

## Rethinking access: key methodological challenges in studying energy companies

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## Abstract

Understanding the role of large energy corporations in society is a crucial, yet challenging task for the social science of energy. Ethnographic methods hold potential for plying into corporations' own self-representations, to reveal the relations of power and politics that determine flows of energy and extractive capital at the global and local level. Ethnography help us move beyond structural analyses, to locate the agents and processes at work within economies of energy production, and identify tensions and dynamics both within the corporation and at the interface with society. We argue that a multi-method and reflexive approach can help social scientists reflect on frictions in corporate encounters, and more importantly that attention to frictions is in fact a gateway to gain new insights about the field. In our research project about Norwegian energy companies and their corporate social responsibility work when 'going global', applying a multi-method made us question dominant assumptions within anthropology of what constitutes "access". We discuss how multiple approaches to "access", which takes into account the positionality of the researcher, fluidity of research fields along with attention to power dynamics can shape the sort of knowledge that is produced when studying energy companies.

## Introduction

Energy is deeply embedded in society, and the way it is produced, distributed and consumed has consequences for the way we live our lives. Yet, the multifaceted social and material relations that this involve tend to elude scientific description and analysis. One major reason for this elusiveness is the barriers we encounter when studying energy companies. Firstly, energy companies are considered close to the cogwheels and power of society, and more than corporations in other fields they confront demands from both political spheres and civil society to attain sustainability and take responsibility for bringing society through the "green transition". Debates regarding the need for more energy, financial profit and increasing unemployment rates adds to the complexity of these goals. Another important factor that might uphold the corporate barriers is the constant development of energy technology, which can change the operations and structure of the energy industry within a short timeframe. Lastly, national and international policies, agreements and guidelines are under constant negotiations. Increasing visibility has pushed energy companies to develop intricate and sophisticated communication strategies, which enable flexible positioning in the face of criticism. When researching energy companies today, these are dimensions that should be accounted for. And social scientists should also be aware that the sum of these societal and environmental dimensions could indeed create challenges in studying energy companies.

So, which methodological measures can make us better equipped to understand the role of energy companies? Participant observation and ethnographic methods hold potential for plying into corporations' own self-representations, to explore the relations of power and politics that determine flows of energy and extractive capital at the global and local level. Ethnographic methods help us move past structural analyses, to locate the agents and processes at work within economies of energy production, and identify tensions and dynamics both within the corporation and at the interface with society. In enabling us to look beyond the virtual, and actual walls of energy companies, such methods help us understand how energy corporations work, and how decisions are made and justified. Also, these methods illuminate the interaction of personal values and institutional norms, individual agency and structural constraints that shape the development and management of energy supply chains.

In addition, ethnographic methods require reflexivity pushing the researcher to question methodological prerequisites which in the case of ethnography on energy companies might be to ask what it *means* to look beyond the walls of energy companies, and, how social scientists should study cultural, structural, ethical and social aspects of energy when the corporate walls are high and usually well guarded. When we enter the field of energy companies, the researchers' initial expectations to access, reflections on positionality and power relations between academia and business are challenged, thus a reconsideration of key anthropological methodological insights are arguably a necessity for further exploration: What can be considered 'good' access for a social scientist in this research field? What are the power relations between academia and business at present, and is reflexivity an essential tool in studying a field that to a large extent exercises power and affects all aspects of society and people's lives?

We will reflect on these questions by demonstrating how we came to question dominant assumptions within anthropology of what constitutes "access" in ethnographic work on energy companies. To do so, we will first present the research project Energethics on which our methodological reflections are built and our take on multi-sited ethnography. Then we will critically discuss how to understand "access" when studying energy companies. We suggest that the term should be de-anchored from conventional understandings of access, to reflect and adapt to the flux we have to negotiate as researchers in the field. Further, we show how multiple approaches to "access", which takes into account the positionality of the researcher, fluidity of research fields along with attention to power dynamics and energy company employees' 'strategic intimacy' can shape the sort of knowledge that is produced when studying energy companies. The overall objective of the article is to show how a creative and active ethnographic approach produces new knowledge about energy corporations, while simultaneously creating new challenges in relation to how to go about this particular field of study. In doing so, we also argue that anthropological ethnographic research, in its particularity and attention to the complexity of contexts has the potential to strengthen the literature on energy companies and extractive industries.

## Energy companies and the "social life" of corporate social responsibility (CSR)

The methodological discussions in this article draw on an ongoing anthropological project named Energethics<sup>1</sup>, and the experiences from fieldwork of members in the research team with references to

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<sup>1</sup> Full title: Norwegian energy companies abroad. Expanding the anthropological understanding of corporate social anthropology. Research Council of Norway research grant number 240617. Energethics website: <https://www.uib.no/en/project/energethics>.

Norwegian energy companies' presence in Turkey, London, Oslo, Tanzania and Northern Norway. In *Energethics*, we study energy companies by investigating corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies and practises of energy companies based in Norway, representing varying degrees of state ownership: *Statkraft* (100% state-owned, hydropower), *Statoil*, now *Equinor* (67% state-owned, hydrocarbons) and *DNO* ('The Norwegian Oil Company', 100% private, hydrocarbons). An important aspect of *Energethics* is that we explore the field where the companies operate, and not just the companies in themselves. Multi-sited ethnography enables us to empirically track the production, circulation, reformulation and outcomes of CSR policy and practice in Norwegian energy companies abroad, from boardrooms to operations, from the sites of formal policy-making to the sites of implementation in different locations around the world. The 'CSR' take on studying energy companies is not unusual amongst social anthropologists as their research mostly focuses on societal, cultural, political and economic challenges of energy investments, productions and infrastructures (Barry 2013, Benson and Kirsch 2010, Cross 2011, Frynas 2009, Rajak 2011, Welker 2009, Welker 2014). And as energy Trans National Corporations (TNCs), as well as Norwegian firms, relate to these challenges by developing policies for corporate ethics, often conceptualized as CSR, a multi-sited approach to the 'flow', negotiation and localization of CSR can arguably provide insights about how energy corporations work.

During the last 20-30 years, Norwegian energy companies have increasingly 'gone global' and many of the projects in which these companies invest have involved significant, and sometimes contested, environmental and social issues in energy frontiers. The investment strategies have raised a number of ethical, social, environmental and political concerns, which have been high on the public and political agenda. Consequently, in Norway, the energy sector, in cooperation with the state have been in the forefront in adapting to global standards for CSR. Anthropological studies have argued that CSR should be seen as a broad, evolving and flexible set of practices and languages through which businesses variously attempt to position themselves as ethical actors. As such, we may consider CSR as a particularly adaptable discourse, which, over the past two decades has evolved to respond to and incorporate new ideas and challenges, encompassing movements that often start out as alternative or even oppositional to the corporate world. The language and practice of CSR has thus increasingly become embedded in international conventions and institutions, such as the UN Global Compact, OECD Corporate Responsibility guidelines, and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

What we see from emergent ethnographic work in this field is the various ways in which corporations use the language and practice of ethics to contain and respond to different kinds of challenges generated by their activities. Examples are the ecological crisis, conflicts concerning labour rights and local expectations of jobs, the problem of dependency and Dutch disease and, increasing corruption and conflict over resources. CSR policies largely evolved out of corporations' accommodation to critiques of the environmental and social impacts of neoliberal economic reforms of the 1980s (Rajak 2011). In the later years, CSR strategies have increasingly involved governance techniques whereby the companies claim to foster local sustainable development in direct interaction with relevant local communities. Thus, claims Noel Castree, CSR is often "actualized in tandem with" free market environmentalism (Castree 2008:147). CSR, as practiced by most TNCs, may therefore be considered neoliberal governmentality.

In the *Energethics* project we critically explore this position, asking whether and to what extent CSR can be claimed "from below" or by governmental entities, and whether state-owned energy

companies can pursue and implement corporate ethics by governance techniques that do not rely on market rule and privatization. Thus, our starting point has been that the role of the state is central to understanding CSR dynamics, whether defined by its presence or at times its absence from the debate. It is well worth reflecting upon the fact that the oil and gas sector is not capitalist, at least not owned by private capital. While the 'seven sisters' used to control most of the oil and gas sector, the tide turned in the 1960s and 1970s so that now "the role of state enterprises is stronger than ever" (Victor et al. 2012: 3). Although "state control over oil waned" during the 1990s (ibid.: 7), national oil companies control roughly two thirds of global oil and gas. Statoil/Equinor is considered to be one of the more successful among these national oil corporations. Statkraft, however, is more of an anomaly since it remains one hundred percent state owned in a sector – electricity production and distribution – that to a much larger extent has been privatized. Both Statoil/Equinor and Statkraft argue that working with and supporting the state in Norway is in their very DNA, and that they therefore find it natural to pursue the same strategy abroad. Fieldwork on these companies is therefore conducted not only on the impact of the corporations' projects in Turkey, Tanzania and Northern Norway, but also on the way in which CSR is handled at various levels of the corporations and in the relevant contexts in which they operate. The project takes us to places such as Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger, Ankara and London, and methodologically involves a variety of approaches, including analysing reports, white papers, guidelines and tracking the performance of CSR through the circuit of conventions, policy forums, and award ceremonies, which constitute the elite 'global' arena of corporate citizenship.

This flexible approach strays from central aspects in conventional anthropological ethnography where thorough and long-term participant observation is the preferable method. The discipline's historical intensity of 'studying down' has shaped the methodological framework, whilst studying corporations demands a reinventing of anthropology, something Nader anticipated decades ago. In 'Up the Anthropologist,' she writes: "What if, in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers, rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?" (Nader, 1969: 289). Also in later years, anthropologists have experienced how the solid tradition on 'studying down' has set its marks on the ethnographic know-how. Karen Ho considers that "Studying up fostered for me a critical re-framing of anthropology's fundamental assumptions, challenges, and possibilities because it necessitated pulling apart methodological and theoretical tools that were forged through the process and contexts of studying the marginalized, and recalibrating their directionality and use (Ho 2012: 29)".

Compared to traditional anthropological ethnography, multi-sited ethnography might come through as an opportunistic approach to the field where energy companies operate, but at the same time necessary to grasp the 'social life' of CSR. There are, interestingly, parallels between the anthropological multi-sited way of approaching the field and the way in which multi-national energy companies themselves operate in a field that encompasses national laws/policies and international non-judicial guidelines on "soft" risk assessment and performance. Both Statoil/Equinor and Statkraft perform and report CSR across sites bound together by new energy investments and infrastructures. Energy projects are dependent on a "smooth" flow across sites and beyond borders, especially because legitimation of projects depends so much on stakeholder involvement, meaning that the CSR department's key activity is to create and implement strategies for ethical business conduct across different sites including main offices, country offices, and local communities, in relation to governments, NGOs and civil society. The fields across which corporations must produce smoothness

are nearly always uneven, and ethnographic methods are, we argue, especially suited to explore how they perform this work.

Using multi-sitedness to approach energy companies' multi national operations, initially opens up for a common understanding between researchers and corporations creating meeting points where ethnography can be conducted. As such, similarities in approaches gives access to arenas for communication, cooperation and even knowledge production between academia and energy corporations regarding international energy development, responsibility and ethics. Still, at a certain point during fieldwork, after the initial conversations and meetings, both the researcher and the representative for the corporation somehow realise that the meaning of 'site' is fundamentally different. While corporations treat multiple sites in their production chain according to a strict hierarchic structure with headquarters at top, researchers treat all sites equal. Talking insightfully about 'sites' and 'gobalisation' with corporate representatives might initially be interpreted by the researcher as an opening to the corporation's inner life, and then turn to a realisation that common language opens up for nothing else than an instrumental intake on the field of study pushing the ethnographic scope to the periphery of the corporate practice. When research language initially speaks to, and then gradually adapts to the corporation, it may contribute to legitimise the corporations' position and reputation in society and have a negative effect on the need to develop a relevant critical language to facilitate an evidence-based dialogue about and with energy companies. To maintain a reflexive position towards the similarities between this project's multi-sited academic approach and the corporate approach to the multi-national energy field has been a central methodological challenge, especially because the unpredictable movement between getting close and feeling distanced to the corporate body made us question the meaning of 'access' in this particular field of study.

### Access and flexibility

Trying to gain access to the energy companies, the Energethics research team found that our expectations of what "access" meant and required in return was a methodological challenge in itself. After establishing contact with the Norwegian energy companies, our main contact persons in Statoil/Equinor and Statkraft made it clear that this cooperation would have to go both ways, and that the company would need to benefit in some way. Often, leveraging or demonstrating our knowledge or previous experience was needed to secure access. Coleman addresses "why they let me in", suggesting that if a corporation sees the ethnographer as a possible asset to the business, they will be more likely to let us in (Coleman 1996). Without explicitly framing it as a methodological challenge Urban and Koh emphasize that "contemporary anthropological research necessitates "giving back" [to the corporation, because] few corporations are eager to allow access to those whose research does not contribute to the corporation's goals" (Urban and Koh 2013: 140). The importance of the corporations having the opportunity to check facts before we published articles was often brought up in conversation with both Statoil/Equinor and Statkraft employees. During interviews, the interviewer sometimes experienced to be tested by employees making statements on certain, pivotal events in ways that demand the anthropologist chooses a side in their response (Choy 2011:1-4). For example when asked what we think of a specific initiative to ensure local content of a project, such as a sponsored event or the amount of locally employed youth, or the new roads or buildings that came as a result of the company's regional activity. In such situations, where our informants clearly expect us to agree with certain points of view, our response shapes what they perceive our motives to be, and with that how and what information is shared.

After several experiences similar to those described above, we realized that our main contacts in Statoil/Equinor and Statkraft, which were very professional, friendly and helpful, were not so much at our disposal to help us gain access to relevant processes and arenas in the corporation, but rather guided us gently towards what they considered to be 'CSR in a nutshell' in the company. They directed us towards "key informants" who were managers in the CSR-departments or key CSR employees in the field. From their perspective, all relevant information about CSR could be untangled by interviewing a few employees. If we talked to employees without approval from our appointed contact person, we received gentle reminders to go through this person. Our main contacts were gatekeepers as well as our closest dialogue partners in the company.

When we had an impression that we gained 'good access', being let into a project and able to observe CSR in practice in the local communities where the companies had invested, this was orchestrated by the gatekeepers with a rationale that 'this particular project' gave an impression of how CSR was 'done' at its best within the company. In a certain sense, they treated us as auditors. After this discovery – that good access mostly meant access carefully directed by the companies – we had to reconsider the meaning of access. It became clear to us that our expectations of "good access" as opposed to "poor access" were affected by a notion of reaching behind the curtains, gaining close insights into the employees every day work life through participant observation in meetings, lunches, seminars, 'hanging out' during or after work appointments.

When we first started the project, "access" was one of the main themes discussed within the research team, and we may have had a rather superficial understanding of what access implied when doing ethnography on energy companies. It is fair to say that we evaded an explicit move towards conducting the necessary concept clarifications; rather we spoke of access as if we all had the same expectations to eventually crack the business code, and be 'let in'. Although we did not envision the total immersion in the daily activities of the corporations, we did imagine that the development of the project depended on 'gaining access', and we emphasized the practical problems concerning 'the gaining' of access rather than asking the obvious: 'What does access mean?' Although it now seems naïve, we did – to varying degrees – aim for and hope to somehow gather crucial and backstage information revealing new knowledge about business and CSR. Our ideas about access were obviously informed by classical anthropological ideals about 'becoming one of them', 'hanging out with the informants', etc. At one of the first meetings with our contact person in Statkraft, for instance, we asked him how we could go about to be a part of the office staff at the headquarters in Oslo and at the country office in Istanbul. We also asked him if we could join some of the CSR staff on their journeys to Turkey and other relevant places. We tried to convey our flexibility. He did not quite turn us down, rather he postponed answering, and after a year of maneuvering our inquiries in other directions, the dialog about 'insider' access whittled away.

So, when access to corporate offices themselves is at best precarious, expanding ethnographic research to the wider field to which corporate employees relate has proven to open up new vistas. Arenas such as conventions, policy forums and award ceremonies offer a critical sphere where energy executives reach out beyond the walls of the company, albeit in ways that are often highly ritualized and orchestrated. Nevertheless, such sites have an important ethnographic value in their own right, giving us access to flows and negotiation of concepts, knowledge and models, as well as articulation of power relations – broadening our understanding of who are relevant in the field. The venues at which we meet are important not only as a place to observe others, but also as a place to be seen. Though

these conference rituals are not equal to the inside of company dynamics, conference participation shapes our access to company employees and representatives, as arenas that are also meeting places at the intersection of business, academia and policy. By registering and paying the conference fee (often a barrier in itself, due to the high fees levied)<sup>2</sup>, dressing and acting like the rest of the delegates, we gain access both to the 'on-stage' conference presentations, and the 'off-stage' conversations and informal business encounters that take place around it. Naturally, these informal encounters are not 'off-stage' even if they give the appearance of being so, but are arenas where the researcher can engage in networking and observations.

Further, fieldwork at such sites can reveal the ritualized and performative dynamics of CSR, which are, we suggest, crucial to establishing it as development orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> It is here that we begin to disentangle the agency of various actors – from captains of industry to representatives of the “grass roots”, from business schools to UN agencies - involved in the production of this powerful discourse; and we begin to see how the shift from agonistic to collaborative, from conflictual to consensual is achieved. Within these arenas corporate executives come together with representatives of global NGOs, the growing army of CSR consultants, and dozens of small firms or non-profits (the boundary between which is often blurred). Participants extol the virtues of bi-, tri- or multi-sector partnerships, develop standards, and present case studies recounting their engagement with the local communities who represent the targets of their ethical behaviour. Such gatherings unfold as highly ritualistic theatres of virtue (Rajak 2011) in which awards for the best corporate citizen are presented and inspiring stories of social responsibility are told. These rituals are elements in the construction of narratives which structure the processes of the CSR world. As Bloch argues, ritual can serve to constrain contestation while inviting participants to share in and thus validate a particular world view (1992). Put another way, they compel consensus while mystifying the dynamics of power at work. Rituals of corporate morality thus play an important role in generating particular ways of seeing and understanding on the part of people involved in the CSR industry and should be seen as a new and significant dimension of corporate power.

Official conventions rarely pass under the radar of civil society, who sometimes engage in their own counter-performances. Participants at Ethical Corporation's 2016 convention in London were greeted with a banner, courtesy of the London Mining Network, that said 'The Oxymoron Appreciation Society proudly presents "The Responsible Extractives Summit 2016"'. Perhaps they had been reading Benson and Kirsch's article on 'Corporate Oxymorons' (2009). It took some time for the hotel to borrow some ladders and construction workers from a building site opposite to take it down. During the panel on 'Stranded Assets' questions flashed up on the big screen polling the audience on 'Is climate change good or bad for the extractive industries?'. An awkward pause followed. After some time, the facilitator glanced over his shoulder, 'oh sorry, that should have read "Is the climate change convention good or bad for the extractive industries?"' "In our company we have a very good story to tell', was a frequent refrain among oil executives at events such as Responsible Extractives 2016, both in their public performance, and in individual conversations over coffee or outside the conference circuit. Of

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<sup>2</sup> Costs for energy conferences may often be upwards of 8000 NOK for a few days of conference, including the conference dinner and other informal events. Researchers are sometimes able to negotiate or request a reduction in price, as the companies are aware that the income difference and spending allowance between academia and the corporate world is enormous, and they do want to include academicians in these events to preserve the democratic flow between different sectors in the Norwegian society.

<sup>3</sup> Development orthodoxy refers to the position of CSR now being firmly established as a central component of the development policy mainstream, which to a large extent these days goes unquestioned, when only a decade ago, many development insiders were still rather ambivalent about such a key role for big business in development.



course the line between public performance and individual narrative is in no way clear, and if ‘inside ethnography’ relies on waiting for a key informant to ‘break rank’ from, for instance, the dominant discourse of sustainability in big oil then we will certainly hit a wall. The smooth surface on energy companies belies these sub-surface fissures but has proved far more impenetrable in recent years. For researchers trying to find a way to scratch these surfaces, there is an implicit way of discussing access where the goal is to gain access.

It was the comparative dimension of the Energethics project that eventually made us realize that practical access to the field of study and access to relevant knowledge about energy companies were different things, which we had conflated. Discussing within the group variations in ‘degree of access’ and strategies for addressing access challenges in case studies that were to some extent interlinked through our main contacts in the companies, we realized that the access issue actually taught us something about the way in which the companies work. Knowledge about business and CSR does not necessarily depend on practical access to the inner workings of the corporation, or what several scholars coin as methodological challenges: corporations’ busy work schedules, sensitivity to publicity, the ethnographer being a distraction, and restrictions on entry and ability to do participant observation (Rohlen 1974, Nader 1969, Gusterson 1997, Ho 2012). Rather than taking for granted that these are obstacles for the researcher to develop knowledge about energy companies, the methodological challenges experienced and discussed by anthropologists since the 1960s can be viewed as basic knowledge about the field which one tries to understand. The corporations’ busy time schedules, for instance, might tell us something important about how corporate time is organized compared to, e.g., academic time, which can be regarded as access to interesting aspects of the field we study, rather than a challenge to gain access. One of the most obvious examples of ‘failure to access’ in the project was the impossibility for us to visit Statkraft’s largest hydropower project outside of Norway, located in South-eastern Turkey. While the company representatives’ reluctance to facilitate our visit to the project site may relate to concerns about reputation, and perhaps mounting challenges for their CSR work, we came to realize that one of the major reasons they did not look favourable on us visiting the site was concerns about (our) security. This, in turn sensitivised us to the importance of security and safety, and together with other observations stimulated us to explore the companies’ concerns and narratives about safety, ultimately leading us to analyse risk-management – which has emerged as one of the major topics in the project and which we have explored further by other means in other contexts. Thus, what we initially thought of as lack of access, actually provides us with basic access about the corporations varied surfaces, flows, and concerns. We found that the key methodological challenge across all cases in the research project was that we had not fully reflected on the meaning of access in this particular field. The methodological challenge was in fact a theoretical one.

Whilst Benson and Kirsch claim that ethnographers risk cooptation when doing fieldwork in corporate offices because they have a tendency “to emphasize and identify with their subjects” (Benson and Kirsch 2010: 464), our exploration of alternative models and methodologies for studying the field in which these energy companies engage, provides means to negotiate this risk. This includes to bring our critical sensibilities to the methodological tools anthropologists use, such as ‘gaining access’ and ‘maintaining a reflexive stand’. However, the meaning of ‘good access’ obviously depends on ones’ research agenda and research questions. If the aim is to understand the motivations, experiences, and meaning of life within a corporation – including e.g. corporate employees’ perspective on energy and sustainability - then a ‘deeper’ kind of access is required to gather relevant data. If instead the aim is to explore the way in which the corporation engages the wider fields of energy policy, CSR discourses,

reporting regimes etc. – in short the role of corporations in society – other methods that come with other criteria for access are called for. In our experience, not gaining the expected access might rather be considered a door opener into important knowledge about what the companies did not want us to know. If we reconsider the meaning of ‘good access’ and focus more on what the corporations strive to avoid telling and showing, we get insight into the implicit ‘flow’ of CSR (Barry 2013). What is made visible and readable, and how access is navigated both from our side and from the companies’ and employees’ side, are relevant methodological considerations. ‘Access’ can be given and withdrawn, therefore the company’s ability to control the information and the different ways in which they make information accessible for us are observations which are appropriate to coin as ‘good access’ in this particular field of study.

Control of information, and the way in which access is navigated are not necessarily guided only by purely instrumental considerations. A thorough methodological reappraisal should critically assess our own positionality, including how we may be embedded in and – willingly or not – be ‘intimate with’ representatives from the energy corporations. Below we discuss this with reference to what it implies to be Norwegian researchers studying Norwegian energy.

### Searching for access through multiple positioning

When following energy companies’ CSR work across sites, the researcher’s search for relevant positions in order to gain access are ever changing. Sometimes seen as a potential asset or a stakeholder by the companies we study, the researcher’s positioning is constantly negotiated and challenged. However, with anthropology’s historical intensity of studying down’, for example looking into local communities and grass root initiatives in the face of energy infrastructure and climate change (see for example Sawyer 2004; Gardner 2012; Kirsch 2014; De Neve 2009; Dolan et.al. 2009; Li 2010; Gilberthorpe 2013), the methodological framework has also been shaped by this particular focus (Ho 2012: 30). Gusterson argues that “participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure” (1997: 115). While corporations shift between ‘reaching out’ and raising their defences, we are compelled to find new creative methodological strategies for research, sometimes mobilising our identities as researchers creatively to create alternative arenas for fieldwork. We have arranged several dialogue-workshops to which we have invited representatives of the companies as well as other relevant ‘stakeholders’ These workshops – lasting a day or two – gave us the opportunity to interact on a different basis with representatives of energy companies, and also observe interaction between them and other actors (state, NGOs, academia).

Thus, to understand how energy corporations work from the inside, our methods have moved beyond conventional participant observation to constantly negotiate the barriers we encounter in the field. Doing fieldwork at Statoils /Equinors investment area in Tanzania for instance, Norwegian researchers are initially perceived as a ‘foreigners’ by local employees. Switching from Tanzania to Statoil/Equinor sites in Norway, puts us in a completely different position, and our research might even be considered self-ethnography of sorts. Norwegians have grown up with the idea that the oil that this company extracts secures our economic future through the pension fund. To demonstrate the enormous size of the fund, journalists at times spell out the fund’s worth per capita, making us all petro-millionaires. For those of us living in Western Norway, we encounter Statoil/Equinor in our daily lives, where we have learned the offshore work schedules of the parents of our children’s best friends. A man in his early 60s, a friend of a friend, has been offered a compensation package with a monthly pay higher than a full professor’s wage for the rest of his life on top of his state pension – if he is only willing to

voluntarily quit his position as part of the cost saving exercise of the company. We learn such news with a mix of moral indignation and envy. Statoil/Equinor and the rest of the industry has, particularly during boom-time, operated outside the economic realities that the rest of us relate to. The company sponsor cultural events, science competitions for children, and student festivals – where, when we visit, we might get a Statoil/Equinor stamp at our wrist – a physical mark – albeit temporary – of this company’s ‘omnipresence’ in our country.

In Tanzania, it is easier to create distance to the everyday life heavily influenced by Statoils/Equinors influence. As anthropologists, we are in a position to get access to lower level employees - and to the Tanzanian national discourses in general – that many of the Norwegian staff and managers do not have. This may in some cases be seen a threat to them, it also makes us more attractive partners, since we may share information and an understanding of local perceptions that they would otherwise not have access to. Which again requires a level of care with regards to the information we disclose back to the higher-ranking employees. Statoil/Equinor specifically stated that they were interested in learning more about the public opinions about their company, and that our research project could be helpful in this regard. Our double capacity thus meant that our access to knowledge about local contexts puts us in a position where access might be given to other parts of the company workings.

Balancing multiple positions resulted in Statoil/Equinor offering us access to their training sessions in Dar es Salaam, which gave us an opportunity to observe communication between company staff and Tanzanian civil servants, academics, and representatives for the corporation, and also how the Tanzanian participants engaged in a counterhegemonic discourse in the lunch breaks. The majority of the seminar participants were Tanzanians and during the lunch break, the discussions quickly switched to Swahili. Being perceived as a Tanzanian and able to engage in the discussions in Swahili the researcher quickly became part of the “us” in the “us” versus “them” discussions that dominated both lunch conversations. There was a heated discussion of how the Statoil/Equinor seminars were a calculated way for international oil companies (IOC’s) to spread information about their agenda in the country. There was mistrust among participants of their intentions in the country, criticisms of their lack of skill transfer, poor CSR initiatives and skepticism around the expenses they have incurred in the country so far.<sup>4</sup> This openness and discussion of the participants’ blatant mistrust of Statoil/Equinor depends on the researcher’s flexible positionality, being able to blend in with both the locals and the corporate staff. However, applying multiple positions, changing direction whenever needed in search for access to a field difficult to grasp, makes the researcher accountable for how changing positionality affects access and even more important, the knowledge that are produced when access are pursued through multiple positionalities.

As one of the researchers in the Energethics project has a background as a campaigner and frequently appears in public debate about the climate crisis, financial and environmental risks of new petroleum fields, and oil sponsorship in the arts and academia in Norway, the methodological positioning becomes even more ambivalent. The ‘researcher’ position is mostly expected to be neutral in Norway, where embedded research on the energy sector from an ‘activist’ position is not a well-known methodology. Though critical perspectives on the industry from the social sciences are not uncommon (see for example Dale and Andersen 2018, Ryggvik and Kristoffersen 2015), there is a tacit expectation of ‘role separation’. Working in the north of Norway, where the environmental groups are smaller and

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<sup>4</sup> Data in this paragraph provided by research assistant Maria Njau.

more weakly organized than in the south (Jentoft 2013:440) – and where Oslo-based NGOs are viewed with a certain suspicion – our researcher did *not* solely align herself within the ‘environmental movement’, but sought an equivocation where she engaged both with the industry and environmental groups. Still, the ‘activist’ slot is not always one you ‘choose’ – it is also one you might be ascribed based on your associations with such groups, and which might shut down discussion because you are assumed to be committed to a preconceived idea, particularly as texts with her signature are easily found by doing a simple Google search. Whilst this ‘bias’ might restrict access in some domains, association with ‘activism’ and advocacy opens for a wider engagement with how company employees engage with our questions and respond to critical engagement within academic research.

Moving between different contexts and events makes it possible to trace how people in the industry and environmental groups relate to each other on as well as off the record. During the Barents Sea Conference of 2016, where there was no visible on-the-ground protest taking place, national NGOs kept an eye on what was going on from afar. When Statoil/Equinor and other companies presented a new report on weather conditions in the Barents Sea, Greenpeace was quick to challenge them in the media, accusing them for under-communicating the risks in the Barents Sea. The disagreement turned into a radio debate on the state channel NRK, where Statoil/Equinor insisted it had a ‘responsible’ approach – one of the company’s core values – based on 50 years of experience as a company. At the conference, we discussed this with some employees. They were confident that they had ‘won’ the radio debate, and told us how Greenpeace had *not* made a good figure. The Twitter-feeds of Greenpeace and other environmentalists told a different story; namely that Statoil/Equinor had made outrageous and irresponsible statements. They had each performed, and convinced, different audiences – and now Statoil’s/Equinor’s representatives were working on convincing us. They kept referring to CEO Eldar Sætre by his first name, insisting that ‘Eldar is really concerned about the climate’ and a very different leader from Helge Lund. Lund was Statoil’s/Equinor’s CEO from 2004-2014, and took the company into foreign investments that have proven both controversial and expensive. ‘Eldar’, from what they told us, was different, someone who was serious about Statoil/Equinor being a sustainable company, with the offshore windmills in Scotland as a prime example.

As Kim Fortun found in her work as ethnographer and advocate after the Bhopal disaster, a methodology working within advocacy can trace transnational connections and how corporate events move across countries, where “[o]scillation between different sources of data became an important research strategy” (Fortun 2001:6). Different materials become traces of longer-term engagements; public discussions, op-eds, interviews, conferences, demonstrations, actions, newspapers and everyday lives in the proximity of the energy operations. The activist status also gives a different entry into how the companies are seen by other groups concerned with energy projects (such as environmental NGOs), and people in the local contexts where they operate, who might seek to share their disagreements with someone they feel understand their conflicted relationship to the industry. Such encounters were frequent during our fieldwork, where different people would confide in us their frustration, scepticism or outright rage towards the company, which they would not voice in town, for fear of falling out with neighbours, whilst others would display an ambivalence and others again outright praise of company activities.

As a methodological tool, the activist-researcher position requires a constant negotiation. It is in no way an escape from the risk of co-optation (cf. Benson and Kirch 2010), but rather highlights how we as researchers may find ourselves becoming part of the company’s strategy or ‘risk management’

whether or not we signal an explicit position of advocacy. Moving between spheres with a willingness to engage with agendas without necessarily signing up to them, *not* being 'neutral' produces knowledge of how energy companies treat different stakeholders and how they engage in public debates in Norway as part of their operations.

### Strategic intimacy

Being reflexive towards our own shifting position in the search for access gave us particular insight into how the corporate staff we encountered positioned themselves towards us. We were often met by employees that managed to balance a strategic and professional appearance with an intimate twist. This particular position blurred our view over the corporate landscape and made access a shifting asset rather than something we gained in time.

Opinions are divided about the internalisation of fully or partly state owned companies in Norway. Statoil/Equinor has been heavily criticized for their investments abroad, which have been controversial for a number of reasons, in addition to contributing relatively little to the company's overall income. Statkraft has lost enormous sums on failed projects, and this is negatively commented upon in the media. Cost cutting and downsizing of the staff in Norway is sometimes held up against the "waste of money" that is taking place when these companies invests abroad. While both companies have internationalised in recent years, the great majority of the companies' staff are still Norwegian. Norway is a society characterized by a high degree of interpersonal trust. Statoil/Equinor employees who have been interviewed in Norwegian have to a very large degree come across as frank and open about various challenges, and they seem to take for granted that we as researchers know where to draw the line – what can be publicized and what can't. This is in marked contrast to the international staff posted in Norway. Such staff has a more corporate air to them, and prefer to refer to official documents and policies, rather than to real life events. These observations highlight a methodological problem encountered when examining the elite agencies of actors within institutions which is enabled or constrained by managerial systems. While intimacy may be articulated also in internationalised 'high-circle' corporate spheres, such as at international conferences and fairs, this intimacy should be interpreted in context of how corporate representatives are situated in the field. Corporate representatives obviously have to maneuver tensions or ambivalence between corporate identity and agendas and personal ones, but methodologically it is important not to disentangle the person from the corporation.

During the previous super-cycle when oil prices and earnings were high, we experienced how researchers actually benefit from the sense of corporate infallibility and complacency. It produced a strangely unguarded openness, at a point when, as one of Statoil's Media and PR executives told us 'It was like selling water in the desert – you don't have to bother with the customer - the stuff just disappears and money appears in your bank account...and so we let ourselves eat too many cakes when times were good'.

Boom-time yielded to downturn, with oil prices plummeting from \$120 a barrel to below \$30 at the lowest. According to insiders, corporate arrogance and profligacy gave way to corporate austerity and job-losses, especially within the 'expendable' functions such as sustainability, and a time of much greater circumspection. A sign of the times, but also indicative of a new sophistication in the practice and discourse of CSR, which is now dubbed sustainability, in which engagement with researchers is welcomed yet tightly controlled, 'dialogue' is open yet company personnel are careful to stay on

message. While the question of where the individual ends and the corporation begins, ethically, socially and politically is an interesting one, it can also be a diversion. Even those moments of apparent spontaneous confessional, breaking ranks from the corporate line to admit failures of responsibility, impotence and frustration at the impending existential crisis of climate change for example, have become part of the ritual of public performance on the CSR/sustainability circuit. "We really dropped the ball on that one, it wasn't good for us, but also on a personal level it felt immensely frustrating to have to let people down because the company had a decision that was effectively beyond my control", an executive of one of the top 10 global oil companies said in a moment of apparently painful candor. Catharsis comes quickly however through the quasi-public ritual of corporate confessional: "But it's at these times that I think we really learn from our mistakes, we paid the price heavily in reputational capital and next time those of us on the 'soft' (ie. CSR, external relations) side will have a bit more influence with the 'hard side'".

Thus, it may be difficult to trace the connection between individual agency and corporate agency and agendas. While the former might at times appear at odds with the latter, it can serve to sustain it in unexpected ways. Internal conflicts and differences can be productive, rather than disruptive, of the company's power to achieve its aims. Yet it relies on the embodied work of individuals who play between the scales of the personal responsibility and institutional responsibility. Thus they embody the ethical agency of the corporation, as well as the supposed systemic limits or impediments to realizing its self-proclaimed vision of a sustainable future. Time and again we were told by executives from sustainability managers up to vice presidents: 'we are all allies, we are on the same side of the table'; 'we want a future for our grandchildren too', 'we're all members of WWF'; or 'like our CEO always says, we have children too, I am worried too, I care about this too'. The apparent intimacy of such statements belies their strategic value to the company. They seem to speak of internal tensions and ethical contestations, rather than structural coordination. Yet their off the cuff intimacy is rehearsed and effective. They can be, we suggest, highly strategic, a reaffirmation of the political role of CSR work, rather than evidence of the failure of company to fully socialize managers of outlying units. As such, defenses rise, leaving the researcher skating (or sliding) over the top if we rely only on corporations' statements and reports. How companies relate to the world beyond their walls, whether the 'impacted communities', national states or civil society, and the techniques they deploy in handling critics, differ from company to company. This has posed particular obstacles to analysing responsibility as a terrain of agency in which we can locate nodes of power and decision-making, and trace routes of causality.

## Conclusion

Doing ethnographic research on energy corporations is not impossible, but challenging. Their role in society can fruitfully be explored ethnographically if certain methodological challenges are comprehensively and reflexively addressed. While we hold that a multi-sited approach is required to explore the way in which energy corporations interact with society, we have also come to realize that this comes with particular challenges and possibilities. The main methodological challenge we initially experienced was 'gaining access'. We have argued that the combination of a comparative method within the project and critical reflexivity about what access means stimulated us to re-think methodology and access and ultimately gave new directions to our analytic work. The heightened sensibility concerning methodology has implied scrutinizing our positionality as researchers; being

flexible, sometimes taking the role of advocacy, and being drawn into strategic intimacy. Handling this obviously requires certain cultural and linguistic skills. For instance, the characters of most case studies require the researchers to fluently handle three languages. But this reflexive multi-sited approach also means working against strongly held ideas about ethnographic fieldwork meaning 'long-time stays in one place,' 'hanging out' with locals. Thus, our research has involved a high degree of personal flexibility, more semi-structured interviews than participation, non-continuous involvement with our interlocutors, mapping infrastructures of extensive geographical extent or opaque character, being present at or attending activities that involve alternative forms of socialites (social media, websites, documents, skype-meetings etc.), and even creatively designing situations where we can interact with and observe company representatives.

We have had to reconsider access to the field in the conventional anthropological meaning of 'reaching behind the curtains', seeking different kinds of data collection: the reporting regime of corporations, the importance of creating evidence for CSR activities and the importance of branding. However, the methodological challenge was not so much to break loose of our initial expectation to access, but to realize that what we had taken for granted as methodological obstacles, in fact was important knowledge about corporations, such as concerns about security and safety. Reflexivity was a key methodological tool throughout, to maintain awareness of our own expectations and implicit insights about energy companies, and to apply these experiences to examine the boundaries between society and corporations. And if we don't reflect critically on the 'sameness' when we argue that multi-sited methodology is a pre-requisite for access since the corporations' operations are multi-sited, we may be seduced to think that researchers and corporate representatives look similarly on the world, whereas the latter may tend to think more hierarchal or core/periphery.

Rather than the day-to-day workings in company offices, we explore the narratives they produce when facing external criticism and dialogue, striving to detail, unpack and situate the patterns that emerge when tracing companies from corporate offices to local sites and back. As researchers in one way or the other are regarded as externals, and sometimes as stakeholders, sometimes as risks, we are indeed embedded in the narratives produced and performed by energy companies. By giving "attention to complexity, contradiction and the contexts that enable and limit even the most powerful among us" (Ho 2012: 45), whether company employee or researcher, these interactions have become integral to our understandings of how CSR is handled by energy companies. While we consider that the approach we have sketched here should contribute to improve our knowledge of the way in which energy corporations interact with society, we also realise that the ideal to gain 'full knowledge' of this interaction is as problematic as 'good access'. Nobody, not even those centrally positioned in the company, has 'full knowledge' of the corporation and its immediate environment, and corporations are likely much more complex, chaotic and instable entities than their self-presentations often convey. Energy corporations interact in a society that very rapidly changes policies, attitudes and practices concerning energy, and we therefore suggest that further reflexive thinking about methodological challenges concerning the study of energy corporations' interaction with society should focus more closely at how we can address the temporal dimension. Then, it will be important to keep in mind that 'corporate time' may be quite different from 'academic time'.

## Acronyms

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility, sometimes also referred to as

CR: Corporate Responsibility

TNC: Transnational Corporation

IOC: International Oil Company

NOC: National Oil Company

GRI: Global Reporting Initiative

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