

Reaching out virtually – attempts to enter my field site, Jiu Valley, Romania, by means of the Internet

How do I meet somebody, a contact, an interlocutor, without being in a place physically? How do I make somebody's acquaintance without a smile, a handshake, an invitation to coffee? In this text I will think of and describe attempts of entering my field site, Jiu Valley, Romania, from my desk in Hamburg.

Jiu Valley is known for its extractive industry, mostly coal, and has been hit especially hard by the repercussions of the deindustrialization of the area in the last twenty years. The dissertation aims to examine the formation, models, and realizations of plans for the future by young Romanians who are directly confronted with this acute deindustrialization. I will focus on three main areas: school, peer-groups, and family.

Due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic I have not been able to visit my proposed place of field work in the south-west of Romania. The initial plan was to travel there in April 2020, and stay for two periods of several months, accompanying a 12th grade class in their final year of school. In mid-March it became apparent that I would not be able to travel for months on end and hopes of departing this fall have fallen short because of the rising number of COVID-19 cases in Romania (Mediafax 2020). Whereas I have been postponing the travel and research plans in the months before, I have now decided to no longer delay the research, and try my hands at remote research instead.

Since I have not lived or been in this specific region in Romania for an extended period (apart from hiking there for a couple of days), I have no acquaintances or direct contacts there. So, while thoughts on adapting my methodology have been on my mind for some time^[1], the challenge this fall has been to socialize and make

connections to a place I have yet to travel to.

Where to start?

To approach possible interlocutors and actors, I thought of ways of meeting people without being physically present. My focus is to get in touch with residents, pupils, teachers and/or principals. Starting points were various contacts I have had and maintained in Romania for some time now: Friends living in Bucharest, lecturers at university, interlocutors from my M.A. research, people in the creative sector that I have worked with before. However, I also considered contacting NGOs working in the valley on connected issues, and schools in the region directly without prior connections.

What field?

Throughout the process of reaching out I adapted my criteria for the field. The pre-SARS-CoV-2 research plan proposed a stay in a mid-sized town (population of ~10.000) and for me to attend school with a 12th grade class. I was to interview all members of the class and their families, provided they were interested in participating. This plan has now been pragmatically adapted à la “beggars can’t be choosers”: whenever there is a chance to talk to/videocall a pupil around the age of 18 years living in Valea Jiului, no matter what city or village they live in, I will interview them. If possible, I will ask them to refer me to their friends, maybe even their families. I feel this snowball-sample is a pragmatic way to collect first data, spread the word, and establish connections for when an in-person-stay becomes possible again.

Reaching out:

I wrote a lot of e-mails and Facebook-messages, some including light banter, others more formal, depending on my relationship with the contacted person. All included a summary of my project idea, and a flyer (“Call for support”) with the summary, a rough sketch of the research ideas, and some details about me.

Cum ne construim viitorul: alegerile profesionale ale tinerilor adulți din Valea Jiului în contextul dezindustrializării profunde

CALL FOR SUPPORT!

Planific proiectul de cercetare doctorală în jurul următoarelor întrebări: cum își imaginează și formează viitorul tinerii dintr-o regiune unde ocupația principală, exploatarea minieră, incetează să mai existe? Cum influențează școala, familia și prietenii decizile cu privire la viitor?

Cercetare: doresc să cunosc și să urmăresc o clasă a XII-a pe parcursul a 8 luni (preferabil începând la mijlocul lunii septembrie), să participe la ore (online), să discut cu elevii și, dacă este posibil, cu familiile lor. Din cauza pandemiei nu pot să călătoresc acum și să încep proiectul, așa cum îmi propusem, pe teren. Mi-am propus însă să încep cercetarea online, urmând să o continu în persoană odată ce acest lucru va fi posibil.

Mă puteti ajuta? Aș dori să iau legătura cu localnici - elevi, profesori, directori de școală - din Valea Jiului, de preferință dintr-un oraș în care mai există o mină activă.

Ce pot oferi: aș putea să ajut cu meditații la limbile germană și engleză sau cu traducere ori interpretare—oriunde pot fi de ajutor!

Hannah Bartels, 28, doctorandă în antropologie culturală și socială, Universitatea din Hamburg
Teza de masterat: „Predarea istoriei: profesorii români în intermedierea perioadei real-socialiste”, 3 luni de cercetare în București și Brașov în 2018
Vorbesc Germană, Engleză, Română, Franceză, Italiană
((Email adresa and phone number))

Building futures: Occupational choices of young adults against the background of profound De-industrialization

CALL FOR SUPPORT!

I am planning my PhD research project about the following questions: How do young people imagine and shape their future in a region, where the main employment, working in the mines, ceases to exist? How do school, family, and peers influence and frame the decisions about the future?

research idea: I would like to meet and follow a 12th grade class for a period of 8 months (preferably starting mid-september), to participate in online lessons, to discuss with the pupils and, if possible, their families. Because of the pandemic I am unable to travel and start the project, as we say, in the field. I propose to start my research online and then follow-up personally, whenever it might be possible.

Could you help me? I'd like to establish contact to a resident, a headmaster/headmistress, a teacher, and/or pupil in Valea Jiului, specifically, but not necessarily, a city where there is still an active mine.

What I can offer: I am happy to help out with any German/English tutoring or any other area, for example translation or interpreting, where I may be of service.

Hannah Bartels, 28, PhD student Social and Cultural anthropology, University of Hamburg
Masterthesis: „Teaching history: Romanian teachers in the mediation of the realsocialist period”, 3 months of research in București and Brașov in 2018
Speaks German, English, Romanian, French, Italian

Image: Call for Support which was sent out to multiple contacts. Photo by Hannah Bartels.

Preliminary conclusion and outlook

Of this first period my reach-out campaign since early September I can report little

success, but a lot of pleasant exchanges. The following table shows my attempt to connect to the Jiu Valley so far in numbers:

contact	Number of first messages (e-mail and facebook sent in September 2020)	Replies with reference/connection to resident/students/teachers/principals
Friends (mostly living in Bucharest)	10	1
lecturers	3	1
Former interlocutors	4	0
Creative sector	4	1
NGOs	5	2
Schools in Jiu Valley	3	0
total	29	4

The table seems less encouraging than the actual experience was. While some contacts did not reply as of now, most offered kind words for my endeavour, despite not having a suitable connection in the region.

Unfortunately, the four generated contacts have turned out to be quite fragile, one-way-streets or hard to maintain. The difficulty of creating a well-balanced communication, plainly, how to avoid annoying possible interlocutors and contacts with repeated requests and messages, is familiar from the research for my master's thesis. This quandary becomes even more challenging in a purely virtual communication, in a time when the novelty of online conference calls has long worn off.

As of now, my plan is to sustain the four existing contacts, and to reach out to additional schools directly via Facebook, which often seems to be a more active site than the webpages. I will possibly start interviewing members of the NGOs that are concerned with the future of Jiu Valley, as they seem to play a role in the young adults' lives and their plans.

Another idea, that is still in its infancy though, is to develop the outline for an online-

creative lesson, either including writing or another form of art, concerned with the topic “future”. Through a collaboration with an art teacher this might be an efficient way to approach the topic and a group of young adults at the same time.

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Footnote

[1] And resources have grown over the last few months, I feel, e.g.:
<https://iriss.stanford.edu/doing-ethnography-remotely>. Last access: 05/10/2020

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