

Jannis J. Grimm • Kevin Koehler • Ellen M. Lust  
Ilyas Saliba • Isabell Schierenbeck

# Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences



Jannis J. Grimm • Kevin Koehler • Ellen M. Lust  
Ilyas Saliba • Isabell Schierenbeck

# Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences

A Guide to Human and Digital Security  
in Hostile Environments



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

---



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

---

Editor: Jai Seaman  
Assistant Editor: Charlotte Bush  
Production Editor: Manmeet Kaur Tura  
Copyeditor: Sarah Bury  
Proofreader: Caroline Hallworth  
Indexer: Cathryn Pritchard  
Marketing Manager: Susheel Gokarakonda  
Cover Design: Shaun Mercier  
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

Authorial arrangement, Preface, Chapter 1 and Chapter 7 © Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba and Isabell Schierenbeck, 2020

Chapter 2 © Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba, Isabell Schierenbeck, Sylvain Lefebvre, Daniel T. R. Masterson and Francesco Strazzari, 2020

Chapter 3 © Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba, Isabell Schierenbeck, Emma Beals, Osama Diab and Alessandra Russo, 2020

Chapter 4 © Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba, Isabell Schierenbeck, Florian Kohstall, Mara Revkin and Sarah E. Parkinson, 2020

Chapter 5 © Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba, Isabell Schierenbeck, Morana Miljanovic and Kersti Ruth Wissenbach, 2020

Chapter 6 © Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba, Isabell Schierenbeck, Morana Miljanovic, Vasilis Ververis and Kersti Ruth Wissenbach, 2020

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2019950311**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5297-0105-0  
ISBN 978-1-5297-0104-3 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using responsibly sourced papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the PREPS grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

# CONTENTS

List of Boxes	viii
About the Contributors	xi
Preface	xv
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Safer Field Research	2
What is fieldwork risk?	6
Multipliers of risk	7
The costs of unnecessary risk-taking	11
Who is the book for?	12
Outline of the book	13
<b>2 Before the Field</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>with Sylvain Lefebvre, Daniel T. R. Masterson, and Francesco Strazzari</i>	
Introduction	16
Comprehensive risk assessment	16
Context analysis	19
Vulnerabilities and capacities assessment	28
Designing a security plan	32
Conclusion	36
Guiding questions	36

<b>3 In the Field</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>with Emma Beals, Osama Diab, and Alessandra Russo</i>	
Introduction	40
Mapping the research context and updating risk assessments	40
Managing risks associated with data collection	43
Considerations of not-so-everyday life	53
Dealing with emergencies	60
Conclusion	66
Guiding questions	67
<b>4 After the Field</b>	<b>69</b>
<i>with Florian Kohstall, Mara Revkin, and Sarah E. Parkinson</i>	
Introduction	70
Risk assessments after the field	70
Research dissemination and publication	73
Emotional challenges and debriefing	80
Conclusion	85
Guiding questions	85
<b>5 Thinking Systematically about Digital Security</b>	<b>89</b>
<i>with Morana Miljanovic and Kersti Ruth Wissenbach</i>	
Introduction	90
Digital threat modelling	91
Thinking of data holistically	96
No silver bullet	99
Strategies for handling digital risk	101
Conclusion	105
Guiding questions	106
<b>6 Tools and Tactics for Data Protection before, during, and after Fieldwork</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>with Morana Miljanovic, Vasilts Ververts, and Kersti Ruth Wissenbach</i>	
Introduction	108
Mitigation tactics	110
Communicating safely	110
Secure data collection and processing	113
Protecting stored data	118
Operational security	123
Conclusion	125
Guiding questions	126

<b>7 Conclusion: The Role of Research Institutions</b>	<b>129</b>
Introduction	130
Recognizing a duty of care without restricting research	130
Support options	132
Experience-sharing	133
Community-building	134
Determining normative standards	135
Building in-house capacities	136
The way forward	137
Bibliography	139
Index	151

---

# LIST OF BOXES

<b>1.1</b>	Out-dangering	3
<b>2.1</b>	Risk matrix	18
<b>2.2</b>	Context analysis	21
<b>2.3</b>	Opposing and supporting actors	26
<b>3.1</b>	How to familiarize yourself with the research ecology	41
<b>3.2</b>	What are trust-based social ties?	44
<b>3.3</b>	Factors to consider when choosing an interview site	50
<b>3.4</b>	Tales of two journalists	52
<b>3.5</b>	Factors to consider when choosing accommodation	54
<b>3.6</b>	Important tips for maintaining health during research	57
<b>3.7</b>	Checklist for emergency contact information	59
<b>3.8</b>	Useful contacts in the event of detention or arrest	65
<b>3.9</b>	Some behavioral suggestions to survive captivity	66
<b>4.1</b>	Interacting with security services I	72
<b>4.2</b>	Interacting with security services II	72
<b>4.3</b>	Readjusting	83

<b>5.1</b>	Metadata	92
<b>5.2</b>	Digital threat modeling	94
<b>5.3</b>	Data types	97
<b>6.1</b>	Off-the-record (OTR)	112
<b>6.2</b>	Privacy-by-design	114
<b>6.3</b>	<i>Tor</i>	115
<b>6.4</b>	HTTPS	115
<b>6.5</b>	Accessing URL	117
<b>6.6</b>	<i>Talls</i>	122





# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

## Main Authors

**Jannis J. Grimm** is a Research Associate at the Institute for Protest and Social Movement Studies in Berlin (ipb) and at the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics at Freie Universität Berlin (FUB). He holds a PhD from the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies. Since 2019, he coordinates the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's trade union work in the MENA region and the foundation's country project on Libya. He has spent several years investigating processes of authoritarian contraction and social mobilization in Egypt and Turkey at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Berlin, SNS Florence and the FUB. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Middle East & North Africa and has served as a consultant to the German Federal Government as well as several human rights organizations and political foundations.

**Kevin Koehler** holds a PhD from the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, and is an Assistant Professor at Leiden University, where he teaches comparative and Middle Eastern politics. He previously taught at the American University in Cairo (AUC) as well as the NATO Defense College (NDC) in Rome. His research focuses on the Arab world, with a particular emphasis on civil-military relations, authoritarian regime dynamics and conflict processes. He has conducted fieldwork in Egypt, Tunisia, the Turkish-Syrian border area, Yemen, as well as Kyrgyzstan, and has served as a consultant for several organizations, including

NATO, the United Nations Development Programme, the UNHCR, and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

**Ellen M. Lust** is the founding director of the programs on Governance and Local Development at Yale University (established in 2013) and at the University of Gothenburg (established in 2015), and is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. Ellen has conducted fieldwork and implemented surveys in Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Palestine/Israel, Syria, and Tunisia, supported by such foundations as the Social Science Research Council and the Swedish Research Council. She has led large-scale writing and research projects, collaborating with more than 30 researchers, and has organized over 15 international conferences and workshops in the past 10 years. She has served as an advisor and consultant to such organizations as the Carter Center, Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute, United Nations Democracy Fund, United Nations Development Programme, United States Agency for International Development, and the World Bank.

**Ilyas Saliba** is a research fellow in the Democracy and Democratization department at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and PhD candidate at the Berlin Graduate School for Social Sciences at Humboldt University Berlin. In 2019 he joined the Global Public Policy Institute as a research associate, where he works on a dedicated index to measure academic freedom infringements across the globe. He has over two years of fieldwork experience in Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia. In the course of his research on decision-making in authoritarian regimes during crises, he has been a visiting researcher at the American University in Cairo, the École de gouvernance et d'économie in Rabat, the European University Institute in Florence, and the University of Oxford's Nuffield College in the United Kingdom.

**Isabell Schierenbeck** is Professor in Political Science at the School of Global Studies (SGS), University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her research focuses on democratization and political leadership, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and Israeli domestic politics. She has also been conducting research on international development cooperation and national ownership in Ethiopia and Rwanda, as well as the right to mental health in Rwanda and South Africa. She has a long-lasting interest in issues on research ethics and safety. She gives lectures and consultations as an expert on Middle Eastern politics.

## Co-Authors

**Emma Beals** is a New Zealand-born journalist and policy advisor whose main focus is Syria. While assisting colleagues in danger in Syria, she co-founded the Frontline Freelance Register and the ACOS Alliance, which both strive to improve safety and security for freelance journalists working on dangerous assignments. She received the 2017 Foley Legacy Foundation World Press Freedom Award for this work. She is also on the Frontline Club and Hostage US Advisory Councils.

**Osama Diab** is a journalist and an economic rights researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. He holds a PhD from the Department of Conflict and Development Studies at Ghent University.

**Florian Kohstall** is in charge of university cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa at the Center for International Cooperation at Freie Universität Berlin and is the head of Academics in Solidarity, a transnational mentoring program for at risk and refugee scientists. From 2010 to 2015 he directed the Freie Universität's Cairo Office at the German Science Center (DWZ). Kohstall holds a PhD on Higher Education and Reform Policies in Egypt and Morocco. He has been teaching political science in Aix-en-Provence, Lyon, and Cairo. His latest publication is a collective volume on *Academia in Transformation: Scholars Facing the Arab Uprisings* (Nomos 2018).

**Sylvain Lefebvre** holds a PhD in International Politics from Aberystwyth University. He has been working as a Senior Adviser for Protection International for the past six years, delivering workshops and leading consultancies on security management and protection for human rights defenders, civil society organizations and international NGOs. Previously, he served as security officer for Peace Brigades International in Colombia. He has worked in remote and volatile contexts, such as Palestine and Israel, Chad, Kenya, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon.

**Daniel T. R. Masterson** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Immigration Policy Lab at Stanford University, California. He studies migration and refugee crises, conflict, and aid. He has a PhD in Political Science from Yale University, an MPP from Harvard's Kennedy School, and a BA in Political Science from Bates College.

**Morana Miljanovic** is a freelance researcher, educator, and activist. As a researcher, she focuses on exploitative systems that suppress individual and community freedoms, such as the surveillance industry and border regimes. As a digital security trainer, she seeks to raise awareness about the non-transparent mechanisms of tracking and profiling, and devises strategies that allow human rights defenders to do their work in a safer way. Morana also teaches sailing and partakes in Sea Watch missions, rescuing persons in distress at sea.

**Sarah E. Parkinson** is the Aronson Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. She received her PhD in political science from the University of Chicago. Grounded by social network theory and ethnographic methodologies, her research examines organizational behavior and social change in war- and disaster-affected settings, focusing on the Middle East and North Africa. Parkinson has conducted extensive fieldwork in Lebanon and Iraq. She has published scholarship on military organizations' decision-making and internal dynamics, political violence, forced migration, ethics, and research methods. Additionally, she is a co-founder of the Advancing Research on Conflict (ARC) Consortium.

---

**Mara Revkin** studies how legal systems operate in and are transformed by war through multi-method research designs that include field experiments, door-to-door surveys, interviews, and social media data. Her dissertation examined the Islamic State's system of governance in Iraq and Syria and its post-conflict consequences. Her current research aims to contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies for strengthening the rule of law and state legitimacy after war, with a particular focus on Iraq. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Yale University and a JD from Yale Law School.

**Alessandra Russo** is a Research Fellow at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium. She held previous appointments in France, Italy, and Germany. Since 2016 she has been reflecting on issues of safety and security of researchers traveling to zones which are considered dangerous and at risk. She has been part of a university taskforce to design a comprehensive fieldwork research policy and has recently co-authored book chapters on universities' duty of care *vis-à-vis* their research staff in missions abroad as well as on the (bio)politics of safe research in violent and illiberal contexts.

**Francesco Strazzari** is a Professor of International Relations at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna (Pisa, Italy) and an adjunct research professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). He specializes in conflict and security studies, focusing on extra-legal governance, transnational organized crime, terrorism, and armed groups.

**Vasilis Ververis** researches the technical implementation of internet censorship, surveillance, information controls and network interference. Parts of the research include the technical development of network measurement tools and methodologies to better evaluate and detect tampering or any network interference that may result in information controls, internet blocking, and unintended surveillance.

**Kersti Ruth Wissenbach** is a senior consultant and researcher working on the intersection of technologies, communication, and political change since 2005. Kersti has worked in more than 15 countries, leading the strategic planning, policy advice, and implementation of diverse civic participation processes. She is an expert in inclusive and co-creative strategy design, as well as participatory and activist research. Kersti is part of the European Research Council-funded DATACTIVE project at the University of Amsterdam, where she is researching power dynamics within and of transnational civic tech activism. She lectures in the Communication for Social Change Master's Program at Malmö University.