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HAVE I BEEN IN THE FIELD?
THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ELECTRONIC CORRESPONDENCE

The author examines the possibilities of defining her own research of electronic correspondence as fieldwork, and describes and interprets certain aspects and stages of that research. She deals with two connected aspects of fieldwork research: the issue of physical groundedness of the field and the issue of her relationship with "the subjects of the research" – placing them in a context of researching an Internet topic, email.

Keywords: fieldwork, the Internet, autoethnography

The papers published in the issue of *Narodna umjetnost* on the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research aimed at bringing to light the unknown and the unpublished, "the private" segment of the Institute life or "the other side of the coin", "covered up by academic and public work" (Gulin and Endstrasser 1998:257). The proportion of anecdotes and memories from the field in that part of the issue indicates a great importance of the field, or at least its strong presence, in the work of the Institute researchers. There was only one text which was completely unaffected by the field; significantly, it was the only one evoking "a sombre mood" (Zečević 1998:291). The remaining texts – memories in the first person, fragments from interviews and various notes from the past – emanate the joy of companionship (Milićević 1998), the closeness to other researchers (Bošković-Stulli 1998:273), a spirit of adventure, amusing and humorous, filled with suspense and audacity (Gulin 1998:27). All of this, along with two or three other things, is primarily connected with *fieldwork*, *the proverbially "fascinating" place of ethnological insight* (Prica 2001:102), which is represented as the green tree of life in contrast to the greyness of theoretical or some other non field-related work (cf. Marks and Lozica 1998:100).

If we compare these with the other texts published in the same issue of the journal – scholarly papers outlining the fifty years of research of

the Institute folklorists, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists – apart from the difference in discourse, another important distinction can be observed. While the "unofficial" texts about the life of the Institute construct the field as more-or-less the main character of narration, in the "official" section the field, admittedly, does appear as a thread in all the papers and is mentioned in expressions such as "skilful field researcher" (Rihtman-Auguštin and Muraj 1998:116), but it remains an essentially insignificant element in the narrative structure, whose description and interpretation is left unexamined.[1] If we take the field as lively and exciting, then the two groups of texts can also be used to trace the dividing line between such liveliness, characteristic of researchers' personal stories, and the greyness supposedly characteristic of theoretical work or, to expand its scope, characteristic of all science, including overviews of researchers' work. This seems to be yet another level confirming the significant isolation of "extra-scholarly, i.e., lively events" in the field, of "the colour and freshness from that *domain of life*" which "supposedly must turn *grey*" – or, in this case, must disappear – – "in the institutional practice of scientific writing and publishing" (cf. Prica 2001:104).

Despite the fascination with the field in the autobiographical stories of researchers – or perhaps because of this fascination that might lose part of its power if translated into the language of scholarship – fieldwork did not figure as an important part in Croatian scholarly studies. Although it is one of the key elements of Croatian ethnology and folklore research and an important, perhaps even a crucial, part of research practice, researchers rarely explicitly dealt with it or interpreted it at length in their works. The field is either understood by itself or hidden in the subtext of the scholarly work. The anecdotes and memories on the pages of the anniversary issue of *Narodna umjetnost* are not – nor, taking into consideration the type of texts, should they be – an analysis of fieldwork; they contain no intention of examining the notion and the practice of the field in one way or another. These texts offer descriptions and impressions and occasionally auto-reflections of field researchers, who are not so much scholars in the field but tourists visiting new areas and meeting new people, travellers who nostalgically remember good old times or even "the ancient mythical past" (Bošković-Stulli 1998:275). These texts contain adventures, jokes and misunderstandings which arise out of a journey with colleagues or out of an encounter of things unknown to each other; in short they are what re-

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[1] Initially, collecting material and its research are mentioned as two primary areas of activity of the Institute (Vitez 1998:7); and at least the former presupposes fieldwork. Later, fieldwork still remains an important component of the Institute's activity, although "with a somewhat altered attitude to individual components of scholarly and research work (theoretically, methodologically and empirically)" (ibid.). It is indicated that fieldwork will keep playing an important role in the future: the last sentences of the folklorist review, which mentions the green tree of life metaphor, also claims that "we personally shall continue to use field research to supplement theory" (Marks and Lozica 1998:100).

searchers remember as amusing and what they do not classify as serious research, bur rather as something less serious or less important for them as public figures / scholars.

Therefore if one wants to describe one's own research experience starting with the notion of the field, finding a point of reference in Croatian research according to which to situate one's own fieldwork (or anything one might wish to call fieldwork) is not a simple matter. However, the image of fieldwork as created on the autobiographical pages of *Narodna umjetnost* and the image that is projected by what is (un)written in scholarly papers do offer some field coordinates. Above all fieldwork is physical removal, a journey, a departure into more or less unknown parts which pose physical or mental obstacles in the path of the researcher. These obstacles by no means measure up to difficulties and thrills that western travellers may encounter in the Solomon Islands, the Cayman Islands, Iran, Brazil, India, China or Cameroon,[2] but still contain a dose of adventure or at least refer to – despite the mention of everyday life in the title of the section containing personal stories in *Narodna umjetnost* – a removal from everyday life, a departure from the daily routine and meeting something new and unusual to a larger or lesser extent. The researcher in the field meets new people, talks to them or asks them questions using questionnaires, encourages them to talk about themselves or the life of the community or to share with her/him their narrating, reciting, singing or dancing skills. The fieldwork researcher in Croatia, unlike numerous world / western anthropologists whose research tradition starts with the traveller who visited the Western Pacific, usually spends shorter periods in the field, a few days at a time, going back once or several times to the same location. But whether short or long, this is a period of time spent in a place that is not home. Although narrators met by the fieldworkers in Croatia, as opposed to people met by anthropologists who travel to faraway countries, are their fellow countrymen, they are also "other" – regionally, professionally, in social class or in some other way. Leaving the field, therefore, means returning home: returning to the researcher's "primary" workplace and among people who are not narrators.[3]

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[2] These are the destinations covered by a university department in Great Britain (cf. Knowles 2000:57). Of course, the choice could have been much wider and more diverse.

[3] Despite similarities, there are also many differences, perhaps even fundamental differences – depending on the perspective – between the classical, "anthropological", and Croatian, "ethnological" and "folklore research" field, or, more specifically, between the "ideal types" of these fields, between their – primarily historical – canons and models. It is not my intention to compare them here, but I will nevertheless mention some of these differences. One of the most conspicuous is the one between leaving to a far away field "to other countries" and staying in "one's own country". Therefore, the partial shift of the field towards "home" to "anthropology at home" (Jackson 1987) is not so striking in Croatian ethnology, taking into consideration that researchers have always dealt with close although "other" cultures, mainly with village communities of their own society (whose members, which is not unimportant, spoke the ethnographer's mother tongue, although they did probably use a different dialect). Still, finding the field

I have never been to such "classical" field. The topic that I have been dealing with for the past several years – one of the many types of internet communication – did not require going to a faraway place or meeting new people. My living room and my computer with a modem connection in the rented apartments in Zagreb where I lived at the time were a more than adequate starting point and a constant background in the interpretation of certain modern practices connected with communication and information technology. Thus, in my research (cf. Pleše 2005) journey as a physical act of removal from one place to another and as the unmistakable external signal of fieldwork is missing. In turn, strictly limited time periods of "being there" and returning from the field to the known and familiar environment are also missing. Instead of coming across a bear (Gulin 1998:277) or facing a dangerous official wearing a militia uniform (Bošković-Stulli 1998:273), I could have perhaps faced a new computer virus which, despite the danger of destroying the electronic archive, is nothing compared to a massive menacing forest animal or a hidden club with a very real (although perhaps not clearly defined) power over people.

Turning to the two abovementioned aspects of field research which are separate and yet connected – the issue of the physical groundedness of the field and the issue of the relationship with the "subjects of the research" – in this text I will try to present my own (field?) research.

Geographical or social "locality"?

Geographically bounded location as the ethnographer's field to be found on the map of the world (anthropology) or of your own homeland (Croatian ethnography), a field to be reached by train, car, plane or some other means of transportation or by walking, has not been a theoretical trend for some time. Due to an expansion of globalization and translocal and transnational practices, due to an increase in the mobility of people, ideas, products and information and due to the prominent place mediated

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"nearby" and the shift from the village to the city and, more so, from the past into the presence, were an important step for Croatian science (Rihtman-Auguštin 1988). Going to faraway countries is very atypical for Croatian science – one of the rare contemporary examples is the research of "the role and position of women in the music life of today's Gambia" (Piškor 2001:41) – and it will probably remain atypical, largely due to the scientific policy and the lack of funding. The ideal of a complete description of a culture was never very prominent in Croatia. Researchers primarily dealt with certain aspects of the way of life in a certain area, which is, among other things, connected to shorter periods spent in the field in comparison with ethnographers-anthropologists. Efforts for completeness of description in Croatian ethnography were mostly connected with non-professional ethnographers who either lived in the community they described or were even more closely connected with it (the so called folk ethnographers, cf. Kideckel 1997:48). Instead of a clear focus on participant observation – which is also connected with the length of stay at a particular place – Croatian ethnography stressed observation, listening and interviewing the narrators. While anthropologists often visited the field alone, Croatian fieldworkers often went in groups.

communication occupies in the modern world, the idea of cultures as bounded, self-contained and separate wholes with their own meanings and internal development, wholes which are strongly connected with specific physical localities has turned out to be outdated and overcome (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Consequently, there are endeavours to "go beyong the field" in practice (Wittel 2000). Instead of dealing with culture or with certain aspects of culture and the way of life at a single geographical area, researchers deal with topics that connect different geographical areas within the same research, they deal with social spaces or practices (Strauss 2000), identities (Čapo Žmegač 2002) or, perhaps, networks (cf. Wittel 2000:9-14). In this way they can remove themselves from the physical space strictly limited by visible or at least more easily establishable boundaries (ibid.).

But if the need to remove oneself from the physical locality / traditional field – taking into consideration the fact that it is not the defining feature of "culture" in the modern world – is carried to extremes, what might seem as perfectly understandable and acceptable on the theoretical level may well turn out to be less straightforward when it comes to research, or ethnographic research, at any rate. Although researchers themselves are mobile and transnational just like their "objects" (cf. Knowles 2000), their ethnographies are still, at least indirectly, connected with physical territories because the people they deal with are also in various ways connected with them. How does one completely detach oneself from the ground, when people that we deal with are still connected with the "ground" – even if they do travel by air? The fact that they are mobile, multilingual, and adaptable to various climates and landscapes does not mean that they live detached from the earth beneath their feet.[4] Whether they are forced or economic migrants (Čapo Žmegač 2002; 2003), members of ballet ensembles travelling around the world (Wulff 2000), participants in the community of practice (Strauss 2000) or simply inhabitants of the global world, whether they connect several "fields" or "the whole world" by their practices and identities, they are still situated – – even if only between cross-ocean flights – in specific geographical localities. Even in the case of radical detachment from geographical locality, or, to be more specific, in the constant change of geographical locality – like in the ethnography of transnational migrants, travellers on the bus between Sweden and Croatia and back – we are dealing with a physical locality, regardless of its reduction in size compared to a region, a village or a city; the vehicle moving through specific geographical areas is the framework of ethnographic research (Povrzanović Frykman 2001).

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[4] However, one should keep in mind that most people today still live attached to one geographical locality – however entwined it may be with different "materials" from various parts of the world. Hence, emphasizing only mobility may mean neglecting those who are chained by various types of chains – despite a great connectedness of the world – to one ground and one physical space.

In this way the Internet as a global network connecting even the remotest places and people in new non-physical cyberspace could become a *deus ex machina* recovering the radicalized idea of an interconnected and globalised world in which the physical aspect is no longer important. If hypertext illustrates the abstract presuppositions of the instability and arbitrariness of meaning (cf. Turkle 1997:17-18),[5] the Internet may illustrate and elucidate the largely abstract network of society, the interconnectedness of the world and its separation from physical locality.[6] The Internet does not merely connect people in different parts of the world in the way that other diverse global products, material objects or television programs do, but *really* connects them, supposedly enabling them to be separated from their physical groundedness. The researcher in cyberspace is therefore not in any one specific physical place but in a non-material net which is separated from physical localities. The people s/he "meets" there do not have physical features: voice timbre or eye colour, visible gender characteristics. They are "objects" separated from their physical bodies, detached from the ground beneath their feet. Therefore, "[a]n ethnography of purely virtual spaces is certainly the most radical attempt to move beyond the traditional 'fieldwork' approach" (Wittel 2000:15).

A simple reduction of all Internet topics to the lowest common denominator might be the claim that my research of the Internet also does away with the physical, territorial boundaries and the attachment of their subjects to physical space. In my research, the participants in the Internet communication did not have to be, or rather must not have been physically present in the same space in order to communicate electronically. To use yet another variant of the worn out claim that on the Internet nobody knows you are a dog, one could add that nobody knows where you are (cf. Negroponte 2002) or, that nobody has to know who you "actually" are in order to communicate with you.

However, as opposed to treating the Internet and the so-called cyberspace as a virtual meeting place for virtual people detached from their physical bodies and physical localities, researchers-ethnographers tend to consider it to be an environment populated by real people with physical bodies – whether they are in their living room, in an Internet cafŽ or on a faraway winter journey – people with real-world problems and identities shaped by their physical groundedness. Although they are seemingly detached from geographical territories, they carry their geographical, social, cultural and other "localities" and "fields" with them as their inseparable part. Whatever their behaviour in cyberspace, whatever

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[5] Certain types of Internet communication supposedly clarify the abstract ideas that "the self (…) [is] constituted by and through language, that sexual congress is the exchange of signifies, and that each of us is a multiplicity of parts, fragments, and desiring connections" (Turkle 1997:14).

[6] There are numerous glorifications of new information and communication technologies which, for example, predict the abolition of geographical boundaries in a post-information age (Negroponte 2002:124).

strategies and discourses they use and in whatever way they identify themselves, "falsely" or "honestly", participants in cyber-communication cannot detach themselves from their mental and physical "remainder" in the "real" world, which can be filled with very real physical pain (cf. Sobchack 2001). Therefore, the legitimacy of treating them exclusively as online personae which float in cyberspace is debatable.[7]

But while some Internet topics – like the behaviour participants in MUDs or in various discussion groups – may prompt researchers to disregard "the real world", some others – such as email exchange in my research – are more difficult or perhaps impossible to examine as detached from that world, as self-sufficient conversations or creative cyberspace games, with whose players sitting in front of the computer screen we do not have to be familiar in order to give an accurate account of their online behaviour. While participants in cyber-communication can "pass for" and play with identities hidden behind their nickname, the authors of emails written to people they are close to – although they do participate in various types of self-representation – have no such option nor, indeed, such objective. Different types of Internet communication (cf. Kollock and Smith 2001:4-6) have different objectives and characteristics, and depending on them researchers approach them in different ways.

Taking into consideration that I dealt with the relationship of users toward private electronic correspondence, which constitutes only one part of their complete mediated and non-mediated interaction and which obviously represents a part of their "real" lives, my work, in comparison with the extensive literature on the practices connected with computer and communication technology, is much less marked by the unknown, new and unusual; it is much less directed at what might be unique and specific to cyber-communication, as is the case with playing with identities (see, e.g., Turkle 1997) or with the so-called virtual communities (see, e.g., Rheingold 2000). Quite the opposite, in my research I dealt with topics that may form a part of the *ethnography of writing* (cf. Danet 2001:11), which is not defined by any specific or unique technology, period or exoticism of new ways of communication. This ethnography is concerned with the everyday usage of writing, its genres, norms and common features, with the issue of who is writing, why, how and using what medium. Therefore, I was not interested in the Internet as "a monolithic or placeless

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[7] Justifiably or not, certain authors do not consider this type of approach ethnography: "I do not wish to argue against research in purely virtual spaces. Certainly this research is necessary and useful. However I would hesitate to ascribe to it the label 'ethnography'. Research in virtual spaces can only then become virtual fieldwork if the researcher is multi-sited, multi-sited in a physical sense. In schools, internet cafés, work places and in private living spaces. If the research conducted is single-sited, that is to say from the researcher's office computer, it might be more appropriate to dispense with the term ethnography and talk about conversation analysis, text analysis or discourse analysis" (Wittel 2000:21).

'cyberspace'" but as a collection of "numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations" (Miller and Slater 2000:1).

This by no means implies that the subjects of research are connected to the real-world locations in the same way as subjects in "old" ethno-graphies and in "old" times. They are mobile, they communicate with one another long-distance and their lives fit the contemporary image of mobility, mediated communication and interconnectedness in general. The researcher can observe their practices without them or herself being physically present in the same space. In fact, physical space, some believe, is less appropriate for their research, taking into consideration that the practices themselves do not happen in physical space (cf. Hine 2000:48). In the next few paragraphs I will discuss the "bearers" of these practices, i.e., the subjects of my research, whom I have nevertheless "found" in the physical space of my immediate environment.[8]

Autoethnography

The number of Internet users in Croatia is on the increase, and email makes up the largest portion in comparison to other Internet activities (www.gfk.hr/press/internet2.htm; www.gfk.hr/press/internet3.htm). How-ever, the comparatively large number of users, with its flip side – an uneven distribution of computers and Internet access referred to as the digital division, did not play an important role in my research. My re-search was not intended as representative or comprehensive; nor did it aim at statistic coverage of the largest possible number of users. Therefore the choice of research participants restricted the scope of my work in the number of email users, their gender and age, their cultural, economic and other ties and their possibly different approaches to and opinions on electronic correspondence. I have built up my research on my own electronic correspondence and my own participation in it, and the users of electronic mail that I wrote about are people with whom I regularly or occasionally communicated via email.[9]

One of the reasons why I opted for my own personal electronic correspondence and narrators who are my acquaintances and friends might have been the difficulty of collecting correspondence from people

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[8] Although I have not travelled in order to research the use of email, this does not mean that researchers of the Internet and its users' practices never travel. Following in the footsteps of British anthropology and its overseas journeys, two researchers of the Internet, Daniel Miller and Don Slater, locate their research in the larger of the two Caribbean islands in the state of Trinidad and Tobago (2000). They wish to situate the topic of the Internet into a geographically, socially and culturally real, and not virtual, ethnographic field. An unrelated, but not unimportant issue here is how much their journey into a faraway country, like the journey of so many contemporary anthropo-logists, supports exotization and a colonial view of the world.

[9] These are mostly my friends, academically educated women in their late twenties or early thirties who – with longer or shorter periods of absence – live in Croatia.

with whom one is not in close contact (cf. Danet 2001:63-64). Correspondence consists of private and sometimes intimate texts that the senders share with their close ones, texts which they are unlikely to share with a wider circle of acquaintances or with a completely unknown audience. However, these potential difficulties were not the (only) reason why I decided to use messages from my own electronic inbox. Quite the opposite: instead of such a research journey in which the topic, the circumstances and the possible difficulties in conducting the research lead to a particular choice of narrators and correspondence, one might say a particular correspondence, i.e., my own correspondence with persons close to me, this was in fact the topic that I wanted to examine. In this way, my role in the research was certainly greater than the role of an observer or an "after-the-fact participant".[10] I have tried to tell an individual story about the usage of email from my own experience and my own participatory perspective, largely incorporating the perspectives and practices of my interlocutors and correspondents; commenting on the history of the usage, its groundedness in the living context, its variations and particularities.

In this way my work is situated into the type of ethnographies focused on practices in which the ethnographer herself participates, not necessarily (only) for research reasons (Panourgia 1995, quoted in Davies 2001:183). Moreover, the ethnographer is in a way one of the central characters of her own ethnography: starting with herself and her own practice, thoughts, feelings and attitudes, she tries to draw a larger picture of a particular *social* topic (Murphy 1987, quoted in Davies 2001:184). This approach is situated on the autobiographical pole of the ethnography continuum, and is covered by one of the meanings of the term autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997a). In itself such an approach is no better or worse than the approach where the researcher's autobiographical element is only partially present, minimized, or, at least seemingly, completely absent. I myself have not chosen it because I believed that I would be able to obtain more authentic or the only reliable data and conclusions. Quite the opposite: using autobiographical elements and my own correspondence and starting with myself as a participant in the written exchange, I believe to have laid strong emphasis on the conditioned nature of (ethnographic) knowledge and on the possibility of obtaining different images of reality in connection with specific persons, their social status, the context, their age as well as with the personality and research position of the ethnographer herself.

The autoethnographic perspective in my case was less a matter of conscious choice and more a matter of something that was a result of the topic, or, to be more precise, something that I consider inextricably linked to the topic. Had I, for example, dealt with the culture of information

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[10] I am referring to a frequent research position in which the ethnographer, having chosen the topic she wants to deal with, approaches a particular group, and tries to become part of it for research reasons.

technology experts or with the electronic gathering places of members of various communities I myself do not belong to, then the topic would have been more detached from myself. Autobiographical, or rather, autoreflexive elements could then have been found in setting the scene for the research, in the relationship toward my narrators or in the writing of the text, but not in the description of the practices of the research subjects. And as the topic of my work was at the same time my private "topic" – the "topic" of my everyday life; that is, as I was a passionate email sender and receiver, it seemed inappropriate and unnecessary to detach myself as a researcher from myself as a participant.[11]

In the described research situation – in which the ethnographer and her close friends and acquaintances are subjects of research[12] – the issue of the relationship with the narrators is constructed differently than when the ethnographer goes to a foreign territory and establishes contact with new people. Taking into consideration that my narrators were also my friends, I may have been in a privileged position in comparison with the ethnographers that I described earlier. As I have not entered a foreign territory, at least not physically, I did not have to search for gatekeepers (in the Croatia they might be "the primary school principal" or a teacher (Delorko, quoted in Endstrasser 1998:263, 262)) to recommend me to the narrators, with whom I would negotiate or with whom I would have to ingratiate myself in this way or the other. Although I did have to use my powers of persuasion, I was never put in a position where the potential narrator would hide "behind the picket fence of her own yard" or in a house where the door was tightly shut (Delorko, as quoted in Endstrasser 1998:263, 262) or in a position where the narrator would deny his identity and go on with his donkey as if nothing had happened (Bošković-Stulli 1998:274). I was never in a position where, like Gogol's government inspector, I would be taken for a spy, a government agent (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:78),

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[11] Of course, this type of detachment cannot be completely avoided since an ethnographer is necessarily in a different position than the other participants. In order to describe the practices she is taking part in, the ethnographer – like any other commentator – must necessarily distance herself more or less from the phenomena she is describing. Quoting Kirsten Hastrup, an author whose narrators were her friends and close ones says: "I would not pretend to avoid (…) 'the inherent process of "othering" in anthropology'" (Pink 2000:102).

[12] Karin Norman considers the term "informants" inappropriate because it is "too technical and emphasizes 'information' which is not what fieldwork is really all about", but adds: "One could use 'friend' or some such term, but that also confounds problems (…) I am close to many of the persons in my study and feel strong friendship towards them, but the distance between us is there because the condition of our relationship can never be completely ignored" (2000:141). As opposed to numerous examples – one of which is the one by Karin Norman – in which narrators became the researcher's friends in the course of the study, my narrators were my friends completely independently of my research, that is to say long before I have started dealing with this topic.

or, in Croatia, for someone who wants to "make money" off the narrators[13] (Delorko, as quoted in Endstrasser 1998:262).

These were the advantages of my research. But, on the other hand, meeting unknown people – who, fortunately, do not always flee head over heels – means new stories, like the story of Ana –, who was, as noticed by the recorder of her narration, "a relatively young woman, and, most importantly, well kept", and her blind husband (Delorko, quoted in Endstrasser 1998:264). Whether happy or sad, new stories and new people are new riches in the life of a researcher. What my research, unfortunately, does not contain are precisely these "new" people, "unmediated" by the narrators' stories, but physically there.

So: have I been in the field?

If there are no new people and there is no new field, is it at all possible to talk about ethnographic fieldwork? My research was conducted in two ways. On the one hand, I was interested in the written texts that were the result of electronic exchange. Reading them anew, I could follow the dynamics of correspondence, the topics that appeared in them and the ways they were shaped. Some ethnographers who deal with written texts "take away" the designation "field" from fieldwork and try to define it differently: in order to define the method used in her own research, the author who ethnographically studied two texts published in France instead of the term fieldwork borrowed the terms "deskwork" and "textwork" (Reed-Danahay 1997b:128). Although my research could in part be called textwork, I would not completely deny the existence of the field component in it. My electronic correspondence as a whole is a continuing process, and every individual email created during this process is an unfinished text – which makes it only a part of the complete correspondence that continued after my decision to adopt a new, additional, research approach to it. One could perhaps say that every time I turned on the computer, wrote a text, connected to the net, sent, received and read the received email this was one visit to the field. Since I have not approached my correspondence retroactively as a completed collection of texts created in the past, but have taken part in the electronic exchange during the research period, designating my research as fieldwork does not seem completely inappropriate. Of course, the meaning of the term does not completely correspond to its previous meaning in the past.[14] Some com-

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[13] Although this type of reasoning would not be completely mistaken: professional ethnographers do in some way earn their living off narrators.

[14] Researching the role of travel, one of the main external characteristics of fieldwork, in creating ethnographic authority and finding its possible equivalent in the ethnography of the Internet, Chrstina Hine views visits to the Internet as centred on experiential as opposed to physical removal. If travel as physical removal is important because it gives authority to the traveller-ethnographer who "has been where the reader cannot or did not go", enabling her to have a unique experience, then experiential removal in the research

paratively newer texts by anthropologists and ethnologists, or, to call them by a common name, ethnographers, talk about other types of departures from the classical meaning of fieldwork (cf., e.g., Amit 2000a). They are all reflections on traditional concepts of fieldwork in contemporary research situations.

But if the interpretation of texts and the participation in their creation cannot be called fieldwork, then the second way in which my research was conducted could more easily get this designation. It is one of the "classical" methods in the ethnographic approach: talking to narrators. The authors of emails became my narrators in two ways: we electronically "discussed" the research questions that interested me,[15] continuing and supplementing our correspondence that went on independently of the research, and we discussed the same topics "live", most frequently continuing conversations among friends concerning other topics in meetings that went on independently of the research. My conversations with the narrators were probably less formal than in a classical prearranged ethnographic interview, which may be more strictly limited by time and topics and in which the interviewer is in a foreign field. However, my research did not consist of completely spontaneous, casual conversation. If nothing else, the fact of turning the tape recorder on or off and of making notes was what marked and limited our conversation about the research topic. Thus, in order to talk to my narrators I did not have to leave my home, but I still went to the field and came back from it by the push of a button.

On the other hand, my conversation with my narrators can be taken as less characteristic of fieldwork than electronic correspondence. If we accept that one of the key elements of fieldwork is the ethnographer's presence "at the scene", then taking part in the correspondence, in comparison to conversation, fulfils this condition to a greater extent. The scene of electronic exchange is the exchange itself, and by participating in it the ethnographer is actually in the field. Talking to narrators after the fact, outside the social space of electronic exchange, the ethnographer creates more of an "artificial", "arranged" situation, far away from the place where the practices that interest her take place.

In any case, the hypothesis that physical space is perhaps less appropriate in the ethnography of the Internet due to the fact that the observed interaction takes place in the *social* space of the Internet and not in *physical* space, has already been put forward. Christine Hine believes that the ethnographer's suggestion to meet face to face with her/his narrators in cases where the participants in cyber-communication meet exclu-

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of social spaces of the Internet also gives the researcher ethnographic authority (Hine 2000:44-46). The idea of experiential travel is by no means new or connected only to the Internet. "The movement is a cognitive one. Little or no physical movement is actually required in order to encounter another form of life – and probably never has been" (Rapport 2000:72).

[15] Internet is presented here not only as the "subject" of the research but also as the "means" of research.

sively in cyberspace puts the ethnographer into an asymmetric position to her /his narrators, because s/he is using different ways of communication than her/his narrators. In classical ethnography, says the author, the ethnographer uses the same means and ways of communication as the ones available to her/his narrators, and is therefore in a symmetric position to them (2000:48-49). I do not want to deal with the issue of balance (or its lack) here – although it does seem more complex than what has been described – but I do want to stress that my meetings with my narrators were held irrespective of the research. The friendship among correspondents, with whom I socialized outside of the limited space of electronic exchange, was also an important component that I wrote about; consequently our meetings which focused on electronic exchange can be taken as fieldwork in a wider sense. If this view is adopted, participation in the correspondence and conversation with my narrators would be equivalent field aspects. Conversations with narrators were not designed to be a so-called control field, although sometimes there were some disparities between what was said and what had been written earlier in the electronic texts. I believe this to be a result of the processual nature of the relationship to the world and to email correspondence. I do not consider either one of the alternatives (i.e., what was uttered and what was written) better or more accurate; rather I regard both as equally valid segments of the relationship of an individual to their connectedness with others.

Constructing the field

This is, of course, constructing the field (cf. Amit 2001a and b). Although "old" fields were also constructed as opposed to found, their boundaries were at least seemingly well-established and fixed (cf. Wittel 2000:9). For the authors of the texts from *Narodna umjetnost* from the beginning of this paper it was easier to say that they are "going to the field" or that they have "come back from the field". If we take the perspective of curious vacationers who look forward to the anxiety of travel, the thrill of facing the unknown, to physical movement and revelation, i.e., vacationers who are unaffected by the general commercialization of travel as a practice and a topic, an intellectual or experiential journey may seem a poor substitute for a "real" journey. Thus, the field constructed at the desk of one's own living room – far away from the fields of our "old" Croatian ethnographers, let alone from the well-off world travellers – can seem a poor substitute for the suspense, adventure, excitement, amusement and liveliness discussed at the beginning of the text.

But it is also possible to take a different view. If we do not take the excitement of travel, the traveller's adventures, jokes and anecdotes as the defining feature of our discipline, then the field as *social space* or as a *set of relationships* that are constructed and researched "here" or "somewhere else" is not a (mere) substitute of the geographical field, let alone a poor substitute. Such a field should be considered in its own terms, and should

not be subjected to attempts of finding elements of an imagined "real" field in it and of determining its value and legitimacy according to the number of these elements and its "proximity" to it.

Thinking in this direction, my qualifications of various aspects of research as fieldwork to a greater or smaller extent could be taken as attempts to adapt to what I simultaneously reject as the only real field; as an attempt to give subsequent legitimacy to my own work, as if legitimacy can only be obtained by "approximating" the "real" field. This would be in contradiction to my earlier statement about the conditioned nature of ethnographic knowledge and in contradiction to my rejection of a single truth of the field, the truth that can be found solely in a (faraway) physical territory.[16] But my own attempt to qualify my own research as fieldwork need not necessarily be interpreted (only) as an attempt to find my own place in the shade of a green tree of life. Although I could have used a different notion from the field without significantly changing the meaning of the text, I did not want to reject it, perhaps because of a strong symbolic and actual meaning of fieldwork in a discipline that I belong to by my education. In this sense I do not abandon the tradition that goes along with this notion. However, I do not consider this tradition an essential point of reference but rather a possible one; a point of reference that cannot establish the value of the field that is being compared, but can make it easier to "situate" it into the (historical) context of the discipline.

Although the notion of fieldwork can – and even should – be examined, I do not think it should be rejected.[17] Just as the traditional name of our discipline remained despite great and possibly fundamental changes in research topics and approaches (cf. Čiča 1993 and Čapo Žmegač 1993) – for reasons of continuity and as a result of various relations of power – the notion of fieldwork has also remained. Its different practices, under the same name, just like the practices of ethnology, are shaped in new and different ways. For instance, "the streets of my town" have become the field (Rihtman-Auguštin 2000), and "narrations" – the products of what used to be going to the field with a tape recorder in one's hand – can now themselves "come" to their researcher in the guise of literary prose or a newspaper genre (cf. Senjković 2002:54).

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[16] In a critical review of the concept of the field as a geographically remote place where the "exotic others" live, Virginia Caputo tries to endow the fieldwork in her own city with important elements of classical, "real" fieldwork (travel, staying in an unknown environment, the experience of initiation, going to the field and returning from it) (2000). In this way she seems to contradict herself: she is trying to adapt to what she simultaneously criticizes. She adopts different strategies to emphasize "the irony and constructedness" of various elements of ethnographic work and text, but at the same time to endows her research with "a certain degree of anthropological legitimacy" (ibidem:23).

[17] Certain authors believe that it is also very difficult or even impossible to replace it with a different notion or term; talking about the so-called ethnography of networks Andreas Wittel says: "The fact that I use the term fieldwork here only reveals how strong it is. It seems impossible to simply replace it with another one" (2000:10).

As shown by two aspects of ethnographic (field)work discussed here[18] – the physical groundedness of the field and the relationship with the subjects of research – my work is clearly, on the one hand, a departure from the traditional field which turns to social instead of physical spaces and in this way at least a partial liberation from physical and territorial boundaries, which may perhaps mean adopting a "wider perspective". On the other hand, it represents a type of limitation and, in comparison with classical fieldwork, even a more strong attachment to particular people at particular places. On the one hand, this ethnography is "contemporary" because it deals with contemporary mediated types of communication that are not strongly linked to any one physical place; on the other hand it is "traditional": I could have approached any other practice of a particular group of people in a similar way that I have approached electronic correspondence. In my approach I was interested in the meanings that email has for correspondents, the ways they use it, the connections and relationships that are established between interlocutors over the net, the reasons and motivations for taking part in such relationships, as well as the "products" themselves: electronic texts produced in such relationships. This clearly shows that every topic – whether it is centuries old or as contemporary as the Internet – is shaped in relation to what the researcher is interested in. To what extent this shaping actually depends on "new" people previously unknown to the researcher, on physical journeys and geographical localities are issues that are perhaps not so crucial.

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[18] There are many topics that I have not discussed here, and that might be stimulating for a discussion of particular features of my work. Among others, for instance, the continual overlap of research and writing, which are usually separated because of the conditions that facilitate fieldwork (being there) or prevent it (being here). In connection with this, it would be interesting to research the coherence of the role of the ethnographer who is now in her "home" environment and is constantly forced to change her roles, as opposed to a situation where she is far away from home, primarily playing the role of ethnographer. One of the at home anthropologists for instance, writes: "coherence in the role of fieldworker was not part of my experience. Rather, my fieldworker persona was made up of a series of partial identities that abruptly shifted according to changes in context" (Caputo 2000:27). But the issue of the actual variation in the researcher's position depending on the distance from the field still remains; the issue of whether complete coherence is possible in any research context. Blending of professional and personal roles is not at all infrequent in ethnographic research.

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JESAM LI BILA NA TERENU?
O ETNOGRAFIJI ELEKTRONIČKOG DOPISIVANJA

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SAŽETAK

Propitujući mogućnost određenja vlastitog istraživanja elektroničkog dopisivanja kao terenskog, autorica opisuje i interpretira pojedine aspekte i faze toga istraživanja. Bavi se dvama međusobno povezanim aspektima terenskog istraživačkog rada – pitanjem fizičkog utemeljenja terena i pitanjem odnosa sa "subjektima istraživanja" – smještajući ih u kontekst istraživanja jedne internetske teme, elektroničke pošte.

Ključne riječi: terenski rad, internet, autoetnografija