# TO BE OR NOT TO BE THERE
## Remote ethnography during the crisis and beyond

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## Introduction

The phrase "being there" appears like a mantra in anthropology – including in the titles of monographs and articles (e.g. Bradburd 1998; Watson 1999; Hannerz 2003; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; Davis and Konner 2011). It describes the way research is carried out following the example of the first hero of anthropology, Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942; see 1922), who started a "revolution in anthropology" (Jarvie 1970). This was marked by his descent from the veranda of colonial outposts to the people studied, with which anthropology became a "normal science" (Kuhn 1962), as it was established at the turn of the 20th century by the discipline's "founding fathers", who in addition to Malinowski included Franz Boas (1858–1942), Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) (for more on the famous four, see Eriksen and Nielsen 2013: 46–67).[1] Without the approach that they helped to conceive, each in his own way, it is today hard to imagine ethnographic work: from arrival in the field and co-existing with the locals until departure, which ends in the creation of a monograph, an article, a report or some other text, in which the researcher presents what happened "there".

And what happens during times and situations when we can no longer go "there"? And, at a time when it is not possible to go "there", how can we deal with the possibilities of a more flexible relationship between "here" and "there", which ethnologists, looking at our local environment, also nurtured here? This is what we deal with in this article. As a starting point, we used the experiences of anthropologists and ethnologists – together with our own experiences – during the covid-19 pandemic, which marked 2020 and stretched into 2021, with the possibility of stretching even further. During this time, the world has been in the throes of a health crisis, which influenced both the everyday life in local communities, cultural creativity and entertainment, socialising, and global politics and economy. The crisis has also left a strong mark in anthropology, the main

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[1] With regard to the four, it is worth mentioning that Marcel Mauss is not exactly known for being "there", i.e. in the field. In fact, even Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown carried out relatively few field studies, and when he did, it was in a camp, rather than in the "natural" environment.

approach in which – the ethnographic one – is based on the idea of co-existing with the people we are studying in their everyday environment, which facilitates in-depth learning about their customs, practices and ways of life (Agar 1980; Atkinson et al 2007; Muršič 2011; Campbell and Lassiter 2015; Matera and Biscaldi 2021). Of course, this kind of co-existence was very difficult due to the pandemic. At the time of complete lockdown in public life, personal contacts were limited mostly to our own households, which also limited the possibilities of carrying out any standard ethnographic fieldwork. Even when the measures were relaxed, it was possible to communicate with other people mainly through the use of internet tools due to the limitations of movement.

In this article, we wonder why anthropologists find it difficult to give up the idea of having to "be there" during fieldwork, in the same space with other people. In a purely human sense, this is an obvious necessity, but we wish to point out that we can be "there" in other ways, for example with the help of a digital camera and sound and picture on modern information and communications tools. Nowadays, we can be "there" almost anywhere and at any time, without having to face the classical dilemma of choosing an armchair on the veranda or in an office, or a tent among the people. Before the pandemic, only few researchers in anthropology used hybrid research techniques (Przybylski 2021) – mainly the researchers and the methods that were interested in and involved virtual worlds (Boellstorff et al. 2012) or those who were unable to carry out their research in any other way (Coleman 2014). This is somewhat surprising since we live in a time when technological tools, such as computers, tablets and telephones, enable us to be together even when we are physically apart (cf. Turkle 2011 and her metaphor that with technology we are increasingly more "alone together"), while carrying out at a distance broader or enriched empirical research (Hsu 2014).

In the article we explain that online/offline and digital/analogue hybridity of the ethnographic experience began long before the pandemic (Przybylski 2021). In view of this we wonder how, on the basis of research and development projects and other experiences, which even during the pre-covid time went beyond the boundaries of anthropology, we can adapt the fundamental method of the discipline, i.e. ethnography, to various uncertain situations, supplementing it and improving it in the expectation of a crisis that will mark the future. We also discuss whether it perhaps makes sense to abandon what are often unrealistic ideas that there is no alternative to "being there" if we wish to learn about and understand the ways of life in communities around the world. We advocate the modernisation, enrichment and supplementation of ethnography with the help of digital technologies, which open up new research possibilities and establish platforms for fieldwork, where we co-exist with people in time, but not necessarily also in space.

As an introduction, we wish to explain that in our opinion, with the current health crisis and the introduction of new approaches, ethnographic fieldwork and physical presence among people do not end but, on the contrary, gain an even greater value. Building upon ethnography using the tools we present in this article can increase its potentials and facilitate access to people also in uncertain periods, milestone moments and crises, such as war, unrest, environmental catastrophes and natural disasters, and at remote locations which cannot be reached easily and quickly. Neither does remote

research mean that information from the field and interventions among the people there will be any less profound, especially if fieldwork is combined with other approaches and ethnography *in situ* is combined with remote ethnography. In this way we also avoid the concern that we would be returning to the period of *armchair anthropology*, about which in many ways, as will be shown in the article, we have a false impression.

## Breaking down the stereotypes about armchair anthropology

In the circumstances that appeared during the covid-19 pandemic, many anthropologists were forced to stay at home. Because of the measures designed to limit the pandemic, they had to avoid direct contacts with people. Visits at home became risky, public spaces were not accessible, work environments were closed for "external" visitors. Direct "eye to eye" communication was limited to rare opportunities, longer conversations were almost impossible and, above all, it was impossible to travel "there", to a place of planned research. This also excluded participant observation, which is (still) the mainstay of almost all ethnographic work. In order to continue their research work, some researchers temporarily turned into "armchair" anthropologists, whereby we are referring to the anthropological research at a distance, reminiscent of what the "forefathers" of the discipline did in the 19th century, perhaps the best known among them were Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) and James Frazer (1854–1941), and of researching folk culture on the basis of questionnaires filled in by local scribes and analysed by, if at all, scholars in their offices (a typical example is the way data was collected for Göth's topography, the part of which that is relevant for Slovene Styria, was translated by Niko Kuret; 1985, 1987, 1989, 1993).[2] And even those researchers who prior to the establishment of the method of participant observation had carried out fieldwork, such as Robert Ranulph Marett (1866–1943) or Charles Gabriel Seligman (1873–1940), did this by creating an office in a colonial outpost and on the veranda received the chosen local "informants", whom they interviewed with the help of local translators with different levels of translation skills.

Their work is often imagined as less valuable and scientifically suitable, since – at least according to the stereotypical ideas – those researchers as a rule did not visit remote areas. It was supposed to be too dangerous and dirty a task, unworthy of their reputation, class and profession. We imagine them as passive analysts of ethnographic material, acquired with other people's help, who simply overlooked the meaning and importance of fieldwork. As explained by Efram Sera-Shriar in his book about the emergence of British anthropology (2013), in which he discusses the relationship between various kinds of observation and a field experience, these ideas are in many ways erroneous. Tylor, Frazer

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[2]   We call them the "forefathers" in line with the analogy with the above mentioned four "founding fathers", mentioned by Eriksen and Nielsen (2013), in order to emphasise a continuity in the discipline, which in fact had a number of starts and centres. All the above-mentioned founders influenced mostly Western European, i.e. mainly British anthropological tradition, while in Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere around the world, other "fathers" and "mothers" of the then ethnographic and comparative ethnographic schools were talked about (for Slovenia, see Fikfak 1999), while the forefathers had begun ethnographic research already in the early 18th century (Vermeulen in Roldán 1995; Vermeulen 2015).

and other anthropologists of that time were in fact aware of the problem of obtaining "second hand" data and material from "informants", as they called them, who collected the data for them in the field, while at the same time they understood the advantages of working at a distance. Every anthropologist actively supervised and organised his own network for collecting information and historical material within the framework of the then British Empire. Their main concern was how to give meaning to the data and interpret it, while direct experience, acquired in contact with the locals, was of secondary importance to them. It was the material that was at the forefront, not the people.

If we think about it, the then anthropologists really did research in less depth in the field – if they had any field experience at all – but it is also true that they carried out a "multi-sited" remote ethnography, since their "informants" were in fact both a medium for establishing contacts as well as a source for obtaining data – like today's databases and digital tools, such as Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp, used more and more frequently by researchers in their anthropological work (see for example Hsu 2013). Local "informants" were essentially the means that enabled the researchers to be "there", in the field, even though in reality they were in their offices, either near the informants or in another part of the world; they were able to deal with a number of locations and study various ways of life and compare them. This is how already a century and a half ago in a slightly unusual way they began to jump between locations, stretching the mantra of "being there" to "being there ... and there ... and there", as recommended on his way to a multi-sited following of phenomena in ethnographic work by Ulf Hannerz (2003).

The final shift from armchair anthropology, at least in most of the canon, happened with Malinowski and his research in the first decades of the 20th century on the then Papua and, above all, on the Trobriand Islands. His research expedition, which he described in detail in his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) was, from the viewpoint of anthropological methodology, in many ways ground-breaking, perhaps even more so because his journey to the remote location, where he spent a number of years, signified the start of the idealisation of the concept of "being there", the starting point of which was observation with participation in the local environment after you have "pitched a tent right in their village" (1922: 7). His stay among the aboriginal peoples, studying their language, customs and rituals and the descriptions of the adversities that he pointed out in his posthumously published personal diary (Malinowski 1989), still represent the starting point in the ethnographic coordinate system of anthropology. This "zero point" in the system is marked by the very idea that "being there" is the fundamental condition of all ethnographic fieldwork and a *conditio sine qua non* of anthropological research (Watson 1999). According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 8), this kind of fieldwork is the competitive advantage of anthropology in comparison to other disciplines, since it contributes to its recognisable status also due to the stereotypical image of a lonely hero who – as if following Campbell's (1949) famous scheme of a hero's journey – leaves the safety of his home, faces dangers in foreign lands and then returns home and reveals to the public his findings or, forever returning to different fields, acts as an engaged and completely different public intellectual from other bookish scholars (about Boas see Whitfield 2012; about Lévi-Strauss see Hayes and Hayes 1970). This image of anthropologists as heroes, who must set off from home into the unknown and

return with finding, was perpetuated not only in the academic environment but, as explained by MacClancy (2005), repeated *ad nauseum* by the media. It even became a constituent part of popular culture, such as films and novels and, more recently, memes, i.e. humorous or provocative images and inscriptions, circling the internet (cf. Podjed and Gorup 2021; Way 2021).

## From "being there" to "being then"

Ideas about it being necessary for learning about customs and practices with the help of the anthropological approach of "being there" began to fade with the establishment of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in the second half of the 20th century. At the turn of the 20th century, many examples of using tools for internet surveys, carrying out substantive analysis and also in-depth ethnographic studies were already known, where digital networks and virtual worlds were investigated (e.g. Reid 1995; Miller and Slater 1999; Hine 2001; Manovich 2002; Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2009). Interviews had already started being carried out much earlier by anthropologists (and even more so by sociologists) on the phone and other audio and video appliances for remote communication (see, for example, Vail 2001) and they increasingly used *netnography* (Kozinets 2020) and researched within digital spaces and on social media (e.g. Ramšak 2007; Podjed 2010; Miller 2011; Miller at al. 2016). *Telepresence*, the ability to see and act at a distance, became an everyday experience with internet technologies, both with presence in a synthetic, i.e. computer created, environment, as well as with "presence" at a remote physical location with picture and sound, transported in real time (Manovich 2002: 165).

The covid-19 pandemic that marked 2020 and 2021 unexpectedly accelerated many social processes, including what is referred to as the *digital transformation*, i.e. a transition to a more comprehensive use of ICT in various social spheres: from the economy, education and politics to everyday tasks. With the help of ICT, scientists also started to connect more intensely, and those from the humanities began approaching people via this path more frequently and carrying out both quantitative and qualitative research remotely. Ethnographic research during the pandemic via Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and other communication tools drew attention to the multi-layered nature of the anthropological experience (Horton 2020) and various aspects of closeness (Cesare Schotzko 2020), and redefined the possibility for coexistence in the globalised world. Mobile phones (Horst and Miller 2005; Miller et al. 2021) proved to be a handy and useful resource for more lasting and less intrusive ways of communication, which offer a specific form of closeness while carrying out everyday tasks with occasional spoken and visual communication at a distance. In addition, it transpired that communication using ICT facilitates various forms of physical, sensory and emotional responses on both sides, even in simple forms of communication (e.g., Zoom), and even more with the tactile accessories and equipment for accessing *virtual reality*, which give people a feeling that they are together even though they are physically apart (Bennett 2020). But even before that, it had become increasingly obvious that digital tools facilitate much more efficient note taking, preserving and presenting sensory experiences of the life being studied (Hsu

2013), and also a more versatile interactivity during the implementation of ethnographic studies, both with locals and with colleagues in the same profession (Wang 2012).

The ethnographic experience during the pandemic has shown that with the use of ICT, new dimensions can be opened in anthropological research and, using digital aids, we can come even closer to people than we could in physical space. Marnie Howlett (2021), for example, describes her remote research in Ukraine, where she was unable to go to because of covid-19, and so she continued her research work over Zoom and tried to connect remotely with people, maintaining and deepening contacts with them. As she explained, in some cases she obtained a much more rounded image about people at a distance than during her visits in the same place, since through the use of digital media, the locals opened for her a view into their private life and talked to her in a more relaxed way than during a live physical meeting. Other researchers of online communication, who tried to find out when and how people reveal their "real selves" at internet (Bargh, McKenna in Fitzsimons 2002) and how cultural patterns can be revealed with ethnography at a distance (Postill 2016), describe similar experiences.

Another important work in the context of this discussion was published just before the pandemic; it was written by Tanja Ahlin and Fangfang Li (2019). In an article based on a study among trans-national families in India and migrant workers from Malesia, the authors explain that a field experience at a particular location is perhaps not necessarily the fundamental unit of anthropological research. According to them, the basic unit should be an event which can happen either in the physical space or a digital one – or in both simultaneously. Digital aids helped the two researchers to follow the people participating in their study even to locations, which would otherwise be inaccessible to them. In the article the authors propose that in future we should focus more on a "field event", which can describe any situation of ethnographic importance, which takes place either face to face or over ICT and is co-created by the ethnographer and the study participants (Ahlin and Li 2019: 18). In this way, at least in relevant examples, anthropology can finally be unburdened of the weight of the field and adjust its way of doing research to the situations in which people cooperate remotely with the help of technological aids.

## An opportunity for an upgrade of ethnography

We will now present a few examples from our own research practice that are connected with ethnography at a distance, and other methods through which we can bring a breath of fresh air to anthropological and ethnographic research and modernise it. Some of the approaches appeared before the pandemic, while on others the circumstances in which we found ourselves in 2020 and due to which we had to adjust not only our ways of life but also ways of doing research had crucial influence.

One of us – Dan Podjed – in March 2020, when the Slovene government proclaimed a covid-19 epidemic, began writing a diary with the title *Indoor Anthropology* and publishing it on social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, both in Slovene and English. In the diary, which was later published in book form (Podjed 2020a), he described on a daily basis for over a month how he had transformed from a

field researcher into an "armchair anthropologist". He started studying his own way of life during the time of limitations and measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus, and revealing his findings about how at a time of uncertainty and crisis people spend their free time, work remotely and buy things more carefully than in the past. In one of the texts, a reference appeared to "armchair anthropology" in a diary entry connected with remote learning, which described the problems that parents faced:

> We try to print and distribute into folders all the materials that the school sends us so that they do not get mixed up. While reading the material we receive via email, I get a feeling that teachers make an exceptional effort drawing it up. And that is not all: while examining the instructions, I sometimes feel that they must also regularly report what they had done during the week and perhaps even maintain a quarantine record, not only for themselves but for each of their pupils: how they are progressing, which tasks they have completed, how they prepared their public appearance... Similar records, called timesheets, must also be handed in on a weekly basis by we researchers, confirming that we have not been lying on the sofa all day – even when we actually have. (As a way of explanation: while writing most texts, including this one, I am lying on the sofa. If I sit at the table and write, very soon my back starts hurting and I am much less productive. Yes, during the quarantine I have evidently turned into an 'armchair anthropologist', a label used for the 19$^{th}$ century researchers, who sat at home, collecting testimonies from travellers).
> (Podjed 2020a: 135–136)

But giving this sort of information about Dan Podjed's own life, which was becoming increasingly sedentary and "armchair-based", is not important for the theme discussed in this article, what is important are the reactions of people who read the diary and themselves began to reveal on the internet what was happening to them in their private life. Among the most commented entries was *Supervision in Crocs*, which describes how the author drove away from the local school playground some youths playing basketball there and was faced with the "Hamletian" dilemma as to whether he had made the right decision. Some comments (printed in Podjed 2020a: 49–50) were understanding. Someone said that:

> it gets me, too, when I see that some people here still use the street workout area next to the playground that is closed. On the one hand I envy their carefreeness and on the other I have a very disturbing feeling that they are contributing to our isolation getting longer. And I often think about how people are reacting to the current situation by carrying out strict monitoring of others.

Another commentator became angry: "*If I believed that you really did this, but I don't, I would tell you that you've become a cantankerous old git.*" Discussion at a distance then continued as follows (A – the diary author, B – the commentator):

> A: *But that is precisely what I did, including the crocs. In your opinion, what would have been the right thing to do?*

> B: *In Sweden, pubs and restaurants and schools are open, while in Serbia they have curfew. The reaction above is a natural one. I'd have left them. That would have been the right thing to do in my opinion.*

A: *Yes, but then here isolation applies to some and not for others. In Sweden the rules are the same for all.*

B: *Rules are always the same for all. Even in the Third Reich they were.*

A: *Then I should've put on leather boots instead of Crocs. And I'd probably have said: 'Boys, please, leave the playground!' And they could have said that they won't and continue playing.*

During the crisis, as is evident from the above, what became of key importance for ethnographic research at a distance was a dialogue or polylogue between the researcher, stuck at home, and individuals who were following the situation from their own perspective. In our opinion, this way of doing research may signify a format for a more egalitarian ethnographic research, whereby ethnographers are no longer in the position of observers of social phenomena, but they themselves reveal their own habits, dilemmas and problems first, in this way extracting advice and information from other people.

The above diary that appeared during the pandemic belongs to the category of serendipity rather than anything else, which unexpectedly but evidently quite frequently happens during fieldwork (see for example Hasan and Hertzog 2012). During the pandemic, researchers were forced to organise their ongoing studies and continue announced work, in spite of the fact that it was impossible to meet people and cross borders, not just the state ones, but during the lockdown even those between municipalities. This also happened during the research project *The Invisible Life of Waste*, which was supposed to run in parallel at a number of locations: Ljubljana, Trieste, Zagreb, Graz, Oslo and Dubai, and the goal of which was the development of solutions for a reduction in the quantity of household waste.[3] In this project, among other goals, ethnographic approaches were supposed to design and test a technological solution (see Podjed 2019 for this development method), a rubbish bin, which with the help of sensors and a screen communicates with people (Burger et al. 2020). The testing of such a rubbish bin was supposed to take place in workshops, at which people from various social and age groups would gather and participate in the design of a new solution. Since such workshops could not be physically organised due to a full lockdown in the second half of 2020, researchers turned to digital solutions. Scenes of the interaction of a researcher with two variants of the rubbish bin were recorded, the two videos were put on YouTube and disseminated online with a request for people to view them and fill in the attached questionnaire, in which there was also a section in which the respondents were able to explain more extensively and freely what they thought about the device and its interface. The survey took place in spring 2021 and the questionnaire was filled in by 194 participants. From the anthropological viewpoint, the most important part of the questionnaire was where people could freely enter their opinion, since it served as a base for further ethnographic work and in-depth discussions, and the researchers obtained considerably more qualitative data than they would have done through just a workshop, at which there would be a limited number of people. Because of this unexpected positive experience, the research group decided that

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[3]  The full title of the project: *The Invisible Life of Waste: Development of an Ethnography-based Solution to Waste Management in Households* (code: L6-9364). The project, running from 2018 until 2022, is co-financed from the state budget by the Slovene Research Agency.

further development of the solution would still run in a hybrid fashion, i.e. with an *in situ* interaction and in-depth discussions at a distance, through which researchers would be able to cross borders and at least partly follow the original research and development plan, thus obtaining more information more rapidly from different locations.

The international project *INFINITE*, the goal of which is an energy efficient upgrade of buildings,[4] was also forced by the pandemic to introduce ethnographic research at a distance. The project began in November 2020 with the idea that during the first few months a part of the research team would carry out a field study in buildings in Slovenia, France, Italy and Spain, obtaining information about the way of life of the people living there and about their desires and needs. They would then draw up recommendations for the upgrade of those buildings that would be done to suit the people living in them. Since the covid-19 pandemic stretched into 2021, qualitative research had to be adapted to the situation. Instead of "close-up", researchers talked to the stakeholders, as they are often called in project jargon, first over the phone and then using video-communication tools such as Zoom and Teams. The main problem was that in this way they were not able to reach the inhabitants since they had not established the first contact with them. And the first contact, i.e. entering the field and "breaking the ice" during the initial communication proved to be the main problem. If researchers manage at least once to come to see the people involved, it is later considerably easier to establish trust that can continue also during fieldwork at a distance. In the above-mentioned project, a field visit to Ravne na Koroškem and carrying out an informal interview with the inhabitants and managers of a block of flats that will be renovated was crucial for any further activities within the project. The initial conversation in March 2021, when in Slovenia strict measures for curbing the epidemic still applied, looked rather unusual compared to such talks researchers used to carry out in the past. The participants of the discussion stood outside, since gathering in closed spaces was prohibited, and some of them wore face masks. What was important more than the content in this case was that the contact among the people who saw and heard each other for the first time was happening "face to face". After this meeting, subsequent research at a distance was considerably easier, the study participants were more willing to trust the people "on the other side of the screen" since they knew them also from "close-up".

The other author of this article, Rajko Muršič, did not carry out research of this kind during the pandemic, but participated in the final phase of a study that was impossible to carry out in any other way than in the field, since it was based on biographical conversations and testimonies of two participants at a time, triggered by sensory input during a simultaneous walk along routes chosen for each of them in their hometown. In the so called *sensobiographic walks* (see Murray and Järviluoma 2020; also Bajič and Abram 2019), carried out by researchers as part of the *Sensotra*[5] project in Turku,

Brighton and Ljubljana, a video camera (GoPro), attached to the chest of the leading walker, a voice recorder, a 360 degree panorama camera and a GPS tracker were used. In spite of the physical implementation of the study, the research itself took place in a partly digital environment, synchronously or asynchronously, since in the in-depth interviews the researchers were able to use the available video as a basis for the conversation. The simultaneous digital information, after it was transcribed and analysed and individual testimonies were chosen, could be turned into an as exact as possible presentation of clips of the walkers' experiences in a completely digital environment with acted out and studio-recorded interpretations by professional actors or announcers (see Sensotra Tour 2021). That the difference between "presence" and "absence" was less and less clear and that this is why we prefer to talk about "present absence" or "absent presence" was shown by the experiential use of the walking technique of experiencing a town as a handy exercise in building awareness of a space where internet and non-internet experiences are combined.

The Slovene participants in this project, Blaž Bajič, Sandi Abram and Rajko Muršič, had planned for the Liber.ac event of the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts an event with the title *Town Footsteps* to carry out a sensory and sound walk around Ljubljana. Because in the middle of May 2020 there was still a ban on such events, the walk was carried out online, with a "hybrid" form of implementation. In contrast with a sensory and sound walk, which takes place in a group, led by the researcher and with the participation of a group which during the walk is not allowed to communicate in any way, but must instead focus completely on the walk and its sensory perception, the internet walk was carried out individually. After a short meeting online, each participant chose their way around the town and reported on it afterwards. In contrast to what would otherwise be a group walk, the moderator recommended the use of mobile phones as the means of recording the experience.

In the sensory walk in the *Town Footsteps* event, it transpired that the final discussion, which is otherwise the main part of such a walking experience, "untied" people's tongues much more than would otherwise have been the case. If on normal walks of this kind, which take about an hour in total, the final discussion takes a maximum of half an hour, and even then the moderators have to make a real effort to make all the participants say something, the online presentation, together with the first videos and digital presentations, lasted at least three times longer than expected. The individual experience of walking, accompanied by the simultaneous digital recording of this experience, proved to be exciting, since it forced the walkers into an unexpected reflection on their own experience, complemented by the online communication with others, who had spent their walks in the same way – some of them far from Ljubljana (see a few examples of the reports from the walk in Bajič 2020).

These examples of research projects and other ethnographic experiences during the covid-19 pandemic show that hybrid methods that are online, offline and, above all, those that are somewhere in-between, are a promising way of enlivening modern ethnographic practices (Laplante, Gandsman and Scobie 2020), which will no longer be able to avoid taking into account our constant transition between physical and digital spaces.

### So: to be or not to be there?

When does ethnography at a distance make sense and when not? This is the first and probably crucial question that we wish to answer in the rest of this article, on the basis of the above mentioned research experiences prior and during the pandemic. We would like to indicate the outline of the development of a method that depends on the very answer to the question above. As explained earlier, an increasing number of possibilities and opportunities are emerging for understanding ways of life with the help of ICT and technological tools, whereby researchers no longer need to go to the field physically but can be present among people also at a distance. But is that really *true* ethnography? After all, "being there" does not mean being a static observer of phenomena, but involves more long-lasting interaction of many kinds, also taking into account embodiment (Muršič 2006; Pezdir 2008) of everyday life and, above all, a specific (multi-) sensory experience (cf. for example Stoller 1997; Pink 2009; Campbell and Lassiter 2015; Cox, Irving and Wright 2017; Bakke and Peterson 2018; Springgay and Truman 2019; O'Neill and Roberts 2020; Roberts 2020). In remote research only part of the ethnographic experience comes to the foreground – a talk over Zoom, Skype or another tool.

How can we prevent ethnographic work becoming limited only to carrying out interviews at a distance over ICT tools? Through their presence among people and constant discussions in diverse everyday situations, and especially while carrying out more biographically marked in-depth interviews. In contrast to researchers in other fields of social sciences, who mainly use and produce written sources, ethnographers have relied on the most fundamental method of communication, i.e. oral communication (see Ong 2012). Electronic communication has not had a crucial influence on ethnographic practice, but digital ways of communicating that combine oral, written and electronic ways of communication into a new, often hybrid form, have had a great influence. Modern communication, particularly among the young, is marked by a combination of written, oral and media (i.e. visual, audio-visual or audio) messaging, both synchronous and asynchronous. A great deal of key information is lost during communication over Zoom and Skype and other online tools; for example, in communication on networks we are often limited by the typing of messages, and the medium itself determines how we socialise, connect and participate (cf. McLuhan 1995, who explained that the medium in itself is a message and at the same time an extension of a person). In the implementation of an interview over Zoom, for example, it is difficult to judge the context in which we are talking to someone, since we cannot see what is outside the camera's visual field. In addition, we physically remain in our own space while digitally reaching into another space and gaining limited information from there about what the people "on the other side" are doing.[6] Even though these limitations do narrow the researchers' horizon, at the same time they acquire an even clearer insight into people's private lives, which in the past were considerably more difficult to access. A talk with a person in his or her home environment can be more relaxed, as we do not have to meet them in a café, office or another environment of that kind, but can talk to them directly in their home which,

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[6]  Because of this partial or hybrid communicational experience it may happen that the formal and informal merge – mostly at the expense of the informal – and in the end ethnography becomes nothing but the carrying out of interviews.

if they are willing of course, they can also show and reveal to us – to use Goffman's (1959) terminology – what is in the back stage of their everyday life, and show us how they present themselves online.

An additional fact proving that ethnography at a distance makes sense is that, on average, people are spending ever more time in front of screens, establishing and maintaining contact in this way. The demarcation line between digital and physical space is becoming increasingly opaque. In fact, we should talk about a kind of an analogue-digital continuum, or a combining of online and off-line reality. The digital is as much material as non-digital (Pink, Ardèvol and Lanzeni 2016). The idea of a *virtual world*, which we access with the help of computers and other technologies is thus obsolete and absurd; the digital and physical space have long ago combined into a whole (Podjed 2010; cf. Boellstorff 2008; Coleman 2014; Lange 2019; Miller 2020), with actions in one "section" of this world affecting its other variants and parts. This combining of spaces can increasingly also be noticed in ethnographic research, which is almost impossible to implement without acquiring information on the internet. Technologies facilitate both the preparation for fieldwork *in situ* and the long-term maintenance of contacts with individuals and groups, who have participated in the study. Hybrid ethnography thus appears like a promising research model (Przybylski 2021), with which we can physically enter the field and exit it, and stay in contact with people during times of uncertainty and unforeseen crises.

In order to successfully carry out this type of ethnography, which goes beyond the ideal of "being there", researchers must become as skilled as possible in ICT and learn about the advantages and disadvantages of the technology. Before they set off for "the field", even if only remotely, they must ascertain which communication tools and online networks are available in a community, how many in the target community do not use these tools, and how to carry out the study with regard to the concrete situation, as well as what are the culturally specific practices in their use (see for example, Miller et al. 2016, where intercultural differences are shown in the use of social networks). In future, in anthropology and probably also in other social sciences and the humanities, it will most likely also be important to handle computational tools and approaches, with which ethnography can be upgraded to a *circular mixed method* (Pretnar in Podjed 2019). With this method, through combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and analysis of Big Data and Thick Data, a more complete picture of the social world and a deeper knowledge of the processes in local communities can be obtained, incorporating them into a wider social context (Podjed 2020b).

## Conclusion

In this article, we tried to show that ethnographic practices are alive and change with time and life situations – at times of crisis, surprisingly quickly. What during the covid-19 pandemic only seemed like a marginal digital phase (Muršič 2020) became an everyday reality, during which people's practices and research approaches changed, together with ethnography. The latter mostly changed and adapted automatically, together with changes accompanying people's life that anthropologists and ethnologists try to come close to and

to understand. We tried to point out that online ethnography at a distance will never fully replace ethnographic experiences, which are still based on the concept of "being there". But it is impossible to expect that in the future, ethnographic research will be carried out in any part of the world without the use of information-communication tools, which will continue changing and adapting to the times and people's needs.

And if we make use of them, these tools facilitate the simplest and most effective ways of seeing the life of others. Mobile phones, for example, enable oral, written and media communication at every step, and with the price of connecting mobile phones to the internet falling, their online use becomes less and less limited in terms of how long we can be connected to other people. This is a tool that enables us to put ourselves into the shoes of others in their everyday life, it facilitates a synchronous and asynchronous communication but, above all, it is a gadget we always have nearby, so that its other users are always in close proximity. This is another reason why there is no obstacle to using mobile phones as a means of connecting two (or more) people in a way that does not disturb anybody. The same applies to the methodologies that include walking and working: in certain cases, it will be possible to carry out such a non-invasive research at a distance, while in others physical proximity will still be necessary.

What is crucial for this discussion is that the two approaches, i.e. *ethnography in situ* and *ethnography from a distance*, do not exclude each other, but in the future, especially because of the further development of smart technologies at home and at work, as well as in public spaces, they will be even more connected. Just as, in our everyday life, we will be in several places at once, we as ethnographers will also be in several places at once. The mantra of "being there" will thus probably not disappear from anthropology, but will reshape itself and adapt to the time and manner of communication, combining itself with another expression, which will acquire more value – "being then". With the temporal-spatial combining of research approaches and findings, anthropologists will actually acquire a more comprehensive and clearer picture of the social worlds they are studying and ensure a better insight into the way of life of individuals and their communities.

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