# Chapter 4
# Assembling the Fieldless Field Site


**Ludovico Rella**

**Abstract** This chapter develops a radically networked approach to the study of digital infrastructures. Drawing from digital and multi-sited ethnographic literature, this chapter illustrates the challenges and opportunities inherent to a research project that does not entail intensive fieldwork in a specific location. This chapter argues that we need to take seriously the claims made by digital and multi-sited ethnographers that the field site is as much produced as it is discovered, and its production is as much a theoretical as it is a logistical effort. In assembling a field site that is hybrid between online and offline, and multi-sited between different locations, one has to be attentive to the challenges of this methodology with respect to the mobility, timing, and their limits when it comes to access, data collection and analysis. When conducting a fieldless fieldwork, the researcher's positionality is that of a scavenging ethnographer that attends to access and limitations to access as a texture rather than as a clear-cut border. Reflexivity is paramount to understand when theoretical saturation has been reached and data gathering can stop. This chapter contributes to literature in multi-sited ethnography, anthropological research in trade fairs, conferences and expos, and in digital social research debates about the necessary methodological specifications required by digitally mediated settings.

**Keywords** Multi-sited ethnography · Digital methods · Networked field site · Trade fair ethnography · Scavenging ethnographer

## 4.1 Introduction

> *A process cannot be understood by stopping it.*
> *Understanding must move with the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it.*
> (Herbert 1982: 30)

This chapter is based on my 18-month fieldwork, and it aims to illustrate how digital infrastructures may require a radically fieldless approach to fieldwork. My

L. Rella (✉)
Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham, UK
e-mail: ludovico.rella@durham.ac.uk



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fieldwork entailed the use of online archival research, ethnography of online meetings, participant and nonparticipant observation of online forums, participant observation of industry trade fairs, expos and conferences; and both digitally mediated and traditional in-person, in-depth expert interviews. The chapter combines methodological, epistemological and practical reflections to illustrate this fieldless approach to fieldwork, and addresses specific concerns regarding time and temporality of field research, power and access, and space.

Ethnography as 'an immersive research strategy that seeks to understand how people create and experience their everyday worlds' (Kavanagh and Till 2020: 321) has been changing as a consequence of increased mobility of people and things, heightened connectivity and circulation of information (Marcus 1995). Multi-sited ethnography emerged as a type of social research that is 'self-consciously embedded in the world-system […] to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space' (Ibid.: 96). Recently, this 'multi-sited imaginary' (Pierides 2010) has been further developed into a conceptualisation of the 'field site as a heterogeneous network' by Burrell (2009: 182). Such definition goes beyond the idea of 'embedding' the localised, idiosyncratic characteristics of the field site in larger global processes. Rather, one should 'imagine the whole' (Marcus 1989) and follow the instantiation of such whole by following the people, the things, the metaphors, the plots, the stories, the allegories, the biographies, and the conflicts that traverse and connect field locations (Marcus 1995). Technological developments and the emergence of new sociocultural spaces represented by digital media further illustrate how social processes are hybridised between online and offline spaces (Burrell 2009; Kitchin and Dodge 2011; Ash et al. 2018).

The core concern of my project has been the making and remaking of monetary spaces through the deployment of digital payment infrastructures including, but not limited to, blockchain technologies and cryptocurrencies. Money, especially in its digital form, is arguably the social relation that is the most embedded in the world system (Hart and Ortiz 2014). The fields of Financial Technologies (FinTech), cryptocurrencies, and blockchain technologies are particularly 'hybridised' between online and offline spaces. FinTech companies operate in geographically dispersed and online-offline hybrid spaces. They are socially interconnected, yet geographically dispersed ecosystems of applications, devices, material and virtual commodities, and communities. These spaces are fraught with power and knowledge asymmetries in terms of technical expertise, and the opacity deriving from non-disclosure agreements surrounding technological solutions applied to financial services. Accessing and exploring these spaces, then, requires a 'polymorphous engagement' (Gusterson 1997: 116) with different types of research data.

A fieldless fieldwork requires a specific type of fieldworker subjectivity that Seaver (2017: 6) calls 'scavenging ethnographer': 'the scavenger replicates the partiality of ordinary conditions of knowing'. The remainder of the chapter will focus on how issues connected with spatialities, temporalities, and positionalities shaped my fieldwork in an increasingly 'fieldless' fashion. The next section expands on issues of the spatial construction and assembly of a radically multi-sited and fieldless fieldwork, and how boundaries are and should be drawn and redrawn

throughout the research process. The subsequent section expands on time, temporality, and temporal boundaries in such fluid research projects. The conclusion highlights explicitly the contribution that the chapter makes, which is especially timely as place-based fieldwork is going to be transformed by the proliferation of digital technologies and by the practical challenges posed by Covid-19.

## 4.2 The Spatialities of the Fieldless Field

My initial research project focused on the making and remaking of subjectivities through and by networked technologies and their interfaces (Greenfield 2017). During the first year, the project progressively drifted towards the making and remaking of monetary spaces through digital payment infrastructures, driven by an uncanny similarity between the flow of money and logistics (Rea et al. 2017). I decided to focus on Ripple, a software company that applies blockchain and interoperability technologies to cross-border payments. It was first conceived in 2004 and deployed in 2013, with the ambition to provide an integration infrastructure between cryptocurrencies, alternative currencies, and traditional interbank payment systems. It presently has more than 300 clients throughout the world, mainly banks and payment providers. Ripple was interesting to me because it allowed me to investigate the materialities and spatialities of money in different settings such as cryptocurrencies, banks, public regulators, FinTech companies and alternative currency schemes. It was then the perfect setting to see the different imaginaries, materialities and political economies played out at once (Rella 2019, 2020).

Since I wanted to test the extent to which a project on digital money could employ similar methods and concepts as research projects in critical logistics, I asked a professor in the department for feedback. I was told that yes, this analogy could hold critical purchase. However, to capture it, I should 'get to the control room' where money is actually moved. Hence, I started attending industry conferences and expos primarily as networking sites, where I could recruit my informants such as bankers, software developers and marketing specialists. Alongside this in-person recruitment, I started sending messages via email and social media to practitioners in the field. I sent 120 recruitment emails and 53 LinkedIn messages to current or former Ripple employees, and to individuals and press and PR offices of financial and software institutions that were clients and providers connected with Ripple.

Three realisations, however, brought me to redesign the approach. First, there were issues of access and gatekeeping that are well known for anyone researching elites. In studying the very rich, very powerful and the technical experts, traditional forms of ethnographic engagements might prove themselves unfeasible or inadequate both practically and ethically (Nader 1972; Gusterson 1997). Practically, institutions like banks and tech companies are fraught with institutional, economic and knowledge-based barriers for access that can take years to overcome, often only thanks to fortuitous personal connection or based on one's idiosyncratic background

(Thomas 1995; Seaver 2014). Ethically, the ethnographic ethos of giving voice to one's informant might work to reinforce, rather than question, the power that informants already have (Pierce 1995). Ripple's software developers were open to discuss regardless of seniority, and with around five of them I managed to build rapport and trust through follow-ups and informal email exchanges. FinTech companies such as payment providers, cryptocurrency exchanges and software companies were also available to discuss and lead to insightful conversations. A wholly different tune, however, was played by banks: of the 120 emails that I mentioned above, only around ten bankers replied. Non-disclosure agreements and patents, furthermore, significantly restricted the scope of the answers. The process of recruitment and attendance of conferences made apparent what Dos Santos (2018: 103) calls 'trial of access'. In Seaver's words (2017: 7), access 'is a protracted, textured practice that never really ends, and no social scene becomes simply available to an ethnographer because she has shown up'.

Second, I came to realise that industry conferences and expos were not an entry point *to* the field, but an integral part *of* the field itself. Temporary exhibitions and trade fairs are one of the paramount venues where FinTech markets are constructed, produced, maintained and reproduced, and where 'tournaments of value' take place (Anand and Jones 2008; Moeran and Pedersen 2011; Aspers and Darr 2011). Figure 4.1 depicts one of the eight industry conferences and expos that I attended between 2017 and 2019, where each company had a dedicated space, the size of which depended on the seniority of the company and on the amount of money they paid for it. Different spaces were used for different purposes, such as exhibiting, discussing, and arranging formal and informal networking events.

It became increasingly clear to me that the nitty-gritty of the logistics of money was just as important as the speculation, myths, enchantments and promises held by technological innovations, as noted by several ethnographers of infrastructure (Winner 1984; Thrift 2001; Harvey and Knox 2012; Larkin 2013; Anand et al. 2018). This led me to let go of the sense of frustration or expectation connected with how many informants I would have been able to recruit during the few days each expo lasted. This approach allowed me to expand my focus and juxtapose the expo floor to the control room, rather than striving to get to the latter through the former.

The third realisation was that, maybe, there was no one control room to begin with. The digital infrastructure that I was studying emerged as much more heterogeneous, fragmentary and contingent than I originally imagined. Instead of one or more control rooms, held at one or more banks, there were multiple 'legacy' payment infrastructures using different standards for different types of payments, and each of these instances had a tailor-made synchronisation system. There was not a unified network with a master switch that one could flip to enable or disable a specific connection, but many switches, the shape of which depended on the pair of organisations that were being connected each time. Offices around the world were not like ports in logistics but more like *pied-à-terre* for the organisation: as one informant put it, 'you cannot be sitting in San Francisco and sell to the world, not in banking' (Interview 29th May 2019).


**Fig. 4.1** FinTech Trade Fair. June, 2018. (Source: Author's own)

Again, this realisation came with a mix of relief and renewed anxiety. I was relieved that now I did not have to pry open the doors of a control room, but then I was caught in the anxiety of a potentially endless list of locations. Each local office was potentially connected and relevant to my topic and case study, but they were all so far apart from each other that it was not thinkable for me to cover all or even most of them. A conceptualisation of my fieldwork as networked and fieldless entailed embracing the research subjectivity of the 'scavenging ethnographer' (Seaver 2017). This type of fieldworker collects and analyses data through 'chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography' (Marcus 1995: 105). I started to think that what mattered were the material or discursive connections made either in-person or online, between different locales by the active production of a multi-sited field.

Furthermore, technological decisions and design and standard choices were made as frequently through online conference calls and forums as in in-person meetings. The software developers I studied made most of their decisions through fortnightly calls via Zoom. Ethnographers of the Internet have long argued against a strict dichotomy between online and offline worlds. An ethnography *in* and/or *of* digital infrastructures (see also Marcus 1995), then, must show how online and offline settings are mutually constituted (Hine 2000; Kozinets 2011). The problem

of how to bridge and inhabit different spaces was not only my epistemological and methodological problem, but also my informants' practical and material problems of establishing a cross-border payment infrastructure. The multi-sitedness of the fieldwork, and the peculiar relationship between online and offline spaces it is based upon, also create a peculiar relationship between fieldwork and time.

## 4.3 Time in the Fieldless Field: When to Start, When to Stop, When to Go

*Blockchain? Blockchain is so 2016!* (An informant, June, 2017).

In digitally mediated environments, time plays an important role not only in the data collection strategies, but also in the nature of the data itself. Hine (2000: 23) argues that one of the resources afforded by online ethnography is that 'ethnographer and participants no longer need to share the same time frame.' However, this lack of synchronicity creates challenges of its own. I identify four ways in which time played both a positive and a negative role in shaping my fieldwork: time as a medium, time as past and memory, time as hype and attention cycle, and time as a limit.

First, time influenced the rhythms of recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Scheduling online interviews with informants who were several time zones away made it visible that digitally mediated interviews are far from frictionless. The mismatch in time and location often means that the informant did not know what I knew and the other way around. In a 'traditional' ethnography, interviews can be both built and expanded on previous interviews, because both the researcher and the informant keep mental and written records of past observations and interactions. This is far less likely to happen when interviews are carried out remotely or without the previous building of rapport with the informant through physical proximity (Hannerz 2003). On the one hand, digitally mediated interviews with informants in far-away locations made room for more paced data analysis: the ostensibly empty time between message and reply, between scheduling and interviewing, and between interviewing and follow-up can be used to start reflecting on the data already collected. On the other hand, since interviews were not built on one another, I could only make sense of data in earlier interviews through the answers and notes collected during much later chats. For example, my fieldwork started in summer 2017, but I managed to recruit one of my key informants in May 2018. Only thanks to his insights, I was able to retroactively make sense of previously collected material, as well as to structure subsequent interviews in ways that were beneficial to my project.

Hence, the lack of synchronicity and physical proximity allows for projects with a much broader geographical spread, but it also poses challenges in terms of building rapport and access. Key informants and gatekeepers acquire an even greater importance in this respect yet relying too much on individual informants can incorporate bias in the overarching narrative. The key informant I mentioned above

laid this risk bare in front of me when I recruited him. In his affirmative reply, he asked me what my preconceived ideas on cryptocurrencies were, because, he said, everyone has one or more preconceived ideas. He then said, 'nearly everybody in this space is in self-promotion mode, and it might be hard to discern what their real agenda is behind self-promotion' (Interview 15th of May 2018). As said above, then, the power asymmetry deriving from access to knowledge and resources must be managed carefully: taking informants at their word might mean becoming a promotional echo chamber rather than a social researcher.

Second, time plays a role as past and memory. The Internet is a living archive, both of present and of past interactions (Chun 2013). Digital ethnographies are very often used in asynchronous ways that strongly resemble archival research, rather than direct participant observation (Tunçalp and Lê 2014: 70). Through the so-called Wayback Machine it is possible to access versions of websites that are no longer online (Rogers 2013; Arora et al. 2016). Through it, I traced a genealogy of Ripple through the content that was published on the page but no longer visible. Figure 4.2 illustrates the Wayback Machine's graphic interface. The search bar gives the address of the archived page. The timeline provides the number of times that page was changed or updated each year.

Archival sources also provide an important resource to 'route around' (Seaver 2017: 10) constraints to access and gatekeeping. However, digital archives are by no means universal or frictionless to access. Even a cursory research on the Wayback Machine, in fact, reveals multiple dead ends and points where data was lost without repair, especially in the case of online forums. Hence, it is important to be constantly wary of the risk of digital ethnography becoming a new form of 'armchair anthropology' (Tsuda et al. 2014; Hine 2017). Whenever I could, I would contact members of the online community whose archive I was perusing, even though I did not always receive replies to my messages.


**Fig. 4.2** The Wayback Machine's visualisation of a page on the Ripple website. June 2017. (Source: Internet Archive n.d., Archive.org)


**Fig. 4.3** Total market capitalisation of cryptocurrency markets, 2013–2020. June, 2019. (Source: Coinmarketcap 2019)

Third, time figures as a cycle of attention and hype. Cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies have gone through wild oscillations in value, popularity, and public awareness between when I started this project in 2016 and the time of writing. Figure 4.3 shows the total market capitalisation of the cryptocurrency markets from 2013 until 2019. Until 2016, one can see that the size of the market remained extremely contained, even though it was already the object of public attention and scrutiny. In 2016, cryptocurrencies were on the rise, but still a quirky niche conversation topic for most, and a research topic mostly for computer scientists, some monetary and financial economists, and very few social scientists. In 2017, attention picked up momentum. Bitcoin almost hit the $20,000 price threshold in December, and the cryptocurrency market almost reached the trillion dollars in collective market capitalisation. However, already in late January 2018, prices started to drop and the so-called 'crypto winter' set in. The amount of floor space in expos and trade fairs also shrank quite visibly, and news started covering companies that went bust more than those who were launching their operations. Every peak was seen by enthusiasts as ushering in a new world of digital money, and every drop was seen by the sceptics as the bursting of a speculative bubble. There is even a website that lists all the times Bitcoin has been declared dead by technological and financial commentators, that has now surpassed 350 obituaries (99Bitcoins 2019). If I had had an intensive fieldwork for a 6-month period at any point between mid-2017 and now, I

would have been more prone to seconding the hype of the moment and I would have missed important trends that would have made sense only if put in context.

Fourth, time acts as a constraint and limit. The boundlessness of hybrid online-offline, and digitally mediated research also has implications when it comes to putting a halt to the data-gathering effort (Reich 2015). The fieldless fieldwork can just as easily become the endless fieldwork. Single-sited intensive ethnographies, however long in their duration, have an endpoint, the crossing of which helps the researcher to take the necessary distance from the field itself before analysis and writing up. A fieldless fieldwork, conversely, lacks not only the topographical, but also the chronological and temporal boundaries typical to conventional fieldwork. I could be 'in the field' during a conference call, remain 'in the field' immersing myself in archival documents, then be 'out of the field' while I was teaching, and then go back into the field several days later for an interview or a trade fair. While this allows data collection and analysis to go hand in hand, a lack of a true boundary between beginning and end of fieldwork also means that the process of data collection could, potentially, go on endlessly. Theoretical saturation, hence, plays a pivotal role in determining the endpoint of data collection, defined as 'the point […] at which theorising the events under investigation is considered to have come to a sufficiently comprehensive end' (Sandelowski 2008: 875).

In my case, given the dynamic nature of my research topic, I had to work on two binaries. On the one hand, I had to isolate theoretical themes that I judged to be relatively stable in the whirlpool of information surrounding blockchain technologies and cryptocurrencies. The decision over theoretical saturation was, then, operated on these lines. On the other hand, I had — and, at the time of writing, still have — to keep my eyes and ears open to the latest developments in the industry, the most recent regulatory measures introduced, and landmark court cases, as well as to the daily oscillations in the price of crypto assets. This prevents a thesis written on this topic from becoming old before it is even sent to print; yet, keeping the door to the field constantly ajar can prove itself stressful.

## 4.4 Conclusion: The Relevance and Contribution of a Fieldless Approach to Fieldwork

Drawing from a research project on digital payment infrastructures, this chapter argues for a radical expansion of the methodological tools employed in multi-sited ethnography. The chapter sketches the spatialities of FinTech and Blockchain technologies as hybridised between online settings like online forums and conference calls, and offline settings like trade fairs and expos. Rather than drawing a demarcating line between what is or is not a legitimate field site, this chapter embraces a multi-sited approach of following 'the people, the things, the metaphors' (Marcus 1995) and to be more attentive to co-presence than to co-location (Beaulieu 2010). Rather than seeing one specific location (the fair) as an instrumental tool to

gain access to another location (the control room), this chapter shows that both the fair and the control room are part of one and the same fieldless field site, a site that is 'constructed rather than discovered' (Tunçalp and Lê 2014: 60). The field site becomes a rhizome: 'A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). In so doing, my fieldwork drew upon and, hopefully, contributed to current research in organisational and institutional anthropology of meetings, conferences, trade fairs, and other temporary gatherings (Høyer Leivestad and Nyqvist 2017).

Through this investigation of the hybrid spatialities of digital money, my research illustrates the complexity and nuances associated with gaining access to a field populated by economic and technical elites like bankers, financiers and technologists. The type of ethnographer subjectivity that is required in this setting is less similar to a detective and more like what Seaver (2017) calls 'scavenging ethnographer'. The radically multi-sited approach to fieldwork that this chapter describes, then, is also a strategy to 'route around' powerful gatekeeping groups and access knowledge about a specific subject, hence contributing to literature on elite research and 'studying up' (Nader 1972; Gusterson 1997; Seaver 2014).

Lastly, the mix of online and offline methods that this chapter outlines points to some specific challenges connected with the temporalities of recruitment, data collection, and analysis in contexts without synchronicity and co-presence between researcher and informants. In so doing, this chapter hopefully contributed to ongoing debates on digital methodologies in social sciences (Horst and Miller 2012; Marres 2017; Ash et al. 2018). As technology evolves and redefines social encounters, and a post-Covid-19 world poses new practical challenges to the in-person encounters that underpin social research, fieldless fieldwork and digitally mediated ethnography will acquire new salience and become more and more frequent, making the contribution of this chapter especially timely.

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