and they wanted me to publish notes or thoughts from my involvement with them and the Morevna project on a blog or elsewhere online. I tried to fulfil these requests to some extent by creating a blog, phd.nordkonst.org, which became another context related to the project. On this blog, I wrote summaries about my work, published reports from talking to or meeting project participants, wrote short public analytical memos and occasionally published some of the recorded interviews with Morevna participants as podcasts. Blogs are often used by researchers to constitute various aspects of ethnographies, from using it as a tool to structure the research work to communicating with the subjects of the research (Beaulieu 2004). In this case, it was not so much about communicating with, but about reporting *back to*, the subjects of the research, and creating more symmetric relations. Indeed, reciprocity turned out to be a core value for Morevna and LGM's participants.

One of the major challenges in this context came from the need to reconcile my participation in several roles. On one hand, I was the official representative of the Morevna project and the Synfig software community at the conference. My presentation made me part of the project's knowledge dissemination strategies and presented me as a person sharing their values. On the other hand, I was there largely in the role of a researcher, and I was supposed to be objective, impartial

and simply documenting what others did. My own presentation at the conference became part of the practice and discourse of the project, putting my self-reflexivity under pressure. This particular problem made it very evident that the multi-sited 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 politicised 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 to both Morevna and to their own smaller animation projects, but remained more obscure. In all of the projects, they used the technologies developed and customised within Morevna 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 3D animation for a small media company from Novosibirsk,

the closest town, located 500 km away. Another one was to make a new website for the Morevna project. 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 Morevna film project. In each of these additional contexts, Konstantin used the open-source technologies developed through Morevna, polishing them further through teaching animation, free-lancing and working on Morevna. Connecting the knowledge that I have gained from navigating the online and offline contexts of the project so far, I realised much more clearly the nuances and sensibilities saturating the project. I understood that Morevna emerged out of a passion of a small local community for anime, a passion that has gone beyond the mere consumption of media and has pushed Konstantin and other young people in the town into producing their own within frameworks of their own making. The Morevna project emerged from an idea about making a particular anime film, one that fills the youth people's lives with meaning while developing skills in media production. Embracing unconventional means of production was a response to an everyday reality in which many cannot afford to buy high-class drawing tablets, powerful computers or expensive mobile phones. The animation classes built a community and transferred knowledge about working with open-source graphics instruments locally, helping to create some of the future contributors to the project and hopefully helping them to find jobs in the media industry in Russia. The Morevna project was a way to transform consumption and fandom into a culture of making through experimenting with models of sharing in which tools, artwork and knowledge get created.

Conclusions

The examples presented above illuminate the diversity of different contexts, people and practices that can get entangled in an unconventional media production practice coordinated from a remote location in Siberia. Neither of these contexts alone would have given a rich enough picture to understand the sensibilities and sense-making practices that were saturating the project, or illuminate in detail its production contexts. Navigating across these multiple contexts, some of which were visible, others of which were not, some of which were mediated, others of which were not, uncovered the complexity of such projects and of the methodological challenges in researching them. With every move in and out of each context, I as a researcher had to move in and out of different roles and occasionally reconcile several ones at the same time. The more active my participation was in some of these contexts, the more challenges were posed toward my abilities to be reflexive.

What became obvious methodologically from this research is that mediated communication creates cultural layers that overlap in larger production contexts. They are impossible to understand or uncovered through prioritising only one cultural location. At the same time, by engaging in a multi-sited participatory communication, the researcher can create new contexts that add additional complexity to the practice being researched.

Despite the richness of the account that the combination of multi-sited 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 to the training course on Synfig in the winter of 2013. I participated in the Libre Graphics Meeting conference 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, people 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 the Morevna project also transferred certain responsibilities on me. Getting on symmetric communication terms with the Morevna 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 contextualise. I let the Morevna 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 [one who is] rather disseminating information for which there is a need’ (Servaes 2001, 11).

This chapter showed 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.

References

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See a critical discussion of this topic by Czarniawska (2007)

ii For a more detailed discussion about this kind of film project and their production frameworks, see Velkova and Jakobsson (2015) and Velkova (2014).

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