A Note on Researching and Writing This Book

We started working together on the projects that formed and funded the research for this book in the autumn of 2018. Rebecca Adler-Nissen had just been promoted as a professor at the University of Copenhagen and Kristin Anabel Eggeling was about to defend her PhD in the UK. While we considered myriad theoretical approaches, research questions and possible focus sites over the years, our main research strategy, based on the defining characteristic of all ethnographic work, was to seek 'immersion' into the world of the Brussels Bubble.[1] We approached this in two ways. Firstly, Kristin conducted in-person ethnographic fieldwork in Brussels during fifteen shorter (a few days to a week) and five longer (two weeks to three months) research trips to Brussels between 2018 and 2023 and an additional three-week follow-up trip during the final writing stages in the autumn of 2025.[2] Secondly, over the course of the entire research period from 2018 to 2025, we sought digital and 'remote' immersion in the world of Brussels politics and governance by tracking the official communications of the EU institutions, closely following significant events like the European Parliament elections in 2019 and 2024, interviewing and staying in

[1] Schatz, E. (2009). Introduction: Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics. In E. Schatz (Ed.), *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (pp. 1–23). Chicago University Press.

[2] Detailed descriptions and additional methodological reflections about the fieldwork done for and in the context of this book can be found in other writings, including Eggeling, K. A. (2022). Embracing the "Inverted Commas", or How COVID-19 Can Show Us New Directions for Ethnographic "Fieldwork". *Qualitative Research*, *23*(5), 1–17; Eggeling, K. A., & Versloot, L. (2023). Taking Trust Online: Digitalisation and the Practice of Information Sharing in Diplomatic Negotiations. *Review of International Studies*, *49*(4), 637–656; Eggeling, K. A. (2025). Evocative Screens: Ethnographic Insights into the Digitalization of Diplomacy. *International Political Sociology*, *19*(1), 1–25.

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close contact with practitioners in Brussels and staying up to date with local news. On a more granular level, we collected an archive of more than two thousand editions of *Politico*'s daily *Brussels Playbook* newsletter from 2015 to 2022 and regularly consulted other Brussels-based news sources such as Euractiv. These different modes of individual, embodied in-person and shared online immersion tethered our interest and attention in what was happening in the EU and allowed us to record both the context of European politics, and how it was collectively and individually experienced by members of the 'Brussels Bubble'.

The methods we worked with to transform this immersion into research 'data' were interpretive, qualitative and ethnographic. One of our key methods took the form of interviews and conversations with over a hundred diplomats, spokespersons, interpreters, interns, politicians, administrators, civil servants, journalists and academics. While engaging with these participants, we used three interview techniques in line with an ethnographic sensibility explained well by Erving Goffman who noted that the task of the researcher is to get 'close to [one's participants] while they are responding to what life does to them ... the way this is done is not, of course, to just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation'.[3]

In practice, this meant meeting our participants in the locations they suggested, and recording (either on digital tape or in note form) not just what they said, but also how they said it, paying as much attention to their laughter, pauses, hesitations, eagerness, ease or awkwardness as to the content of what they shared. This strategy added contextual depth to the standard semi-structured interviews that characterised our initial field trips in 2018, 2019 and January 2020. As we came to know both the field and some of our research participants more intimately, we began working with two further interview techniques, focused on eliciting ethnographic insights into how members of the Brussels

[3] Lofland, L. H. (1989). On Fieldwork – Erving Goffman. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *18*(2), 125.

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Bubble perceive and practically navigate their world. These techniques included ordinary language interviews and an interviewing strategy called the 'interview to the double'. Ordinary language interviews, according to the political scientist Frederic Schaffer, aim to uncover how individuals understand and use contested terms such as 'digitalisation', 'democracy' or 'power'. They include explorative questions such as 'Is there digitalisation in your work?,' judgement questions such as 'Is digitalisation a good thing?', or internal logic questions such as 'Can you explain how digital work relates to analogue work?'.[4] The 'interview to the double', as explained by the organisation scholar Davide Nicolini, is a way of using interviews to get to 'practice'. This technique invites participants to reflect on their daily (work) tasks by imagining they had to instruct a double to perform their role instead of them.[5] This entails explaining in detail how to handle tasks like attending meetings, working with colleagues or managing files.

Alongside the interviews, the second big part of our data-generation came through deploying different types of ethnographic observation. As noted above, the first involved immersive in-person participant observations in Brussels, ranging from public gatherings and informal hangouts to varying types of restricted, confidential and closed-door meetings. Over the years, this included drinking countless cups of coffee in cafés around Place Schuman, attending Thursday after-work-drinks in the bars lining Place Luxembourg and visiting the many buildings of the European Commission, Council of the European Union and European Parliament. It also included attending meetings that ranged from dummy booth sessions where staff interpreters are trained, to once, after months of slow and stringent access negotiation, a high-level meeting in the Council of Ministers.

[4] Schaffer, F. C. (2014). Ordinary Language Interviewing. In D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Eds.), *Interpretation and Method – Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (2nd ed., pp. 182–191). Routledge; Schaffer, F. C. (2016). *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide*. Routledge.

[5] Nicolini, D. (2009). Articulating Practice through the Interview to the Double. *Management Learning*, *40*(2), 195–212.

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Conducting ethnographic observations is not an exact science. In ethnographic research, the conditions and context of the field often determine which methods can be used and how.[6] One condition that shaped our observational work in the Brussels Bubble throughout our research was the question of access. It is difficult to codify or quantify the dynamics involved, but the fact that for every 100 doors we knocked on, only fifteen to twenty opened serves as an illustration. Access in ethnography is always partial and temporary. Once in an immersive situation, our observations focused on five key dynamics: setting, characterisations, interactions, mood and the role and effects of the presence of digital devices. All of these we recorded in jottings, small notes, text messages and voice memos to ourselves as we moved through many fieldwork days. Since every hour in the field demands around two hours of writing fieldnotes, most evenings and weekends in Brussels were spent on this. Together with the interview transcripts and the official and journalistic texts we collected, the resulting notes became the book's raw material. After more than five years of active research, the fieldnotes amounted to more than 1,000 pages of size 10 typeset notes.

In between fieldwork trips, and after the end of our main research period in 2023, we collectively worked with and qualitatively coded all these notes using the research software NVivo. Our approach to coding was initially explorative to categorise the material. Given our theoretical focus on practice, rather than code the material based on the participant, the moment or the location, we followed methodological approaches from interpretive policy analysis to develop codes that captured how our research participants related to and did things. Framed in this way, coding 'involves more than the mere descriptive organisation of a mass of data. Good codes tell you something about the data in a way that connects hitherto

[6] Amit, V. (2000). *Constructing the Field: Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Contemporary World*. Routledge; Wilkinson, C. (2013). Ethnographic Methods. In L. Shepherd (Ed.), *Critical Approaches to Security Studies: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (pp. 129–145). Taylor & Francis.

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unconnected instances of the empirical material'.[7] This process took almost a year.

Our coding list included technology-specific categories of action like 'posting on social media', 'texting' or 'monitoring the online debate', as well as more general practices linked to political and diplomatic work such as 'conducting a meeting', 'liaising with the capital' or 'following the rules'. Over time, the codes and the relations between them became the thematic and theoretical building blocks of our study. In this phase of the process, we used NVivo as a tool to help us systematise, categorise and remember the nuances and highlights of an eclectic and extensive data set. While this software can also be used to classify, categorise and relate materials automatically, we deployed it primarily to identify patterns and draw connections: think of the multiple examples assigned to a code-heading as stacks of paper, and the codes as the Post-it note stuck on top of each to signify what the stories from the field exemplify.

While readers of this book may recognise all the real places and environments in which we worked, we anonymised all the individuals with whom we interacted. Since names function as markers of identity (including gender and national background, both of which are important to understand an individual's position in the field), we selected pseudonyms following a public list of the most common men and women names in the European Union member states at the time of writing.

An ethnographic study is always particular and partial, shaped and bounded by questions of method, access, funding resources, time and, not least, luck. While the work of European civil servants and diplomats is often secretive and necessarily confidential, our focus on technology presented another methodological challenge. How should we acknowledge the omnipresence of screens, connections and devices without either becoming blind to them or falling into the

[7] Wagenaar, H. (2011). *Meaning in Action: Interpretation and Dialogue in Policy Analysis*. Routledge, p. 261.

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traps of over-sensationalism or nostalgia for an imagined, golden, analogue past? Our consciousness of the need to navigate this territory highlighted the ethnographic conundrum of how to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.

While any research project can be designed and prepared, in the case of ethnography there is much that cannot be planned. In 2018, we began by asking members of the Brussels Bubble about their daily work rhythms, their sense of the role of digital tools, and what they considered to be essential characteristics of a competent EU diplomat. From November 2018 until January 2020, we met and interviewed more than sixty people and attended many exciting – and many boring – meetings. Many of our participants were enthusiastic, with one joking, 'Finally, someone who will explain Twitter to me!' while others asked, tongue-in-cheek, if we couldn't spend the time talking about something less tedious. Conversation by conversation, our research participants showed us glimpses of their attitudes along with small but precious pieces of their world.

Then, like the big twist before the final climax of a play, everything was upturned. In March 2020, all fieldtrips were cancelled, EU institutions closed their doors, and most political, diplomatic and social life migrated online – and from one day to the next, the territory that ethnographers call 'the field' was effectively shut down. Our first reactions were uncertainty and dismay. But as the weeks passed, it dawned on us that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a case of ethnography's 'tragic serendipity'.[8] Tragic because of the grief, desperation and uncertainty that coronavirus brought – but serendipitous because of the dynamic impact it had on our research. Suddenly, the questions we had been asking for a year and a half – 'How do you use your phone?,' 'How important are digital information flows for your work?' or 'Do digital technologies change or undermine how you relate to your colleagues?' – were at the top of everybody's mind. With cautious enthusiasm, we followed the Brussels Bubble as

[8] Eggeling, Embracing the "Inverted Commas", p. 1343.

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it struggled to adapt to its digital 'new normal', while we simultaneously struggled to adapt to our own. The constraints of the pandemic entailed a stark shift in our methods, forcing us to interact with the field from a distance and via the screen. Yet our goal – to chronicle how Bubble officials use and understand technologies – stayed the same.

The version of the Brussels Bubble you encountered in these pages is the version given to us by our research participants, but it is also our version, shaped by our perspective and by the questions we posed to the ethnographic material. While much of the text in our account is written as narrative, that is, as story, 'story' should not be taken to mean fictitious or invented. The stories we present here are real and concern real people. All direct quotations were recorded during interviews or transcribed into fieldnotes on the day we heard them, and all the places we mention existed at the time, as most still do. There really is an EXKi coffee shop on Place Schuman and a Café Paul on Rui Froissart, and the zebra crossing on Rue de la Loi – at least prior to the major remodelling of the nearby square in 2025 – really was painted in the colours of the rainbow.

Just as the central square at the heart of our research field is undergoing a remodelling at the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026, the world of EU politics itself is also constantly changing. Our book provides a snapshot of European politics in the late-2010s, during the coronavirus pandemic and in the first half of the 2020s. In many ways, it is already now an artefact of contemporary history. New challenges are on the rise for those who live and work in the Bubble, as well as for those, like us, who want to understand their world. Not least, we hope that writing this book may inspire more ethnographic research on Brussels, diplomacy, global governance and the politics and societal transformations in the wake of digitalisation and technological change.

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