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The Online-Offline Nexus: Social Media and Ethnographic Fieldwork in Post- 3.11 Northeast Japan

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Summary

In Japan as well as in other countries social media is now part of daily life. During fieldwork, researchers are confronted with decisions to be made concerning the engagement in social media activities in the course of ongoing research, or with their informants in general. Taking experiences from several years of ethnographic field research in Northeast Japan after the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster as examples, this paper analyzes the opportunities and challenges regarding the use specifically of Facebook in fieldwork. I argue that social media can become a tool for building rapport and enacting reciprocity, as well as for providing informants with agency. At the same time, challenges regarding privacy, the distribution of information, and possible influences on ongoing research projects have to be kept in mind. Therefore the usage of online tools should be extensively discussed among scholars, while ethics boards have to consider the interdependence of online and offline social dynamics — so as to incentivize greater reflection on this issue among researchers.

Keywords: 3.11 Japan, social media, fieldwork, anthropology, Tohoku, digital ethnography, Fukushima, disaster

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Introduction

“Thank you for joining our symposium on the risks of low-level radiation,” said a Facebook post by a woman who had co-organized an event that I attended. Afterward, I connected with her via Facebook to arrange an interview. One of my informants asked in a Facebook message that I received later: “So, why are you attending an event conducted by *that* person? You know that she left our hometown because she didn’t like it from the very beginning. She is just using the disaster as an excuse.”

This scene from my fieldwork in Tōhoku (Northeast Japan) in 2017, where I spent one year conducting research on the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster’s influence on local culture and community-building, illustrates that it involves negotiating the expectations and social relations of informants not only offline but also increasingly online too. When one of my informants noticed that I followed a woman with a different opinion on social media, she asked me “to pick a side.” This was challenging, because it affected not only my aspired position of neutrality as a researcher but also my relations of trust with other informants. Without Facebook, she might have never found out I was in touch with that woman. In various situations during my fieldwork, the use of social media and the entanglements of online and offline worlds posed challenges — but also provided new opportunities for my ethnographic research.

To be clear, anthropologists faced all kinds of difficulties during fieldwork before the internet existed. Anthropology is about research in the field, and about participating in and observing the everyday life of people in order to understand complex social relations and connections (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Schensul and LeCompte 2013; Sluka and Robben 2012: 2). Challenges can occur in a number of different situations within everyday community life. These can include violations of informants’ or the researcher’s privacy, expectations to return favors, or rumors that spread through a group.

In addition to these more general challenges, specific contexts bring about particular problems for the researcher. Hardacre (2017: 73), for instance, describes how her fieldwork with religious groups in Japan put her in the difficult situation of knowing that her hosts wanted her to convert to their religion — whereas not doing so would diminish her informants’ interest in cooperation. But, staying neutral can sometimes lead informants to invest more time in talking to researchers, as they want to have the chance to prove their claims (Aldrich 2009: 300). Generally speaking, in almost every situation that arises during fieldwork researchers have to carefully negotiate their informants’ and their own expectations while being aware of the ethical challenges that they face by withholding or altering possibly unpleasant information. Respecting their informants’ privacy concerns in order to produce meaningful research is also key.

On the one hand the internet offers new “virtual worlds” for anthropologists to explore (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012), but, on the other, the online and offline worlds are becoming more and more entangled (Danley 2018; Postill and Pink 2012; Potter 2017). In some contexts it has even become normal to stay in touch via social media rather than e-mail. Decisions on how to deal with social media information can be crucial for the further advancing of research projects and ethics. Despite the many advantages of social media use in research (Baker 2013; Danley 2018; Edirisingha et al. 2017; Postill and Pink 2012), ethical problems can be exacerbated through the use of online platforms. Although questions regarding reciprocity, anonymity, or rapport-building are widely discussed with regard to research in the offline world (Bernard 2015; Cutcliffe and Ramcharan 2002; Robben and Sluka 2012; Robertson 2007; Sieber 1982), the entanglement of online and offline fields and the consequences of being active in this “messy web” (Postill and Pink 2012) have not yet been fully explored. Social media content can serve as a valuable source of information during the researcher’s physical absence from the field site (Baker 2013; Danley 2018; Postill and Pink 2012). But, at the same time, protecting “rough data” or the privacy of interviewees — and also that of researchers — becomes more difficult in a time when staying in touch with informants goes beyond private e-mails, letters, or chats on the telephone to increasingly include communication via social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter too. The online world is now part of the communities that we study and to which we belong. Like in the “real world,” these online dimensions are not free from conflict and influence offline dynamics as well.

This is especially true for fieldwork conducted in the wake of a disaster. My field sites are located in Northeast Japan, and belong to postdisaster communities. The so-called Tōhoku Region was hit by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, a tsunami, and nuclear meltdown on March 11, 2011 (henceforth, 3.11). The eventual death toll exceeded 15,800 people, and the bodies of more than 2,500 victims have never been found. In addition, about 450,000 people were displaced due to the destruction wreaked by the tsunami and the explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. As of November 2018, some of them still live in temporary housing dispersed across the whole country (Reconstruction Agency 2018).

In short, the disasters destroyed whole villages and disrupted social relations in the affected areas. Particularly communities severely affected by the nuclear disaster suffered from ambiguous risk communication, different risk perceptions, and tensions between community members (Kimura 2016; Morioka 2014; Reiher 2017; Slater et al. 2014; Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015). These frayed relations influenced my fieldwork, because researchers need to be cautious about becoming embroiled in personal conflicts within communities.

Just like elsewhere, in Japan social media has become an integral part of everyday life.¹ Thus, it is no surprise that 3.11 took place in the virtual world too. During the months that followed, people used social media to search for help, to share information about shelters or radiation, to discuss their views on recovery that may have diverged from those presented in the mass media, or to mobilize protest movements against nuclear power (Slater et al. 2012). Online discussions and representations on and of 3.11 still continue to this day. My research focuses on the experiences of people affected by the triple disaster in the town of Namie, Fukushima Prefecture, and in the city of Natori, Miyagi Prefecture. Thus my topic is sensitive and private, but also political and polarized. Heated debates about recovery emerged locally among those who used to live in the most affected areas, as well as at the national level too.

These debates also took place on social media platforms, and affected my fieldwork. Accordingly, social as well as traditional media would play significant roles during my fieldwork. Among such social media platforms Facebook and LINE were my main means of communication. In this paper, I focus specifically on my experiences with Facebook because it not only served as a communication tool when sending private messages, but my informants were also using it as a public platform to discuss current issues and share information about their lives. After conducting preliminary fieldwork in 2013, Facebook helped to maintain contact first established from abroad. Thanks to this preliminary fieldwork and to social media, it was much easier to find informants during my main fieldwork stay in 2017.

In this paper, I share my experiences with traditional and social media's effects on fieldwork as I encountered them during my research in the Tōhoku Region. Drawing on events related to television reports and Facebook activities, I want to highlight the opportunities that social media can provide for rapport-building and reciprocity. Just like other scholars who have written about social media use in ethnography (Baker 2013; Danley 2018; Postill and Pink 2012), I found that distributing information via social media platforms facilitated the more active engagement of informants in ongoing research — and thereby increased their agency. Agency is of special importance within my research, as the communities that I visited were still in the process of recovering from the 2011 triple disaster — and as “victims” my informants were often deprived of it (see Slater 2013). This exceptional situation leads to additional challenges that I will also address in this paper, although I assume that the baselines of these — namely, how to respect the rights of informants, how to build rapport and offer reciprocity, and how to best conduct open research — can be applied in other research contexts as well.

1 According to a Global Web Index survey (Statista 2019), in 2017 the penetration rate of social media among the Japanese population was high. YouTube ranked first with 70 percent, followed by the communication app LINE with 54 percent, and then came Twitter with a 45 percent penetration rate. Facebook ranked fourth, with 34 percent penetration.

In order to discuss how engagement with social media impacted on my fieldwork, I will first present scholarly debates on reciprocity in cultural anthropology and outline how other scholars used social media in previous ethnographic studies as a means of it. Then I will introduce Namie in Fukushima Prefecture, one of my field sites, where social dynamics were challenged both online and offline by radiation, evacuation, and polarized debates regarding recovery. This is followed by an account of how I used Facebook to collect data and to stay in touch with my informants even when physically absent from the field. Finally, I will discuss how my engagement with traditional media coverage as well as my presence on social media affected the social dynamics in the offline world and my ongoing field research. In a nutshell, this paper will show how online and offline activities are invariably entangled. I argue that this online-offline nexus has to be taken into consideration when conducting field research in an internet-oriented country like Japan (and elsewhere).

Responsibility, reciprocity, and social media in ethnographic fieldwork

The relationships formed during fieldwork require careful negotiation, and constant renegotiation (Gibson et al. 2013: 19). This is particularly true when the researcher becomes part of the community, or even a friend to informants — be it in the virtual or the physical world. This role comes with its responsibilities. “Free and informed consent of research participants [...] shaped with the active collaboration of research ‘participants’ rather than ‘subjects’” (Sluka and Robben 2012: 29) is the ideal in anthropology.

However the often time-consuming and unpaid participation of informants, as well as the conduct of researchers in the field, should not simply be taken for granted. In ethnographic research in general, but especially regarding that undertaken with so-called vulnerable people — like, in my case, disaster survivors — reciprocity is vital. Coleman (2017: 120) points to the imbalance between researchers and their research participants, as informants are likely to provide data for free — whereas the information that is shared will become an asset for the researcher. On the other hand, “giving back” can also lead to the impression of “paying for information” — and it could be reasonably asked whether informants fall into a kind of selection bias if they attempt to deliver the kind that they think the researcher would like to hear.

Yet, reciprocity is not only important regarding the researcher expressing gratitude and returning favors to a community. It also means agency for the people we ideally study not only as “research objects” but who we also study with. This is of special importance in postdisaster situations, where the most affected people — as “victims” — often struggle to perform agency. Slater (2013) problematizes reciprocity, specifically in terms of volunteer aid, after the 3.11 disaster and points to a “moral dilemma” (2013: 268) that emerges when complete strangers provide aid without giving locals the chance to return the favor — thus depriving them of the possibility “to live up to ethical standards” (2013: 276). Slater stresses that acts of giving can

become even more problematic if they are done by people who may not be able to build up lasting relationships (2013: 275).

This is where social media can provide new opportunities not only for data collection but particularly also for building rapport, for creating possibilities of reciprocity, and for increasing informants' agency. When it comes to data collection, social media provides "both another venue for engaging – through online interactions – with participants in the community studied and an avenue for recording such interactions" (Danley 2018: 8). Social media thus is not only a source of information but always additionally involves interactions and relationships with those studied. In her study on students' literacy levels, Baker used Facebook as a tool for data collection and stresses the benefits of being able to glimpse students' "personal (non-official) attitudes regarding their academic reading and writing practices" (2013: 132). Although her initial plan involved using Facebook only as a communication tool, it helped sustain relationships in the long term and provide access to rich data which otherwise might not have been collectable (Baker 2013: 135). Danley (2018) emphasizes that his online presence made him more known in the community he studied. At the same time, his informants could learn more about his thoughts and motivations by checking his blog, Facebook, or Twitter posts, which he found crucial for building rapport.

Social media can, then, provide research participants with agency, and offer new modes of reciprocity and rapport (Danley 2018; Edirisingha et al. 2017; Lewis 2015; Sinanan 2017). Social media platforms produce ethnographic places "that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public" (Postill and Pink 2012: 124). Danley, for instance, argues that "social media presence increase[s] the transparency inherent in ethnography by providing those involved with informed choices about how to engage with such research" (2018: 2). Social media sites like Facebook "encourage [...] rapport building by enabling researchers to gradually develop dialogical researcher-participant relationships" (Edirisingha et al. 2017: 416).

It is certainly true that reciprocity is among the most important features of all kinds of online community because its functions are based on creating, sharing, "liking," and commenting on posted content (Holton et al. 2015). Although social media enables informants to gain access to information on the research project that they are involved in, to engage more actively in it, and to comment on the researcher's interpretations of their stories and experiences, reciprocity through such mediums can also pose certain challenges. If reciprocity does indeed involve publicly "picking a side," just like in the case I described in the introduction to this paper, then it is likely to impact on further research collaboration (see also, Danley 2018: 10). This shows how the online and offline worlds are intertwined and how, to make things even more complicated, digital fingerprints are hard to remove (Postill and Pink 2012: 127).

In a postdisaster context, navigating through the different expectations of informants while respecting their and one's own privacy — as well as striving to keep possible influences on the research outcome in mind — is a challenging task indeed. Nevertheless, I believe that my experiences with using social media in the field are of importance for on-site research in other areas as well since “both anthropologists and the people who collaborate with us in our projects, inhabit and co-constitute environments in which digital technologies and media are inextricably entangled” (Pink 2017: 9).

Offline fields: The scattered community of Namie Town

After 2011 I had the chance to visit the disaster-stricken areas in Northeast Japan several times, and eventually started to conduct research on local cultural practices and social dynamics in, as noted, two places: Namie Town in Fukushima Prefecture and Natori City in Miyagi Prefecture. In 2017, the year of my main field research, the situation in both locations was very complicated. Those in Natori who had lost their houses in the tsunami were still waiting for permission to rebuild them in their previously inhabited neighborhoods, while evacuees from Namie were living dispersed across the whole country (Namie Town 2019).

Most people I met were active users of social media platforms, and especially Facebook. Due to the various evacuation locations of the residents, Namie Town even introduced their own social media platform. The “Namie Town Tablet” allowed former residents to register with their smartphones or a tablet (that was distributed to them for free), and thereby exchange pictures and stories of their current whereabouts, read the *Namie Newspaper* (*Namie Shinbun*), and learn about events related to their hometown (Code for Namie 2015). Despite this vast world of online interactions and information, I would have never been able to gain access to interview partners, get an idea of what the former residents were going through, or comprehend how social dynamics were affected by the 3.11 disaster if I had not conducted field research in the affected places themselves. To understand the risks and advantages when using online platforms as a tool in field research, naturally it is important to recognize the complicated and heated situation of informants in the physical world as well. This was especially true for the residents of Namie in Fukushima Prefecture. For that reason, I want to explain their circumstances in more detail.

The town, with its previously about 18,000 residents, is located only four kilometers away from the destroyed Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The tsunami washed away its districts close to the sea while, on top of the destruction caused, a series of explosions at the neighboring nuclear power plant forced all residents to evacuate. The years that followed were characterized by changing evacuation orders and uncertainty regarding safety limits and health hazards resulting from the released radionuclides. Evacuation orders in parts of Minamisōma, a city next to Namie, were already lifted months after the accident, whereas Namie remained part of the

exclusion zone until 2017. Due to ongoing decontamination efforts and declining radiation levels, in April of that year the evacuation orders were rescinded for the areas most densely inhabited before the disaster, and residents were encouraged to move back.

However, even months after the ban was partially lifted, Namie resembled a ghost town: most shops were closed, a thick layer of dust covered the goods still on display in the windows, cracks in the walls had not been repaired since the earthquake, and blue plastic sheets were installed on the roofs to keep the rain from pouring into the damaged buildings. Most footprints visible in the once neatly trimmed gardens did not belong to their former inhabitants, but to the many wild boars that roamed around freely in search of food. Only the town center became lively again, with about nine shops — including restaurants and a convenience store. These places became important meeting and socializing points for people working in the area, like employees at the town hall or construction and decontamination workers. As of July 2017 some 234 people were registered as returnees (Namie Town 2018),² although the general affairs secretary of Namie Town Hall revealed in an interview a few months later (interview with local government employee in Namie Town, 20 October, 2017) that some people were not actually living in their former homes but kept up their registration for nostalgic reasons.

The situation in my field sites was complicated at the time of my stays there. The central government wanted to promote an image of almost-completed reconstruction and progressive recovery (see Kurokawa 2017); the first residents had returned to their previous hometowns, while others were still located in temporary housing and others besides had decided not to return at all. This led to various social conflicts among former residents (Gill et al. 2013; Kimura 2016; Morioka 2014; Slater et al. 2014). Especially in Fukushima Prefecture, those who returned were often considered to be ignoring the hazards of radiation, downplaying the consequences of the nuclear accident, or even risking their family's health. Those who moved away, on the contrary, were accused of giving up on their hometowns, supporting so-called harmful rumors about Fukushima Prefecture being an unsafe place, contributing to the economic downturn, and thus ultimately betraying their community. Of course, not everyone shared such strong opinions — but it was certainly a heated situation, and personal decisions regarding where to settle tended to be politicized.

In this tense situation, and due to overwhelming numbers of people coming to the disaster-hit areas to volunteer or to conduct research, outsiders were not always welcome (see Gill 2014; Numazaki 2012). I expected that this was even more so the case in Fukushima Prefecture. Since I had never been to Namie Town before, I was afraid that most people would be reluctant to tell their story to yet another foreigner asking about the disaster. Yet, to my surprise, when I walked around in the almost

2 As of February 2019 this number had risen to 896 (Namie Town 2019).

empty town or joined “public hearings” (*setsumeikai*) for residents, many people were eager to talk to me and to share their opinions and experiences. But I also met people who were not too enthusiastic about my research. When I went to neighboring Minamisōma, many people were hesitant to talk to me or expressed their discontent with journalists and researchers coming to the area. However, after visiting the city several times, a trusting relationship developed and the residents began to share their stories.

Their reason for being so skeptical was repeated negative experiences with foreign journalists and documentary directors who would edit their interviews in such a way as to change locals’ narratives or portray them as people who would not understand the dangers of radiation. Many residents also stressed that researchers would come to conduct interviews but then never show up again, or never report back on what had become of the data provided. This critique directly connects to a key responsibility for researchers, but also points to the challenges of reciprocity — as it might not always be possible to present the results of the research conducted in a useful way (i.e. in the native language of the informants). At other times, the findings might differ from the ideas of the participants and some may even feel offended by them. This was also the case in my research, when I stressed the social divisions that emerged after the 3.11 disaster. This social reality definitely differs from the ideal of cohesion that local and national governments aim to promote at in the postdisaster communities in Tōhoku (see also, Slater et al. 2014; Tagsold 2012).

Online fields: Social media and reciprocity in a postdisaster setting

Through Facebook and e-mails, I was able to stay in contact with most of the people I met during my initial field research in Natori in 2013. Before returning to Japan in 2017, I was assured that they were eager to show me how their situation had changed since my previous visit — especially because they were worried that six years after the disaster they might have been forgotten about. It became clear that keeping contact seemed to be most important for almost everyone, regardless of their previous place of residence. Many informants reported that particularly in the direct aftermath of the disaster, the number of people visiting the area to help or to conduct research (or both) was so great that local residents could not handle all the meetings and eventually declined to participate. But, as time went by, interest in the fate of the survivors faded.

With regard to reciprocity, an informant from Natori repeatedly told the story of volunteers who came to plant flowers but then never showed up again and left it to the locals to keep watering them. Likewise, people from Fukushima Prefecture stressed bad experiences with volunteers who seemed to be doing their work to make themselves feel better rather than as part of actually building relations with locals. These narratives show how people can feel deprived of agency when researchers fail to build mutual relationships with them (Slater 2013: 268). Yet, everyday life

obligations like work and family obviously make it difficult to sustain all the relationships established in the field. Especially volunteers from faraway places like Tokyo or the Kansai Region, and even more so people from abroad who will eventually leave Japan, may have a hard time to keep returning to the Tohoku Region. In my case, social media became a useful tool to keep in touch with many of the people I had met in Japan.

Facebook became an extension of my field sites, as my informants kept uploading pictures, sharing newspaper articles, and commenting on new developments. It seemed that they would express their opinions more freely and openly online. This included ones on sensitive and controversial topics like risk communication, decontamination, recovery, and compensation policies, or on decisions regarding settlement. Among these issues, recovery policies were the ones most frequently discussed. This may have been due to the vast coverage of traditional media, so that Facebook users could quickly repost links to a newspaper article to spark discussion. Thus, discussions on social media were more open and transmitted affect and emotions much more than mass media (Slater et al. 2014: 14).

This observation is connected to the so-called “filter bubble” (Pariser 2011) that describes the tendency of users to connect primarily with people sharing their own opinions (Kaakinen et al. 2018). Thus my informants faced a relatively low risk of receiving critique from their followers, which might be a reason for their openness. Another was likely my invisibility. As long as I did not join in the conversation by adding comments on posts, I was a bystander rather than a participant observer. This may have led to the impression that my informants were talking just among the community members that they were used to. Social media resembles in a certain sense a virtual marketplace or an *izakaya* (“bar”) where people meet and talk more or less freely about pressing issues. Reading about such topics, Facebook facilitated the bringing up of them in a more natural manner during follow-up interviews — as I could refer to what I had seen online.

In addition, during and even after my stays in Japan, I could see the projects or events that my informants were visiting or organizing themselves. That way, I was able to join these events or at least read the descriptions and ask for more information. Vice versa, my informants gained easier access to “views from abroad” when I shared newspaper articles on relevant issues. Yet, judging from their comments on Facebook, what seemed more important to them was that — without having to write lengthy messages, and just by following my posts and leaving a few words or a “like” — they could continue to follow my life, and exchange expressions of sociality. In these ways, Facebook became an important tool for staying up to date and sustaining the relationships that I had built in the field.

The online-offline nexus: Social media's and mass media's impact on fieldwork

Social media played a crucial role in helping gain access to informants, keeping in contact with them, finding information, and in expressing gratitude and reciprocity. Yet, the use of social media was not free from its complications. I tried to talk to as many people as possible from diverse social groups to obtain an impression of the overall social dynamics, the different situations that they were living in, and the factors that influenced their settlement decisions. Talking to community members, however, inevitably results in becoming part of their social dynamics. In the following section, I will provide examples of the interplay between traditional and social media in my field research.

Shortly before a part of Namie was released from the exclusion zone in 2017, I was invited to visit by two families who had evacuated after the explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. They had decided not to move back, and were about to have their houses demolished. This would be their last visit there they told me. After agreeing on the tour, they explained that a local TV station would follow them around to produce a special report about Namie residents who refused to return. This was their last chance to show what they had lost due to the disaster, and the report was a way to demonstrate their discontent with the recovery plan. I declared that I would be happy to join as long as I was not the focus of the report, and that I wished to remain neutral. Several days later, the reporter asked me for information that he apparently only needed so as to explain my presence. Knowing the importance of the report for the families, I still agreed — even though I already expected that there would be more to come regarding the “*gaijin* (‘foreigner’) in Namie,” as some locals said.

As I had suspected, the focus of the report shifted after all, and the visit itself became a challenge for the rest of my fieldwork. In the end, the journalist decided to focus his report on “the present condition of the community as seen by a German woman who visited Namie Town” (*Namie-machi tazuneta doitsu jin josei mitsumeru komyūniti no ima*). Unfortunately, his short report featured several problematic scenes. One featured me following a family as they visited their house for the last time. They held up some of their personal belongings, including heirlooms and pictures drawn by their children, and explained that they could not take much with them because they did not want the radiation to spread. The family insisted that especially the women entering the house should wear full-body protective clothing. They were afraid that the dust contained health-threatening radioactive materials, and did not want anyone to breathe in the particles. Moreover, by wearing the protective gear, they wanted to make a statement in showing that they found radiation levels still too dangerous to return.

It must be emphasized that the house of the family is located in an area that was about to be released from the evacuation zone (and by now has been), and that radiation levels were lower there than in other ones already open to the public again

— and yet higher than those in some of the areas still part of the exclusion zone. Further, it should be noted that there are certain people (returnees, those who plan to return, or people whose houses are located in the exclusion zone) who find behavior like that described above offensive. They argue that wearing protective gear in an area designated as “safe” helps spread a negative image of Fukushima Prefecture, and leads to the stigmatization of those who used to live there — or still do. Since I spoke to people with different opinions regarding recovery, while also respecting diverse views, I was concerned about how other informants would react to the report. The family, however, was pleased that it strengthened their argument by showing that even a foreigner would wear protective gear in an area designated as “inhabitable” again.

The situation became even more serious when a friend posted on Facebook that he saw me on the show, and shared a link to the report. Whereas he certainly meant well, within minutes I was receiving messages from informants from residents of Minamisōma emphasizing their annoyance about the report. Whereas radiation levels in their neighborhood were similar to those mentioned in the report, they would never wear protective gear. But there were also friends of the evacuees who took me to their former houses and who asked them for my contact details, because they wanted to talk about their own experiences too. I had a tough time regaining the trust of those who felt offended by the report, but I also received access to people who I would not have otherwise met. In any case, as a researcher, I needed to pay special attention to the privacy settings on social media and stay aware of the social dynamics existing online.

Sharing the TV report online resulted in contact with evacuees whom I might not have reached out to otherwise. However it also led to people questioning my research goals, as they did not seemingly fit with their own views on recovery. Social media, just like more traditional formats such as newspapers or TV reports, can accelerate processes of gaining access and finding informants in the field. Most informants immediately asked about my social media accounts to keep in contact. Facebook was particularly helpful for finding new contacts. Once a person commented on my wall or posted a picture with me, comments by others followed. Some of them directly asked if they could talk to me too, and, as mentioned before, this social networking service (SNS) became one of my most important tools for keeping in contact after my return to Germany.

Additionally, the protection of privacy became a challenge when interlinking research offline and online. While in more traditional mass media the protagonists should be aware of and agree to being reported on and where it will be presented (i.e. on a certain TV or radio channel, or published in print etc.), with social media this is not so simple. Although certain privacy regulations also apply to the latter, not all users obey them. If, for example, a picture with several people is taken after an interview or during participant observation, most of the time not everyone is asked for permission before it is posted online. Many people might find this

unproblematic, yet in heated situations like the one in Fukushima Prefecture not everybody wants to be connected with certain topics. For instance, some evacuated families did not want to reveal that they originally came from an area close to the crippled nuclear power plant because they were afraid that this information could lead to their children being bullied at school. If a picture of them at a Fukushima-related event was shared on a social media platform, this could unintentionally reveal their identity as evacuees.

Expressing reciprocity via social media also turned out to be problematic in some cases. Just as letters or e-mails have long been used to keep contact with informants or to thank them for sharing their time, in Japan social media is nowadays frequently used to express gratitude. It is common — and even expected — that after meeting someone, the people involved will create a short post on social media to summarize what happened and to emphasize their gratitude for the meeting. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the lines between a more formal interview situation and casual meetings may change as the researchers and interviewees continue to build their relationships; Facebook posts by my informants followed most interviews or our more informal meetings.

In some cases, interviewees asked me to “like” the Facebook profiles of certain companies or projects that I was introduced to. This can be problematic if seen by people who do not share the same opinions. One time, I visited the nonprofit organization *Asubito Fukushima*, as they support several projects in the prefecture. Among them is the magazine *High Schoolers Present Fukushima Messages* (*Kōkōsei ga tsutaeru Fukushima taberu tsūshin*), in which high-school students publish articles about local food products from Fukushima to help “restore a positive image of the prefecture” (interview with the magazine’s office chief via e-mail, June 30, 2018). Whereas it was an important part of my dissertation to understand how local food culture is used in community-building — also by those who stayed in the prefecture — some evacuees see the project critically, as they do not consider local products safe enough to consume or places in the prefecture safe enough for pupils to live in.

“Likes” of such pages can hence not only be regarded as a source of information but also as an endorsement for the company or the person in question. Again, this leads to questions regarding the necessity of special social media accounts created only for research purposes, or relating to the withdrawal of such social “obligations.” As I generally do not use social media to the extent that I follow the public accounts of companies, I did not “like” all of those introduced by my informants — even though following such sites can reveal important information. However, this was criticized by my informants, as they saw “follows” and “likes” also as an expression of reciprocity and support of the Tōhoku region. The question of to what extent one’s private life and research can be separated existed long before the emergence of the internet, but it is important to remember that these concerns have herewith now extended to the online world as well.

Another challenging situation related to reciprocity occurred when I organized a presentation of my preliminary fieldwork results at my host university in Sendai. The announcement hereof on the university's website was shared on Facebook. This is a common practice at many universities. Therefore, it should not have been such a surprise that suddenly several informants told me that they wanted to join the presentation. A woman stressed that she was upset about researchers who never shared the findings of the research to which she had significantly contributed through giving various lengthy interviews. Others mentioned that my presentation was a rare chance for them to actually see what happened with the information that they shared, since most researchers would either present in faraway places or in English, which they had difficulties to understand. As my presentation was held in Sendai, and in Japanese, they wanted to come — some even from Fukushima Prefecture, which meant several hours of travel.

There are different opinions about whether it is appropriate to present ongoing research in front of (possible) informants. Some emphasize the need to be as open as possible with the latter (Glowczewski et al. 2013; Monberg 1975). Presenting preliminary research findings in front of one's interlocutors could offer them the chance to respond to what might be written or said about them, and to fix errors of understanding. Yet, it could also mean that they might change their narrative to suit what they think the researcher expects. There is also the possibility that they refuse to further cooperate if they do not like what they hear. The people who expressed their interest in attending my presentation came from a variety of backgrounds, with sometimes opposing views on recovery and community-building. Among them were residents of Natori who were mainly affected by the tsunami and still live in temporary housing, evacuees from different places in Fukushima Prefecture that were still part of the exclusion zone, returnees, as well as people who had decided not to return to their former homes.

I carefully considered how to best prepare for this possibly difficult presentation, and particularly for the subsequent discussion. To my surprise, my concerns turned out to be exaggerated. Instead of witnessing a heated argument, I received many constructive comments — which included personal experiences shared by the audience. The discussion that developed remained respectful, and became one of the most fruitful talks that I held during my entire fieldwork. Moreover, it turned out that some people in the audience knew each other but had lost contact after 3.11. Opportunities for people with different opinions to actually sit together and talk about their experiences in the years after the disaster, and the reasons for their related decisions, have become rare, and I was grateful to see that even in such heated situations people were still in search of candid exchange. Presentations of preliminary findings and advertising these events through social media can become an incentive for face-to-face discussions and a way to generate new information. Due to these experiences, I decided to continue to invite people “from the field” to my talks.

Many of the challenges and opportunities connected to social media use during fieldwork are not new ones. Especially when doing research in rural Japan, where outsiders are recognized immediately, information may travel within minutes and is shared beyond one's own reach. Gatekeepers may significantly influence the availability of interviewees, and talking to outcast community members may become a hurdle in finding new contacts. If these social relations are discussed on the "open stage" of the internet, however, the consequences can affect offline research as well, because the internet speeds up the dissemination of information and reaches more individuals. People are expected to react faster, share their opinions, and be ever-present. Taking a position not only affects the person creating such content but also those contributing to the research too. It is certainly difficult to control the effects of online activities on offline fieldwork, and vice versa, and to balance the various advantages and disadvantages hereof.

Conclusion

Drawing on my fieldwork experience in postdisaster Northeast Japan, in this paper I have demonstrated how online and offline activities are invariably entangled with each other in ethnography. I have discussed the opportunities and challenges that the internet and social media have brought about for ethnographic fieldwork, and argued that the online-offline nexus has to be considered when conducting field research. Social media can provide new opportunities for collecting data and for building rapport. It creates new means for reciprocity, and increases informants' agency. Although most of the issues raised in this paper — for instance, matters of reciprocity, rapport, as well as privacy rights and regulations — were pertinent even before the expansion of the online world, some of the researcher's responsibilities to their informants have increased. This includes the responsibility for the information provided in fieldwork by informants and their privacy (Gibson et al. 2013), and responsibilities emerging from new modes of reciprocity — for example sharing, "liking," and commenting on social media posts — or regarding carefully negotiating and balancing the opinions of informants from different camps as well as their impact on social relations offline.

As I have argued in this article, thoughtful employment of social media can turn into a merit for research if used for gaining access to information and sustaining relations with informants. This is especially the case when research needs to be continued beyond the offline field site, for instance after moving to other cities or even countries. In such cases, social media is a useful tool that can provide information even during the researcher's physical absence from the site in question. Further, during the time away from the field, researchers can stay present by using social media platforms to post news or pictures — and can thereby build up long-term relations with informants. Social media enabled research participants to actively comment on shared research results, or give thoughts on ongoing research (Baker 2013; Danley 2018; Edisingha et al. 2017). They could share, "like," or express

disapproval of content shared. Therefore, social media can increase the agency of research participants. Informants' agency is also increased, for instance, by presenting findings to a wider audience not necessarily connected to academia. Direct interactions between informants and researchers online can involve informants in several stages of the research process.

Providing information on the research in an open and accessible manner on online platforms can also be regarded as a form of reciprocity. In most cases, research participants do not have access to scientific journals written in foreign languages. Thus, by announcing presentations or sharing information via the research being presented online, social media can turn into a tool for "giving back" to the communities and informants who support researchers by sharing their time, their knowledge, and their stories. In my fieldwork reciprocity was also expressed by my informants, who articulated their gratitude for me listening to their stories by sharing pictures of the events we joined together online.

But with these merits also come challenges. These include informants' demands to "pick a side," expectations of favors being returned, and the protection of informants' and the researcher's privacy. My fieldwork experience shows that the challenges related to social media are, in most cases, extended versions of ones that exist offline too. Demands to sympathize with informants' viewpoints and denied access and cooperation when researchers knowingly or unknowingly talk to "the wrong people" are challenges that ethnographers faced long before the emergence of the internet (Hardacre 2017). Limited control over the dissemination of the researcher's and informants' information is also a familiar phenomenon. As I illustrated with the example of a TV report, even when participating in traditional media coverage formats it may be hard to know in advance how the results of these will ultimately be presented. It usually requires consent, however, and confirmation of the means of distribution and of the target audience.

In the online world, however, researchers are less in control of how information — including TV reports and other mass media formats — is shared, and who will be able to access it. Thus, when social relations with and between informants and gatekeepers are also negotiated on the "open stage" of the internet, the consequences and reach in the offline world might be faster, wider, and harder to foresee. Therefore, the privacy concerns of those involved as well as the possible impacts on research outcomes have to be taken very seriously. Hence it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind that online social dynamics may strongly affect the offline world as well.

In conclusion, in my field research the opportunities that social media offered with regard to rapport and reciprocity made it an almost indispensable tool even despite the risks that emerge when using it in the field. In addition, my informants expected me to participate in SNSs like Facebook. These expectations in turn reflect the entanglement of the online and offline worlds, which in many countries is almost impossible to escape. Therefore, appropriate recommendations by ethics committees

at universities or within anthropological associations can provide support in related decision-making procedures. Nevertheless, the digital dimensions of the worlds that we study will not be fully covered by such guidelines. For this reason the use of online tools should be discussed intensely among scholars, while ethics boards should consider the interdependence of online and offline social dynamics when developing guidelines for researchers.

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