

FROM A BACK-UP PLAN TO A PURPOSEFUL RESEARCH DESIGN

Using Remote Fieldwork in two EU case studies

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Introduction

We are two qualitative political science researchers working on the same field, the European Union (EU). Like many other researchers in EU politics, our first months of PhDs were dedicated to orchestrating our data gathering, the first step being planning an in-person, interview-based fieldwork. From the careful crafting of interview grids, observation protocols and doing the preliminary networking necessary to navigate our way through Brussels' glass-and-concrete administrative centres. Unfortunately, the successive waves of Covid crashed our hopes for a fully in-person, traditional qualitative interview sample, and forced us to look for remote alternatives.

Qualitative remote practices are still a grey zone of EU Studies' methodology, as in other subfields of politics and sociology; they are, however,, not new. Qualitative methods in the social sciences have been undergoing a process of hybridization between in-person and remote investigations, a process only exacerbated with the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic (Gruber et al., 2021). Of course, the latter has caused a ramp up in the amount of actual remote fieldwork, accompanied by an increase in publications related to it. Nevertheless the relative merits and drawbacks of remote interviews have been on the social sciences' discussion table for a while now.

A significant body of literature is concerned with how research methods must evolve to grasp our increasingly digitised ways of living, working, or even doing politics. Then, the case for "digital anthropology" (Bluteau, 2021) concerns not only those who work on narrow technological or web-related fields, but all researchers who acknowledge that the institutions

and actors they survey are becoming digital beings. As Coleman (Coleman, 2010) points out, today's online connections are not secluded from the wider (and in-person) reality, but are rather made of continuums between the digital spaces and the "outside", more in-person, world.

Indeed, as EU governance and institutions alike become increasingly digitalised (Battista, 2021), by choice or by force, our researcher tools must also adapt to catch up with these global trends of online research. Not only to make the most of this hardening period, but also to better embrace the online/offline networks of a "multilevel" (Marks, 1993), decentralised European policymaking. With the current piece, we hope to provoke some thoughts in the EU studies community regarding remote fieldwork and its potential applications.

Our paper starts with a brief delineation of our understanding of qualitative interviewing and remote fieldwork. Then, we build on our respective PhD fieldwork experiences and use them as case studies for different types of expert communities. The first one deals with the use of semi-structured interviews to engage with Brussels' elites and policymakers in the field of counterterrorism. Conversely, the second case underlines how remote fieldwork can help access pan-European communities of experts via the example of EU-related policy evaluators.

Through these case studies, we also want to show how we turned an initial, precarious back-up measure for interrupted in-person work, into a productive and self-sustaining approach to fieldwork. In the process of adapting to remote interviewing, we ran into both pragmatic considerations (what technology to use and how?) and ethical considerations (how to navigate privacy and intimacy issues through a screen?). At the end of the piece, we provide a list of "golden rules" on remote research. These cover both pragmatic challenges and ethical considerations: they are meant to provide a starting point for new researchers on the field.

Remote Interviews and Qualitative Research

While many forms of online research look at digital environments or use digital platforms as data collection sites, this article focuses on traditional qualitative interviews and participant observations conducted through telematics: phone, video-call, webinars, etc. Despite the centennial existence of the telephone and the more recent pervasiveness of digital technologies, online interviewing remained until recently in the shadows of qualitative methodology. Remoteness has for long been implicitly associated with superficiality, whereas the researcher's physical presence on the field was seen as consubstantial to qualitative research

(Olivesi, 2005). Remoteness would have been considered by many as a failure to establish a close contact with the field.

The assumption above is by now heavily challenged, as remote interviews, using both the telephone or videoconference technologies, have become common substitutes or even equivalents to the more traditional in-person interview. By and large, the advocacy for online fieldwork has been framed through a “cost-benefit” approach to interviewing, i.e. the balance between quality (or productivity) of the interview and its accessibility (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Johnson et al., 2021; Stephens, 2007; Weller, 2017). According to this body of literature, remote interviews are beneficial as they allow for the optimization of scarce time and financial resources for aspiring researchers, whose topics and samples could easily be internationalized or enlarged by the globalized nature of modern communication networks (as is the case of EU policymaking). Their potential drawback, or their “cost”, would be the potential loss of rapport building, by the disappearance of cues generally associated with an in-person situation; given the importance of rapport in qualitative interviews, this is a critical issue for the eventual relevance of online fieldwork

Furthermore, online rapport building could be made even more difficult in our case as we focus on political and administrative “elites”. As blurred as they might be,¹ the social boundaries surrounding these groups often made them particularly difficult to access, as they are more accustomed to negotiation or gatekeeping than other groups (Weller, 2017). Although the topic of qualitative research on elites and how to rightly approach them has been dealt with in the past (Chamboredon et al., 1994; Hertz and Imber, 1995), elite-oriented online interviewing remains in the blind spot.

In this article, we try to address how and when elite and expert populations can be successfully engaged through remote interviews, as well as partially challenging existing negative assumptions about rapport building and remote fieldwork. We do so using our experiences with two different but complimentary samples of elites in the EU-policymaking sphere. Our approach is explicitly based on the premise of fieldwork having to transition to the digital

¹As a reminder, there is no clear-cut definition of the term ‘elite’ and the indicators researchers use to signify ‘elite’ vary greatly from context to context. Some research sees elite as knowledge holders/disseminators, others focus on professionals working in prestigious institutions, and a third group refers to ‘elite’ to signify people holding positions of political authority (Smith, 2006, p. 644).

sphere, and explores four key dimensions that are common to both remote and traditional fieldwork: sampling, networking, interviewing and processing operations.

Case studies

Phone Calls with EU Bureaucrats, Experts and Policy Makers on Terrorism Prevention (Inés Bolaños Somoano)

European Union (EU) counterterrorism has been a growing source of interest for researchers. In the last two decades, counter-terrorism has fundamentally changed (Coaffee and Wood, 2006). Shortly after 9/11, reactive, retaliating and repressive measures were dominant, but nowadays the focus has shifted towards anticipatory measures, which try to prevent rather than react to terrorism. This approach is known as Prevention of Terrorism or Prevention and Countering of Radicalization to Violent Extremism. Despite being a completely new policy field, and one that encroaches on Member states (MS) exclusive competences, such as education or social cohesion, Prevention has grown into a pillar of EU and MS internal security strategies.

The research explored here aims at examining in detail key events and actors of the process whereby such a nationally sensitive policy field became a staple field for collective action and coordinated policy making at the EU level. In order to capture the composite agency of the EU, the original **sample** was plural and heterogeneous, including EU policymakers, experts, and bureaucrats, who were involved in key counter-terrorism policy developments, in one way or another, between 2005 and 2020. It also included a small amount of “peripheral” actors, involved in bodies or initiatives related to Prevention, but outside the main three institutions. Those latter interviews were less formal and often not recorded but rather just annotated. In total, the sample was planned to include ten to twenty in depth semi-structured interviews with the main actors, and between five and ten background interviews with peripheral actors, including academics. The final sample size was seventeen main interviews, of which four were conducted in person and the other thirteen remotely, either through the telephone or videoconference platforms (Zoom, Skype, etc.); the final sample included also six peripheral actors’ interviews. The majority of the interviewees were localised in Brussels, so I organised a fieldwork stay within a public research branch of the European Parliament, who hosted me and provided me with a corporate email address and a mentor. My mentor there facilitated

some initial interviews, mostly with peripheral actors, who nonetheless helped me do an initial calibration of my interview questions and overall interviewer tone.

The institutionalised nature of my fieldwork granted me significant advantages in establishing a **network** of interviewees prior to beginning the interviews. As mentioned, my first interviews were facilitated by my mentor, who also worked in a separate but related area of counter-terrorism. These initial interviews also helped me sound the waters regarding the most adequate tone for the different types of EU elites in my sample: experts, bureaucrats and politicians. This was especially important during the beginning of my fieldwork, as a practice before the more challenging interviews with central actors.

Later on, thanks largely to my institutional EU email address and access to the EU directories, I gained access to top elite interviewees. Conducting such interviews with top players indeed facilitated my access to more contacts, and improved the idea that interviewees had of me as a researcher, strengthening my rapport with that EU counter-terrorism niche community. Ironically, it was at this point in time that all Brussels institutions locked down due to the Covid pandemic. Nevertheless, the ensuing months of initial lockdown constituted my most intense **interview** period for the sample, and it was all done remotely. While the physical location of my interviewees had not changed, mine had, and remote interviewing, both through the phone and via Skype and Zoom, allowed me to complete my sample.

In many ways, I was at an advantageous position for a methodological transition. Firstly, remote interviews allowed me to circumvent Covid restrictions, which themselves forced a lot of my sample to stay home, often becoming more amenable to interviews. Secondly, remote interviewing cancelled two logistical problems about interviewing in-person in Brussels: lack of adequate physical interview location, and low quality of recordings due to background noise. Thirdly, many of my interviewees treated phone and video interviews normally, being already socialised into teleconferences and work discussions via telematics. Fourthly, my corporate email (which I retained) alleviated my lack of access to interviewees, for example via initial informal contact (aimed at setting an interview).

In terms of security concerns, none of my interviewees expressed special uneasiness regarding conducting an interview online and me recording it. This could be because they were from the beginning informed of my intention for recording, and those uninterested in being recorded potentially never agreed to be interviewed. My interview fieldwork was also framed by a strict

Data Privacy agreement, which was disclosed before the interview and seemed to satisfy my interviewees' need for privacy. This agreement was always explained to my interviewees, via email and prior to the interview, mainly highlighting how I would collect and process their data, once pseudo-anonymised, as well as stating strict data retention limits for how long I could keep their data. They had to give their oral consent to the interview, which I recorded and saved.

The main drawback of remote interviewing for me was the construction of rapport with interviewees. To foster intimacy with elites, before interviews I would expound my ethical rulebook, as well as let them choose between recording or not, and encourage them to add this off the record.. Overall these techniques were useful in establishing a cordial, relaxed but still professional atmosphere for the interviews.

At the same time, during the beginning of the interview, I often tried to show that I knew their trajectories and/or policy outputs intimately, in order to create positive reactions that facilitated harder questions. My knowledge of the exact policy documents and legal initiatives they were involved in also worked in my favour, as interviewees were proud of their work and being recognised by it, as well as taking my stance as researcher of EU counter-terrorism more seriously, which prompted more technical and detailed responses.

I designed my remote questions so that interviewees would start with open-ended questions (describing their jobs, for example), building some initial rapport, and leading to increasingly closed-ended questions about specific phenomena. The end of the interview would veer again towards open-ended questions; in successful interviews with good rapport, this would lead to interviewees adding unexpected or interesting insights, unprompted.

These positive dynamics were kept in the remote interviews as well. For example, to compensate for the lack of in-person intimacy, I often emailed interviewees post-interview to ask them for further contacts and/or documents mentioned during the interview. They all responded to these requests favourably, in fact, more so during remote interviews than in person, perhaps due to non-physical medium facilitating fluid and quick email exchanges. It is worth noting that recording oral consents can facilitate remote fieldwork ethical practices, as it is often easiest to record their consent after hearing the researcher state the Data Privacy conditions, than it often is to obtain a signed written consent form an interviewee.

The switch to remote fieldwork also had a strong impact on my **processing operations** once the interview sample was completed. I encountered few oppositions to being recorded, at either stage, at most having several “off the record” aside during the interviews.

Furthermore, in many cases the remote recordings were of better quality than the in-person recordings. The transcription process was facilitated by using software such as Google Speech-to-Text, Zoom transcription and Otter.ai. The use of an online software for transcription of course meant that all raw textual data had to be pseudo-anonymised before being processed. To avoid confusion on my end, but keep my interviewees’ privacy, private code document was created with the key between the names stated in the transcripts and the real identities of my interviewees. Aside from this problem, it is true that some in-person recordings were partially blank, of very low quality and one was deleted accidentally. In these cases, the existence of handwritten notes on each interview helped patch the gaps.

To summarise, this fieldwork could be characterised as a hybrid of in-person and remote interviews. The experience of mixing both has become a staple of my approach to fieldwork; if occasion allows, initial in-person interviews and having an official institutional presence are both key factors in accessing difficult actors and establishing a positive rapport with the target knowledge community. At the same time, remote interviewing allows for a continuation of the fieldwork with increased breadth and choice of interviews, as well as improved technical approaches to data processing after interviews. Combined, both approaches are most useful and present the best cost-benefit approach for the EU elite interview researcher.

Remote Interviewing to Investigate the Networks and Practices of European Policy Evaluators (Antonin Thyraud)

A growing transnational profession with European anchorages (Castro et al., 2016), policy evaluation became inescapable in contemporary EU policy making. This was most notably the case in the EU structural funds, in the design of which third-party evaluators (consultants, academics) were embedded since the early 1990s. Due to the multifaceted and decentralised nature of these funds (the epitome of a so-called “EU multilevel governance”), most of the research revolving around the cause and effects of EU-sponsored evaluations was performed through localised case studies looking into the ways policymakers or politicians use evaluative knowledge to both steer policy reform and market their results. With the notable exception of

surveys aiming to characterise the nascent population of EU-sponsored evaluators in the late 1990s (Toulemonde, 1995), the bulk of this past research avoided dealing explicitly with the boundaries of the “community of practice” or “epistemic community” of evaluation while assuming it was functionally there.² Taking note of that pitfall, the following case-study underlines how those online interviews and observations eventually appeared as a productive research design to explore the cross-border relationship between European evaluators, whose professional socialisation and activity were remote even before the 2020 Covid outbreak.

Regarding **sampling**, this PhD research was at first also based on a mix of socio-history at the Commission level (interviewing the officials successively in charge) and case studies at the regional level in several countries, to work on the use the so-called “managing authorities” of the EU funds make of evaluation. Although the researcher was already puzzled by the hypothetical existence of a European “community of practice”, the uncovering of hundreds of actors and consultancies scattered around Europe seemed impossible with the meagre resources of a PhD research.

Eventually, the Covid outbreak happened to be a critical juncture in terms of research design. The will to keep on interviewing and moving on the research went through the uncovering of a raw database of EU Commission’s service providers in the field of evaluation, which was used to map the recurrent cross-border consortiums of professionals that are set up to evaluate EU structural programmes. With the help of this map of evaluators, important (and previously invisible) practitioners were contacted in many Member States, which led to a snowball effect. From what was at first thought of as a back-up for already planned in-person interviews, online interviewing quickly became a powerful tool to engage with evaluators across the continent, ask them about their relationship to EU methodologies and aims, as well as with their peers in other countries. Contact opportunities were facilitated by the period, when everyone was riveted to Zoom calls: I could easily fit in the busy schedules of my interviewees, since professional travels and functions were suspended. Eventually, around 65 interviews with practitioners from 10 countries were remotely performed for this PhD between March 2019 and October 2021, a figure which would have been unparalleled using only in-person interviews, which advocates for the “cost-benefit” of remote interviews.

²A 2016 paper by Castro, Fraganane and Rinaldi dealing with the online jurisdictionalisation of evaluation is an interesting counterexample. Online groups and social networks serve as a central node for the exchange of professional “good practice” or self-identification.

The digitisation of evaluation during the pandemic also affected observations of professional events and internal meetings: thanks to the informal networking during and around remote interviews, it was made possible to access various administrative circles which were theoretically closed to observers in the past. Sneaking into an online meeting proved to be definitely easier than in an in-person one (as no one ever checked the full list of online participants), and the data collected was found to be as rich as before: e.g. the director making an address and leaving early, the challenging questions by the audience which are then understated by the Commission officials or the consultants, etc.

However, it must be stated that anterior, more in-person **networking** has been a key to successful remote interviews and fieldwork. First, a third of this PhD's remote interviews were undertaken with people met in-person in the past (in Brussels or elsewhere, at the Commission or in international fairs and events) and most of the other interviewees had an acquaintance whom the researcher had already met or frequented the same in-person spaces (the Commission, the Parliament, regional or local authorities). These in-person commonalities were accentuated by the researcher's position as a part-time evaluation consultant in the context of a PhD funding scheme ("Cifre" doctoral contracts in France), and while online forums allow for international and simultaneous connections, the social attributes of the practitioners remain similar, be it online or offline.

The **interviewing** situations were as varied as they could be in-person. Some interviews were very pleasant and effusive, as the interviewed officials or consultants felt more secure to "meet" an external interlocutor in the comfort of their homes. Even if there remains a digital trace of the interview in the organisations' IT systems, doing it online eventually avoided civil servants or private-sector workers a lot of justification to their managers regarding the purpose of such interviews. A main factor of worry at start, the contemporary lack of faith in the confidentiality of online interactions never proved to be an issue for my interviewees, except for some EU Commission officials who specifically asked to connect through their own system which they deemed "safer". Broadly speaking, the remote situation not only equalled in-person interviews in terms of intimacy, but it also reinforced this feeling.

Conversely, this intimacy also comes with a drawback for the interviewer. Blocked in his small den, he shares his own intimacy with the interviewee, whose character could sometimes be vindictive or plainly aggressive. Some academics or high-level civil servants acted especially picky or doubtful about the usefulness of the research or the appropriateness of the

methodology. These challenges can happen anytime but were found to be more stressful in “remote” situations, as we lack a more neutral territory (a meeting room, a café). It might sound trivial, but admonitions and criticism sounded more painful when heard in one’s own apartment.

The **processing operations** of the interview material were similar to the parallel in-person work, as a regular recorder and an old-style notebook were used during interviews. The only noticeable difference would be screenshots: a lot of them were taken during interviews or observation, to keep track of an interviewee's facial reaction, to save some PowerPoint slides that were shared or to remember the names of participants to an online meeting. Of course, they must be kept and used according to the applicable ethical and legal rules.

To sum up, the switch to remote interviews in the case of policy evaluators not only brought “cost-benefit” advantages that helped to fulfil a difficult task (the mapping of EU-sponsored evaluators and their relationships), it really helped this research change course, giving up more secure but less innovative case studies of evaluation utilisation, to really focus on the aspirations, similarities and political perspectives of evaluators as a community. However, it is fair to say that it was more an “hybridisation” of methods than a pure substitution towards remote fieldwork: on both the practitioners’ side (physical meetings remain a norm, professional conferences and other “nodes” keep existing) and the researcher’s side (her or his social capital and integration into the field), in-person contacts can build long-lasting confidence and remain a working norm that is somehow replicated online. As for any research topic using remote or in-person work, the best of both worlds should be conjugated, and hybrid research protocol should become a norm for such transnational communities, allowing familiarisation with the field (for instance by attending “nodes” such as international conferences) before exploring the weaker or stronger online ties that sustain the feeling of community on the longer term.

Golden Rules of Remote Interview Practice

On the basis of our practical experience, we would like to offer some suggestions to colleagues beginning their work with online interviewing. We also provide some more depth on the technical and ethical dimensions of remote interviewing, which proved important for our own research. Mainly, we advise prospective interviewers to look into their institution’s ethical requirements for interviews’ recording, interviewee consent requirements and data storage,

prior to starting their fieldwork. This is meant to, firstly, protect the privacy and data rights of interviewees, and secondly, to foster good practices in qualitative researchers' work and facilitate the posterior publication process, as ethical research practices are (rightly so) a growing concern in qualitative journals. We have categorised these tips along the four categories of our analysis: sampling, networking, interviewing, and processing operations.

Nevertheless, please remember that one's approach to remote interviews will ultimately depend on two specific factors: available resources and targeted samples. Thus, the following rules do not at all cover all the possible spectrum of challenges in remote interviews. Keep those variables in mind and adapt our advice accordingly!

<p>Sampling and networking: “Be cost-effective!”</p>	<p>→ Practice hybridization: mix remote/in-person interviews according to the type of data you seek and interviewees you have: participant observations vs biographical data; framing interviews vs in-depth structured interviews, etc.</p> <p>→ Consider initial physical fieldwork to establish yourself in your sample's network. If physical presence is too costly/unfeasible, consider networking through online interactions: LinkedIn and Twitter are useful for contacting professional or elite interviewees, and allow them to see you as well!</p>
<p>Interviewing (#1): “Create (a mediated) rapport”</p>	<p>→ Remote interviews = interviews. Don't lose sight of the method because of a change in interview medium.</p> <p>→ Remote interviews are human interactions too! Be creative and flexible on how to create intimacy in your interview: lighting, camera, backgrounds, body language, etc.</p>
	<p>→ Arrive at the interview technology-ready: back up headsets and an emergency Internet source, in case of WiFi failure, like your phone data.</p>

<p>Interviewing (#2): “Remember, you are on the field!”</p>	<p>→ Disable all social media pop-up notifications. Be sure to neutralize distractions and focus on the interview as it is happening.</p> <p>→ Remote fieldwork is likely to lead to similar processes of burnout and frustration. Consider the added difficulties that remote fieldwork will imply for you: adequate interview space, dependent obligations, etc.</p>
<p>Processing Operations: “Mind interviewee privacy rights!”</p>	<p>→ Ethics Review: consider the legal and ethics requirements for processing interview material: recorded oral consent, most importantly.</p> <p>→ Privacy rights also apply on digital platforms and remote interviewing. Think about potential anonymity and data protection and storage strategies before you start your fieldwork.</p>

Conclusion

To briefly sum up our experience, the pandemic pushed us into new online fieldwork experiments with EU actors and personnel, a way to work we did not really consider a good (or even a desirable) research practice. Even though we acknowledge that this shift started as a substitute for in-person situations, the pandemic somehow made us rethink our original stances on online fieldwork for EU-related topics, as we discovered some intrinsic qualities to remote research.

First, it constitutes a lever for the democratisation of EU studies. Whether it is about approaching busy administrative elites or building a research protocol on the transnational effects of EU policies, the “cost-benefit” dimension of online interviewing or observations is weighted in favour of the benefits. Obviously, remote interviews could not substitute for the embeddedness in a situated context, a physical presence, but it allows for less self-censorship when it comes for the aspiring researcher to choose a relevant topic. Thus, remote interviews might be regarded as a way to decentralise EU studies from the “Brussels bubble”.

Secondly, remote interviews may constitute a necessary shift to capture the hybridisation of EU policymaking. Increasingly, EU actors and institutions have been present online, either as

a dissemination platform or via cooperative, online work (e.g.: remote work during Covid pandemic). This even applies to new possibilities of conducting observations and “on spot interviews” online, through Zoom meetings observations, for example. More methodological thinking is needed to conceptualise research on digital-bound policy work.

Thirdly, the main critique against remote interview is its impact on rapport building. Through our experiences, we have found that remote means do not necessarily mean that rapport is more challenging to establish or maintain: “‘Remoteness’ shifts the encounter in such a way that the physical separation between researcher and participant can facilitate a greater (emotional) connection through participants’ increased sense of ease with the setting and mode” (Weller, 2017, 623).

More research is needed in this area to propose coherent ontologies and codes of action for remote interviewing, as they already exist for in-person research. Furthermore, distinction and comparison among interviewee types will also be key to an honest conversation about the limitations of remote interviews. At any rate, we hope this piece opens the conversation in EU studies about practicing remote interviews, and that our personal experiences might be useful. This is just the beginning of remote fieldwork, so watch your step!

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