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2 Accessing online communities

Abstract: Establishing a connection to research participants online requires specific reflections and preparations. This chapter goes through the social and technical connections that need to be made when involving online communities into research: How do I connect to the group I seek to involve? With what technology is it possible to build relationships and how do they encourage participants to engage? These questions are key to reflexive processes that consider how technologies co-shape the observations and connections that can be made, as well as the information one is able to collect.

Keywords: method, technology, agency, research participants, reflexivity

Access is a powerful entry point to empirical research as it defines major directions of the project. For criminologists it is common to conduct research with groups that are not easy to reach, for example consumers of illegal services or substances, or radical groups online. Doing such research *online* adds new challenges: What are the many parties involved in conducting research online? What role do participants play and how do we even identify them online? How are technologies part of gaining access and generating knowledge?

We may choose to do our research online (or with other digital technologies) for several reasons. One reason may be that online tools are substantial to the processes we are interested in, for example online drug markets (e.g., Bakken and Harder, 2023). Another reason is that participants are spread out in terms of their location, using the internet as a common platform, one example of which are the information channels involuntary celibates create for discussion (Andersen, 2023). Both of these reasons were central to the group I was interested in and who will follow us through this entry: hackers.

Where to start?

Establishing a connection to research participants is shaped by a mosaic of different aspects. That was the same for me. The hacker community is vast and motivations for hacking are many (see Hacking by Wall). Motivations include learning about and appropriating technology, expressing a political opinion, playing or experiencing excitement or community, gaining access to restricted information for various reasons,

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making money, developing products or techniques, and much more (Coleman and Golub, 2008; Hunsiger and Schrock 2016; SSL Nagbot 2016). I was interested in hackers who are aware of the socio-political implications of surveillance technologies online and who choose to engage with such technologies critically. Identifying this particular group in the various communities of hackers was already a practical challenge. Yet another aspect complicating access was directly tied to my very research interest: responses to surveillance. Those who are critical of surveillance are not necessarily visible figures in popular online environments, since most of these online environments are heavily surveilled. Hackers, however, also choose not to abandon the internet. While they may leave commercial providers (Evans, 2014; Syvertsen, 2020), they find other channels to socially express themselves online. Many hackers have a sense of ownership when it comes to infrastructures as they build and craft with them (see Infrastructures by Grisot and Parmiggiani). I sought to speak to exactly those who do not leave the internet, but hack it. And this is where building a connection can become a challenge: many hackers create their own online environments, channels, and techniques, precisely because they want to be accessible to like-minded people only. Researching these material practices also means that I would have to navigate and, to a certain extent, enter these channels in order to build a connection. What is more, my interest in these groups, environments, and practices was, of course, also a type of surveillance, which caused additional suspicion independent of my intentions.

Any research project will encounter a specific set of issues when seeking access to research environments and participants. Generally, a good starting point for gaining access—online and offline—is to reflect about existing connections. These connections can be of social, but also of technical nature, e. g., one shares the same online fora (see Researching Online Forums by Šupa). The more connections already exist, the more likely it is to have authentic experiences related to the phenomena we are interested in. However, as mentioned above, criminologists tend to have a research interest in groups that are not necessarily easy to access. The reasons for being hard-to-reach are many, but so are the reasons to include the hard-to-reach in research projects. It is, for example, important to include new perspectives on phenomena, or give voice to groups that are invisibilized or overheard in specific discourses. If a group is hard to reach, the most likely reason for that is that few connections exist from before and one does not know enough about the people one would like to invite to participate, their habits, their environments. Hence, it is smart to start access from a humble position: Why should we gain access to this group? Are there any ways in which we already connect? If not, how can I craft these connections carefully?

Access online involves many types of connections

Connections, as hinted at above, also need to be established technically, especially when we are doing research online (Kaufmann, 2018). In the same way in which build-

ing connections to people requires trust, technical infrastructures, too, need to be trusted. They are co-shaping the connections built. Research tools and techniques always reflect the culture they are used in (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). The technologies used for online research, too, have norms and assumptions built into their design (Lupton, 2015). When doing research with them, one also relates to these norms and ideas. Power-, as well as technical relations are recreated at the same time. Being aware of this dimension of access is crucial.

I will use my own study to illustrate this point. Speaking to hackers and using online tools to do so was about giving space to them and their practices. I wanted to grasp what they think and get insight into their own norms and routines. I wanted to understand and delve into their own techniques of navigating online space. In order to do so, however, I also needed to reflect well about the tools they would use to speak to me—*precisely* because they would be aware of the norms and values of different technical solutions. Hackers concerned with online surveillance would likely not accept the use of research tools that collect private information for third parties (Kaufmann, 2020).

A reflection about the tools used is necessary for any type of research (see Interviews with Digital Objects by Adams and Lynn Thompson). In order to reflect with care, it helps to putting oneself into the position of the people one would like to connect with. Under which circumstances would we invest time and thoughts into an online research project, especially if we could become vulnerable by taking part in this research? In addition, we would ask ourselves which types of technical channels and infrastructures we would trust when speaking to each other. Similar considerations are likely undertaken by the people we would like to connect to. Hence, preparing research requires reflections about purpose, positionalities, and wording, but also the choice of method and technology when connections are established online. What does a method and technology achieve for the project? With what technology is it possible to build relationships and how do they encourage participants to engage?

Sometimes, access involves a rite of passage or inauguration rituals as a way of building trust and credibility (for credibility see: Aradau and Huysmans, 2018). One can experience these rites and rituals in most empirical settings. As someone who invites a participant, it is easy to think of oneself as the one in charge of asking the questions and thereby establishing the 'access rituals.'. Even if one may not perceive of oneself as fulfilling that role, it is possible that a dialogue partner experiences the interviewer as being in a position of power. It is thus relevant to be aware of such dynamics when seeking access. Thinking of access and research as co-creative processes also implies that not only the researcher asks questions, but participants do so, too (Riese, 2018; Kaufmann, 2020). Access and research are a two-way relationship and a form of sharing. It is possible to embrace this attitude even though positionalities do actively influence the research situation. *Meaningful* access and knowledge production is likely to come about in situations where participants feel that they can contribute and receive something in return. Sometimes, this situation already defines the initial steps of establishing connections.

When I approached hackers, the traditional positions of power were reversed: not I was the one asking questions to prompt the interview, but the participants queried me instead. I had to establish my trustworthiness quite concretely by expanding on political, societal, and subcultural aspects, for example by responding to their questions about the political dimensions of surveillance (Kaufmann, 2018; 2020). What is more, hackers naturally demanded a high degree of knowledge or reflexivity about the technologies we would discuss. These first parts of establishing a connection constituted a rite of passage. One of my interviewees referred to this as a "social captcha test" (Kaufmann and Tzanetakis, 2020). We encounter captcha tests online when we need to verify that we are humans and not robots. What hackers baptized social captchas refers to them testing whether they can trust their counterpart and whether they have the right amount of credibility within the group.

Routines, rites, and rituals that one experiences when entering into new conversations or connections find their equivalent in online environments. Establishing a meaningful connection is thus not only a matter of knowing the culture, the slang, the standpoints of the groups one seeks to include in one's research, but getting to know the mediated rites and rituals is part of making that connection. Since the groups criminologists study are diverse, knowing technologies, rites, and rituals is more complex than it first may seem (Lupton, 2015). Doing research is messy (Squire, 2013). Establishing trust is not always a one-time conversation, but involves negotiations and a back-and-forth between the researcher, participants, and different technologies.

In the context of connecting to hackers, many individuals would ask me to perform some kind of routine. Hence, not only did I need to answer their questions in order to gain access, but each participant negotiated with me which programs and apps we would use for our actual conversation (Kaufmann, 2018). Some asked me to install specific solutions while we were already in conversation. Here, I was enacting a technological routine or a rite of passage to be able to connect to hackers. This enactment did not only support a relationship of trust, but the reasoning about which tool would be the most trustworthy already gave me insight into what I was interested in: the hackers' choice of communication tool and their functioning was part of expressing their views on surveillance.

This is relevant for everyone doing research online. Being able to perform routines in an online environment requires good knowledge of the ways in which routines are technologically mediated and an active inclusion of technological solutions into methodological reflections. It also requires adaptability on the researcher's side. By negotiating and talking about the different tools—chatrooms, comment fields, sites and services, apps—one will understand what technologies research participants trust. One will grasp a new aspect about world that matters to them. Even if participants are indifferent about the use of specific technologies, one already learns something about them. Discussions about tools, technologies, and infrastructures are not just about norms and practices related to surveillance, which was relevant in my case. They also involve aspects of gender, racial discrimination, positions related to

economy, the body (Lupton, 2015) and much more aspects that may be meaningful to research participants.

'Gaining access,' then, also means to gather knowledge about the commercial and non-commercial technologies for communication and their functioning. It requires knowledge about the technical language and vocabulary of abbreviations, as well as the vulnerabilities of each tool. Taking the time and energy to prepare ways of connecting carefully heightens the possibility to speak to those who would have remained anonymous in a face-to-face setting. With careful planning it is more likely to reach those who would maybe not have participated in the study or would have given different answers if they were interviewed via products that they are not familiar with, or that trace and store data for commercial reasons. Or to put it the other way around: choosing just one channel for connecting to people will necessarily homogenize the group of participants, which means that one may lose some of the diversity that characterizes the group. Technologies, then, take an active role in the creation of connections and knowledge. They will co-shape insights and results. Tools and technologies also influence research in the sense that some of them are unintuitive to install, not very user-friendly or too user-friendly. Some break down, have glitches, or enable interrupted communication only, which is likely to happen, for example, in a chat-based conversation.

Conclusion

Access is a co-creative act. Often, we are aware of the fact that we do not create research alone. We know, for example, that any participant enables insight and therewith co-owns the research data. Since we focus on digital methods, this entry sheds light on yet another actor: how can we think about technologies as co-creators of access? There is a position that sees online ethnography as a mere continuation of conventional ethnography (Lee et al., 2008; Hine, 2018). Indeed, online ethnographies and the issue of access includes both, analogue and digital, as well as online and offline aspects (see Online Ethnography by Gibbs and Hall). At the same time are both, method and knowledge, changed by the fact that a large part of research is conducted online.

When we do research online, our connection to subjects is dependent on technologies: it involves technological routines and solutions, which means that access and conversations can more easily be interrupted or delayed. Depending on who owns the end devices or accounts—the researcher, the researcher's institution, or a company—connections and dynamics of access can play out very differently. Technologies influence how we identify participants and establish contact, where the tools mediate what participants we can even find and how. Especially when technologies are part of the everyday lives of the communities we are interested in, they shape codices and practices of community. As we have seen in the example of trying to connect to hackers, technologies co-constitute the credibility and status of us who initiate the research.

There are values and norms embedded in methods, which is the same case for technologies. When developing and programming tools, the providers took design choices that influence the functionality of each tool. While these decisions are not always easy to identify, it is worth familiarizing oneself with the terms and conditions, functionalities, and design choices of the relevant tools in order to be able to reflect about them and their influence on empirical research. At the same time, it is important to explore which techniques are necessary for immersing oneself in a community. What tools are suitable and necessary to create a platform for the communities relevant to the research project?

Once a connection is established, technologies define the space and situation of the conversation. This is also true for the timing of the conversation, especially when it is done in writing. Most important, when we use online technologies, research also materializes in different ways. Digital tools do not only en- and disable conversations, but any contact materializes as different types of data. Contact produces content data and metadata, which can be stored, computed with and potentially traced. This materialization influences a conversation, but also the type of analyses we can make quite concretely. Technologies influence what participants share in a mediated environment – and what they do not share. In groups that are hard-to-reach because they have heightened sense of privacy, encryption allows them to speak up differently. Establishing research connections online actively shapes whom we can speak to, how, what contents we may explore together, what information is generated and may need extra protection, and what insights we can eventually create.

When doing research online, it helps to allow oneself to have a steep learning curve. A methodology can reflect that online research, too, is a messy process (Squire, 2013) and a learning process. It is not necessary to be a professional when starting the project. But if everything works neatly, one may miss out on some depth. A project will surely have participants if one chooses to use one technology only for interviewing, but this choice may leave the project with a skewed access and different knowledge.

Main takeaways

- Access is not just a methodical choice taken by the researcher, but participants, their mediated rites and rituals, their trust in technologies, and the online tools themselves are part of creating access and research outcomes.
- We need to consider which subjects we will and will not be able to reach by conducting research online. Digital technologies can enable connections that would not come about face-to-face. Conducting research online requires reflections about the ways in which the profile of the participants as well as the conversations may be changed by the medium used to do research.
- Remaining flexible in the solutions one chooses is key; different solutions can reach varied participants.

- The technology used to connect to participants defines the spatiality and temporality experienced by the researcher and participants.
- The tools used for doing research embody norms, as well as commercial and political dimensions.
- The functions of a tool co-define research design choices.
- Digital technologies create data about any connection. Even establishing a first contact—the moment of access—already leaves traces. This traceability influences conversations and requires the active creation of a room for protection.

Suggested reading

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