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Starting-Up During COVID-19

Daniela Peluso

The global impact of COVID-19 has rippled into all areas of social, economic, political and business lives no matter what one's line of work or livelihood. Considerable focus has been directed at understanding some of the challenges presented by the current pandemic on primary research, including the negative impacts of a technology-dependent or technology-mediated field site, the lack of material shared spaces during covid-19, interrupted fieldwork, transformed field sites, mental wellbeing, the weakness of online communications in comparison to face-to face contact and other concrete and adverse repercussions of the current pandemic on primary research. While the negative disruptive effects on organizations have been addressed elsewhere (Bartik *et al.* 2020, Meyer *et al.* 2020), here I wish to reflect upon my positive experiences of meeting and working with a small start-up. From my home office, I was able to meet and connect to new colleagues, build a research team, and design and conduct a research project at a new field site– all transpiring without having previously worked together. These circumstances led me to make decisions that I would not have made *sans* pandemic but which contributed toward positive project decisions. Feeling encouraged about what we accomplished together without ever having met my research team colleagues in person, I focus on how covid-19 has created new possibilities for connection and for conducting research within and across borders. Rather than to focus on disruption,

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one might also consider the emergence of new businesses during covid and the ensuing nascent forms and conditions for conducting business at such times.

The global pandemic had been ongoing for over 10 months when I began discussions with a dozen people in small start-up to consider how an anthropological approach might offer a ground-up understanding to a particular set of questions about precarious individuals, groups and workplaces. The, by then, common use of Zoom as a convenient and increasingly ‘natural’ platform for everyday communication among colleagues made these conversations possible – making us feel within close proximity to each other even though we were scattered across the United States and in my case, separated by the Atlantic Ocean. This online proximity felt very different from what some scholars (Howlett 2021) have emphasized as being quite challenging. At the same time, such virtual workplace can be more democratic in contrast to office settings which might potentially group particular people together or have separate partitions and locations. Nonetheless, non-spatial proximity can still happen in other ways through, for example, closed meetings or private chat channels.

At the time that I met the start-up, I was finishing up two projects in Latin America, one in the Peruvian Amazon basin that was aimed at spreading awareness about the sensitive topic of sexual abuse among vulnerable peoples (Peluso *et.al.* 2020), and the other aimed to establish a network of Amazonianist experts to disseminate vetted information on COVID-19 that could be used by Indigenous Peoples, journalists and researchers to assist in efforts to minimize negative health outcomes. I already had first-hand experience with online interviewing on sensitive topics and was using Zoom and WhatsApp to work with an overseas research assistant when worldwide lockdowns and restrictions on travel began. What I was able to undertake and achieve in those projects was possible because the work rested upon well-established relationships *in situ*.

What was novel for me in meeting and working as a consultant with a new start-up in the United States, was that I had not had a pre-established familiar field site or contacts in the region where my work aimed to take place and therefore I needed to employ online communications as a starting point. In a non-COVID-19 setting, I would have typically flown to the new field site and situated myself into the workplace of Kwik-Delish, the organization the start-up was working with for their pilot study. However, I was still in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis COVID-19 in the UK and furthermore, lockdown measures between our respective countries were not favorable for travel. As the start-up requested that the work begin immediately, I decided to hire local anthropologists and positioned myself as a coordinator rather than as an on-the-ground fieldworker. I straightaway posted on relevant listserves

looking for local researchers in the geographical region of the study and sought out the advice of a number of colleagues within my professional network who have experience working with vulnerable peoples in the United States but with whom I was not in regular contact. Previously, the notion of zooming with colleagues that I otherwise would have bumped into at conferences or corresponded with via email was simply not on the table. In academia, pre-pandemic, the assumption of asking for a zoom session was usually limited to one's closest circle. Yet, without enlisting a deep connection to the goals of the project at hand – which required conversation and debate that would not have happened via email, I would not have been able to get the excellent referrals that I did. I was soon able to tap into a wide range of qualified recent PhDs who were able to make room in their schedules to become involved. The interview process required ensuring that the fieldworkers were talented, experienced and genuinely interested in the project. Often, it was the most resistant interviewees – the ones who questioned the project's assumptions - that proved to be the best suited once they better understood the overall positioning of the research. While the researchers had experience working with people who live in various types of precarity, the study required a background in specialized knowledge that was outside their general scope of expertise and thus additional time needed to be spent sharing readings and discussing ideas that grew their interests in the subject of study. I was also able to draw in the time and interest of three colleagues from the start-up, two of whom became directly involved with the research. This was time well spent as it was the basis for a collaboration, training and shared community.

The start-up's preliminary study was designed to be carried out independently from Kwik-Delish, based on an agreement made with them at the time that I was establishing consent procedures for prospective participants. This same agreement gave the start-up access to the organization's workers and allowed two of my colleagues to be site-trained and to work at their facilities for a short duration. Working across the start-up's different teams, together with the knowledge gleaned from my colleagues' short workplace immersion, and following discussions with Kwik-Delish's management of, I was able to design and pilot intensive semi-structured interviews, additional data gathering methods and interactive tools for the study participants.

Within the start-up, working remotely due to COVID-19 positively contributed toward having full attendance at regular project team meet-ups as accessibility was equally available to all. While remote work is not new to businesses, the elimination of office space and the scale with which the pandemic has accelerated participation in the 'anywhere' economy is. There are several standout features for online communication such as body language and expressions that are typically emphasised and noted such as particular hand signals. Yet some

researchers also recognize the limitations of online interactions due to the full range of body motions not being available (Self 2021). Nonetheless, during the pandemic, being able to interact unmasked and comfortably was appreciated by many who had to otherwise practice several safety protocols when outside their homes. In many ways there is an aspect to 'face-to-face' that was more literal because typically only one's shoulders upward are viewed, but also more intimate. Levels of intimacy were also prominent as we were able to be inside one another's homes, to meet family members, pets or repairpersons that make their way into the virtual shared space, and to be aware of and discuss one's surroundings whether it be a change of venue or wall hangings or other aesthetics. When a colleague once repeatedly remained off camera without explanation, many follow-up to ensure that they were in good health. Furthermore, while physical offices provide spontaneous spaces that are sorely missed, they can also be confining, for instance, one can be conscious of interrupting a work colleague's time as they stand in their office doorway asking a question; whereas the online space can feel more comfortable to be present in and/or to say, or be told, that one has a 'hard stop' or an 'incoming meeting call'. In this sense time can feel more fluid and more flexible with the danger being that perhaps there is more time being spent in meetings than might be needed. On the other hand, feedback is typically speedily available during meetings via parallel online meeting chat features — a space where colleagues can affirm or disagree, repeat a speaker's phrase that resonates with the team, add a relevant link or information and also express glee in responding to a speaker's faux pas evidenced by the bursts of lively teasing when one says something they did not mean to say in a certain way. There is also an added awareness of colleagues' interactions with the online ecosystem permitting us to see who is online, who is unavailable, who is working at 1am and in general an ability to have a sense of one's virtual work habits. Such visibility tends to forefront 'seeing' and 'visuality' in terms of how knowledge about colleagues is derived.

The desire for colleagues to connect as people, and not just workers, has also led to the creation of third spaces: shared online coffee breaks, hang-outs, concerts, readings, meditation and spontaneous reaching out. All these possibilities, certainly create connections between peoples and allows each individual to know another in new ways which I suggest create a positive familiarity that is healthy for working relationships and outputs. Notwithstanding, as with all relationships, individuals are also able to make boundaries where they wish to draw them.

At the project level, as I inferred earlier, the local anthropologists who worked with Kwik-Delish would not have been sought out had it not been for COVID-19, and yet they were key to this project. Their understanding of the region and their resident knowledge about and

sensitivity to the particular issues faced by participants (marginality, precarity) was invaluable. The interview process was iterative: each interview and its purpose were discussed at team meet-ups, feedback from the interviews were also discussed alongside changes in the start-up team's needs leading to recrafting the content and design of each subsequent interview in which both their local knowledge and professional skills fed into the process. They mostly held interviews in person often in outdoor locations and always masked. One of the anthropologists remarked that working in person with a study participant allowed for a strong human connection, yet he found that facemasks removed the visibility of facial expressions that are so commonly relied upon for connection and understanding and which are ironically heightened in online communications. Nonetheless, the shared experience of meeting with someone during the pandemic allowed for a critical sense of shared experience, the experience of trying to normalize life as much as possible during COVID-19 times.

In addition, the pandemic created conditions for increased reflection from Kwik-Delish study participants. COVID-19 measures brought into sharp relief critical questions of inequality, accessibility and dependency. Lockdown measures, the demand for essential workers, the possibilities or lack of possibilities to work remotely, the necessary home schooling of children and so forth has been extensively discussed in the media. What impacted the core of this project, was how the conditions of the pandemic placed people in the heart of what this study was interested in: how people navigate an economically precarious world. While the study was not focused on the pandemic, because of it participants were already in varying spaces of contemplation regarding the larger questions that this project sought viewpoints on: people's needs, worries, and wishes in operationalizing their own and others' resources to navigate their work and personal lives in challenging financial circumstances. The pandemic, as a local and global background, heightened peoples' reflections upon their vulnerabilities and loosened their reservations around such sensitive topics. In this sense the pandemic provides an opportunity to gather and learn more about hardships and otherwise veiled accounts about such hardships because it sadly accentuated the economic challenges of workers' lives.

In conclusion, the positive aspects of working remotely and through alternatives strategies during a pandemic, suggest that remote work and research spaces should be evaluated on their own merit for what they can add and reveal. In the case of the project and the organization, while technology has provided a conduit for communication and action, it is important not to lose sight of what continues to matter through its various mediums: the human connections, building rapport, relationality, and conviviality that allow individuals and groups to thrive. This, in turn, informs how people overcome perceived obstacles, when

and how technology matters and in what ways it can be best placed in our service. Overall, what virtual workplaces and subsequent virtual research design and overviews bring to human creativity and innovation need to be considered alongside and just as significantly as what has been left behind.

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