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**What is action ethnography? Reconsidering our intentions
for impact in ethnographic practice**

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What is action ethnography?

Reconsidering our intentions for impact in ethnographic practice

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer an accessible and interdisciplinary research strategy in organisational ethnography, called action ethnography, that acknowledges key concepts from action research and engaged and immersive ethnography. It aims to encourage methodological innovation and an impact turn in ethnographic practice.

Design/methodology/approach – A working definition of ‘action ethnography’ is provided first. Then, to illustrate how an action ethnography can be designed by considering impact from the outset, the author draws on a study she is undertaking with a grassroots human rights monitoring group, based in England, then discusses advantages and limitations to the approach.

Findings – The author suggests three main tenets to action ethnography that embrace synergies between action research and ethnography: researcher immersion, intervention leading to change, and knowledge contributions that are useful to both practitioners and researchers.

Originality/value – Whereas ‘traditional’ ethnography has emphasised a contribution to theoretical knowledge, less attention has been on a contribution to practice and to those who ethnographers engage with in the field. Action ethnography challenges researchers to consider the impact of their research from the outset during the research design, rather upon reflection after a study is completed.

Practical implications – This paper provides researchers who align with aspects of both action research and ethnography with an accessible research strategy to employ, and a better understanding of the interplay between the two approaches when justifying their research designs. It also offers an example of designing an action ethnography in practice.

Key words – Action ethnography, action research, organizational ethnography, participant observation, research impact

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Hammersley (2018) notes at least 42 different forms of ethnography that have emerged, usually named by adding an adjective before the word ‘ethnography’. He points out that diverse ‘methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical and political ideas’ are attached to each form of ethnography claimed (Hammersley, 2018: 6). Then, he problematises the act of defining ethnography, but offers suggested approaches: ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ (Hammersley, 2018: 7). A ‘thick’ approach would state specific parameters and commitments for conducting ethnographic work, and justifications for these, in order to be considered that form of ethnography. A ‘thin’ approach would take a looser slant and ‘treat ethnography simply as a research strategy that can be employed by researchers adopting a wide variety of potentially conflicting commitments’ (Hammersley, 2018: 7). He argues that each approach to define ethnography comes with its own set of issues, but the production of knowledge must stand in the forefront of any form of ethnography.

Whereas Hammersley (2019) has suggested ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ approaches to the act of defining forms of ethnography, I confess that my approach fits neither dichotomous category. In this paper, I set out to delineate action ethnography in organisational contexts, not as another form of ethnography, but as a research approach or strategy that researchers can utilise in a range of ways that retains synergies in action research and immersive ethnography.

I begin with a brief review of the literature of two extant approaches that encompass elements of ethnography and action research by which action ethnography is influenced: action anthropology (Blanchard, 1980; Tax, 1975a; Watson, 2019) and ethnographic action research (Bath, 2009; Eisenhart, 2019; Tacchi et al., 2003). Through analysing these two methodologies, I highlight their strengths and shortcomings in accessibility and commitment to ethnographic principles, such as reflexivity and understanding social actors and their social, cultural and political worlds. Then, I offer a working definition of action ethnography and the three main pillars I see as foundational to its research design: researcher participation and immersion, intervention leading to change, and production of knowledge that is useful to both practitioners and researchers. Next, I introduce my current ongoing action ethnography with a voluntary organisation, based in southeast England, to illustrate how an action ethnography can be designed by considering impact from the outset. Finally, I reflect on the benefits and limitations of the approach, before concluding with suggestions for further methodological development.

This paper aims to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of action ethnography by offering a working definition of it and by drawing on an example of it in practice. Particularly for researchers who are attracted to elements of both action research and ethnography, this paper provides a set of methodological justifications necessary to be explicit in research designs and a foundation for how

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3 synergies between the two methodologies can be negotiated. By offering an interpretation of action
4 ethnography here, my point is not to exclude other ethnographic or action research approaches,
5 instead, I wish to open-up discussion and encourage methodological innovation and consideration for
6 impact and knowledge exchange in ethnographic research. At a time when research impact is highly
7 scrutinised in research projects, and often a deciding factor in funding applications, I argue that action
8 ethnography is an important approach to consider for both ethnographers and action researchers, but
9 also for researchers who may be insider researchers, or those who are studying groups or
10 organisations in which they are members. In addition, action ethnography is an approach to consider
11 by both academics and practitioners who are interested in research with (not on) people or
12 organisations.
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22 **The influencing literature**

23 *Action anthropology*

24 The emergence of action anthropology (also referred to as applied anthropology (Bennett, 1996;
25 Calhoun, 2002; Polgar, 1980)) is credited to Sol Tax (1975a) and his work with indigenous tribes in
26 North America to tackle social issues in the 1950's. His main concern was to understand the culture of
27 the groups and communities he studied by going 'to the field' and being in the environment, but
28 equally with the aim to solve pressing problems faced by the groups. He viewed action
29 anthropologists as taking proactive positions, not just as observers or participant observers, but similar
30 to consultants and facilitators, balancing advocacy and withholding value judgements as to what
31 participants 'should' do to solve their own problems. With his action research approach underpinned
32 by social justice (Blanchard, 1980), he believed that action anthropologists could even influence
33 policy (Borman, 1980; Tax, 1975b).
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43 Action anthropology has been associated with 'helping' communities and societies by intervening in
44 practical ways with the intent to improve their livelihoods (Borman, 1980). Action anthropologists are
45 to forgo positions of power and focus on learning in the process of their intervention with their
46 'subject of study' but also 'object' (Tax, 1975a: 515, original emphasis). For example, Borman's
47 (1980) active involvement with Kalmuk Mongols resettling in the United States and American Indian
48 tribes contributed to our knowledge of self-help/mutual aid groups and how they organise themselves.
49 However, he also contributed in significant practical ways, such as becoming a liaison between the
50 groups and more formal, established professional or government bodies and opening lines of
51 communications with these populations that can be hard-to-reach and initially mistrustful of 'helping'
52 professionals.
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3 However, referring to participants as subjects/objects carries risks of ‘othering’, a group in need of an
4 outsider’s help and ‘educating’ them (Blanchard, 1980: 429), which tips the hierarchical scale in
5 favour of the researcher. Additionally, in Tax’s action anthropology there is little acknowledgement in
6 the literature that views participants as experts in their own domain in the co-construction of new
7 knowledge or the significance of researcher reflexivity. Although knowledge produced in the field
8 aims to benefit the ‘subjects’ involved, and those directly affected by the study, and to be generalised
9 beyond the study’s contextual boundaries (Blanchard, 1980), *co*-construction of knowledge and
10 reflexivity is not accentuated until the development of participatory action research (PAR) (Ozano
11 and Khatri, 2018). However, PAR scarcely credits having roots in action anthropology. It diverges in
12 approach by insisting on participants being involved in all stages of the research process (often
13 viewed as co-researchers) (Herr and Anderson, 2005; Stringer, 2007). This can make PAR potentially
14 less accessible in some organisational contexts if participants do not want to become co-researchers.
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24 Despite the strong acknowledgement of Tax’s influence on anthropology, action anthropology has
25 received relatively little methodological development from scholars (although the term ‘applied
26 anthropology’ seems to be accepted). With a lack of unity amongst anthropologists defending it as a
27 discipline in its own right, criticisms of action anthropology have regarded it as bordering paternalism
28 or ‘the white man’s burden’, or as imposed interference in host communities (Bennett, 1996: S32–
29 S39). Although Cole (2005a: 65) attempts to support action anthropology in her study on tourism
30 development in Indonesia acting as a ‘culture-broker’, in another paper she uses the term action
31 ethnography as the research approach she took ‘to produce an ethnography of tourism, and to make it
32 useful to the researchees’ (2005b: 84). However, she does little to explicate what is action
33 ethnography. Likewise, Melillo et al. (2019) refer to the qualitative part of their mixed methods study
34 on reintegrating veterans with brain injuries as action ethnography, but without explanation as to their
35 methodological choices, aside from taking a community-based engagement approach. Further
36 conceptualisation on methodology is needed to further our understanding of how action-orientated
37 ethnographic approaches can be designed from the outset with consideration of the research impact on
38 both participants and researchers.
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49 *Ethnographic Action Research (EAR)*

50 Although the name connects the two methodologies together, EAR is mainly grounded in principles
51 of action research and pragmatism but adopts ethnographic methods. EAR was a methodology
52 developed in 2002 by Jo Tacchi, Don Slater and Greg Hearn (Tacchi, 2015) originally for
53 ‘information and communication technology for development (ICT4D)’ projects in developing
54 countries. Sustainable economic, cultural and social development were expected outcomes, thereby
55 leading to poverty alleviation, but a methodology to investigate the impact of these projects was
56 needed. With the financial support of the British government and UNESCO, Tacchi, Slater and Hearn
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3 (2003) produced an accessible training handbook for conducting EAR in further ICT4D projects. As
4 with most international development initiatives, maintaining them is vital, therefore, the aim was for
5 researchers trained in EAR to train others, including local communities, in the methodology (Tacchi,
6 2015).
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11 Since EAR was developed for information and media technology initiatives in mind, it is underpinned
12 by communicative ecology theory, which argues that a holistic view is needed as to how information
13 is created, shared and interconnected in a given context. If new ICTs are introduced for the betterment
14 of societies, they must be analysed as to how they fit into existing structures, systems and networks
15 (Tacchi, 2015). Researchers are then to apply this same notion in their own practice by reflecting on
16 how they may generate and source information from within their research context and
17 project/programme in which EAR is situated. From this stance, researchers are concerned about
18 learning what is meaningful for participants, their local context, what barriers to adoption exist and
19 how to overcome them to improve livelihoods.
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27 EAR merges aspects of ethnography and participatory action research (PAR) and adopts a multi-
28 method approach, two of which are central to ethnography (participant observation and individual or
29 group interviews), but it is mainly grounded in principles of PAR. This is because the EAR approach
30 insists on participant involvement in all parts of the research process, particularly in participatory
31 activities that researchers facilitate. Furthermore, an emancipatory ideology can be seen in the
32 participatory techniques (Freire, 2017), with suggestions to empower participants, such as
33 marginalised groups, to realise their own problems or barriers, voice their opinions and agree on
34 actions to take (see Tacchi et al., 2007, sections 1.3.2 and 2.4). Tacchi et al. (2007) affirm that
35 researchers should use at least three methods, which they call 'tools', listed in their 'EAR toolbox'¹.
36 In addition to the aforementioned methods, they suggest surveys, self-reporting forms, diaries, visual
37 methods and internal documents to 'collect' data. Nevertheless, this implies a perspective of
38 ethnographic data as being 'out there' to gather, and positions the researcher as having little impact on
39 the field, rather than an interactive ethnographer who co-constructs data (Coffey, 2018).
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49 Aside from the user-friendly EAR manual, there has been little evolution and application of EAR
50 outside of ICT and international development projects/programmes since its inception in 2002. This
51 may be due to its rigid process and grounding in monitoring and evaluating specific (ICT)
52 projects/programmes, making it less versatile as a methodology in broader contexts. Exceptions to
53 this are variations of EAR in the education sector by Eisenhart (2019) and Bath (2009). In Bath's
54 (2009) study on children's participation in their first year in primary school, she makes a case for
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¹ See <http://ear.findingavoice.org/toolbox>.

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3 EAR as having the potential to blend the immersive characteristics of ethnography and participatory
4 aspects of action research to better understand teaching and learning cultures and to co-create
5 improvements in practice with participants in the classroom. Her in-depth examination of
6 ethnography as an integral part to her action research project acknowledges the complexity of
7 merging the two methodologies and the importance of reflexivity, an overlooked element in Tacchi et
8 al.'s (2003) work. Bath (2009) suggests that researchers clarify which approach they are applying at
9 each stage in the research process, but admits that ethnographic studies are not exactly tidy. Eisenhart
10 (2019) follows this suggestion by distinctly labelling the two parts in her longitudinal study, which
11 she called 'participatory action research (PAR)-with-ethnography', to explore American high school
12 girls' interests in engineering. The first part was PAR-based to build awareness of the occupation and
13 its gender inequalities and to co-design an after-school programme with pupils, who eventually ran it.
14 The second part was ethnographic to better understand the students' experiences of the after-school
15 programme and their perceptions of engineering as an option at university or as a future career.
16 Eisenhart (2019) acknowledges taking an advocacy role and having to negotiate the tensions around
17 'controlling' the research process and balancing participant involvement.
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28 Bath's (2009) and Eisenhart's (2019) hybrid approaches in education research are noteworthy.
29 However, ethnographic studies that do not incorporate action cycles would not be considered EAR,
30 despite researcher engagement with participants and contributions to practice (and knowledge).
31 Furthermore, the commitment to following the action research cycles of 'plan, do, reflect' with
32 participants and the pragmatic stance of EAR, usually deriving from a problem, prioritises action
33 research principles over ethnographic ones. Next, I turn to explore the possibility of an accessible
34 approach to qualitative enquiries grounded in ethnographic principles with researcher engaged and
35 impact-orientated tendencies.
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44 **Defining action ethnography**

45 Hybrid approaches are necessary not only for the advancement of research, but for innovating in the
46 ways that we study social worlds in constant flux. Drawing on the previously reviewed principles of
47 action anthropology and EAR, I start with an explication of action ethnography in organisations by
48 laying out its foundation consisting of three main pillars that I see as core elements to this approach.
49 Then, I explore each one in depth.
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- 54 1. Researcher participation and immersion in participants' day-to-day activities, as opposed to
55 passively observing for the purposes of research.
- 56 2. The notion of researcher 'intervention' as contributing to change or as a catalyst for change.
- 57 3. Production of knowledge that is useful to both practitioners and researchers.
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3 First, a main tenet in conducting an action ethnography concerns **acknowledging researchers’**
4 **positionality and multiple roles** in taking a participative role in the group studied, as opposed to acting
5 as a spectator ‘looking in’ for data collection purposes. Participant observation is a key method in
6 ethnographic approaches to derive a deep understanding of the everyday life of a group or
7 organisation studied and its nuances, whether exciting or mundane (Cole, 2005b; Lewis and Russell,
8 2011). However, the ultimate purposes of participant observation in action ethnography are not to
9 unearth the group or organisation’s underlying problems and find solutions, as are the goals in action-
10 research rooted approaches (Bennett, 1996). Taking an active role immersed in the everyday context
11 in which they live/work can bring richer understandings of their social lives, relationships and issues
12 (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009: 104). Engagement in their social world can create better opportunities
13 to contribute to and experience day-to-day activities, discuss issues or lend a hand, whether in critical
14 or mundane situations. Action ethnographers can combine the role of outsider and insider whilst
15 immersed in the social world studied in order to keep the familiar strange and maintain a reflexive
16 stance. The ‘dual stance’ of action ethnographers is crucial, to be able to be engaged and participative,
17 yet distanced enough to be critical about what they see, hear and do (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009:
18 103). This may be particularly applicable if taking a complete membership approach or studying
19 one’s own group/organisation.
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31 Second, a researcher’s prolonged participation and engagement in day-to-day activities can be seen as
32 an act of intervention that leads to some form of change in participants’ organisational lives. Amalie
33 Hauge (2021: 97) outlines three prevalent ‘modes of intervention’ that ethnographers may apply:
34 political activism, organisational development and intervening description. Politically active
35 interventions have a social justice and emancipatory agenda. Organisational development
36 interventions intend to improve or build the capacity of organisations. Intervening description focuses
37 on preserving ethnographic description and representation of the social world studied whilst
38 maintaining a reflexive and critical distance in the field.
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46 In action ethnography, I argue, the spectrum of intervention is unbounded and flexible, and the three
47 modes that Hauge (2021) describes may overlap in the same study. The level of intervention may be
48 determined during the research design phase and openly discussed with participants from the outset.
49 Nonetheless, the expected impact of action ethnography can only be estimated since any changes,
50 whether broad or narrow, specific or multi-faceted, may be unexpected or unpredictable. For example,
51 researchers’ interventions may be related to policy, culture, leadership, organisational structure,
52 behaviour, or other aspects of organisational life. In Lewis and Russell’s (2011: 399) ‘embedded
53 research’ with a public health organisation focussed on smoking cessation in the United Kingdom
54 (UK), Lewis was overt about her dual intervening role as a researcher and participant in service
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3 delivery for the organisation's activities. This allowed her to be close to the community and 'useful',
4 yet critical.
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8 Being useful draws on principles of the 'ethics of intervention' from action anthropology (Bennett,
9 1996: S33) in which interventions in participants' daily practices aim to have constructive outcomes
10 that outweigh any potential disruptions (Tax, 1975a, 1975b). Ultimately it is the researcher's
11 responsibility to choose what actions to undertake in the field, and whilst disseminating the findings,
12 that minimise any possibility of harm to those directly, or indirectly, involved in the research
13 (Bennett, 1996: S33). Additionally, this second tenet refers to a commitment to being driven by the
14 group/organisation's agenda, not just the researcher's own agenda (Levin and Greenwood, 2001;
15 Stringer, 2007). For example, Ichikawa and Tamura (2012: 186) describe their participatory
16 ethnographic research with the Kesenuma community, in Japan, as becoming 'part of the action' to
17 develop new income sources after a tsunami devastated its fishing industry. Although their paper
18 lacks methodological details, their multi-faceted intervention led to helping the community set up a
19 wide network of food producers.
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28 Last, action ethnography attempts to encourage the interplay between researchers' contributions to
29 theory and practice. If the primary goal of any form of ethnographic research is to contribute to
30 knowledge about the social world studied (Hammersley, 2018), then for action ethnographers this
31 knowledge contribution is to practice, as much as it is to theory. Knowledge is not just the end result
32 or product of a study, but it is in what Coffey (2018: 12) calls the 'talking and doing' during
33 ethnographers' engagement or what Pigg (2013: 132) terms 'on the spot, in the doing of the sitting' in
34 the everyday, and co-created in the research context.
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41 On one end of the continuum, action research prioritises contributions to useful, practical knowledge
42 and less emphasis on theoretical contributions. Knowledge is developed through participative and
43 iterative cycles of critical reflection on participants' action planning to resolve issues and then making
44 observations on taking those actions (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Reason and Bradbury (2001)
45 emphasise that action research should involve all community stakeholders in each stage of the cycle.
46 On the other end of the continuum, 'traditional' ethnography prioritises theoretical over practical
47 contributions, and it is debatable whether ethnographers should commit to a conceptual framework
48 before embarking on fieldwork (Wilson and Chaddha, 2009). An action ethnographic approach aims
49 to negotiate these tensions by being explicit about a two-fold contribution from the outset. For
50 example, Cole (2005b) describes that her objective was to construct an ethnography that would also
51 be useful for her interlocutors in Indonesian tourism development. Returning to the example of Lewis
52 and Russell's (2011) work with a public health organisation, they clarify both their practical and
53 theoretical contributions. Although not explicitly termed an action ethnography, their practical
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3 contribution was a toolkit for forming local alliances or regional partnerships in tobacco control. Their
4 theoretical contribution was a conceptual framework for the toolkit, based on social science theories,
5 which was in an accessible format for their collaborators to be able to utilise as well.
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10 However, Lewis and Russell (2011: 399) admit to applying the term ‘embedded research’ to their
11 ethnography upon reflection *after* completing their study. Their term is borrowed from Reiter-Theil’s
12 (2004) suggestion to medical ethics researchers to get involved in the practices under investigation to
13 derive a deeper understanding of the issues in the field. Although intentionally collaborative with the
14 participating organisation, they acknowledge that their approach was formative and improvised, as
15 ethnography often can be. But what if we could design our ethnographic studies from the outset to be
16 ‘active, engaged and impactful [...] whilst remaining critically aware of its, and our, political
17 situatedness’, as they call for in the future of ethnography (Lewis and Russell, 2011: 412)?
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25 **An example of action ethnography with a grassroots human rights monitoring** 26 **organisation**

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28 To illustrate how an action ethnography can be designed with the three core tenets interwoven
29 through the study, I introduce the empirical context of Channel Monitor², a grassroots human rights
30 organisation based on the southeast coast of England. I commenced part-time postgraduate research
31 with them in February 2022, and at the writing of this paper, I have completed fieldwork over a 16-
32 month period and have begun data analysis.
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38 In 2020, a few British citizens informally founded Channel Monitor as a non-hierarchical voluntary
39 group with the common interest of acting as an independent observatory and advocate for human
40 rights to cross the English Channel to seek refuge. In 2022, the group legally registered as a company
41 limited by guarantee, without share capital, and with a sole director. This formalisation was instigated
42 when they became involved with two British charities to legally challenge the Home Secretary’s
43 clandestine policy to ‘push back’ refugee boats to France, breaching international law³.
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49 The voluntary group’s main activity, called ‘spotting’, was to monitor the maritime search and rescue
50 (SAR) activities performed by the various actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors in the UK
51 (e.g. Border Force, Royal Navy, Coastguard and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI)).
52 Volunteers tracked vessel and aircraft movements in real-time via online applications⁴ and in-person
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57 ² The organisation and any participants names are pseudonyms.

58 ³ See the House of Commons, Home Affairs Committee (2022: 20), for a summary of the UK government’s
59 response to rescind their pushback policy shortly before their judicial review was due.

60 ⁴ Examples of the mobile device applications utilised were Marine Traffic, Boat Watch and FlightRadar24.

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3 along the Kent coastline by using binoculars, telescopes and handheld VHF radios. On the rare
4 occasion that a rubber dinghy was spotted from land, volunteers were equipped with supplies to assist
5 arrivals landing on the beach, who were often dehydrated, sunburned and/or had petrol burns. The
6 main objective of monitoring SAR activities was to ensure that SAR actors complied with
7 international laws to rescue distressed people efficiently, irrespective of who they were, where they
8 were from or why they made the dangerous voyage. During the time of my fieldwork, under a
9 Conservative government, frequent changes in the position of Home Secretary and their backed
10 policies attempted to deter asylum seekers from arriving in the UK, as well as to restrict the rights of
11 asylum seekers already in-country (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2022; House of
12 Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2022). Therefore, independent monitoring of SAR operations
13 was crucial to Channel Monitor.
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22 As stricter border control measures grew in the UK, so did Channel Monitor's membership. One year
23 after incorporation, there were approximately 115 geographically dispersed members. However, most
24 members could be considered non-participative 'followers' since less than 15-20 participated in
25 spotting, social media or administrative tasks at any given time⁵. Membership was diverse and people
26 identified as activists, anarchists, students, researchers, pensioners and local residents sympathetic to
27 the rising hostile environment towards people seeking asylum in the UK. The majority were white,
28 British citizens, without lived experiences of seeking asylum or the immigration regime. Therefore, I
29 was an unusual addition to the group as a foreign national with Chinese descent and lived experience
30 of 24-hours in an immigration detention centre fifteen years ago⁶.
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38 During my first meeting with Channel Monitor's Director, I proposed my action ethnographic
39 approach as a 'complete member researcher' (Adler and Adler, 1987) to participate in the
40 organisation's activities as a volunteer and an ethnographer. We discussed his specific areas of
41 interest in the organisation's development and this shaped the aim of my research: to explore
42 volunteers' involvement and engagement in Channel Monitor's activities. My objectives are to
43 contribute to new theoretical and practical knowledge on grassroots volunteer engagement that would
44 directly benefit them and the wider voluntary sector. My anticipated theoretical contribution is
45 important since grassroots voluntary associations tend to be understudied in organisation and
46 management studies, yet play a substantial role in filling gaps in public services, impacting
47 communities and addressing social injustices (Smith, 1997).
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57 ⁵ The exact number of members participating in the organisation's activities during the time of the study was
58 estimated to be between 15 and 20. Channel Monitor did not have a consistent induction process or designated
59 'volunteer manager'. They did not track or regularly review membership after volunteers joined and completed
60 their initial training, and they did not remove inactive members from the list.

⁶ See Vincett (2018).

Fieldwork took place **both in-person, on the Kent coast, and online**. Due to the wide geographic dispersal of Channel Monitor volunteers, they communicated via telephone, online meetings and text messaging. All members were part of a main group chat and opted to join any of the eleven subgroups that addressed specific areas of the organisation: land operations, media/press, social media, training, fundraising, forensics (to geospatially reconstruct incidents in the Channel), admin, watchtower (to observe activity from far-right groups), weather data, research, and boat operations (to develop a new method of monitoring by sea). I joined five subgroups: fundraising, research, training, land operations and weather. Opportunistically, when the organisation was looking for volunteers to rotate as subgroup coordinators, I became one of the coordinators for the training, land operations, and weather groups. I immersed myself by participating in multiple subgroup meetings, four land spotting shifts, and the group chats (Figure 1). I recorded reflective fieldnotes weekly throughout my participation in activities, which became the majority of my dataset. These fieldnotes included ‘ethnographic conversations’ (Coffey, 2018: 49) with members in-person and via text and telephone, but were not audio-recorded.

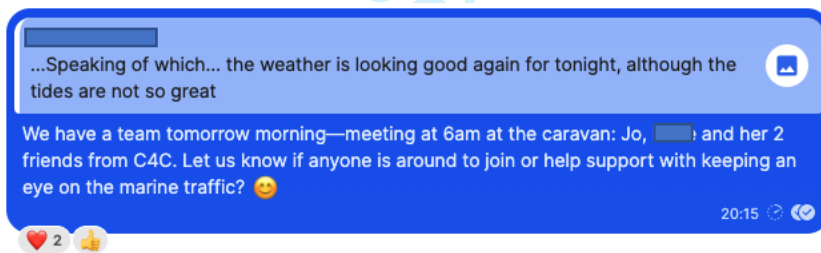


Figure 1. Example of my response to a group chat via the text messaging platform used by Channel Monitor (anonimised fieldnotes, 24 March 2022)

To complement fieldnotes, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with current and former members from across the subgroups to gain perceptions on volunteer engagement, their experiences volunteering with Channel Monitor and other voluntary groups, and what might enable or disable their involvement. To supplement fieldnotes and interview transcripts, secondary data, such as internal documents, presentations, photos and social media posts accompanied the dataset. These added another contextual layer to better understand the organisation’s values and operations, the extent to which they adapted with the political environment, how members organised themselves and communicated internally and externally with the public. At the time of writing, I am thematically analysing my data and then will be sharing my overall findings with the organisation and academic audiences.

Reflections on designing and doing action ethnography

Since early on in the research design, I planned to apply my skillsets to Channel Monitor’s current situation, contribute where I could be most useful and draw upon my practitioner and research

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3 experience in voluntary organisations that supported asylum seekers, migrants and refugees. When I
4 first approached the Director of Channel Monitor about participating in my study, I explained my
5 intentions to fulfil my academic research obligations, be conducive to their mission, and also produce
6 new knowledge that would be useful for us both. Indeed, George E. Marcus (2008: 7) has challenged
7 us to consider our participants as ‘counterparts’ in collaboration with us in the field, a move away
8 from the ‘traditional’ mode of ethnography, and I adopted this from the outset. Transparency about
9 the multiple roles ethnographers take and their intentions in participation, interventions and outputs is
10 an important part of designing an action ethnography, not just for claiming and justifying the
11 methodological approach, but for building trust with the host organisation and its members. A
12 collaborative approach to ethnography that incorporates activism, ethical responsibility and
13 contribution to the participating organisation in the process of studying it comes with advantages and
14 drawbacks for researchers to consider if they are proposing to undertake this approach (Denzin,
15 2017). The remainder of this section will discuss the learning that has unfolded thus far in my
16 research, while referring back to the three main pillars that I believe constitute an action ethnography.

26 27 *For action ethnography*

28 Concerning the first tenet of action ethnography, researcher participation and immersion in the field,
29 in my case, this was realised through in-person and virtual activities. Immersing oneself in the field by
30 getting involved in the most mundane tasks that constitute routine organisational life for members, not
31 just the main, significant or exciting events, has become an expected practice of ethnography (Coffey,
32 2018). I interacted with participants each week by posting weather and sea conditions on the group
33 chat, engaging in discussions, particularly when incidents on the Channel were identified, and
34 organising in-person and online training sessions for volunteers. In addition, I spent time with
35 members co-writing fundraising applications (fieldnotes, 18 June 2022) and submitting written
36 evidence in response to the Joint Committee on Human Rights’ call for concerns about asylum
37 seekers in the UK⁷ (fieldnotes, 14 December 2023). Since the traditional ‘going out to the field’ and
38 physically ‘being there’ from anthropology has evolved over time (Burrell, 2009; de Seta, 2020), I
39 utilised a hybrid approach to get involved in their day-to-day activities and become an insider. This
40 allowed me access to views that otherwise may not be noticed or understood. This shift is in line with
41 the continually changing ways in which our interlocutors apply technology to work, socialise,
42 communicate and interrelate with one another, and with the public.

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44 In turn, technology has impacted the way ethnographers are able to build a presence, interact with
45 participants and immerse themselves in the social worlds they are studying (Hallett and Barber, 2014).
46 I was able to build and maintain relationships with participants by combining in-person and online

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60 ⁷ For details of the inquiry, see <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6983/>

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3 meetings and text messages, allowing me to stay in contact more frequently with geographically
4 dispersed members. Participating in and observing everyday activities could be realised from home or
5 anywhere in the world by typing with two thumbs on a mobile phone. Digital anthropologist
6 Magdalena Góralaska (2020: 50) describe these same benefits to ‘digital ethnography’⁸ during the
7 Covid-19 global health pandemic and being able to continue studying health communications during a
8 time of travel restrictions and overall uncertainty. In addition to saving on travel costs and time, the
9 digital space provided me another avenue to immerse myself and stay involved in ongoing discussions
10 with organisational members. Following Hallet and Barber’s (2014: 308) contention that it is crucial
11 for ethnographers to incorporate online spaces, I moved from being an outsider, when I first joined
12 Channel Monitor, to being an insider by complementing my visits to the coast for spotting with
13 consistent participation in online group discussions.
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22 Relating to the second proposed precept of action ethnography, researcher intervention contributing to
23 change, my intervention took place both in-person at spotting locations looking out at the English
24 Channel, and also online social spaces where Channel Monitor members occupied and built their
25 community across the UK. For instance, I intervened in the way they collected weather data,
26 mobilised spotting teams, and conducted ongoing training with volunteers. I suggested a systematic
27 way of collecting weather and tidal data and analysing this against the Home Office’s public statistics
28 of dinghies intercepted. I asked a member with statistical analysis expertise to analyse the data for
29 patterns and relationships between the variables (fieldnotes, 26 October 2022). Her findings allowed
30 the organisation to better understand when conditions were favourable for Channel crossings. With
31 this information, in my daily postings of the weather conditions to the group, I was able to suggest
32 when to mobilise spotting teams.
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41 Nonetheless, despite posting that crossings were likely, land spotting teams were not always formed
42 when they were most needed⁹, which raised further questions for the organisation to address as to
43 why. As the coordinator for the training subgroup, I attempted to make sense of this from a training
44 perspective. I surveyed members who had already completed initial spotting training to learn what
45 were their additional training interests (fieldnotes, 19 November 2022). Although only twelve
46 members responded, out of 56 in the subgroup, their feedback helped inform my decision-making
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53 ⁸ I have not considered my study as a form of netnography or digital ethnography since it was not concerning an
54 online field site in its entirety (as outlined in Kozinets (2023) procedures). In my study, using digital
55 technologies was a part of their everyday work, but not the only means of my observation and interaction with
56 participants. Travel to the Kent coastline was required for their main operational activities of spotting refugee
57 crossings and monitoring SAR activities; a physical presence there was pivotal for the organisation.

58 ⁹ For example, there was no land spotting team mobilised (only monitoring from marine traffic apps) when a
59 major SAR operation ensued after a dinghy capsized attempting to cross the Channel on 14 December 2022.
60 There were with 47 people onboard and four died during the incident (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-639689415>).

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3 with the training subgroup to plan workshops and source internal and external training providers for
4 the topics requested.
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8 The main intention of my interventions was to take part in shaping the changes that Channel Monitor
9 was undergoing and to contribute to new learning with and for them. Being a part of change through
10 our engagement as researchers has been appealed for in qualitative enquiries (Denzin, 2017).

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12 Likewise, in academic institutions, this call is further evidenced in the emphasis on impact case
13 studies for the Research Excellence Framework, the system for evaluating the quality of research in
14 UK higher education institutions, and documenting ‘pathways to impact’¹⁰ for research funding
15 applications. Utilising an action ethnographic approach enables researchers to continuously consider
16 what types of impact they are making during and after fieldwork, since it is embedded in the strategy.
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22 Last, action ethnography aims to make a knowledge contribution that is useful to host organisations
23 and their members, not just a contribution to theory (the third tenet of action ethnography). Useful, in
24 this context, is what would be practical and applicable to organisations as they have defined it in time
25 and space, or could be what is ‘actionable’, as grounded in action research (Shani et al., 2012). For
26 instance, the learning from the data that members and I collected on weather conditions helped
27 Channel Monitor determine more than just when was to mobilise land spotting teams. It identified the
28 need to look deeper as to why teams were not always mobilised and how to better communicate with
29 volunteers. From the poll I sent to volunteers, some of the most popular training topics were
30 ‘conducting a spotting shift’, ‘how maritime SAR missions are conducted’ and ‘how to use the radios’
31 (fieldnotes, 19 November 2022) – all topics that I thought were covered in their initial training and
32 induction. However, this practical knowledge helped the organisation realise that volunteers desired
33 ongoing training and ‘refreshers’, as well as further learning about the legal frameworks on seeking
34 asylum and the technicalities of SAR operations. Also, it created useful knowledge for the
35 organisation that training activities were a way to keep volunteers engaged, particularly when weather
36 conditions were poor and spotting teams were unnecessary.
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47 Additionally, knowledge produced with and for those we have worked alongside can be rewarding
48 and empowering for both participants and researchers. This is about ensuring that we do not solely
49 take from the field to fulfil our academic agendas and simply leave a practitioner report of our
50 findings as compensation for their time. For participants, involvement in producing knowledge that is
51 valuable to their own practice can have enduring effects, such as helping participants become more
52 self-aware of their skillsets and developing them (fieldnotes, 20 January 2023; interview with Juniper,
53 30 January 2023). Prior to my intervention, training activities were sporadic with little divergence
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¹⁰ See <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/do-engagement/funding/pathways-impact>.

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3 from spotting training. Consulting with members as a volunteer and ethnographer helped to develop a
4 better understanding of volunteers' interests and to build their knowledge and skills. Although I have
5 not finalised my data analysis yet, multiple participants highlighted the potential to keep volunteers
6 engaged by improving the consistency of activities and communication with volunteers¹¹. Participants
7 also sought more clarity on roles and responsibilities¹². Particularly when some volunteers complained
8 about another's behaviour, this raised awareness of that volunteers were unclear about who to turn to
9 for support (fieldnotes, 17 January 2023; interview with Astrid). In turn, it became an opportunity for
10 them to reflect on their processes and policies on wellbeing, safeguarding and handling misconduct,
11 and how to improve them.
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19 As researchers in academia, we can continue to theorise on ethnographic data for years after a study,
20 contribute to the scholarly literature through publications and support our own careers. For
21 postgraduate researchers enrolled in a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) programme, or
22 other professional doctorate programme, a contribution to practice is a requirement and a
23 distinguishing characteristic from its popular relative, the Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) (Rigg et al.,
24 2021). Therefore, action ethnography may be a compatible choice and less restrictive compared to
25 action research or participatory action research, which can be more complex and constraining for
26 novice researchers with limited time and funding for their projects (Herr and Anderson, 2005).
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33 *Limitations to action ethnography*

34 As with any methodology, there are drawbacks to consider in taking an action ethnographic approach.
35 First, researcher participation and immersion in participants' day-to-day activities can be exhausting
36 and feel like you are balancing two jobs when you have taken on multiple roles and built relationships
37 with participants (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). Particularly in emotionally demanding settings
38 or research on sensitive topics, action ethnographers will need to reflect on strategies for self-care
39 from the outset of the study to safeguard their own wellbeing (see Vincett, 2018). Although we cannot
40 plan for every eventuality in the ethnographic process, before starting fieldwork, I identified potential
41 major barriers to completing my project and a support network and documented these in my research
42 journal and in the form of a 'learning agreement' submitted to my programme leaders and mentors.
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50 If immersion in the field involves a digital platform that can be accessed from your fingertips on a
51 mobile device, then focussing on work-life balance may be even more important. Góralaska (2020: 50)
52 warns ethnographers deeply engaged in the online world to be self-disciplined in setting work-time
53 boundaries if they can carry their 'fieldwork in [their] pocket'. In other words, fieldwork can be *too*
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59 ¹¹ Interviews with Frode, Kit, Arne, Astrid, Tallulah, Oso, Tove, Hyacinth and Odin.

60 ¹² Interviews with Tove, Sky, Kit, Autumn, Hyacinth, Spring, Odin and Hilda.

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3 accessible at times and developing good habits to ‘switch off’ can be an invaluable skill. This includes
4 switching off from being an ‘outsider’ as well, since we move back and forth from closeness to
5 critical distance in our ethnographic practice (Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009). Even if I turned off my
6 mobile phone notifications, I found it difficult to mentally ‘switch off’ at the end of the day, since
7 crossings usually began after sunset and could continue well past sunrise or mid-day. Admittedly, I
8 developed a fear of missing out especially when I was not on the Kent coast for spotting shifts. Yet, I
9 only became self-aware of this after my partner complained that I was worse than a teenager glued to
10 her phone and group chats (fieldnotes, 16 August 2022).
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17 Aside from cautions regarding researcher immersion, the second limitation concerns the second
18 proposed tenet of action ethnography, the notion of researcher intervention as contributing to change
19 or as a catalyst for change. Action ethnography has the potential for failing to contribute to change or
20 instigate change in the organisational lives that ethnographers had hoped or intended. Some
21 participants may not value ethnographers’ interventions or reject their involvement as members.
22 Knowledge produced from research findings may not be what participants want to hear or learn, and
23 projects may not progress as they intended (Verbuyst and Galazka, 2023). The list of failures that may
24 happen throughout an ethnographic study is admittedly long, as Verbuyst and Galazka (2023) bring to
25 light, but for action ethnography, which hinges on making an impact and contribution to the
26 organisational lives of those with whom they have engaged, failures can be disheartening and
27 disappointing. For example, an expelled member once verbally condemned my research with Channel
28 Monitor when I was part of a group involved in investigating his breach in the Code of Conduct.
29 Suddenly, I felt unsettled from having to explain my dual role (again) and intentions as a member and
30 researcher, plus do any repair work to build my legitimacy, and defend the legitimacy of academic
31 research.
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43 However, Sløk-Andersen and Persson (2021) argue that awkward situations that can arise in
44 ethnographic fieldwork can bring an affectual level of insight and knowledge from our data if we can
45 bear to acknowledge and embrace them. This involves writing detailed fieldnotes about situations
46 when they happen, including the researcher’s feelings and emotions, as I did. These are often left out
47 or ignored since they can be uncomfortable and intense (Sløk-Andersen and Persson, 2021) or even
48 traumatic (Vincett, 2018).
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54 Last, pertaining to the third proposed component of action ethnography, it may be tricky to balance
55 equally a contribution to theory and practice for researchers who have situated themselves in one side,
56 but not put much consideration in the other. In support of the notion of a scholarly practitioner and
57 Raelin’s (2007) work on uniting theory and practice to extend our knowledge and understanding,
58 action ethnography offers a vehicle to unify the two, but comes with warnings. One caution is that
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3 knowledge created from action ethnography may be ‘good to know’, but not useful to practitioners.
4 This limitation to the methodology is dependent upon confirming with participating organisations
5 early on in the research design what would be considered useful knowledge for them, rather than
6 assuming it. In addition, can knowledge produced in the field be considered useful if it is not novel, if
7 they know it already? Also, if membership in organisations is dynamic and changeable, such as the
8 voluntary organisation in my study, will the same interlocutors still be there when I formally share my
9 findings? These are questions to be aware of and to consider in an action ethnography. In practice, we
10 may leave the field without fulfilling promises of novel results or we may discover things that are not
11 meaningful to participants.
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21 **Conclusion**

22 Although there have been attempts to merge aspects of action research and anthropology or
23 ethnography in more ‘applied research’ contexts, there has been little explication as to what this
24 means in ethnographic practice. Marcus (2008: 9) admits that despite the move from seeing research
25 ‘subjects’ less as ‘others’ and more as ‘collaborators’, there have not been ‘adjectival subfields’ of
26 anthropology that have held up over time with the exception of those grounded in specific disciplines
27 (e.g. medical anthropology). Hammersley (2018) also notes the different forms of ethnography that
28 have emerged by adding a preceding adjective before the word ‘ethnography’. This paper has
29 intended to stimulate discussion by suggesting action ethnography, not just as another adjectival
30 subfield, but as a research strategy that is interdisciplinary, accessible and focusses on research
31 impact. It contributes to advancing organisational ethnography and encourages methodological
32 innovation by proposing an impact turn in ethnographic practice. An action ethnographic approach
33 challenges ethnographers to contemplate their positionality in the social worlds in which they have
34 immersed themselves and how they are influencing them, contributing to them and taking a role in
35 catalysing or instilling change (and how it is changing them).
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46 I have proposed what I see as the main precepts of action ethnography, *researcher immersion,*
47 *intervention leading to change, and production of knowledge that is useful to both practitioners and*
48 *researchers,* which acknowledge and embrace synergies between action research and ethnography,
49 rather than problematise them. I have elaborated on the advantages and limitations of conducting an
50 action ethnography that include advocacy, requiring us to balance our distance/closeness in our
51 outsider/insider roles, ethical responsibilities and co-create meaningful new knowledge to host
52 organisations in the process of engaging with them. Although the example I have illustrated in this
53 article is situated in informal, grassroots voluntary organisations, action ethnography can be applied to
54 a wide variety of contexts and fields. Regardless of the context, our explicit intentions for research
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3 impact and the choices we make from the beginning of the research design to incorporate the elements
4 of action ethnography are important, rather than reflecting on them as an afterthought.
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8 Suggesting yet another approach to ethnography opens up debate as to why this is important in the
9 first place. I argue that in a continuously changing world by *not* pursuing new research strategies that
10 place impact at the forefront of better understanding social worlds, many of which are hidden or
11 difficult to reach, we risk becoming stagnant as researchers and ethnographers. Also, we limit our
12 potential for discovering knowledge that may be useful for groups and communities that are excluded
13 in mainstream research or overlooked in society.
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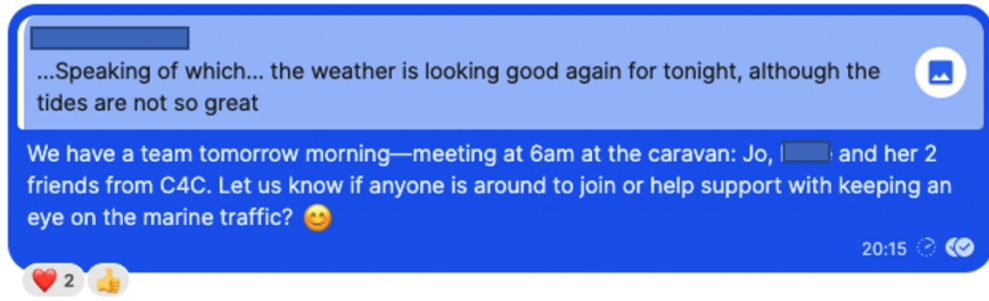


Figure 1. Example of my response to a group chat via the text messaging platform used by Channel Monitor (anonymised fieldnotes, 24 March 2022)

475x146mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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