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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.

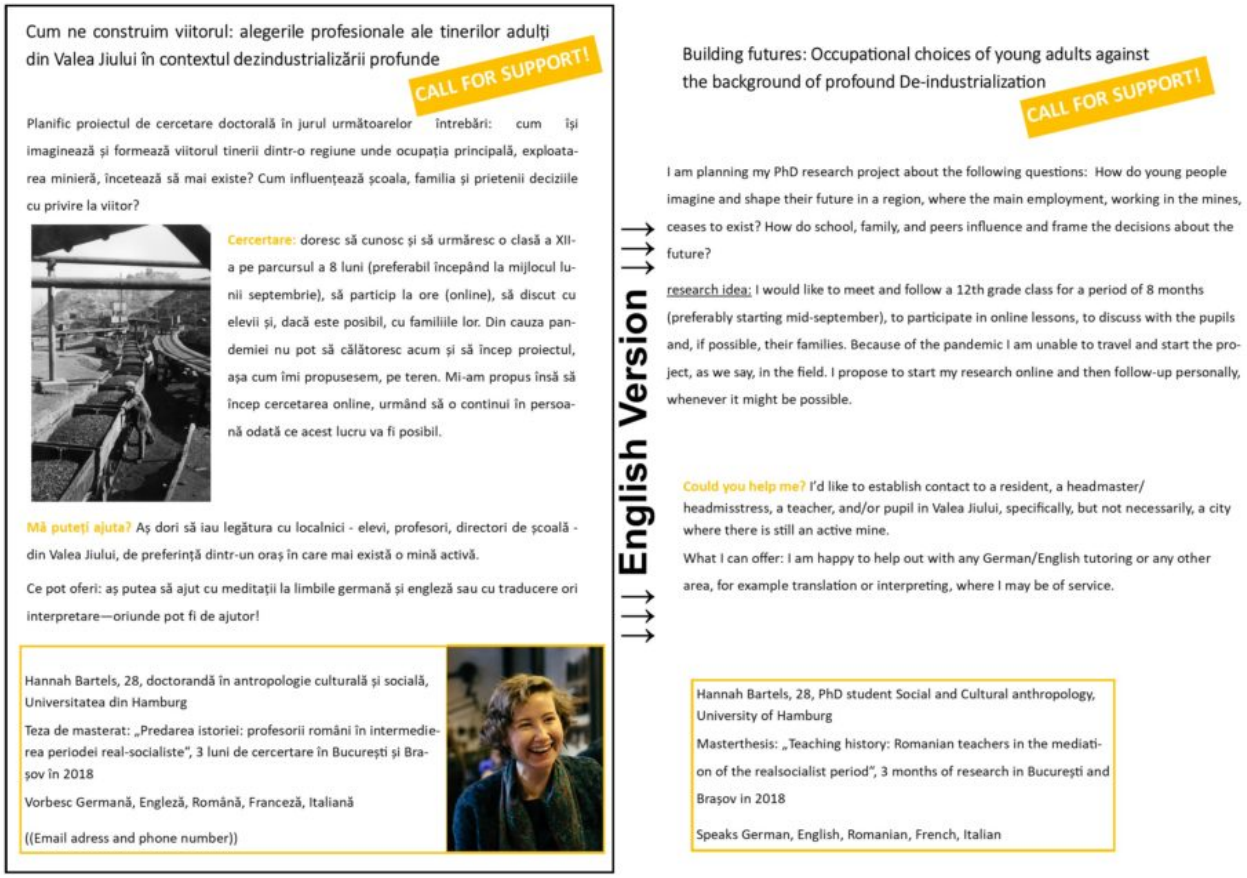

Image: Call for Support which was sent out to multiple contacts. Photo by Hannah Bartels.

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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Hannah Bartels started her PhD at the University of Hamburg in April 2020, following her BA and MA there. Her research interests include education, labor, the real-socialist period and its mediation in the present, aesthetic research, and post-industrial futures. Next to her academic efforts she is a Romanian-German interpreter and can otherwise be found lurking around in Hamburg’s museums, looking for inspiration. Contact: hannah.bartels[at]studium.uni-hamburg.de

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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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