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Researching Asia in Pandemic Times

Editorial

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Mapping the terrain – introductory reflections and concerns

Four people sit in a café; next to glasses of water and mugs of tea, there are also a few smart phones on the table. The four friends are engaged in a lively discussion – suddenly a "ping". One person takes his phone out of his jeans pocket and checks his messages, the other three also automatically turn to their phones. The conversation drifts off because everyone's centre of attention has shifted towards the screens. One person laughs because she just received a funny meme and, immediately, she forwards it to her friends around the table. Simultaneously, she receives a message from a researcher who sits in a different country and who seeks to understand the impact of volatility on everyday practices. After laughing about the meme, she switches windows and quickly tries to respond to the researcher's query. At the same time, the interrupted conversation picks up again. She wants to do justice to the researcher and answer properly, but she also wants to hear the story one of her friends is sharing. With one eye and ear, she is involved in face-to-face interactions, with the other she thinks about the prompt on her phone.

Many of us have encountered situations like the one described above: no matter where we go, phones, laptops, tabs and other electronic communication devices are ubiquitous. Electronic devices and digital-mediated communication

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have become an integral part of most people's lives, and we are constantly switching between different modalities of interaction and communication, between digital and physical spaces. Often, we are present in different spaces and spheres all at once. Technology and the internet have become enmeshed in every aspect of our lives, albeit to varying degrees and in various ways. These transformations have created novel opportunities and interactions but also new or compounding inequalities, marginalisations and exclusions in intersectional terms. It seems that many of these developments accelerated and intensified during the lockdowns and travel restrictions that were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). These structural changes are new to all of us – many feel overwhelmed and rapid developments in this sector make it difficult to keep up. Nevertheless, they require academic attention.

Based on discussions among colleagues and anecdotal evidence, it seems that many of us became "accidental" online researchers (Fujji 2015, Shah 2023) during the pandemic-related lockdowns and travel restrictions. Many stumbled into spheres we were familiar with from our everyday lives, but navigating them in our professional capacities required different skill sets and sensibilities. Digital research methods and online spaces emerged as central sites of knowledge production in pandemic times (and most likely will remain so). These new fields of enquiry necessitate rethinking and adjusting research methodologies and methods as well as research ethics. Switching to the "field" and in-between "fields" via digitally-mediated means confronts scholars with a new set of challenges. Hence, especially during the pandemic, many researchers sought training, guidance and resources. While some manuals on online and internet-mediated research exist, they can only cover rather general topics (Ess 2020, British Sociological Association n.d.). The fine-tuning and adaptation was, and is, a task each researcher has to undertake themselves. These developments highlighted the need for university courses and co-learning spaces that focus on skills but also on the adaptation of research designs to these changed circumstances – not only, but particularly for early career researchers.

In late 2020, as an ad-hoc response and in order to feel less alone, Andrea Fleschenberg, Sarah Holz and Salman Khan connected to create a space for exchange and to offer support to each other and to a group of early career researchers. Out of this emerged a working group that incorporated more early career researchers from across Asia and Europe with diverse (inter-)disciplinary angles and positionalities conducting research based in Asia. Initially titled "Researching South Asia in Pandemic Times", the group was later renamed "Researching Asia in Pandemic Times" – the title of this special issue. In 2022, Wikke Jansen joined a guest lecture series project, part of an MA / PhD class on "Digital Research Methods in (Post-)Pandemic Times", organised by Andrea Fleschenberg with Salman Khan (who joined digitally from the UK), and became part of the team.

Out of these discussions and interactions emerged this special issue. The authors of the articles document negotiations, discussions and choices that they made with regard to data collection, engagement with research partners and the researchers' own positionality in unplanned situations. The authors are (or were at that time) primarily PhD scholars who were conducting fieldwork during the COVID-19 lockdowns and who were suddenly faced with questions and issues that they had not foreseen when they started their research journeys. The accounts do not provide clear answers and solutions to methodological and research ethical challenges; they are not a "how-to" manual but instead connect grounded experiences with larger conceptual and methodological questions about research in a digitally connected and rapidly changing world.[1]

The guest lecture series provided the idea for this special issue, which is focused on early career researchers, featuring the travels and navigations of those in advanced phases of their PhD as well as early post-doc stages. The articles by Mutmaina Syam / Dissa Paputungan-Engelhardt and Wikke Jansen originated from the guest lecture series mentioned above, as did the current debates section. Syam and Paputungan-Engelhardt recount how the pandemic disrupted their planned fieldwork with actors from the field of education in Indonesia and explain their coping strategies. In doing so they show how existing inequalities took on new forms. Jansen elaborates on her engagement with the queer community in Indonesia and highlights the implications of moving research online with vulnerable and marginalised groups. Rahat Shah was part of the working group from the very beginning and his article is a continuation of a vignette he contributed to the first publication that emerged from the working group (Batool et al. 2021). Shah works in Pakistan and investigates how couples where women are the breadwinner experience their unconventional status in a patriarchal society. In his article, he argues that social constraints that determine relations and interactions between researchers and their subjects in the physical sphere are not necessarily flattened or overcome by moving data collection online but continue to exist in different forms and by different means.

In 2022, Ingrid Austveg Evans joined the discussions of the working group through our network in Berlin. She primarily works with manuscripts and archives and adds this important dimension to this issue. In her article, she recounts how she was confronted with questions about access to archives, file-sharing and copyright due to the pandemic but also due to increasing use of digitisation in archives and libraries. She connects these points with reflections about her own positionality vis-à-vis these practices and advocates for more attention to these aspects by researchers who work with manuscripts and non-

1 The first iteration of these accounts was the special section "Researching in Times of a Pandemic" published in *South Asia Chronicle* (2021); see Fleschenberg / Holz 2021, Batool et al. 2021, Khan 2021, Zuberi 2021.

living objects. To complement these accounts, we use this editorial to map and reflect on some of the "construction sites" that emerged from our broader discussions about the structural transformations that technological change and digital-mediated communication have brought about for research in the social sciences and humanities.

We start with an observation: It is of note that in 2022, when senior researchers were invited to speak at the guest lecture series "Digital Research Methods in (Post-)Pandemic Times", many regrets were received. Frequent reasons that were cited were pandemic-related anxieties and insecurities when conducting research as well as fears of making oneself vulnerable by sharing experiences of pandemic challenges with regard to research designs, methods and the ethics thereof. In contrast, early career researchers were much more forthcoming, turning the MA class that was attached to the guest lecture series into a safe space of joint learning, reflexivity and co-mentoring.[2] The aim of this learning space was to critically explore how online contexts and digital research methods function as substitutes, alternatives or complementary tools to research methods in the physical field. What opportunities and what kinds of new biases and exclusions are created through a focus on the online world and online research methods? In other words, who can reach whom through online methods and who is excluded? Digital research methods and subsequent research ethical navigations in terms of process, situatedness and embeddedness are not novel. What might be new is the scope and scale of a potential digital turn in academia.

A digital turn in academic practices and encounters seems to make it possible to reduce costs and mitigate financial constraints and time management challenges. It promises to lift geographic barriers and boundaries and thereby also speaks to sustainability while, at the same time, exposing us to new work-life balances and research ethical challenges due to digital scholarship. Not to mention issues of traceability and informed consent, governmental surveillance technologies of online spaces or hacking of cloud-based collaboration platforms. But more fundamentally: research phenomena, vocabularies, spaces, tools, rela-

2 The MA class was clustered around three major blocks and included a number of interdisciplinary, interactive, participatory learning and reflection spaces, either presence-based or in hybrid mode (Zoom-based input lectures with international participants). Block 1: *Read – Think – Ask* introduced key theoretical and methodological readings and academic debates on digital research methods, the ethics thereof and research in pandemic times, in a series of weekly sessions. The second block, *Stop – Listen – Reflect*, provided space for a hybrid guest lecture series with input lectures and/or fishbowl talks by early career as well as senior (inter-)national researchers with an interdisciplinary and transregional background, discussing, with a hands-on approach, their own experiences, challenges and also strategies in tackling digital research methods and research ethics during and also beyond pandemic times. Among other things, this included an interactive guest lecture from Gökce Günel, presenting their approach of patchwork ethnography with space for on-site exercises. Audio podcasts were produced and made available via the HU Open Access Repository. The third block, *Conceptualize – Discuss – Review*, was a mentoring space to present and discuss the participants' own research projects and subsequent challenges in terms of digital research methods and the ethics thereof. See also our review essays in *South Asia Chronicle* 11/2021, https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/suedasien/publikationen/sachronik/sachronik.

tionships and interactions are reshaped, hence there is a need to consciously reflect upon and carefully re-calibrate them, not only but also when entangled with pandemic (re)productions of inequalities, silences and emergencies. Which aspects do we need to rethink for research collaborations when decentring knowledge production within the Global South, as well as between Global North and South, in terms of authorship, ownership, risk assessments, divergent positionalities, existing as well as compounded volatilities and precarities? What praxis of research ethics is linked to such interrogations, when one must be cognisant of the frequently asymmetrical relationships with "facilitating researchers", as well as allegations of data extractivism, digital divides and lurking? In 2024, what are the implications when we revisit the notions of care, reciprocity, slow science and relatedness that many scholars called for during the pandemic? Because these phenomena are novel, diverse and dynamic, the development of adequate and ethically-sound methodological approaches is an important topic to consider in pandemic as well as post-pandemic times.

In the following sections, we would like to highlight a few selected issues and topics that we have identified as most relevant and pressing in the growing body of literature on digital research methods and the investigation of online spaces, as well as the impact of technology, the internet and social networks. The first set of issues pertains to terminology. How do we label what we are doing? How important are such labels for our practice? A plethora of terms are in use to describe research, methodology and methods that go beyond the physical sphere: digital methods, internet-mediated, cyber, online or virtual research. Each term carries a different connotation of how we perceive these interlocking and overlapping spheres and spaces of the online, digital and physical world. Most scholars have moved away from binary thinking in terms of offline versus online and towards an approach that treats the two as inseparable on both a theoretical and methodological level (Crang et al. 2007, Postill / Pink 2012, Bonilla / Rosa 2015, Hine 2015, Pink et al. 2016). Fully aware that the relationship between online and offline is entangled and complex, we do make distinctions. There is a tension we can never fully resolve. This means that we should wonder how they are related to each other, to what degree we behave differently in each space and how this can be accurately depicted and accounted for in research. Some have suggested that we could use a label such as post-digital research (Fawns et al. 2023, Wang / Canagarajah 2024), where post-digital connotes "a condition where the virtual and physical mediate each other to form layered and hybridized spaces that transcend the online/offline distinction" (Wang / Canagarajah 2024: Paragraph 1).

Depending on the discipline or region, different terms might have become established. Judging by the number of publications and their dates of publication, some disciplines, such as anthropology or digital humanities, seem to have engaged with these issues for some time already, while such discussions

have only begun comparatively recently in other disciplines (see Evans in this issue). In line with other scholars (Góralska 2020), we make a distinction between 1) the use of online and digital methods and 2) research in online environments. For us the former means to collect data through digital and internet-mediated means, for instance conducting interviews via video, call and messenger services. The latter means being present in online environments over extended periods of time, investigating the reciprocal relationship between online and offline contexts.

Terminology is not the focus of this issue; as a shorthand we refer to both "digital" and "online" methods employed by researchers in a world where technology is a constant companion and where online and offline are entangled. We consider "digital" any means and conditions where technology is in use, while "online" connotes those instances where the internet is used as a medium to connect, communicate, compute, record and analyse.

What is certain is that digital and online methods with people and things affect everyone differently. Depending on the topic and the people we work with, levels of vulnerability and interactivity, visibility and invisibility change when compared to conducting research in the physical world. While digital and online means can enable access to hard-to-reach populations (Khan 2021, Batool et al. 2021), technology and internet availability can also reproduce existing inequalities, hierarchies and power relations (Morrow et al. 2015, Dasgupta 2019, Kara / Khoo 2020, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). Hence, we need to consider the implications from the so-called "digital divide" arising from, for example, gender, class and race differences (Murthy 2008, Moores 2012, Slama 2021). The exclusions are due not only to an unequal digital divide, but also to the material infrastructure within which technology operates. Because technology and internet-mediated communication rely on electricity, technological equipment and internet availability, those who do not have access to these, or very little, are excluded. (Lorea et al. 2021, Mahtab 2021, Zuberi 2021). Moreover, much depends on the participant's competence to use a certain technology (Carter et al. 2021). Online research causes additional burdens or stress for participants whose access to and use of technology is both socially and politically regulated. Such inequalities cut across and are altered, alleviated or amplified by new technologies and online dynamics not only within communities, but also on a global scale. Several recent works address the urgency of studying digital inequalities in the Global South (Ragnedda / Gladkova 2020).

The reliance on internet and digital infrastructure also renders researchers dependent on companies that offer these services and makes them vulnerable to state control. Hence, new concerns are being raised about surveillance, censorship and online risk, particularly in volatile or politically sensitive contexts (Bano et al. 2022). As we have seen in recent months, various governments experiment with blackouts, the banning of certain apps, etc. (Abassi 2024, Amnesty International April 2024, Amnesty International Aug. 2024, Zhou

2020, Al-Balushi 2018, Rajan et al. 2017). Hence, it is imperative to consider how online methods and the spread of digital technology and the internet reconfigure power structures and biases – on the socio-political level but also for research.

The articles in this special issue touch on many of these questions, focusing on three transversal themes. The first is to re-think how to design studies, including ethics reviews. In other words, how do we conceptualise the relation between the online and offline world, not only for interactions but also from a methodological perspective: how to follow, analyse and write about these complex interlinkages and switches (Przybylski 2020, Zani 2021). Here an important point to consider is how to engage with participants and interlocutors and build rapport (Jaehn 2021, see also Shah as well as Jansen in this issue). Another point to consider is data: How can one document and analyse data collected in different spaces, patch it together and depict the findings?[3] Here it is important to note that the boundaries of what we generally understand as public and private have become fuzzier (Góralska 2020, Wijaya 2023). To depict the entanglement between online/digital and physical spheres, we might need to combine different sets of data, which requires broader skills sets and diverse sensibilities.[4] Also, do we treat digitised objects, such as manuscripts and archives, in a different manner than their original counterparts (see Evans in this issue and Suarez 2023)? All this leads to the overarching conundrum: Where is "the field" located? This is an issue that emerged prominently in our discussions and will be discussed in more detail later.

The second theme is related to methods. What kinds of modifications are required in methods and methodologies? Are all digital data collection methods created equally? What kinds of opportunities emerge from these new methods and how do power relations shift and generate new biases? Who becomes visible and what remains hidden through the expansion of data and methods?

The third theme focuses on the ethical challenges of conducting research in online spaces and via digital research methods. In this context, volatility acquires a new dimension. It can no longer be understood only in terms of physical safety and security; volatility also emerges because rapid technological changes create disruptions and uncertainties. For instance, institutional and legal frameworks often lag behind the rapid changes (see Evans in this issue). In this context,

3 Here extending the patchwork ethnography approach might be an interesting way to think ahead (Gökçe et al. 2020).

4 Especially in contexts that are difficult to reach online and offline, approaches have been developed that combine various methods and data. For example, the project *Remote Ethnography of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* uses remote ethnography, which is "a medley of methods to research a region from the outside. It is particularly suited for places with very limited access but can be productively employed also as a complement to on-the-ground research as well. The main point of [the] approach is to see research of any place or topic as a holistic endeavour. This is the crux of ethnography which demands immersion in a social context and a broad collection of data to be triangulated as well as a deep understanding of the context" (XUAR 2024).

researchers have to devise strategies to protect themselves and their participants and interlocutors from harm. This includes thinking about data security and surveillance as well as protection from legal issues.

We primarily raise questions about the opportunities and challenges of digital methods and enquiries into online spaces. In doing so, we focus on data collection, with a special focus on volatile contexts in Asia. The impact of these transformations on data analysis is beyond the scope of this issue, but it is an important question that has come up frequently in discussions: how to combine data that is collected in the physical world with data collected via digital means, and how to evaluate and represent this data. Another aspect we cannot cover is the impact, practice and function of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in research practice and their entanglement with everyday lives.

In the next sections we expand on the foundational question that underpins all discussions: Where is the field located, and where and how should we draw distinctions between different spaces, sites and environments? We use an anthropological perspective to start the conversation, because anthropologists have engaged with this topic for many years, and then suggest an embodied and reflexive praxis to address some of these issues.

Where is the field?

While it has been long recognised that the "fields" that we study are neither a priori entities nor static or bound (Burrell 2009, Cook et al. 2009), the increasing entanglement of digital and physical worlds in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the idea of "the field" even further (Buckband 2023). Although the call for a study of how digital activities and technologies are embedded in people's lives precedes the pandemic (Hine 2015, Moores 2017, Airoldi 2018, Castillo 2021), the widespread interruption of in-person ethnographic fieldwork and archival research trips during this period has given unprecedented impulse to the discussion. The importance of the researcher's "being there" in the age of rapidly evolving technology must take into account the multiply produced and located meanings surrounding social media (Bonilla / Rosa 2015, Beneito-Montagut et al. 2017, Mollerup 2017) and the acknowledgement that "studying a group of people in their 'natural habitat' now includes their 'online habitat'" (Hallett / Barber 2014: 308).

Issues concerning digital methods and digital humanities, including ethics, access and the decolonisation of knowledge, have been discussed within disciplines ranging from history (Brennan 2018, Burton 2021) and sociology (Chowdhry et al. 2020, Addeo et al. 2024) to literary studies (Eve 2022) and geography (Dammann / Kremer 2024). The debate has been especially lively, however, among

anthropologists and other scholars who rely on ethnography as method. Cory Buckband (2023) points out the need to adapt existing, "traditional" ethnographic methods in order to adjust to post-pandemic realities, especially when it comes to doing research in hybrid settings such as offline/online education. Concepts like "hybrid ethnography" (Przybylski 2020), "virtual ethnography" (Hine 2000), "netnography," (Kozinets 2010) and "chatnography" (Käihkö 2020) have since entered the anthropological mainstream in a frenzy that has aptly been labelled "buzzword ethnography" (Abidin / de Seta 2020).

Within this emerging body of research, the distinction we mentioned above – between, on the one hand, ethnographic research in and on online spaces using participant observation building (partly) on in-person relationships and, on the other hand, purely online data collection such as tracking social media activity and/or conducting purely online interviews – becomes increasingly blurred in publications that claim digital, online or virtual ethnography as their core method. The debate sways between critiques of "empiricist assumptions behind the privileging of material, embodied, and face-to-face data gathering" (Morrow et al. 2015: 534) on one side and the cautioning against an uncritical, disembodied approach to online data on the other (Murthy 2008, Boyd / Crawford 2012, Hallett / Barber 2014, Luka / Millette 2018). The debate about appropriate methods is not just a question of reliable research outcomes, however, but also stems from the new ethical challenges that come with research in online spaces, such as the possibility of covert and invisible research (Murthy 2008, Buckband 2023) or "lurking" (Hine 2000) when doing ethnography online.

Comprehensive approaches to social media are especially crucial for a deeper understanding of these considerations. Whereas technologies exist that allow scholars to extract large amounts of user data from social network sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter (X), a deeper understanding of how social media content is generated and what meanings, practices and social structures are attached to them requires a "thickening" (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017) of the online data that is readily available. Participatory strategies such as interacting with other social media users, sharing and following (Postill / Pink 2012) and establishing a credible social media profile and network for the researcher (Chitwood 2019) require attention. Moreover, researchers need to think about offline methods that focus on observing and participating in the practices surrounding social media rather than treating social media platforms as spaces (Bonilla / Rosa 2015, Caliandro 2017, Mollerup 2017, Di / Liu 2021), including discussing them during in-depth interviews following long-term observation (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017), a point we elaborate on in the following section. Hybrid offline / online team ethnography has also been suggested as a way to deal with the complex and multifaceted nature of social media (Beneito-Montagut et al. 2017).

Incorporating the digital into the ethnographic every day, then, requires flexibility, adaptability and openness to new and less traditional approaches (Günel et al. 2020). At the same time, this complex blurring of multiple and overlapping online and offline "fields" also causes a blurring of the boundaries between fieldwork time and free time. With the internet – and access to data and to our interlocutors – available all the time and on multiple devices, considering our work-life balance as ethnographers becomes especially crucial (Boellstorf et al. 2012, Góralska 2020, Käihkö 2020).

Digital ethnography offers a special promise for circumstances where offline research is highly limited or impossible, such as during pandemics and other times of disaster (Rivera-González et al. 2022) or in conflict or politically-sensitive settings (Käihkö 2020, XUAR 2024). Its ethical, methodological and theoretical implications, however, as the contributions in this issue demonstrate, will lastingly contribute to the transformation of various disciplines, especially as many early career researchers have embarked on their scholarly journeys during these unsettling times.

Navigating relationships and interactions – online/offline interdependencies and entanglements

We now turn to a brief discussion of the entanglements and interdependencies that have emerged out of the structural transformations brought about by technological change and internet-mediated communication. Alicea Lieberman and Juliana Schroeder (2020) review how online interactions disrupt or enhance offline interactions. In doing so, they identify four structural differences between online and offline interactions. They find that, compared to offline interactions, online interactions include fewer nonverbal gestures, greater anonymity, greater opportunity to form social ties and wider dissemination of information.

However, another set of researchers has argued for the pre-existence of extensive social networks that facilitate online network development (Khan 2021), and they advocate for paying attention to other forms of nonverbal cues in the absence of visual ones (Khan 2024). As shown above, it is increasingly difficult to determine the sites ("the where" of data collection) and sampling ("the what" of the data collection). The question is thus where we should enter the field and what we should we collect once we decide where its borders are.

A useful starting point is to view online mediums of communication not just as tools applied regardless of context, but to regard a digital space as inherently linked to the participants and their experiences under study, and thus as a promising entry point for researchers (Kaufmann / Palmberger 2022). In the absence of fully developed guidelines on online research ethics (Sugiura 2017), a situa-

tional, embodied and reflexive engagement with these ethical challenges, arising from idiosyncratic online research encounters, is a way forward.

We can certainly carry methodological questions raised before 2020 and lessons learned from the pandemic into a post-COVID-19 world to shift the argument away from coping with online methods when crises require it, to embracing them as valuable and valid methods (Keen et al. 2022). As mentioned earlier, despite dangers of exclusion and reinforcing inequalities, digital methods do facilitate access to geographically remote, politically difficult and socially vulnerable populations. Some researchers argue that sometimes being hard-to-reach in an offline environment is different than being hard-to-reach online (Kaufmann / Tzanetakis 2020). The latter populations range from those lacking technological competence (Khan 2021) to those involved in illegal activities and operating in highly encrypted ways with concealed identities (Kaufmann / Tzanetakis 2020), living in conflict-affected or politically-sensitive areas (Mwambari et al. 2024, XUAR 2024) or at the risk of persecution due to their political views (among others).

The participants' use of technology and the usefulness of online research for researchers depends on the political and cultural context within which participants are situated (see Syam / Paputungan-Engelhardt, Jansen as well as Shah, all this issue). When researchers do not or cannot personally visit the research context, they are required to embed themselves in the environment using alternative ways, such as exploring the region using wider literature, news media, online talks and even interactive maps (Keen et al. 2022). Despite such alternative means of immersion in the research context, online research requires deeper reflexive engagement not only with the data generation tools and the means of communication employed, but also with the ways participants and researchers understand that context. Therefore, internet research includes both online and offline cultures.

Many disciplines in the social sciences are still grappling with the difficulty of coping with the heterogeneous and contingent reality of online embodiment, where bodily, technological, reflexive and social aspects are intertwined. The question of online embodiment becomes an intriguing area, provoking deep ontological questions. Simultaneously, challenges posed by these complexities need to be viewed as an exciting opportunity to foster theoretical and methodological developments on the ongoing exchanges between bodies and technologies, and how they are reflexively and socially situated (Rudnicki 2017).

One such key challenge, amplified by the increased digitisation of research in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, is the unequal distribution of vulnerabilities between researchers in the Global North and their research participants in the Global South (Mwambari et al. 2024). South-South interactions and vulnerabilities are quite absent from these discussions, especially because this can mean that "the field" is actually not that remote or distant. This is an

issue that requires urgent attention but one that we do not address in this issue because all authors who were able to contribute an article are based at institutions in the Global North (even though the working group had several members who are based at universities in the Global South, which, in itself, is telling).

In addition, while internet-mediated environments do offer certain opportunities, Khan (2024) argues that their ability to bypass social boundaries such as gender has been widely over-celebrated without sufficient critical scrutiny. Online, remote research remains "both embodied and embedded" (Mwambari et al. 2024: 6). Researchers engaging in online spaces and online research should be attuned to their own embodied presence and to the body and embodiment of their research participants if they are to facilitate epistemic access in addition to facilitating conventional access (in the sense of bridging distance) (ibid.). One of the ways forward in this connection is to pay special attention to the context-dependent socially constructed realities of online research environments.

Reflections on the ways forward – a critical research ethical praxis

As we have argued elsewhere (Fleschenberg / Holz 2021, Fleschenberg / Castillo 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic served as a kind of magnifying glass for research ethical challenges and concerns within academic mainstream discussions on research practices and the ethics thereof. Scholars from a variety of (inter-)disciplinary approaches called for a different praxis of research ethics and knowledge production, particularly with regard to Global North and Global South interactions and asymmetries in knowledge production, research collaborations and academic publishing. Furthermore, the body of literature that emerged during and after the pandemic and addressed the (re-)thinking of research ethical praxis highlights a number of challenges and concerns, specifically with regard to research ethics, that have emerged from recent structural transformations. Among them are: how to address shifts in research relationships and encounters; how to navigate research via digital means, new technologies and in digital spaces while remaining mindful of communication, connectivity, resources and agency divides; revisiting notions of care, reciprocity and relatedness to counter extractive research practices and "lurking"; and questions of integrity and the need for (novel) research practices beyond pandemic times. Among this literature are also calls for more inclusive, diversity-oriented and caring practices – be it for conventional research methods and contexts or for re-devised remote, digital methods and (post-)pandemic contexts (see Syam / Paputungan-Engelhardt in this issue; Batool et al. 2021, Thajib 2022, Sakti / Taek 2023).

Taking a cue from decolonial and feminist approaches, what is required here is a critical embodied research ethical praxis of care with continued deliberation, reflexivity and adaptive flexibility for research design parameters, concrete research praxis and processes. The notion of care, however, applies not only to research participants and collaborators. It extends to researchers themselves, whose privilege and power in research settings were more often than not challenged and reversed in pandemic settings along, among others, gendered and racialised cleavages (see Shah, Syam / Paputungan-Engelhardt, Jansen in this issue, Batool et al. 2021, Bano / Holz 2022). Having said that, the need to negotiate one's positionality and ethical responsibility – as well as enacting self-care and doing no harm to oneself or to those near and dear in the face of traumatic or stressful encounters and volatile contexts – has been a daunting journey and a burden for many critical and engaged scholars (see current debate section in this issue). Experiences of powerlessness, of not being able to do enough beyond (or despite) metric-oriented, competitive academic work, of not being able to "give back" sufficiently, or even tokenism or researcher-centred face-saving have been known to lead to feelings such as fatigue, numbing, cynicism, hyper-vigilance, guilt and disassociation, among others. As we have argued already before (Batool et al. 2021, Fleschenberg / Holz 2021, Fleschenberg / Castillo 2022), questions of researchers' mental health and coping strategies have been discussed by many, particularly when working in the Global South in volatile contexts or when working from a critical approach, where contexts of multi-layered, compounded crises, volatilities, inequalities and uncertainties are the everyday normal within which people must operate. For the majority these circumstances are not just an exceptional, temporary crisis – as, for instance, many in the Global North regarded the COVID-19 pandemic (see Syam / Paputungan-Engelhardt and Shah, both in this issue).

Linked to the multi-dimensional and multi-directional notion of care are renewed calls for slow research, questioning the timing, pace and rigid sequencing of research steps in times of a pandemic crisis and its long aftermath. Emma Louise Backe's (2021) notion of an "ethics of crisis" renews the urgent call for slow, decentred research and a "practice of pragmatic solidarity" through a locally situated and grounded ethics of concern that is attentive to the particular temporalities and extractive logics of academic research. In these cases, research is oriented not by the "tyranny of the urgent" or the neoliberal demands of the academy, but rather by the priorities and needs of the community that participates in the research. Revisiting notions of reciprocity, trust, power, vulnerability and inequality in research relationships in light of the pandemic-instigated "ethics of disruption" for social sciences and humanities worldwide, Gina Crivello and Marta Favara (2021: 1) argue that "we have entered a new ethical landscape, one that is compelling social researchers to re-examine previously held assumptions about what is appropriate, possible, valuable and relevant

for their research, and the nature of ethical responsibilities to all those enmeshed in the research relationship during this time".

Volatility and resilience have been key buzzwords to describe research in pandemic times – referring to contexts and situations marked by unpredictability and uncertainty, by ongoing processes of transformation and thus (potentially) rapidly changing dynamics, heightened and intersecting vulnerabilities of all involved research partners, as well as disruptions within "the field". As mapped out by Rosa Castillo, Anthony Patthathu and June Rubis (2023) and reflected upon in contributions to this special issue, navigating such volatile, disrupted, shifting and/or transforming fields with increasingly blurred demarcations, requires a continuous critical research praxis with reflexivity, care and openness for re-/un-learning, (re-)negotiation, (re-)adaptation and creative coping strategies.

While it is beyond this editorial's scope, we would like to at least mention further key areas of research ethical concerns when researching Asia (but not only) in post-pandemic times that merit closer attention and documentation. As highlighted in previous sections, the pandemic-accelerated digital turn signifies new ethical challenges and concerns with surveillance, control, censorship and blackouts. These are facilitated by online technologies and architectures and enabled by our own digital footprints as citizens, researchers and research participants, as well as our digital myopia and (il-)literacy toward digital data security. In many countries across Asia there are concerns about overreaching and authoritarian legal frameworks and governmentalities, which challenge our own research ethical praxis, whether in terms of research data management and data protection or in establishing and ensuring informed consent in a globalised, digitised world. As one example, these developments make anonymisation more complex and difficult to tackle, given that in online spaces access to documentation and recording – and thus, ultimately, surveillance, hacking, tracking and tracing – is much easier to implement and conceal than in offline spaces. The blurring or rather entanglement of offline and online research approaches and methods poses complex and specific research ethical challenges that need to be considered and addressed carefully. It is particularly important to pay attention to what happens at the interstices of this new research hybridity. And with this we do not even enter the novel terrain of AI and research ethics, which challenges and potentially transforms, in novel and variegated ways, how we conduct research in/on Asia and beyond – another interesting topic for another special issue to follow.

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