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Unreachable: The Poverty of Virtual Ethnography

Pekka Tuominen



Figure 1 - 'Photo: Jakob Johannsen'

My current fieldsite is just a 15-minute metro ride away from my home. I have been studying Kontula, a suburban housing estate in Helsinki, since the beginning of 2017, concentrating especially on the concrete and symbolic boundaries of its inhabitants' lifeworlds. Located at the urban periphery, with a notorious reputation since its construction in the 1960s, it has come to represent various ills of contemporary urbanity, from poverty and substance abuse to failed immigration policies.

The research funding allowed me to conduct extensive ethnographic research in the area: a full year followed by three months in 2018. However, fieldwork never really ended and I have kept visiting Kontula, sometimes several times a week, often to volunteer in some of the charitable organisations of the area or just to meet friends. Furthermore, the boundaries of this fieldsite had always been porous – it was situated in my native Helsinki, I was familiar with Kontula before I started the research and my focus was on the movement of people, which naturally involved the crossing of boundaries. There was a precarious balance of movement and encounters restricted to Kontula and to its immediate surroundings, together with those that stretched out to the other spaces in Helsinki and further away.

Since my first days of fieldwork, I paid careful attention to the dialectical relationship of alternations between intimacy and estrangement (Shah, 2017). I had even pondered the question of moving to Kontula for the duration of my fieldwork but decided against it – I believed that commuting between the urban periphery and the city centre would help me to better understand the relative location of Kontula: its relations with – and separations from – other places, in terms of their value and the hierarchically ordered position, and the overall value system that is used to create this order (Green, 2012; 2013). In addition to the metro rides, I would walk around, alone and with my informants, sometimes to the neighbouring districts or even the whole twelve kilometres separating my home from Kontula. Then, in a matter of days, the spatial order at the foundation of my ethnography was completely transformed.

The arrival of the pandemic coincided with the final preparations of the Kontula Electronic music and arts festival scheduled for mid-April (17–19.4.2020). Our festival team had been busy for several months organising around 100 performances to be held over the course of the spring weekend. On the 15th of March we were barely aware that something massive was about to unfold, on the 17th we were discussing possibly restricting the audiences for the largest events and on the 20th we decided to postpone the festival to the end of October, joking about extreme caution and how everyone would have forgotten the pandemic by then. The deadline for writing this piece is just before the festival – this year consisting of a very limited number of performances, all outdoors and for small audiences. It will also be the first time that I will visit Kontula in person in seven months.

Time for Rational Decisions

It is already difficult to evoke the experience of frantic multitasking of late March, with its abundance of speculations about a new, radically different normal. At the moment of writing (October), in many ways Helsinki has returned rather close to the old nor-

mal, despite the prognoses of new catastrophic waves: people are wearing masks, the cafes and restaurants are allowed to operate at just half capacity and nightclubs have to close early. What follows is my attempt to illustrate the change in spatially ordered dimensions of sociality (Taylor, 1992) in these unforeseen and exceptional circumstances.

In March my physical lifeworld shrank to the area that I can reach on foot or bicycle, avoiding all visits to indoor spaces. The meaning of home shifted: we were encouraged to *#stayhome* globally. Finns returned *en masse* from abroad, those without homes found themselves largely abandoned with the support facilities closing, and my colleagues who had been in the middle of fieldwork mostly returned to their homes. My situation was very different as the boundary between my home and fieldsite was not clear-cut but consisted of frequent but irregular movement to and from.

People close to me had to adapt to shrinking space for everyday life and to radically reorganise ideas about how they were located relative to others. The biggest difference was between those who began to work remotely and those who had to continue to commute between homes and workplaces. In Finland the big discussion was about what to designate as essential services that could not function remotely. Very soon almost all the services provided by the state, city and NGOs in Kontula closed their doors and helped me to justify my own decision following the same rationale: it was better for me to put a stop to my visits in Kontula; my fieldwork was not necessary in this situation. It felt easier to make an unambiguous decision to stop spending time in Kontula rather than justifying each visit separately.

Geography of Detachment

Having been studying the boundedness of lifeworlds in urban environments for over fifteen years, my reaction to the pandemic was a combination of dread and – despite the sense of guilt attached to it – curiosity. This situation would alter the sense of lived place more than anything I had experienced in the field previously. At the same time, urban geography acquired a new moral dimension to the extent that it halted my fieldwork: all non-essential movement across distances would make controlling the spread of the pandemic harder.

In spring there was strong advice against all international travel and a three-week blockade that cut off the Uusimaa region around Helsinki from its neighbours and prevented all non-essential travel. Following the Nordic political tradition of providing advice instead of strict prohibitions, it would have been possible to visit my fieldsite but it did not seem ethical. In the worst case, I could be a super-spreader carrying the virus from my neighbourhood into my fieldsite or vice versa. It made matters worse that many of my informants belonged to risk groups, and their exposure to the virus could be life-threatening. What followed was a completely new experience of urban geography and relative location: the networks of everyday encounters adapted to the logic of the pandemic, shrinkage and isolation became virtues and non-essential movement a selfish act.

It also surprised me to realise how small a role digital elements played in my fieldwork. I would arrange meetings using my smartphone and followed some local social media channels but otherwise relied on face-to-face meetings and other forms of participant observation. It also made me recognise how I saw long-term fieldwork as a rare privilege allowing me to foreground the multimodality of the senses, affects and other experiential dimensions in my research. The feeling that I had about my fieldsite was so intimate and powerfully embodied that I felt reluctant to narrow my life further into the digital and virtual realm.

Poverty of Virtual Encounters

The ethnographic notes that I wrote in the end of March dealt mainly with the sense of disconnection from my fieldsite. Only the most crucial municipal and NGO facilities stayed open while a hesitant building of virtual working elements was beginning. While we were debating the pros and cons of Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Hangouts for video communications, the digital divide left many out completely. This was a reminder of how many people in my fieldsite were not using social media or other digital communications, and were not even interested in jumping aboard. Situating myself on the other side of this divide meant I was reproducing the new, increasingly powerful, virtual geography. Only one-on-one telephone calls bridged the gap occasionally.

After just two weeks of not visiting Kontula I felt a desperate need to understand how everyday realities had changed. Nothing prevented me from visiting in person except a sense of moral restraint. I delved deeper into the virtual space of Kontula using the digital tools available and accepted that I would be disconnected from the physical space of Kontula until the pandemic withered away.

Shall we call this position a surrender? Ethnographic research in an urban environment requires dealing with the abundance of diverse perspectives, powerful stimuli and moments of confusion, but embodied connection helps to absorb the information. After the pandemic had begun, the voices I was hearing appeared fragmented and singular with nothing to bring them together. It was as if my practical ability to understand spatially situated sociocultural phenomena, formerly unfolding in exercise, was reduced to maps inside our heads. These maps seemed to be simultaneously relating all points to one without discrimination (see Taylor, 1995; 1992). With the ample digital communication tools gaining such prominence in our lives, the relative location of places was disrupted and connections were almost impossible to establish. The depictions felt scattered and random.

Some of the most important elements of embodied experience – the gradual approach by metro, arrival into the open-air shopping centre of Kontula and random encounters with its inhabitants, could not be replicated with digital tools. Without daily face-to-face dialogue in shared space, it seemed that I, my friends and colleagues had all lost touch with the place. For some, Kontula had descended into chaos, bringing together all the disadvantaged who had no other place to go. For others, the place seemed like it had always been, just a bit quieter and its inhabitants more cautious. Some must have decided to stay at home, others continued their lives as if the pandemic did not exist.

Failures in Cultural Intimacy

My entry into the realm of digital ethnography began reluctantly but with high intensity. I tried to build a coherent picture of the change in Kontula by obsessively gathering bits and pieces of information. At first, after a thorough study of the local news, Facebook groups, innumerable chat discussions and video calls, I felt that I could relate to the atmosphere of Kontula without being physically present. I developed a routine of checking out different channels and had regular updates with friends about the most recent developments. However, a sense of fatigue set in early on that I had to combat. The systematic collection of impressions felt like accumulating an archive, albeit one now consisting of digital data and information, of a bounded rapidly and overwhelmingly changing space.

Nonetheless, I had very little interest in studying the “new normal” of the pandemic as if it were a separate field disconnected from the time before. It was easy to find, gather and archive field data digitally but very difficult to connect it in any meaningful way to the previous data, which had been supported by face-to-face interactions. The sense of community tied to the physical space of Kontula had come alive through movement at different scales – between home and the local grocery store, Kontula and the city centre, Helsinki and other cities; it was reproduced through unexpected encounters in public space and depended on the sense of cultural intimacy, establishing powerful senses of community on the basis of their imperfection and shared colloquial solidarity (Herzfeld, 2016).

The poverty of my virtual ethnography came from the lack of these integral features of the everyday. I was studying, very selectively, a network of connections originating from myself. There were no distances between the chat rooms and Facebook groups, their access was regulated and the cultural intimacy was lost because there was just a vague if embodied sense of a group in dialogue. Communication was reduced to isolated fragments on separate planes, and what had previously been responsive conversation felt like empty words emanating from an abyss.

Once I understood (and accepted) that fieldwork in a pandemic would require a very different research methodology, I felt content. I decided to move to the countryside and visited Helsinki irregularly. I also decided to continue to keep my distance from Kontula and to accept that following the local news and having video calls could not be considered ethnographic fieldwork as much as they were expressions of interest and communication, perhaps even therapeutic acts. I concentrated on finishing texts that were based on the fieldwork done before the pandemic.

I believe that it is perfectly possible to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in pandemic times with methodologies tailored to these exceptional circumstances. What I experienced, however, was a poverty of virtual encounters. I tried to engage in virtual research, which did not provide me any new insights on urban transformation, yet helped me understand my ethnographic practice better. Namely, it made me realise how the embodied understanding of relative location, unanticipated encounters of the everyday and the culturally intimate dialogues in public space cannot be reduced to gathering of the research data. It also made me realise how much I missed my friends, too easily labelled as informants.



Figure 2

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