

Nina ter Laan

“Anything can happen on a smartphone...” Mutual explorations of digitalization and social transformation in Morocco’s High Atlas through On/Offline Theatre Ethnography.

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“Anything can happen on a smartphone...”

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Nina ter Laan

in collaboration with Marike Mahtat-Minnema

University of Cologne



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Cover image: Participants of the online theatre project in the Media Space, watching a video assignment by the Dutch theatre maker via WhatsApp, projected on a large screen. Photo made by one of the tutors of the Media Space.

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“Anything can happen on a smartphone...”*

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Abstract This paper discusses the use of (online) theatre as an ethnographic research tool in an existing collaborative study on (digital) media use and social transformation in a Moroccan village situated in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Due to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic to the ongoing fieldwork there, the project team sought a way to re-establish a regular feedback loop with the village community in a non-physical way. As a solution, the project team, together with the local partners, decided to bring in a theatre maker to conduct online theatre workshops, with the aim to bring the project back to life in a meaningful way and to generate data for the overall goal of the project: to explore and develop socio-technical collaboration infrastructures in Morocco. This working paper describes the process, motivations, design, and outcomes of the project, as well as the controversies, opportunities, and struggles that arose during the theatre work. It also reflects on the added value and objections of such a collaboration between an academic and an artistic discipline and describes the process of ‘negotiating connection’ between researchers and research partners amidst the pandemic. I argue that, despite the necessary challenges, using theatre as a methodological tool for ethnographic research, can, through cooperation, allow researchers to better understand cultural practices, social relations, and power dynamics within a marginalized community.

Keywords: Morocco, media, digitalization, ethnography, Covid-19 pandemic, arts-based research, theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed.

* Quote by one of the two tutors during a theatre session in the Media Space in the village. 7 May 2022.

** This paper was written by Nina ter Laan, based on a project conducted in close collaboration with independent Dutch theatre maker Marike Mahtat-Minnema. Minnema studied Theatre and International Relations in Utrecht. From 2009 to 2019 she lived in Rabat, Morocco. In 2010 she came across the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, which she has been working with since 2012, collaborating with activists of the 20 February movement in Morocco, and later with young migrant mothers and youth from sub-Saharan Africa. In 2019 she moved back to the Netherlands with her family, where she continues her theatre work. Contact details: Holten, The Netherlands, marikeminnema@yahoo.com, www.marikeminnema.nl.

Introduction

There is a poor connection during the first Zoom session between the theatre maker in a village in the east of The Netherlands and the young participants in the Media Space set in a village in the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Zoom shows static, blurry, and pixelated images accompanied by stuttering and choppy voices. The sound is lagging, there is some mumbling, then an accelerated sentence, children try out the keyboard, and write to the theatre maker in the Zoom chat: “How are you?” She answers back in *darija* (Moroccan Arabic): “Ki dayrin?” (how are you?) and they chat back and forth a bit. Then the connection is gone...

This depiction summarizes the description the theatre maker shared with me about how her first online session went, right after it ended. Between 2021 and 2022, we worked together on a research project that combined ethnographic research with (online and on-site) theatre to explore digitalization in a village in the High Atlas, Morocco. The idea for the project was born in early 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, when I had just joined an existing research project as an anthropologist and postdoctoral researcher. The interdisciplinary team (consisting of socio-informaticians and cultural anthropologists) had been working since 2016 on a project on digitalization, publics, and social change in Morocco, for which they had established in collaboration with a local NGO, an educational ICT-intervention, a Media Space, in the High Atlas, Morocco (Rüller et al. 2019). However, like everywhere else in the world at the time, travel restrictions made it impossible for researchers to conduct fieldwork. In order to maintain contact with the project’s main site, together with the research team I developed (in light of my interest in the nexus of art and anthropology) the idea of organizing remote theatre workshops as a form of ethnographic research. The goal of this initiative was to revive the dwindling contact during the pandemic in a meaningful way, that would appeal to the local village community, where storytelling is an important part of its culture. The research team chose a theatre maker who is fluent in *darija* (Moroccan Arabic) and with extensive knowledge and hands-on experience of Moroccan culture. However, as the vignette above illustrates, the early stages of the project were marked by technological setbacks. Despite the availability of an internet connection since 2014, and the presence of a broadcasting tower, that was erected in 2018 to connect the valley, in which the village is located, to the World Wide Web, its functionality was erratic, which worsened during the Covid-19 lockdown due to increased internet usage.

This working paper, which I developed in collaboration with theatre maker Marike Mahtat-Minnema, ex-

plores the use of theatre as a means of ethnographic inquiry to gain a better understanding of digital practices in Morocco and their socio-cultural contexts. The choice to use (digital) theatre as a means of collaborative ethnography stems from an interest in the potential of art forms as a methodological tool for conducting ethnographic research. While anthropologists have long studied art forms at various levels, their integration as a tool to gain insight into specific topics of research has only recently been explored (Greenwood 2019, Goopy et al. 2019, Martínez 2021, Leavy, 2022). As I will show, using (digital) theatre in, and as a form of, participatory research can provide valuable insights into the perspectives of marginalized groups on various issues through a repertoire of their own choosing. This is particularly the case with Theatre of the Oppressed, which has been used in this project. This set of theatrical techniques, developed by Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal in the 1970s, can provide a space for non-professional participants to express themselves and to surface issues on subjugation through a procedure of improvisational theatre techniques.

This endeavor also aligns with recent calls for collaborative knowledge production within decolonizing anthropology (Kennemore & Postero, 2020, 2021; Pels, 2021), to which this theatre-based project seeks to contribute. As I will demonstrate, theatre can serve as a collective mode of inquiry as it engages participants in pro-active processes of producing knowledge through a participatory and physical mode of expression, that significantly differs from the more reactive and conventional forms of inquiry, such as interviewing and (participant) observation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not only to report on the process and results of the theatre research, but also to make a contribution to recent explorations of new forms of research practices that are grounded in, and advance collaborative knowledge production (Lassiter 2019, Boyer & Marcus 2021). I will also address methodological questions about the analysis of such a collaborative project and the dissemination of the results.

The question that is central to this paper is how can the use of theatre as a form of collaborative ethnography provide insight into the socio-cultural changes that are occurring as a result of digitalization in a village in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco? To answer this question, I discuss the process and results of the theatre project, as well as the opportunities and challenges of collecting and analyzing ethnographic data on digitalization through theatre. The main focus here is on one of the theatre pieces, that was developed by the village community under the guidance of the theatre maker. The play, which tells the story of a village girl whose picture is being taken and posted on Facebook without her permission, is followed from its inception during the first (online) phase of the theatre project, to its actual staging during the second on-site phase. In addition, I briefly explore how the contro-

versy over digitalization and female honor, originally presented in this particular play, came to manifest itself in the social dynamics during the preparation of another theatre play during the on-site phase.

The theatre project took place between May 2021 and September 2022 and consisted of an online phase and an on-site phase. The online phase consisted of a series of online theatre workshops that took place between May and October 2021. The on-site phase, that took place after travel restrictions had been lifted, consisted of two field visits to the village community: one in April–May 2022 and one in August 2022. The research methods used, included collaborative media research through improvisational (forum) theatre work (Boal 1994) combined with ethnography, while adhering to the research team's principle of open dialogue with the community, allowing space for our local partners to bring in and realize their own ideas, and for the researchers to learn about local uses and views of (digital) media (Aal et al. 2018, Rüller et al. 2019).

This paper, that outlines the project's motivation, set up, progress, and results, is divided into four sections. It starts with providing a brief background on the broader project and the context in which the theatre sessions were organized. The second section discusses the original design of the theatre sessions, and the third section presents the actual data generated during the online and on-site phases of the project. The fourth part analyzes the data generated and reflects on the processes involved. The paper concludes with highlighting the benefits and challenges of using theatre as a methodological tool for ethnographic research in the Moroccan context and provides recommendations for future research.

Background of the project and the Media Space

Because the results of the theatre project were influenced by the circumstances under which it was conducted, it is important to first provide a brief background on the broader project and the context in which the theatre sessions were organized.

The theatrical activities described here were commissioned by the research project (B04) 'Digital Publics and Social Transformation in the Maghreb', one of the sub-projects within the collaborative research center (CRC) 'Media of Cooperation', funded by the German Research Community (DFG). The CRC's purpose is to understand how media technology influences people's social practices and how technology can be designed in a way that serves people.¹ B04, as one of its sub-projects

examines (digital) media practices in Morocco and its diaspora in Europe. It aims to understand the emergence of publics and forms of cooperation within ongoing processes of social transformation and is rooted in interdisciplinary and inter-university work within a team of cultural anthropologists (University of Cologne) and socio-informaticians (University of Siegen). Part of this project is the implementation of educational ICT interventions through the establishment and maintenance of Media Spaces (or computer clubs) in disadvantaged areas (2 in Morocco, 1 in Germany). These are implemented in close collaboration with local partners (Aal et al. 2018, Rüller et al. 2019), while collaborative projects and ethnographic research are carried out. Based on the study of these processes on the ground, the project aims at the conception, realization, investigation, and evaluation of socio-technical (infra) structures. The project strongly relies on combining participatory approaches, collaborative design and action research, as well as extensive (media)ethnographic fieldwork.

The theatre project took place in the older of two Media Spaces, established by the research team in Morocco. This one is located in an Amazigh (Berber) village in a valley of the High Atlas Mountains, and was set up in close collaboration with local partners in 2016. The team chose this location because of an existing contact who had initiated development work in the area. After the grant was awarded, various project members made several visits, leading to the establishment of the Media Space.

The purpose of the Media Space was twofold: both to provide people in an underprivileged position with access to (digital) technology, and to gain insight into their engagement with this technology. The Media Space was created with the help of the local community, who had plenty of room to share their ideas about digital media technology and how they could learn to use it. The formal partnership was with a local NGO whose activities include improving and maintaining the environmental, social, cultural, and infrastructural conditions of the village. The construction, maintenance, and management of the Media Space was mainly carried out with this NGO: they hired two tutors to manage the media space on a daily basis and organize activities with community members. Digital interventions were created by socio-informaticians from the University of Siegen, while cultural anthropologists from the University of Cologne played a key role in understanding the wider socio-cultural, political, and economic context of the local community where the Media Space was built and to gain insight into the ways in which the introduction of (digital) media devices, connectivity, and a Media Space, affect the village community (Holdermann 2021).

Over a period of three years, a strong relationship developed between the research team and the local community. A Ph.D. student in Social and Cultural

¹ <https://www.mediacoop.uni-siegen.de/en/>.

Anthropology at the University of Cologne conducted 16 months of ethnographic field research in the community between 2017 and 2020, learning the local languages. Through his dedication and immersion, he was able to build meaningful connections with the locals, earning their trust and respect (Holdermann 2019). In addition, two socio-informatics Ph.D. students regularly visited the community, and the principal investigators made occasional visits, contributing to a regular exchange between the research team and the village community. As a result, rather than having to build a network of relationships and trust from scratch, the theatre maker and I were able to tap into an existing network of relationships and trust when we arrived in the village.

At the time of our theatre project, the Media Space was run by two tutors, a young married couple and parents to a young girl. The husband, Farid², was born in the village and manages the Media Space and is also involved in other community activities, such as volunteering for elections, reading water meters, and as a sports instructor for children, activities for which the Media Space is also sometimes used. His wife, Meryem, comes from a nearby village, holds a BA in Social Sciences and engages with the women who participate in activities organized in the Media Space, such as language classes and movie making. They are both part from the same tribe and fluent in Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight (Berber from the Middle and High Atlas, their mother tongue) and speak some French and English.

The village where the Media Space is located is one of seven villages where different tribes live along a river that supplies water to the surrounding pastures and farmlands through a sophisticated local water distribution system. The main livelihood is based on small-scale farming and raising and herding livestock, especially sheep and goats, as well as outdoor tourism. However, due to its remote location, there are few opportunities to work outside of tourism and small-scale farming and ranching. As a result, many of the adult men migrate to larger cities in the region (and beyond) for seasonal work, particularly in the construction industry, while adolescent students leave the village after high school to pursue higher education at colleges or universities (Holdermann 2022).

In spite of its remote and rural location, the community of the valley has a rich history of being connected to a variety of (trans)national infrastructures. The valley was connected to the outside world by saints, pilgrims, pastoral nomads, French colonial settlers, anthropologists, and development agencies, but also by tourists, schools, the construction of a road, connection to the national power grid, and a running water system (Gellner 1969, Holderman 2021, 2022).

In 2018, an internet mast was installed in the valley by the French-Moroccan telecommunications company Orange. During our stay, we learned that Inwi, another telecom company in the country, also has plans to expand internet access in the area. The introduction of a Media Space by the German research team, as well as the theatre project, can be interpreted as one of the projects, connections, and activities that the village has attracted in order to sustain the community and integrate it into the expanding global economy, while maintaining its autonomy from the central government (Holdermann 2022; Montanari & Teixidor-Toneu 2022).

The pandemic, dwindling contact

Prior to the start of the theatre project, the research team's last visit to the village, was made in early 2020. After his graduation, the anthropology Ph.D. student left the project, and I joined as a postdoctoral researcher in late 2020. This change in personnel, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic, led to a decrease in contact with the village community.

Despite these challenges, the team was committed to finding new ways to engage with the community. Together with the president of the partner NGO and the two tutors of the Media Space, the team discussed possible ways to establish a non-physical connection with the community, using the facilities in the Media Space, in order to reinvigorate the project in a way that would intrinsically motivate the community to engage (again) with the Media Space, the project, and the researchers.

I proposed a collaboration with Marike Mahtat-Minnema, a Dutch theatre maker with extensive experience in socially engaged and research-based theatre projects in Morocco³ and Europe. She also conducted online theatre workshops during the pandemic. Marike has lived in Morocco for over a decade and is married to a Moroccan-Amazigh man, although he is from a different tribe, and not from the High Atlas. She is fluent in *darija* and French, knows some Tamazight, and has a deep understanding of Moroccan society. Her theatrical work focuses on storytelling and oral history, cultural practices closely linked to the culture of the village community. In fact, the research team had already worked with storytelling in one of their projects in the village community before. The proposal to organize online theatre workshops as a way to overcome the pandemic-induced lack of contact with the Media Space coincided with my long-standing wish to integrate art forms into ethnographic research. But integrating theatre into ethnographic research requires an exploration of arts-based methodologies as a platform for marginalized and minority communities to gain voice and agency.

² All personal and place names have been anonymized or replaced by pseudonyms, to protect confidentiality.

³ During the second phase of the project, another Media Space was established in the Rif (North Morocco) in 2022.

Art, ethnography and theatre

Although artists and anthropologists work according to different rules and conventions in many ways, art forms and ethnographic research also have points in common. Since the 1990s, contemporary artists have increasingly used an ethnographic approach in their work. In addition to this so-called ‘ethnographic turn’ in modern art (Foster 1995: 105), there was also a ‘social turn’ (Bishop 2005), when artists started to work more in the public domain, involving a variety of communities in the conceptual development and delivery of artistic work. Socially engaged research became a central focus of these works, in which process took precedence over outcome or product. This approach has been called ‘relational aesthetics’ by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) and has led to an expanding field of intellectual and social research that forms a practice between social theory, artforms, and research (Greenwood, 2019).

In addition, scholars from a variety of disciplines have paid attention to the relationship between art and ethnography, exploring the possibilities of arts-based formats and collaborations between art, science, and society in teaching, research, and knowledge production in the broadest sense (Johnston 2018). There has also been a growing interest within anthropology in using various art forms, in particular to represent research findings in embodied and sensory ways to diverse audiences, in addition to traditional textual forms of representing ethnographic findings and insights (Rutten et al. 2013: 460). These explorations of creative modalities have primarily focused on the representational level. However, attempts to integrate art forms, such as music, painting, and performance, as a methodological tool of ethnographic research and analysis remain rare (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021: 20). Although traditional research methods such as participant observation, interviews, mapping, oral history, filmmaking, and photography are often used in ethnographic fieldwork, the incorporation of art and the artistic process as a method of inquiry that can provide valuable insights into the research topic and process has only recently been recognized and explored within the discipline of anthropology (Greenwood 2019; Goopy et al. 2019; Martínez 2021).

Theatre and anthropology

Nonetheless, the relationship between theatre and anthropology might be one of the oldest combinations of ethnography and art forms and has been a subject of scholarly inquiry in anthropology since the 1970s. This inquiry concerns three broad areas of interest. First of all, the performative ontology of ethnographic fieldwork, to understand fieldwork as a theatre, has been an anthropological topic of interest (Castañeda 2006). A second line of inquiry involves the study of theatre as the cultural and biological behavior of people in a the-

atrical setting, in which the physical and mental presence of people is presented and used according to laws different from those of everyday life (Barba et al. 1984). The third branch of anthropological interest in theatre focuses on theoretical reflections on the performative nature of social life, with scholars such as Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, Ervin Goffman, and James Scott using the theatre stage as an analogy for everyday life (Goffman 1959, Turner 1982, Schechner 1985, Scott 1990). This theoretical framework has become a central point of reference in the analytical work and conceptual toolbox of anthropologists, with particular emphasis on how a theatrical performance resembles ritual (Turner 1982). Theatre has also been used to represent and document the ways of life of cultural “others” and to create a theatrical performance with research participants to address research questions (Conquergood 2002; Denzin 2003; Fabian 1990; Madison 1998; Allen and Garner 1997; Mieniczakowski 1994, 1995, 2001; Schechner 1985).

Yet, using theatre as an ethnographic research method is still relatively new. Despite the rather limited research on the use of theatre as a method of ethnographic research, recent efforts have sought to engage participants in active and ethical processes of knowledge production through theatre (D’Onofrio 2018). In line with these endeavors, I argue that in the call to working and learning collaboratively with research participants to get at the heart of their experiences, while serving their communities, theatre can be one possible way to contribute to ongoing efforts to decolonize ethnographic research (Estalella & Criado 2018). As a more indirect, non-discursive, metaphoric, and physical means of expression, that extends beyond the written and spoken word, theatre is a potent form to tell stories through a combination of spoken text, emotional engagement, and physical movement (Schechner, 1985: 14, 32) to bring out and explore experiences and knowledge. Moreover, the collective nature of theatre holds the promise of a more participatory mode of ethnographic inquiry. Theatre also has the potential to mobilize collective agency, and mutual knowledge (Magnat, Houston & Auslander 2021:24).

In our research project, the theatre maker used the methodology of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1994), a participatory and improvisational form of theatre developed by Brazilian activist Augusto Boal in response to political oppression in the 1970s. Originally intended for peasant and worker populations, it has since been adopted worldwide for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community building, therapy, and government legislation. It is a participatory form of theatre that provides a space for the oppressed or marginalized of society to be heard, and a means of analyzing the mechanisms of specific conditions of oppression (Boal 1979, 1994; Greenwood 2019). Theatre of the Oppressed provides an accessible and analytical form of theatre that aims to serve people who are normally

not represented in politics, media, or other positions of power. In this approach, audiences are not passive spectators, but are invited to share their opinions on the issues at hand and possible ways to resolve oppression through the language of theatre (Boal 1979, 1994; Greenwood 2019).

Our theatre plan: the online phase

Once the research team and local partners agreed to conduct online theatre sessions in the Media Space, we worked together to design and implement the online theatre sessions. The original plan for the theatre project was to set up online theatre workshops via Zoom to: 1) reconnect the project team with the Media Space during the pandemic, 2) to provide a space for the village community to reflect on digitalization, and 3) to collect data to support the overall goal of the research project: to use, explore, and develop socio-technical cooperation media infrastructures by engaging with the technology present in the Media Space in order to mobilize new forms of publicness and cooperation. An eventual field phase would be conducted in the village, if online activities would be successful and travel conditions would allow. The online theatre-based workshops were designed to build on local oral histories and storytelling practices by linking them to the technological possibilities of the Media Space. In order to achieve this, the theatre maker would work closely with the two tutors of the Media Space to ensure that the workshops were culturally appropriate and engaging for the participants. The theatre maker leading the workshops, would provide guidance, while allowing space for the participants to reflect and share their stories and perspectives on digital media use. There was space for two researchers to attend and participate in the online workshops. The videos would be stored in a shared database to which the researchers and the tutors have access.

Theatre through WhatsApp: what actually happened

The theatre project aimed to explore the impact of digitalization on the village community, but ironically faced significant obstacles due to poor internet connectivity, which made real-time online sessions nearly impossible. Together with the theatre maker, the researchers tried to discover the root of the problem and tried several measures to address and solve these issues, including negotiating new media tools, such as We-Transfer and trying to improve the Internet connection by purchasing new routers. However, these efforts were all in vain. During the few sessions that did have good enough connection, the children participating in the sessions were mostly searching the keyboards and negotiating the media tools. These conditions all together did not allow for any theatre

workshops to be conducted. Moreover, there was difficulty to connect with the tutors, which made it hard to reflect together with our local partners about what was (not) happening and why, and how to resolve this.

The theatre maker overcame the challenge of a weak internet connection that hindered real-time communication between her and the participants in the Media Space, by sending short video messages with theatre assignments in *darija* via WhatsApp to the tutor, Farid. The tutor then projected the video assignments onto a large screen in the Media Space. He then worked with the children to complete the tasks, which they presented for the group and the tutor, who recorded their performances with his mobile phone and sent a selection of these video presentations back to the theatre maker via WhatsApp. The online phase involved a group of about 15 children who participated faithfully in the assignments, and who were given the freedom to create their own stories by both the theatre maker and the tutor. The participants edited their own videos on WhatsApp, which the tutor saved on his phone and the theatre maker on her laptop.

During this online phase 18 video assignments and responses were produced through WhatsApp, which can roughly be divided into three different stages. The first stage focused on physical exercises and theatre games, in which the children could loosen up and in which they could practice with their imagination and the impersonation of objects or personages. In the second stage, the assignments became more reflective in nature, asking participants to reflect on media use. In the third phase, they were asked to create a theatre piece to be recorded on video with their phones, about posting people's photos without permission on social media. This last task consisted of a series of sub-assignments and responses (sent back and forth via WhatsApp), in which improvisation played an important role. Through a series of videos, the theatre maker asked the children to create a short scene. The children then collaborated to create a scene, which the tutor filmed with a smartphone and sent back to the theatre maker via WhatsApp. Instead of giving feedback on form aspects or acting skills, she in turn performed a scene herself with a co-actor, that responded directly to the scene the children had worked on. The children then created another scene that was a response to the scene made by the theatre maker. In this way, a mutual story about posting people's pictures on social media without permission emerged.

The story that was eventually produced followed the fictional character of Kaoutar, a girl from an imaginary mountain village, whose picture was taken without her consent by the fictional character of Hamed (a young man from the same village) while she was drinking coffee in a cafe. After taking Kaoutar's picture, Hamed posted it on Facebook, causing a

huge uproar. The ensuing controversy threatened to ruin the girl's and her family's reputation and marriage prospects, and became the subject of rumor and gossip, which were enacted over two filmed scenes, one by the theatre maker and her co-actor (her husband), and one by the children in the Media Space. Relatives were afraid to speak out for fear of escalating the scandal. One scene focused on the attempt to resolve the issue by seeking assistance from the local authorities (*lqiyada*). But a visit to the *moqqadem*, a local representative of the Moroccan state, was in vain, as there seemed to be no legislation on the matter (at least in the WhatsApp play). Despite these attempts to seek help from local authorities and family members, no solution was found. Finally, Kaoutar's brother Khalid (played by a girl from the village community) decides to take matters into his own hands. In a brief but violent scene, he takes revenge on Hamed (the photographer) by stabbing him to death. The final scene is dark and begins with Khalid being released from prison after five years and living penniless on the streets.

Even though the effort to connect the research team with the village community through real-time online theatre sessions did not go as expected, the work-arounds via WhatsApp implemented due to Covid-19 lockdowns and an unstable internet connection, led to unexpected ways of conducting collaborative media research through dialogic and improvisational theatre work, that was captured and sent back and forth between the theatre maker and the community. Although the medium of WhatsApp did not allow the team's researchers to participate in the sessions, nevertheless, the theatre project opened up unexplored avenues in terms of methodology and content. The theatre work also created a motivated commitment among a group of participants to engage in remote theatre work and collaboratively generated research data, raising pertinent social issues related to digitalization and publics, with gender at the forefront. As the results of this phase were promising and the conditions for travel were again favorable, the project team initiated an on-site phase.

The on-site phase: "Look, that's our teacher!"

2 May 2022, *Fieldnotes*, Nina ter Laan

Today was Eid al-Fitr, the day when people celebrate the end of Ramadan. After a full day of visiting families, we headed off to a soccer game in the mountains. Farid, the Media Space tutor, had sent someone to accompany us. We made our hike up to the soccer field along steep goat trails. Marike carried her young son on her back, while her oldest ran across the fields on his slippers. Marike's

cousin-in-law Salwa explored the small medicinal plants growing along the trail. We walked slowly, enjoying the breathtaking views and the fresh mountain air, until we reached a plain where the soccer game was taking place. On a small hill a *khima* (tent) was set up with plastic chairs for the men, to watch the game. Farther away, on another hill, women, girls, and children gathered, performing *ahidous* – a traditional dance with singing, drumming and shoulder-to-shoulder dancing in a circle. Marike and Salwa immediately joined in with enthusiasm. Then a little boy, about eight years old, approached me. He tapped my arm, pointed to Marike and with a big smile on his face told me: "*Hadi, l-usteda diyal-na!*" which means, "Look, that's our teacher!" It was a heartwarming moment, and I'm struck by how Marike's WhatsApp theatre sessions have managed to build a rapport between her and the children, that translated into an on-site sympathy on that very hilltop, despite the challenges of a pandemic and unstable internet connections. Later, Marike spoke with some of her students, and it's clear that the bond between them is strong.

Building on the connections established during the online phase of the theatre project, the objectives of the on-site phase were to deepen the relationship and increase the collaboration between the research team and the local community. This would enrich the data already available to the research team, as well as provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the changes and challenges that the advent of digital media have brought to the community. We also planned to obtain parental consent for the use of photo and video footage of the theatre sessions, and to assess the feasibility of preparing and performing a theatre play with the community during a possible second field visit.

The on-site phase of the project consisted of two field visits. The first visit took place in April and May 2022, and the second in August 2022. During the on-site phase, the theatre maker led the theatre project and produced theatre sessions with the local community in the Media Space, in close collaboration with the two tutors. I was assigned the role of research project representative, responsible for coordinating the project on-site, while simultaneously performing research tasks, including attending and observing theatre sessions, taking notes, and investigating whether and how theatre could be used as an ethnographic research method. In the broader context of the Media Space, I also wanted to understand the local situation, infrastructure, problems, and different actors. Me and the theatre maker worked closely together to document, and reflect on the processes and content that emerged during the theatre sessions and the broader fieldwork. We also assessed whether the socio-technical interventions carried out by the project members from the University of Siegen (still) matched the needs of the local partners. A secondary goal was to create an open-source village archive of sounds, images and texts, and to incorporate

oral history work into theatrical forms. To ensure good research ethics and the mutual consent of all partners, sound and video recordings were made by and with the permission of the tutors of the Media Space for the purpose of further academic analysis.

First field visit

For the first field visit, which took place between April 30 and May 10 2022, I traveled together with the theatre maker and her two young children, who she brought along to the village where the Media Space is located. A cousin of the theatre maker's Moroccan husband, Salwa, joined us from another city in Morocco to help care for the children while the theatre maker and I worked at the Media Space during the day. We stayed together at the same hotel, owned by the president of the project's local partner NGO, which caters to both foreign and local tourists interested in nature and hiking. We arrived the day before the celebration of *'eid el-fitr*, which marks the end of Ramadan. There seemed to be some initial reservation on the part of the local partners, and it took us some effort to introduce ourselves to the village community and explain the purpose of our stay, our connection to the project and each other, and to the research colleagues who had established a strong bond with the community in the past. However, traditional visits to people's homes to celebrate the end of Ramadan helped break the ice. The theatre maker's fluent command of *darja*, and her familiarity to Amazigh (Berber) village life (due to her marriage with an Amazigh man from a similar tribe outside of the High Atlas), the presence of her children and her cousin-in-law, who speaks Tamazight, helped to establish a warm connection and particularly opened up the world of women to us.

During the first field visit, a total of five theatre-based activities were set up with groups of women, children, and men. These workshops were all led and conducted by the theatre maker, in close collaboration with the two tutors, who brought participants together in the Media Space. During all the sessions, short exercises and games were played to loosen the participants up. For the first activity, the theatre maker met with seven women from the village, including two teenagers, to work on a project she had previously done with female relatives of her husband's tribe. The project involved younger women interviewing older women to record folktales in Tamazight. She showed the women in the Media Space two short film clips she made in her husband's village as an example: one was her cousin-in-law's mother telling a local fairy tale, the other one was an interview with her husband's grandmother about traditional Amazigh tattoos. Despite some problems with the sound of the video, the women were enthusiastic. The project included the women filming each other, while telling a story, either about their life or a local fairytale, with the equipment present in the Media Space, and a camera and microphone the theatre

maker brought herself. Not all of the women wanted to be filmed. For example, one older woman said that she thought it was a great project, but that she could not be filmed because she would never get permission from her husband. The women who did not want to be filmed were given another task and then worked together to transcribe the filmed stories. The filmed stories were then projected on a large screen, while the women, guided by the female tutor, transcribed the Tamazight stories with Arabic script. The women were enthusiastic about the project and learned about each other, as well as how to film and edit videos.⁴ Overall, the project successfully achieved its goals of preserving traditional stories, promoting language skills, and providing technological training to the younger generation.

The second theatre activity organized in the Media Space involved the children of the village community. This event was attended by seven children and was characterized by joy and a strong bond between the theatre maker and the children, which was immediately evident upon their arrival. Together, they engaged in various activities such as playing tag and participating in a game of "hints," which not only provided entertainment for the children, but also served as a means for them to work together. They then watched parts of the WhatsApp video clips about the girl who gets her picture taken and posted on Facebook, which were projected on a large screen. There was a lot of giggling among the children as they laughed to see themselves on such a big screen. In the discussion that followed, the theatre maker emphasized the importance of problem solving and creative thinking. It turned out they had made an alternative ending to the Facebook controversy, which they did not send to the theatre maker. In this ending, the girl's father intervenes by going to the *qaid* (local judge), asking him to mitigate the problem. But the *qaid* ends up asking for money, which the father does not have. This solution does not work either, and so Khalid ends up killing the photographer anyway⁵.

A third theatre activity involved a joint session with some of the men of the village. During that session, which like all theatre sessions started with playful warming up exercises, it turned out that the men were not so enthusiastic about a theatre play, but were rather interested in making a movie. As a matter of fact, they already made one, or started it, but the recordings were placed on an old secondhand laptop that had broken down and seemed to be beyond repair. The theatre maker tried to explain her approach to theatre, which does not involve a pre-written scenario, but is based on improvisation. Most questions asked by the men however, focused on technological inquiries such as how to save the data of the movie from the moth-

⁴ Fieldnotes Nina ter Laan, 4 & 6 May 2022.

⁵ Fieldnotes Nina ter Laan, 4 May 2022.

erboard. Both the theatre maker and I were unable to help out in this matter⁶. During the fourth theatre session, which was meant for the men again, who came around somewhat, three young women also showed up. Together they started practicing with the principles of Forum Theatre and improvisation, and ended up playing a very intense scene on domestic violence.⁷

The fifth theatre activity, which was also the major event of our first field visit was the communal screening of the videos of the different scenes via WhatsApp, made during the pandemic about the girl who was photographed without her consent and whose brother then stabbed the person who took the picture. One of the main objectives was to get as many people from the community as possible (including the childrens' parents) to watch the screening, so as to involve the wider community in the WhatsApp film the children made, as well as to have a discussion after the screening about the movie's content and the pros and cons of digital media and how these affect the local community.

Remarkably, hardly any parents came, because – as we were told – they had work to do or had to take care of their other children. Later during the session a few (grand-)parents were fetched at the last minute and arrived at the Media Space to watch the screening. After having seen the movie (which had to be watched on a laptop, as the beamer did not work), the theatre maker asked the group whether anything like this could also happen in real life. Farid, the tutor, sighed hopelessly: “Yes, anything can happen on a smartphone...” Under the guidance of the theatre maker, the group discussed possible outcomes and solutions to the situation, other than death and violence, with one older woman suggesting that the tribe should solve the problem.

Throughout the discussion, it was clear that members of the local community were grappling with the new and rapidly evolving digital landscape. They were particularly worried about Facebook, but also had negative attitudes towards Instagram and Tiktok. WhatsApp seemed to be less stigmatized. Examples shared ranged from positive experiences, such as sharing photos and staying connected with family members, and retaining memories, to negative experiences, such as invasion of privacy, cyberbullying and immoral behavior, like promiscuity and violence. It seemed that the elder generation was looking for guidance and support to navigate the internet safely and responsibly. The State was considered able to provide that guidance. For example, Farid suggested that the Moroccan government should switch off the internet during the evenings and nights. The meeting also highlighted the importance of intergenerational dialogue and collabora-

tion, as younger and older members of the community came together to share their perspectives.

After the discussion, drawing on the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, the theatre maker encouraged the audience to come up with alternative endings, other than the girl's cousin killing the photographer. This resulted into a long scene, performed on the spot, that portrayed a discussion between the families of the photographer and the photographed girl. The outcome was an arranged marriage between Kaoutar and Hamed, and the scene ended with an *ahidous* celebration, in which everyone participated. After the performance of the scene, a reflective group discussion followed whether this was really the best solution. Everyone agreed, except one young man, who stated that “this is really the last resort”. The theatre maker then asked the group to come up with alternative ideas. After a long silence, Salwa, the theatre maker's cousin-in-law, who also attended the screening, suggested that Hamed should apologize publicly. The group enthusiastically agreed and decided to organize a *maarouf*, a religious harvest festival, without music and with shared food, in a cemetery at the tomb of a holy woman. Then they worked to make another scene, which they performed. In this new ending scene, Hamed apologized at the festival, but Kaoutar's parents were not pleased. To resolve the issue, Hamed had to apologize to Kaoutar's family, pay them money, and remove the photo from Facebook, which is what was enacted. After the final scene, there was a small party in the Media Space with softdrinks and sweets to celebrate the theatre activities.

Second field visit: August 2022

In August 2022, the second field visit aimed to prepare, produce, and perform a theatre play with the village community. This visit had a different dynamic than the first, as initial contacts and local partners were familiar with the theatre research project. The second field visit also involved more people, different time periods, and different accommodations. This time the theatre maker arrived in the village two weeks before me, where she and her family had rented a house in the village. In addition to her two children and her cousin-in-law Salwa, two of Salwa's sisters also came, as well as the theatre maker's husband, who joined the family later. Upon my arrival, I noticed that she and her family seemed well rooted in the village community. I stayed at the same hotel during as our previous field visit. This time, my project colleagues from socio-informatics from the University of Siegen also visited the village to introduce a new colleague to the research site and to attend some of the theatre sessions. Two of them had been involved in setting up the Media Space from the beginning, although their last visit had been more than two years ago. They arrived a week after me and stayed in the same hotel for a week.

The focus of this field visit was the preparation and performance of an on-site the-

⁶ Fieldnotes Nina ter Laan, 6 May 2022.

⁷ Fieldnotes Nina ter Laan, 7 May 2022.

atre play with and for the village community. The preparation and performance of this theatre play, took place during an outdoor village festival (*moussem*) for more than 100 people, and will be analyzed in more detail in a future publication. However it is interesting and important to note, that the play was not directly about digital media, but focused on pollution of the river, that runs through the valley. Nevertheless, issues of digital media were addressed indirectly in the play, with the actors referring to smartphones and Facebook, in improvised scenes.

Another notable point was that the play brought out gender-related issues, that were also present in the WhatsApp play. But unlike the WhatsApp theatre scenes, where these issues were the central theme of the play, they were not thematized in the on-site play about the river. However, they were pervasive in the group dynamics during the preparations of the play. Especially in the run-up to the public performance in the village, there was a lot of anxiety among the women who wanted to be part of the play and act, but were afraid that during the public performance they would be seen, gossiped about, or worse, photographed or filmed on smart phones by (un)known people in the audience and that their pictures would then be posted on Facebook, which could damage their reputation and marriage prospects. Especially as the date of the performance approached, some women (and men) stopped coming to rehearsals or insisted on playing male roles, such as one girl who wanted to play a member of a local association that takes care of the village's infrastructure, a position usually held by men. During a theatre session she began to cry because she was so afraid to play this role and yet so determined to do so. The final rehearsals were full of tension and emotions, and the play was almost cancelled. The situation was finally resolved when the female tutor, Meryem, with her husband's permission, decided to take the lead role, which put the other women over the edge. What is striking here is that the gender issues raised in the online theatre scenes created via WhatsApp, which focused on the unsolicited photographing and posting of a woman's picture on Facebook via smartphones, were also present in the preparation of the public performance of the play on-site during the second field visit. However, these issues were not explicitly addressed as a theme, but rather emerged in the dynamics and interactions among the participants in the run-up to the public performance of the play.

Analysis

Through online and offline theatre sessions, the children of the village community, under the guidance of a tutor and a theatre maker, created a multi-scene play based on assignments and improvisation techniques. The different scenes were filmed on smartphones, edited and sent via WhatsApp. Based on the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, the non-professional and

young participants, through playful exercises and improvisational performances, were able to gradually gain confidence and express their experiences and point of view regarding the presence and use of digital media in their community.

The case developed in the theatrical scenes through WhatsApp highlights the importance of young women maintaining their dignity in the village community amidst the increasing presence and use of digital media. The solution presented in the play to the problems that could arise for women, from the increasing presence of digital media, was the killing of the perpetrator by a young man (but played by a young woman). Although dramatic and dark in nature, this solution could, in my eyes, be interpreted as relatively emancipatory. Classical structuralist analyses of gender in Mediterranean societies have often emphasized the honor/shame configuration (Pitt-Rivers 1966; Herzfeld 1980; Stewart 2015), in which women's honor is maintained through the control of their sexuality, as well as women's self-disciplining behavior to avoid shame. Within this framework, honor-motivated violence against women (such as abuse, exile, or murder) for transgressing the boundaries of their communities' definition of acceptable femininity was interpreted as a means to restore community dignity, since women were seen as the bearers of family and community honor. In this context, however, those who participated in the play expressed the need to hold perpetrators accountable rather than punish the female victim when recourse to legal institutions failed. The central theme of the play revolves around the transformation of women's dignity and honor in the face of digitalization, but not so much in the conventional sense of exercising control and imposing discipline on female sexuality, but rather as values critical to women's desire and ability to participate fully in their communities. The fact that the role of Khalid (who murders Hamed) was played by a female actor reinforces this interpretation. The play thus provides a compelling local female perspective on pertinent issues of digitalization, gender, justice, violence, and women's publicity.

Considering the literature on publics in our evaluation of this theatre project, it could be argued that theatre can bring hidden issue publics into being on multiple levels (Warner 2002; Marres 2005; Zillinger 2017). During the online phase, the actual public present was quite limited, as the videos with assignments and responses were sent back and forth between the theatre maker in the Netherlands and the participants and tutor in Morocco. However, the theme itself raised questions about how digital media opens up unknown and hidden publics that could pose a threat to female honor and that of the community as a whole. Smart phones, the internet, and Facebook in particular, open the gates – in the eyes of the community we have been working with – to an uncontrollable and potentially malicious (invisible) public, which can lead to controversy, repu-

tational damage, and even death. Through the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, the participants also discussed how they, as a community, could deal with this unruly, dangerous public that can infiltrate their community, especially when the authorities do not lend any support in the woman's family search for justice and accountability. The same gender issues arose during the on-site theatre play about the pollution of the river, but this time because the female actors were about to face a real audience at the theatre performance during a village festival. Thirdly, the theatre project made gender issues public and addressed a public from a female perspective, while creating a female public: by being present in the play, showing a specific female perspective on societal issues, and voicing their viewpoints towards the broader community.

Looking back on the project, theatre can be used as a mode of ethnographic research that allows for joint participation and collaboration between researchers and research partners. In contrast to more traditional ethnographic research methods such as participant observation and interviewing, theatre involves a mutual vulnerability in which all participants must transform into a role, revealing and sharing knowledge through play and creative expression that goes beyond words. Because the theatrical vocabulary is not only linguistic but also performative, it can address what is happening in the community in the cultural repertoire of the community, even while other topics are addressed simultaneously, and throughout the entire theatre process, not only the final performance.

Inevitably, however, difficulties and challenges arose. The collaboration of two professionals from different disciplines required adaptation on both sides. The theatre maker took the lead in the project and had the greatest cultural proximity to the community, because of her personal experience in Morocco. This included a lived familiarity with the cultural codes, her fluency in *darja*, being married to a Moroccan Amazigh man from a tribe similar to the one in the village where we worked, and having her children and some of her Moroccan in-laws with her in the field, which presented her as part of a Moroccan-Amazigh family. As a professional theatre maker, she emphasized above all the creative and artistic process that can channel all kinds of crises within a community, while as an activist and advocate of the Theatre of the Oppressed method, she looked for opportunities that could lead to emancipation and transformation of oppression in all its manifestations. As an anthropologist who has conducted various ethnographic research projects in Morocco, I focused primarily on being there, observing, and dissecting the different points of view, understanding the practices and actors involved, and interpreting them within the broader social, cultural, and political context of the research setting. The collaboration required for me as an anthropologist, who traditionally works alone as a researcher in a research field, to step back and

give way to the artistic process and work of the theatre maker.

Another challenge that arose was that we were unable to secure parental consent, as few parents came to the community screening of the WhatsApp videos, and many left before the end of the session. We were also unable to create an appropriate shared database as a democratic, accessible, and secure interface with the community. Instead we used the German academic platform Sciebo, which neither me, the theatre maker, nor the tutors understood, and so we resorted to the big tech giant Google Drive. Furthermore due to the slow and difficult internet connection with the local community, researchers were not able to participate in the production of the WhatsApp videos, but they witnessed the process of creation by watching the videos from time to time instead.

Given that procedures and context also create specific dynamics within a research field, it is important to reflect on how these dynamics led to the emergence of certain data. This depended on the relationships that existed between many different parties involved: the participants in the Media Space, the tutors, the village community, the wider community, the tribes, as well as the relationship between the research team and the local NGO, the different universities, and the collaboration between the theatre maker and myself and the research team. Another important aspect to take into consideration, while reflecting on some of the outcomes of this project is the kind of questions asked, and who raised them, how and where, as well as who determined what issues were addressed. The project leaders were driven for data during the empirical dry-spell of the Covid-19 pandemic, they also had too much on their plates during the pandemic to engage with the community online and in the field. Nevertheless, they set the direction and requirements for the project, while giving us the space to be open to anything that might come up. The overall assignment thus was to focus on the impact and use of digital technology in this mountain village, and the theatre maker directed the sessions accordingly. Yet, the WhatsApp sessions brought up issues of gender, sexuality, justice, and violence. Then, during the second visit of the on-site phase, while preparing a play about the river and pollution, digital technology appeared in indirect ways: for example, in a song (*izlan*) entitled "the big problem of the smartphone", sung during a scene by women actors, who (unintentionally) were polluting the river by washing their clothes in it with detergent, or when gender issues arose during the preparations of the theatre play through emotional dynamics and fear to be filmed and photographed while performing in public.

The affordances of the theatre process, as it developed according to the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, both in the online and on-site setting, allowed for social issues to surface, on the terms and in the language and emotions of the participants. The data gen-

erated through theatre thus emerged not only through the research questions posed or a specific research design, but also through the space that this type of theatre was able to create for participants to raise concerns in their own (cultural) vocabulary, within a collaborative endeavor.

The theatre project as it was conducted during the online and offline phase thus seems to be a promising case of ethnographic media research, generating research data on a collaborative basis and raising pertinent social issues related to digitalization and publicity. As such, the project also responds to calls for greater collaboration between researchers and participants in the production of knowledge, made in recent decolonization debates (Bishop 2005, Estalella & Criado 2018, Bejarano et al. 2019). A further publication is needed to assess how this particular ethnographic theatre project connects to such calls, and whether it has been effective in terms of decolonization.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we presented an example of a collaborative research project using theatre as an arts-based research method to explore digitalization in Morocco. We discussed how, due to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the project team brought in a theatre maker to conduct online theatre workshops with a village community in the High Atlas, Morocco. These workshops were designed to reinvigorate the project and engage with the village community in a non-physical way. The original plan was to use the technologies available in the existing Media Space to establish a real-time remote connection through theatre activities to explore how the villagers were coping with the rapid development of being connected to the internet. Despite an unstable internet connection and technological setbacks, the workarounds to Covid-19's travel restrictions led to unforeseen ways of doing collaborative media research through dialogic and improvisational theatre work that was captured and sent back and forth via WhatsApp between the theatre maker and the workshop participants. Although the theatre work did not fully succeed in re-establishing the intended regular feedback loop between the entire research team and the village community, it did succeed in creating a motivated commitment from a group of participants to engage in remote theatre work, build a strong relationship with the theatre maker, and produce research data on a collaborative basis in a way that raised pertinent social issues about gender and digitalization. The second phase of the project, which was conducted on-site in the village, built on the work done during the online workshops and further strengthened the relationship between the project and the community, while further exploring gender issues related to digital media in the village. During this phase, gender issues in relation to

digital media, became part of the actual and overall dynamics and interaction during the preparations of a village theatre performance.

Both online and in the field, the theatre sessions served as an interface between the research team and the village community, and generated valuable data for the project. Through the theatre maker's specific approach, based on the principles of Theatre of the Oppressed, the participants were able to creatively express themselves and share their work with each other. The workshops also allowed for the building of trust and the creation of new forms of publicity and collaboration. The theatre sessions produced different publics and made certain issues public through collaboration, in the sense that certain forms of publicity were achieved (or contained) through the practice of theatre, as well as through the issues enacted during online and offline performances. The challenges of working with three different disciplines, anthropology, socio-informatics and theatre, were not always easy during this project and require more consideration and preparation in terms of expectations and working styles for the future. But despite certain pitfalls and challenges, overall the use of theatre can be a valuable methodological tool for ethnographic research, as well as for socio-technical cooperation, as it fosters collaboration between researcher and research participants. The theatre process of gaining familiarity, overcoming one's nerves, growing into a role, rehearsing, improvising, preparing, and reflecting is as valuable as the end product of a final performance. In contrast to conventional modes of observation and interviewing, there is a mutual vulnerability: all participants must transform into a role, there is mutual expression, exposure, exchange, play, and dissemination of knowledge in the language and cultural repertoire of the community that goes beyond words, linear texts, and publications. It also allows researchers to engage with a community to better understand the cultural practices, social relations, and power dynamics at stake. In addition, the theatre work as conducted in this case involved much media practice in action, as all participants had to engage with media technology to facilitate and record the stories created through the theatre workshops. Theatre as a mode of ethnographic participatory research to gain insight into media practices and its socio-cultural effects can thus offer a different way of making and negotiating connection, while collaboratively producing knowledge.

This also implies that such a project produces new forms of knowledge and raises questions for future research: how to ethnographically analyze and interpret the collaborative knowledge that emerges from an artist's frequent encounters with the community in which he/she works? How does one take notes on a play and analyze theatre-based empirical data? To address these questions, we need to renew our conceptual and methodological toolbox to interpret the material produced

by other kinds of modalities to formulate pressing questions and possible answers and solutions, preferably in cooperation with our research partners.

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