

## APPENDIX

# Mixed Distance Methods and Data

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To oversimplify: with a given amount of time and resources, one can either study a few subjects in great detail or many subjects in broader strokes. Again simplifying, we can say that the first, ‘small-*n*’ strategy is typically taken by ‘qualitative’ or ‘interpretive’ research, such as ethnography, producing ‘thick descriptions’, deeper understandings, compelling interpretations and novel theories, whereas the second, ‘large-*n*’ strategy is more common in ‘quantitative’ work aiming for replicable and generalizable results and the systematic testing of precise hypotheses. The project presented in this book began with the idea of combining deep-diving ethnographic work, in which researchers may spend years with a small group of people they study, with ‘big data’ computational analysis, which in contrast can scrape the surface of very large datasets. The idea was to study ways of doing society both very thoroughly and very broadly.

Another way to think about this is the metaphor of observational distance. Whereas interpretive qualitative methods are sometimes described as close reading (where an abundance of meaning is derived from material), computational big data analysis can be described as ‘distant reading’, looking at an abundance of material from afar, so that details are imperceptible, but a wider-angle view is rendered: ‘If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something’ (Moretti 2013: 49). Whereas with text, observational distance is an apt metaphor, with ethnography, it becomes quite real: ethnographers are indeed much *closer*, physically as well as socially, to their subjects than big data analysts looking at patterns emerging from texts written by distant humans. But the advantage that big data analysts have is the ability to look at, however superficially, texts produced by thousands of subjects. Our aim was to get the best of both worlds – what could be called *mixed-distance methods*.

To plan field cases, we used a two-dimensional theoretical space with an axis from informal to formal engagement and another one from latent to manifest

engagement, creating a 2x2 table. Informal latent means nonparticipation, formal latent engagement could be seen in empowerment projects in which institutions try to engage people, manifest informal engagement could be described as activism, and manifest formal engagement corresponds to institutional ‘politics’ as typically recognized. Seen in this way, politics is only one of four possible ‘modes of engagement’. We planned field cases by employing at least two differing analytical viewing distances for each of the four quadrants, for a total of eight cases of different engagements at different distances.

Bent Flyvbjerg (2011: 302–303) argues that much of the empirical knowledge about the world has been gained through case studies, underlining that knowledge in the social sciences is always situational and case-specific. Case studies do not necessarily verify assumptions, but can offer new insights and a more detailed understanding of the complexities of human interaction. Such knowledge cannot always be generalized through hypotheses or theory, but can be transferred to similar cases or used as examples (Flyvbjerg 2011: 305). Accordingly, a strategically well-chosen case is one which can be generalized based on the assumption that whatever is found in this specific case should apply to others. These principles guided our case selection.

Since we were about to study very different data of different people using different methods, the theoretical framework of cultural sociological tools and new pragmatist thinking – which we here codify as focusing on *doing society* laid out in Chapter 1 of this book – was to act as a device binding the various approaches together. In the research project that transpired, some choices of fields, subjects and data had to be modified, and not all quadrants were studied using both distant and close methods. Also, we made the decision to prioritize the closer-distance, qualitative work in this book, and also to take a cultural sociology approach to the big data work (see, for example, Mohr et al 2020) rather than a more traditional quantitative hypothesis-testing approach. Nevertheless, all qualitative work was informed by the quantitative analyses we conducted, which helped in terms of selecting and getting to know the fields, having an idea of what is important before diving in more deeply.

The chronological order in which analyses should be conducted, of course, depends on the role each analysis should play in the whole project. One possibility would be to first look closely at small data to come up with a theory (induction), before zooming out to view big data to test the generalizability of that theory (deduction). Another would be sampling: first looking at big data to select interesting parts of those data and then to study more carefully using qualitative data – this is an approach we employed in many parts of this work. But in practice, sociological research, especially multisited group work, rarely follows such neatly prefigured idealizations of the research process. What unfolded during this work was more of an *abductive* process (see Tavory and Timmermans 2014): piecing together the

evidence here and there, going back and forth between perspectives and conceptual development, understanding a bit more with each step and by each surprise that the empirical fields provided. Crucially, each different methodological viewpoint informed the work done in each step forward.

Altogether, the project data consist of over 200 interviews, four ethnographic field projects, tens of thousands of pages of text analysed from different distances, a demonstration survey among the Fridays for Future (FFF) participants (for details, see [de Moor et al 2020](#)), as well as a survey with 1,247 young respondents.

### **Getting close: ethnography and the focus on patterned (inter)action**

The various ethnographic projects in this book all aim at understanding and explaining situated, patterned actions of young people participating in society. Ethnography, a method of immersing oneself into people's daily routines and systematically recording social processes as they unfold in real time, is well suited for exploring mundane, everyday action. At the same time, it makes it possible to pay attention to how these actions are not haphazard, but culturally patterned. Following everyday actions and interactions with a pragmatist and cultural sociological lens allowed us to notice how different cultures of doing society shaped young people's actions and, conversely, how their everyday actions shaped the cultural tools of doing society.

As we entered the world of young people we studied, whether in youth council meetings, youth houses, climate strikes or online forums, we followed, observed and participated in their routines, seeking to understand life as it is lived. In so doing, we were able to understand how young people participate in doing society in different areas of life, in extremely varying ways – sometimes in a conscious, wilful manner as they (sometimes) participated in democratic processes, but also imperceptibly, more as a side effect of ongoing activities. Whereas with more distant methods it would have been hard to grasp these less apparent and less articulated forms of action, ethnography that is based on 'being there' in order to observe people acting ([Jerolmack and Khan 2018](#)) enabled us to recognize and become attuned to the less explicit and apparent forms of doing society. Rather than following the established ideas of what doing society is or should be, we embraced the discovery-oriented nature of the ethnographic method and volitionally followed 'surprise data, things [we] didn't ask about but were told anyway' ([Becker 1996](#): 56).

Multisited ethnography with a relatively open design allowed us to broaden our gaze from the 'usual suspects', and the classical modes of societal participation to asking how everyone – in one way or another – *does society*. Not designing our field sites and research foci solely based on the existing literature on societal participation led us to new discoveries concerning where,

how and by whom society is being done. This also led us to challenge some of the conceptualizations of civic action and participation, as we learned, for example, that not all ways of doing society can be described as ‘civic’, and some forms of doing society are better described as nonparticipation. Crucially, we did not commit to any predetermined normative theory on how societal participation *ought* to look like, but instead went on to enquire how the actors themselves valued their action or inaction.

It is of course difficult to know about people’s practices without talking to them about the meanings these practices have for them. While our theoretical approach is focused on both action and meaning, we put great emphasis on in-depth interviewing and collecting data about cultural repertoires, imagined futures and meanings of actions. We wanted to understand how the actors themselves made sense of their actions or inactions, how they assigned value to them, what they imagined as possible and what, conversely, entirely out of their reach. Asking questions and listening (see [Lamont and Swidler 2014](#)) helped us to direct our ethnographic gaze at what we call the three ways of doing society: imagining, engaging and acting. We enquired how the youth envision society, both now and in the future, how these imaginations shape their current actions, and how they build commonalities, with whom and with which tools. The tools for doing this ranged from just asking the young people about their visions of society, what they thought is good life and how they defined politics, to observing how they asked for floor in meetings, who they invited to planning sessions, and who stepped up and took responsibility in crucial moments and how.

In order to make ethnographic observation usable and generalizable, the interpretation of the results was done abductively, with an explicit objective of theory construction. All the fields were discussed together with the whole group, both in data sessions as well as sessions on theoretical development.

In addition to participant observation, we also used other methods of qualitative data collection. For Chapter 3, we interviewed 32 young candidates. We also employed qualitative text-reading techniques with the more distanced data sets.

## **Zooming out: big data, surveys and large-n text analysis**

We employed several methods for zooming out from ethnographic and interview-based fieldwork. We collected hundreds of ideas from an e-democracy website and conducted category-driven theory-based content analysis to provide a broader look at the cultural tools used therein. We utilized a demonstration survey we participated in conducting within the climate movement ([de Moor et al 2020](#)) to better understand participant dynamics among the climate activists and Kallio Block Party participants.

We conducted a representative random-sample mail survey of people aged between 15 and 25 in the Helsinki metropolitan region (N=1,247), the results of which informed the conclusions drawn from each field case. For example, the survey let us know that roughly a quarter of Finnish 15–25 year olds had used Ylilauta, the 4chan-inspired imageboard studied in [Chapter 6](#), and that the respondents that had done so were dominantly male, before launching deeper qualitative work thereon.

For the Ylilauta data of about 800,000 messages, we employed topic modelling ([Blei et al 2003](#); see, for example, [diMaggio et al 2013](#); [Evans 2014](#)) as well as a word embeddings-based neural network classifier ([Ylä-Anttila et al 2020](#)). Computational approaches have often emphasized induction, in which patterns are expected to arise from the data with as few theoretical preconceptions as possible, while sometimes simultaneously making aggressive claims about causality ([Babones 2016](#)). We attempted to reconcile some of these issues with our approach, complementing text mining with deep-diving qualitative work both before and after.

As we have argued elsewhere ([Ylä-Anttila et al 2021](#)), topic modelling has noticeable points of convergence with certain versions of frame analysis. If a frame is defined so that it ‘links two concepts, so that after exposure to this linkage, the intended audience now accepts the concepts’ connection’ ([Nisbet 2009](#): 17), these linkages can be found by an algorithm that detects which terms ‘tend to occur in documents together more frequently than one would expect by chance’ ([diMaggio et al 2013](#): 578). Ongoing habitual usage of certain words together is a sign that those words have meaning *in relation to each other*, forming a cluster of words that is then interpreted as a frame.

Text mining models are necessarily reductions of the complexity of human interaction. But by observing patterns and changes in these reductions, we may observe variations in meaning-making habits – that is, culture.

## Methods and data notes for individual chapters

### *Chapter 2: participatory projects*

This chapter is based on the ethnographic participant observation of two institutional youth participation initiatives in the Helsinki metropolitan region conducted by Georg Boldt from 2015 to 2018: a youth council and participatory budgeting with young people. The fieldwork sites were chosen to study the democratic merits of institutional youth participation by focusing on methods of participation, patterns of interaction and the use of political power. A multisited research design was developed to enable an interpretation of the significance of local variations of a translocal policy ([Marcus 1995](#); [Hannerz 2015](#)).

In accordance with our case selection principles about choosing cases that likely inform us of other cases, a well-established ‘textbook’ example of a

youth council was chosen. In the participatory budgeting case, contrasting districts were selected: one well-to-do and the other strongly segregated and marginalized.

A research permit was obtained from the city of Helsinki's youth department. Youth council meetings are public. Nevertheless, the researcher (Boldt) conducting this fieldwork still reached out to the chairperson and secretary-general before attending his first meeting. They invited him to meetings and other events, and added him to their instant messaging groups. Boldt also carried out numerous one-on-one interviews with council members as well as those who had dropped out. The youth council fieldwork included one full mandate period, as well as the end of the preceding mandate and the start of the subsequent period. The participatory budgeting process was observed for three consecutive cycles. During the fieldwork, Boldt participated in games and activities, but refrained from participating in political discussions or influencing decisions.

Throughout the fieldwork period, the process of seeking informed consent was continuous and reflexive (Hoong Sing 2005). At the roll call at the start of each monthly assembly, the chairperson stated Boldt's name and reason for being present, along with those of other guests. In this way, everyone was reminded of his role at the meeting. At participatory budgeting events, he introduced himself at the beginning and offered handouts providing more information about his research, together with his contact details. Over the years, he discussed his research and interpretations with participants, and at his last youth council assembly in 2017, he gave a presentation on his impressions, which seemed to be well received by most council members.

Boldt's subjective position as a researcher was also shaped by his past involvement in youth politics. This was the basis not only for his interest in the research topic, but also for his understanding that participatory structures often fail. This made him a critical advocate of participation, motivated not only to understand why institutional youth participation works or does not work, but also to improve it by showing how cases differ from each other and what the various participatory methods and settings achieve. This emancipatory, embodied and critical stance is necessary since institutional youth participation tends to be planned, implemented and reported by local authorities. Accordingly, in order to understand the limitations of participatory vehicles, one has to study them from the viewpoint of their participants (Rolin 1999).

### *Chapter 3: aspiring politicians*

To find young people manifestly engaged in formal politics, we decided to interview first-time candidates in the Helsinki metropolitan region city council elections of 2017 right before election day. We searched for

first-time candidates under the age of 25 in the Voting Advice Application of YLE, the Finnish national broadcaster, and randomly chose 25 candidates for interview, while ensuring representation of all parties and a reasonable balance of genders. This was done to ensure that we would capture as broad a range of potential backgrounds and ways of doing society as possible. We planned a list of semistructured interview questions in planning meetings involving the whole research team. In a few cases, we wanted to include specific candidates who were already familiar to us from other fields, to increase the dialogue between datasets; in some of those cases, the interviewees were over 25, but still under 30. Each researcher in the team then conducted several interviews, adding up to 32 in total. Each interviewer made logbook entries about each interview for the other researchers to review, and we also discussed how the interviews were going in several team meetings as the interviewing project went on. Interviews, which lasted between 25 and 120 minutes, were recorded as audio and then transcribed verbatim.

#### *Chapter 4: e-democracy*

The Nuortenideat.fi service had 459 ideas or suggestions submitted to it at the time when we gathered our materials (20 January 2017). Most of these were in Finnish, with a small number of them also in Swedish. All ideas were scraped for the analysis using a python script written by the authors, together with the comments they had received. However, we excluded the official responses the ideas had received. While these official responses are an interesting data in their own right, they were not essential for the analysis focused on studying young people's ways of doing society.

While going through the materials, we discovered that, in addition to the actual ideas submitted by young people, the service is used in many cities as a channel for gathering feedback from young people concerning, for example, local bus routes. This is understandable, as the service is promoted to young people (those under 29) and professionals working with young people. We have removed these kinds of facilitated 'feedback ideas' from our data corpus. We also removed ideas in which the person submitting them expressed clearly that they were older than the actual target age. The final dataset we used consisted of 428 submitted ideas, which varied from a few sentences to about one page in length. Of these, 63 ideas were extremely scant, less than one sentence in length.

The ideas were analysed using public justification analysis (Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio 2016; Luhtakallio and Ylä-Anttila 2023), paying attention to grammars of commonality (following Eranti 2017 procedures) and in the categories of civic imagination (Baioocchi et al 2014). We also did a broader content analysis to record the primary 'issue' presented in the idea, similar

to political claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999) and the scope or range of the ideas.

### *Chapter 5: stigmatized youth*

Chapter 5 is based on ethnographic research on two separate but coalescing field sites. In 2012–2016 and 2018–2022, we carried out two ethnographic research projects among young people at the margins of society.

The first project was conducted by Junnilainen in two stigmatized urban neighbourhoods in Finland with a focus on urban inequality and place-based stigma (see Junnilainen 2019, 2020, 2022). Over a period of four years, Junnilainen participated in the everyday lives of the neighbourhoods and conducted around 60 interviews with local inhabitants and public officials. The analysis of this chapter particularly draws on the data that were collected in youth houses, local schools, libraries and other places, where Junnilainen intensively followed the local youth, participating in their everyday routines and detecting how and why they acted, thought and felt the way they did (see Wacquant 2003).

The second project was conducted by Meriluoto among youth with stigmatizing and marginalizing experiences. Over four years, Meriluoto participated in the everyday activities of a group of homelessness activists and another group of young mental health activists, with a focus on their visual political action (for example, Meriluoto 2023; Luhtakallio, et al 2024). She also conducted fieldwork in a rehabilitation centre for young people recovering from addiction for three months in early 2020. She followed the groups and their consenting individual participants with the snap-along ethnographic method both online and offline (Luhtakallio and Meriluoto 2022). As part of the fieldwork, she conducted 32 interviews with the youth.

### *Chapter 6: anonymous imageboard*

Our work on the anonymous online Ylilauta imageboard was originally conducted by a team of three: two cultural/political sociologists (Veikko Eranti and Tuukka Ylä-Anttila) and one computational linguist (Sam Hardwick), all of whom had longstanding cultural familiarity with such online communities. For data, we collected over 800,000 messages on Ylilauta posted in two time windows – 2012–2014 and 2018–2019 – since our initial interest was whether Ylilauta had become more politicized in recent years.

For quantification, we obviously also needed a working definition of ‘political’ that could be operationalized, but we had a distaste for defining it beforehand, since the definitions of Ylilauta users might well diverge

from our own. In team discussions planning the study, we eventually tasked Hardwick with training a convolutional neural network based language model on Ylilauta's 'Politics' sub-board to learn the linguistic features that are categorized as political by Ylilauta users themselves, and a scoring model to rate how linguistically similar messages on other sub-boards to those on the 'Politics' sub-board were (this is based on a probability the model assigns to a message being from 'Politics' as opposed to the other sub-boards). Before using the model, we validated it qualitatively by assessing a random sample of 400 messages from four score categories (100 each) and noted after blind coding that in fact the model's scoring of messages corresponded quite closely to our conception of what politics on Ylilauta would look like.

This enabled two things: first, quantifying politics on Ylilauta as a whole and on the various sub-boards; and, second, inspired by our theoretical background, locating discussions in which something we could call 'doing society' arises in ostensibly nonsocietal discussions, which could then be further assessed qualitatively. Comparing the old and new corpora, we found that Ylilauta had indeed become more political over time. These results were published in [Ylä-Anttila et al \(2020\)](#), together with a topic model assessing the prevalent political themes and a qualitative text analysis of selected 'political' messages.

For the work in this book, Eranti and Ylä-Anttila extended their previous article, armed with our previous quantitative and qualitative results, now diving deeper into the culture of Ylilauta and what it tells us about ways of 'doing society'. Here, the previous computational work about the amount and themes of political and proto-political content allowed us to select materials for qualitative work in a theoretically relevant way and to focus on what matters.

### *Chapter 7: street party – urban individualism and sense of community*

Jokela gathered the fieldwork data on Kallio movement during 2017–2019 by attending the movement meetings, following discussions in Facebook groups and by conducting in-depth interviews with ten Kallio movement participants. Especially compared to more radical groups such as the Extinction Rebellion (XR), it was easy to gain access to study the movement since the Kallio movement does not engage in civic disobedience. In addition, the movement members were used to being approached by students doing their theses in, for instance, sociology, architecture or urban planning. The meetings Jokela attended were mostly Kallio Block Party meetings that focused on the practical arrangements of the festival. In the meetings, she usually acted as the secretary, but also took up practical tasks with other participants, such as filing an online event application, meeting with the City of Helsinki traffic department about the closing of streets

during the festival, or running errands at the Kallio Block Party backstage. All participants are anonymized.

### *Chapter 8: climate activists*

The chapter is based on 17 interviews with 15 young climate activists, aged between 14 and 30. The interviewees had been engaged in climate strikes organized by the FFF and/or in XR, and they were chosen to represent the younger generation of the climate mobilization. Nine interviewees were part of the Finnish chapter of XR, and the interviews were conducted by Kettunen in 2021, interviewing two of them twice in different thematic interviews. The interviewees were recruited as part of Kettunen's separate ethnographic project (see [Malafaia et al 2024](#)).

Jokela conducted six interviews in 2019 with young people taking part in climate strikes, who were recruited by attending the protests in which they took part. During the FFF protests of that year, Jokela and Luhtakallio also took part in an internationally comparative protest survey project on the climate movement ([de Moor et al 2020](#)).

The analysis focuses more on the XR activists, yet interpretations emerging from the interviews with climate strikers have been included when appropriate. In addition, at least two of the climate strikers later joined XR, making the distinction between the activists' affiliations less than watertight. This also reflects the terrain of the current climate activism that consists of unofficial movements and campaigns rather than rigid organizations with a clear membership base.

## **Research ethics**

Ethnographic research that includes young people, some of whom are in vulnerable and marginal positions, imposes high ethical demands regarding how the research is conducted. We took special care in explaining the research design, purpose and ethical guidelines to all research participants prior to their involvement in the study and informed them of their rights and the safeguards in place. We obtained research permits wherever necessary, notably in the cases of institutional youth participation of [Chapter 2](#), and of the youth we met at the rehabilitation centre in [Chapter 5](#). Interviewees were asked to fill and sign a form with background information, contact details and consent – those who were underage were asked to provide us with the consent of a guardian. All interviews that we have reported on in this book have been consented to our use by the interviewees and pseudonymized to protect their identities. In [Chapter 3](#), we also considered the display of party affiliations and specific positions in youth organizations of the interviewees: we omitted information of party affiliation where we

estimated that naming this would compromise the interviewees' anonymity, and we also left out all mentions of positions held by the interviewees in specific organizations, such as chairperson and vice-chairperson positions, as well as the exact names of the organizations whenever these seemed to give away the identities of those interviewed.

For ethnographic and interview data collection in particular, we followed the ethics codes of the American Anthropological Association (AAA 2012), based on the grounding principle of causing no harm to any of the research participants, and of exercising continuous ethical assessment throughout the research process. All ethnographic work has commenced with a careful explanation of the overall project design, objectives and practices, followed by a discussion on the research participants' rights and the safeguards to protect them.

For the data collection on the online fora, we followed the ethics code of the British Psychological Society's guidelines for internet-mediated research (BPS 2021). We did not use consent (as identified in the General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR]) as the legitimation basis for processing personal data. Instead, the legitimation was based on research for general interest as identified in the GDPR, as well as the Finnish data protection legislation. Further, the project uses texts submitted on the youthideas.fi service, as well as Ylilauta imageboard, stripped from their original contexts and with no metadata or user information included. Scraped text data were stored in secure servers provided by CSC – IT Centre for Science, a centre of expertise in information technology owned by the Finnish state and higher education institutions, and only for the time period necessary for the processing of the analyses.

The risk of vulnerable individuals' and groups' stigmatization has been prevented by strict pseudonymization techniques used throughout the data collection, analysis and reporting phases, and organizational and technical measures adopted to prevent illegitimate access to data.

Our research work has in its integrity been carried out according to the general guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2012), the guidelines on data security of the Universities of Helsinki and Tampere, and the Finnish legislation, as well as the European GDPR.

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