

17th November 2021, 2pm - 6.30pm

COVID and what next? Methodological Implications for Digitalization Research in Rural-Peripheral Areas

Online Workshop

Chairs: Prof. Dr. Heike Mayer (Uni Bern), Dr. Julia Binder (BTU Cottbus), Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann (IRS Erkner), Dr. Ariane Sept (IRS Erkner)

The pandemic not only confronts political actors with the enormous task of finding answers to the infection processes and how to deal with it in society, but also researchers are confronted with new challenges in adapting their research to the transforming socio-spatial conditions. Former research designs lose their validity, field approaches have to be redefined, and social actors in public space become invisible.

Against this background, digital space is gaining enormous importance. The relevance of digitalization for the shift of everyday practices to the virtual is only one example that reorients digitalization research in perspective. Rural-peripheral areas are also subject to growing attention in terms of urban-rural digital inequalities. Rural and urban migration, multilocality, as well as new forms of working and living are widely discussed in the media and enrich the dynamic debates about the opportunities of digitalization for rural areas.

Our workshop aims to provide a forum to discuss the methodological challenges of the pandemic for digitalization research in rural areas. We address researchers as actors of knowledge production in order to reflect on pitfalls and limitations as well as on new opportunities for research. The digital format is intended to provide a forum to present intermediate and current work, but also to openly discuss uncertainties.

Programme overview

2:00 – 2:10 pm	Welcome (Gabriela Christmann)
2:10 – 2:40 pm	Keynote 1: Researching digitalisation in remote rural regions during Covid-19: the case of the Scottish Crofters Leanne Townsend, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, UK
2:40 – 3:00 pm	Q&A and Discussion (Chair: Heike Mayer)
3:00 – 3:10 pm	<i>Coffee Break (small breakout sessions for networking and chatting)</i>
3:10 – 4:45 pm	Parallel working groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digitalisation research in rural areas (Chair: Heike Mayer) - Integrated methods (Chair: Julia Binder) - Dynamics of knowledge traditions (Chair: Gabriela Christmann)
4:45 – 5:10 pm	Short reports from the working groups (Chair: Antje Matern)
5:10 – 5:30 pm	<i>Coffee Break (small breakout sessions for networking and chatting)</i>
5:30 – 6:00 pm	Keynote 2: Methods from the margins: from Myanmar's digital villages towards a global research agenda Hilary Faxon, University of California, Berkeley, USA
6:00 – 6:20 pm	Q&A and Discussion (Chair: Julia Binder)
6:20 – 6:30 pm	Conclusion, Take away messages and farewell (Ariane Sept)
6:30 pm	Optional networking

Keynotes

Keynote 1: Researching digitalisation in remote rural regions during Covid-19: the case of the Scottish Crofters

Leanne Townsend, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, UK
2:10 – 2:40 pm

Restrictions to travel and face-to-face contact during Covid-19 have had profound implications for social research. Researchers have had to reimagine research methods in order to reach participants for successful data collection. Many projects have switched to running research activities virtually, through online workshops, focus groups and interviews. This can be an effective research approach, though it depends upon research participants having relatively good levels of digital access and skills. In this keynote I will present insights from research on the EU H2020 DESIRA project. DESIRA (“Digitalisation: Economic and Social Impacts in Rural Areas”) explores the impacts of rural digitalisation in 20 European countries across three domains – agriculture, forestry and rural communities.

Keynote 2: Methods from the margins: from Myanmar's digital villages towards a global research agenda

Hilary Faxon, University of California, Berkeley, USA
5:30 – 6 pm

Dr. Hilary Oliva Faxon is a human geographer whose research examines how digital tools extend and transform political ecologies, agrarian relations and global development. She uses participatory methodologies that highlight marginalized voices and new digital methodologies (including social media analysis and critical remote sensing) alongside the traditional tools of interviews, ethnography, household surveys, and document review in order to understand environmental politics and uneven development in the digital age. She leads a collaborative research project on digital mobilization in Myanmar and has taught graduate student workshops on Researching (with) Social Media for the American Association of Geographers. She is currently a Ciriacy-Wantrup Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California Berkeley, where she is working on two book projects tentatively titled, 'Golden Land: Making Race, Property and Nation in Myanmar,' and 'The Peasant and her Smartphone: Technology, Violence and Revolution in Myanmar's Countryside.'

Parallel working groups

3:10 – 4:45 pm (each paper 15min presentation, 10 min discussion)

1. Digitalisation research in rural areas

Chair: Heike Mayer

Presenters: Tobias Mettenberger | Matthias Hannemann, Susann Schäfer, Sebastian Henn |

Blom Meijering

Reporter: Antje Matern

Analysing digital pioneers in rural areas from my big city home office – How the pandemic shaped the issue and the methodology of an ongoing research project

Tobias Mettenberger | BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg

Our research project on „Digital Pioneers in Rural Regional Development (DigPion)“ was fundamentally shaped by the COVID19 pandemic in at least two ways. First, our research field of rural digitalisation has become much more dynamic, since businesses, public administrations and civil society faced the challenges of social distancing and lockdown policies. After decades of oftentimes slow and ineffectual digital changes the pandemic left no other option, as re-organising social processes online, e.g. in the areas of office working, schooling or cultural events. Hence, digital pioneers, as individual or collective drivers of positive economic, social or ecological development, emerged or expanded in multiple social fields. Following our research aims of systematically identifying such pioneers and understanding, which beneficial resp. hindering context conditions are influencing their agency, the pandemic situation has become an inevitable part of the empirical phenomena, we are dealing with: Which kinds of digitalisation processes have been accelerated by COVID19? Which actors are promoting those dynamics? Which digital changes will remain after the pandemic is under control?

Second, COVID19 forced us to fundamentally re-conceptualise our empirical approach to the field. As we wrote our proposal in pre-pandemic times, extensive qualitative fieldwork on site was the key part of our concept. Soon, in 2020 it became very obvious, that we would not be able to travel to our two case study regions (in Baden-Württemberg and Mecklenburg West-Pomerania) for conducting comprehensive face-to-face interviews. Accordingly, we had to change our empirical design in a way, that allows us to get as much relevant insights as possible, acting from our distant (home) offices. Against that background we developed a phone interview questionnaire, combining open as well as closed questions with a name generator-based egocentric network analysis. The latter is based on the software “EgoWeb 2.0”, which enables us to systematically collect and categorise network data during and after the interview process. Those data sets will be quantitatively analysed by using SPSS.

Bringing together those two major pandemic impacts on our research, I argue, that COVID19 has left us in a trade-off between being very open and at the same time highly structured in our empirical approach: On the one hand, the pandemic situation has increased the highly explorative nature of our research issue, so that we should avoid too narrow perspectives and questions concerning the characteristics, agencies and contextual embedment of our digital pioneers. On the other hand, effective interviewing from the distance demands higher degrees of structuration, as they can be achieved by using closed questions or the EgoWeb 2.0 tool.

In my talk I will elaborate on that trade-off by giving insights into our interviewing experiences and our empirical material. Based on that, I will present some crucial assumptions, in which ways the pandemic has shaped the phenomenon of rural digital pioneers as well as our analytical approach to it.

Research in the Digital Periphery – Insights from Qualitative Research with Firms and Entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Matthias Hannemann, Susann Schäfer, Sebastian Henn | Friedrich Schiller University Jena

So far, the COVID-19 pandemic and related constraints have severely impacted empirical research practices in human geography, largely limiting researchers to the use of online methods that do not allow for direct face-to-face interaction with their research subjects. In this paper, we argue that the accessibility and implementation of online research methods and thus the quality of research is influenced by a three-dimensional setting composed of digital infrastructures, technical literacy in the sense of the subjects' ability to overcome technical challenges, and the subjects' digital lifestyle, i. e. the degree of digitality in the research participants' daily lives. We argue that these dimensions delimit a digital periphery that is spatially and socially unevenly structured. Using vignettes of empirical research situations in two ongoing research projects, we explore the characteristics of this digital periphery. In particular, we present snapshots of situations where the peripheral position of the research subjects becomes very evident, e.g., in cases where irritations with technical settings or misunderstandings due to online interviewing occurred. We conclude by developing recommendations that help researchers to deal with digital peripheries in research practice.

Why do high-tech startups locate where they do?

Blom Meijering | Bundesinstitut für Bau- Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR)

High-tech startups are engines of employment creation (Kane, 2010; Brown et al., 2019). To attract and retain high-tech startups, studying the location choices in their life course is important. Moreover, it fosters an understanding on what attracts them to a site (*pull*-factors), what might push them out of a present location (*push*-factors) and what keeps them stay put (*keep*-factors) (Pellenbarg et al., 2002). Generally, it is expected that high-tech startups locate at places that stimulate productive entrepreneurship and, thus, innovation because startups often have to innovate to increase their survival prospects. The *entrepreneurial ecosystem concept* describes how ten location-specific elements foster such productive entrepreneurship. Although some existing studies show that various elements indeed influence location choices, empirical research on the role of all entrepreneurial ecosystem elements in location choices is mostly scarce, as the concept has productive entrepreneurship as outcome rather than location choices. Therefore, this study is an empirical testing of the role of entrepreneurial ecosystem elements in location choices in which the entrepreneurial decision-making is placed at the center of analysis by using in-depth interviews.

Literature

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2. Integrated methods

Chair: Julia Binder

Presenters: Elena Trubina | Reto Bürgin | Carla Rene Baldivieso Soruco

Reporter: Ariane Sept

Combining “before” and “after” approaches: examining walking in course of pandemics

Elena Trubina | Ural Federal University

In this presentation, I'll reflect on the comparative research of the practices of walking in Tampere (Finland) and Ekaterinburg (Russia) conducted in 2020-2021. I'll focus on the ways I solicited interview accounts from research participants and my own fieldwork experiences. This study aimed to examine (1) the performative and existential aspects of walking; (2) the diverse ways in which “healthy” distances have been maintained (i.e. walking towards “10 thousand steps”); (3) repetitive walking along untreated roads and sidewalks under unfavorable weather conditions. The findings and my own observations about the field walk shed a broader light upon the meanings which this workshop discusses: (1) changing meanings of “peripheralization”, (2) the dynamics among the digital methods of research and “digital” practices of the respondents. I'll discuss usefulness of “blitz” interviews, the increased importance of autoethnography under the conditions of pandemics and a need to problematize existing conceptual frameworks in light of the “new normal”.

Analyzing digital multilocality - Combining and integrating digital and analog research methods to analyze multilocal work arrangements between urban centers and rural peripheries

Reto Bürgin | University of Bern

With Heike Mayer, Alexander Kashev, Sigve Haug | University of Bern

In recent years, knowledge work became increasingly location-independent (Nadler, 2014). The higher use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as laptops, smartphones, tablets and the possibility to access the Internet in different locations, lead to new geographies of work. In doing so, employees, businesses and entrepreneurs can relocate part of their economic activities from urban to rural areas such as, for example, the Swiss Alps. Therefore, an increasing number of knowledge workers that mainly work at the employers' premises or home offices in cities start to temporary work in those mountain areas (in co-working spaces or in second homes).

In our study, we analyzed digital multilocal work arrangements of knowledge workers, who engage with digital technologies at both workplaces in the urban center and the rural periphery. Those workers mainly work in an urban central areas but temporarily withdraw themselves to peripheral mountain areas in the Swiss Alps to work undisturbed and concentrated. In doing so, we focused on topics such as self-chosen marginality (Grabher, 2018), urban-rural linkages (Bosworth & Venhorst, 2018; Mayer et al., 2016; Kalantaridis et al., 2019), temporary proximity (Torre, 2008; Torre & Rallet, 2005) and embeddedness (Bosworth & Willett, 2011; Jack & Anderson, 2002).

We examined a sample of six multilocal knowledge workers. To do so, we analyzed the participant's work activities at both workplaces in the urban center and in the rural periphery using a novel created mixed methods approach that combines digital and analog methods: Geotracking, laptop app tracking, smartphone app tracking, self-administered digital diaries, ethnographic walk-along observations and semi-structured interviews. Those methods were applied in two consecutive phases of data collection and they are truly integrated (Bryman, 2007). In doing so, we collected and integrated data from heterogeneous data sources in order to bridge to qualitative/quantitative divide to build better methods (Bathelt & Li, 2020). The three tracking methods are quantitative and

the others were qualitative in nature. With this mixed methods approach, we also contribute to the ongoing discussion on mixed methods in rural studies (Strijker et al., 2020) and generally the discussion on mixed methods in social science research.

At the workshop 'COVID and what next? Methodological Implications for Digitalization Research in Rural-Peripheral Areas' I want to share the study's new methodological insights. In doing so, I will provide emphasis on data processing and analysis, the recruitment of the sample and the consideration of ethical issues in using such a methodological approach combining digital and analog methods. Those findings will be reflected in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic in which traditional methods that require face-to-face interaction come to the limit. Despite our fieldwork was conducted pre Covid-19, I will discuss in an outlook the opportunities and limitations of using digital research methods during Covid-19.

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Social-ecological research in Covid19 times in rural Bolivia: the case of the Weenhayek artisanal fishery

Carla Rene Baldivieso Soruco | Humboldt University of Berlin, Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF)

The objective of our study was to understand the governance mechanisms used by the Weenhayeks in the complex biodiversity system where fishing is practiced, and how the differences in their management systems determine the use of resources under livelihood transformation processes. This population is highly dependent on the Pilcomayo River system; they gather fruits and produce handicrafts and handmade furniture from the forests in their area; some families practice agriculture, livestock and beekeeping on a small scale. They live in a regional context where economies and lifestyles are undergoing major changes in the face of existential threats to agrobiodiversity in their habitats.

We decided to undertake a flexible study design to cope with the conditions imposed by the Covid19 pandemic. Considering the complexity of socioecological research, where field research is highly valued especially when the study is based on qualitative methods. In addition, we used a qualitative

case study strategy to examine the fishery system. This facilitated the examination of a wide range of evidence, accompanied by triangulation of methods through cross-validation. Theory-based data collection, analysis and interpretation were conducted in parallel. The study was elaborated in three main stages: i) exploratory work: contextualization and local engagement, ii) investigating variables in depth, iii) data analysis and theoretical discussion. The data collection focus changes on each phase, considering: i) diagnostic analysis and local expectations, ii) mechanisms involved in the governance system and variables classification, iii) analysis of processes through the conceptual framework. Evidence was obtained through document analysis, media review, participant and non-participant observations, and exploratory and semi-structured interviews.

In terms of time, the on-site research for the exploratory fieldwork lasted two weeks, the exploratory interviews and participant observation took place during this time. This phase coincided with the pre-pandemic period, making it possible to conduct the field research. All other methods were carried out simultaneously for five months using digital tools. Ethnographic methods such as media review were important as supporting tools, to become familiar with the context of the region. Document analysis, including ethnographic studies such as academic archives transcribing interviews conducted by anthropologists, were important means of information to learn from local voices. Digital media were used extensively in the research to conduct non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews, through video calls and phone calls.

The challenges encountered are related to the access to technological means by the participating population and the distribution of power, which conditions access to diverse local subjects. It is noted that people in a better economic or power situation were able to participate in the virtual meetings, as well as the fact that we were able to contact mainly men of adult age for the interviews. Having a research commitment with the local rural organization allowed us to continue with the research. We argue that digital tools contribute greatly to the challenges imposed in this type of circumstances. We emphasize the importance of field study for the engagement with local processes and to know the reality from and with local collectives.

3. Dynamics of knowledge traditions

Chair: Gabriela Christmann

Presenters: Astrid Zabel, Laurenzia Karrer | Manuel Nicklich, Silke Röbenack, Stefan Sauer, Jasmin Schreyer, Amelie Tihlarik | Francois Questiaux, Sofie Mortensen

Reporter: Nicole Zerrer

Implications of COVID-19 for transdisciplinary and transformative research and education

Astrid Zabel, Laurenzia Karrer | University of Bern

A plurality of methods is available for transdisciplinary research and learning. Despite their many differences, a common trait is that they build on communication. Much of the transdisciplinary research and learning literature assumes that communication takes place in face-to-face settings. In face-to-face talk, factual information is transmitted from sender to receiver and non-verbal communication, sometimes referred to as ‘touch’, helps convey emotions and establish trust. Entirely shifting communication to the digital space – as became necessary during the pandemic - opens questions on how to create a form of ‘digital touch’ to establish the often unspoken attitudes that frame communication in general and transdisciplinary research and learning in specific.

In this presentation we focus on three such attitudes: participation and inclusion (who has the opportunity to talk), trust (what is dared to be said), and contributive fairness (who says how much). We discuss findings from a literature review as well as first empirical insights gained during a workshop on digital communication experiences at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE).

Pictures from restricted spaces: opportunities and challenges of (remote) photovoice as a method for an inclusive research agenda

Sofie Mortensen, Francois Questiaux | University of Copenhagen

Photovoice has gained traction as a research method that can engage different emotional perspectives than standard interviews, give more space to the research participants, contribute to social change and add a spatial understanding of areas otherwise not accessible to researchers for instance due to conflict, and more recently, COVID. Yet, despite the various benefits the method creates, it is predominantly used within health research in Western contexts, although important exceptions exist. This article seeks to understand how photovoice can be used in other contexts, namely in rural-peripheral areas in Ghana, Burkina Faso and Thailand, the two former with women shea nut collectors and the latter Burmese migrants in the tourism and agriculture sectors. In doing so, we explore the opportunities and challenges for photovoice as a way to give the participants as well as the research assistants more power in the research process and through that contribute to a more inclusive research agenda. In the midst of travel restrictions, we seek to understand how photovoice can be used to gain a better understanding of inaccessible areas through remote collection in Burkina Faso, and in retrospect through Burmese migrants’ photos from prior visits to Myanmar. Furthermore, we discuss how photovoice, as it mobilizes the participant’s gaze and perception of their environment, is a useful tool to understand different spaces and subjectivities and make otherwise marginalized groups more visible. The research and data collection is still in progress, and conclusions forthcoming.

Vielfältigkeit von Räumen in virtuellen qualitativen Interviews - Bedingungen und Effekte - Multiplicity of spaces in virtual qualitative interviews - conditions and effects -

Manuel Nicklich, Silke Röbenack, Stefan Sauer, Jasmin Schreyer, Amelie Tihlarik | FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg

Durch die Covid-19 Pandemie wurden in kürzester Zeit fast alle Lebens- und Arbeitsbereiche gezwungen digitale Alternativen für sonst rein analoge Praktiken anzubieten. Aufgrund der weitreichenden Kontaktbeschränkungen zur Vermeidung von steigenden Infektionszahlen kam es in vielen sozialen Feldern zu einer Beschleunigung der Digitalisierung und auch Virtualisierung, die auch die empirische Sozialforschung, insbesondere die Erhebung und Analyse qualitativer Daten vor (neue) Herausforderungen gestellt hat. Die Ausrufung einer „Krise der qualitativen Sozialforschung“¹, nicht zuletzt wegen der fehlenden körperlichen Ko-Präsenz, der sich veränderten Interaktionsordnungen, dem Wegbrechen von eingespielten Ritualen und soziale Praktiken, ist somit nicht weiter verwunderlich.

Aber die Diskussion über digitale Interviews ist keineswegs neu (Bampton & Cowton 2002; Janghorban et al. 2014; Krouwel et al. 2019; Leinhos 2019; Meß 2015; Salmons 2014; Weller 2017) und wird auch nicht nur als potentiell Ende der qualitativen Sozialforschung betrachtet. Im Gegenteil, es wird immer wieder auf die vergrößerte Reichweite der potentiellen Interviewpartner*innen hingewiesen, da nun auch geographisch weit verstreute Interaktionspartner*innen bequem und kostengünstig erreicht werden können (Archibald et al. 2019). Darüber hinaus ermöglichen Videokonferenzplattformen eine multimodale Echtzeit-Interaktion, in der etwa mittels Chatfunktionen zusätzliche Inhalte geteilt, betrachtet und thematisiert werden können, wodurch auf verschiedenen Ebenen erzählgenerierende Impulse gesetzt werden können, die die Interaktionen und Kommunikation anregen.

Nichtsdestotrotz handelt es sich um eine ambivalent geführte Diskussion, in welcher der Aspekt der sozialen Ungleichheit, der sich potentiell auch in und über Methoden empirischer Sozialforschung manifestiert bzw. reproduziert (u.a. King et al. 2019: 122) in den Hintergrund gerückt ist. Unser Plädoyer ist daher, das (veränderte) methodische Vorgehen mit den digitalen Herausforderungen auch einer Ungleichheitsperspektive in den Blick zu nehmen, insbesondere deswegen, weil sich die derzeitige Sondersituation zu verstetigen und normalisieren scheint. Es stellt sich nicht mehr nur die Frage, ob und inwiefern sich bisherige qualitative Methoden ins Virtuelle übertragen lassen. Dazu werden wir sowohl den Blick auf die infrastrukturellen, technischen Interviewräume richten als auch auf die physisch-räumlichen Bedingungen, die damit einhergehen, und auch auf die Beziehungsräume, die damit korrespondieren. Wir reflektieren kritisch, was sich davon auch über die Pandemie hinaus erhalten lässt und welche Folgewirkungen derart veränderte Forschungspraktiken mit sich bringen, oder anders: mit welcher ‚neuen‘ Normalität wir als Soziolog*innen in unserer empirischen Forschung nach/jenseits der Pandemie rechnen können.

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¹ (Reichertz, Jo: BMTalk zu "Qualitative Forschung in Zeiten von Corona" vom 29.09.2020. Berliner Methodentreffen 2020. Online verfügbar unter https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GtWm0R9Rck&t=36s, letzter Zugriff 26.03.2021)

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