

Why onsite meetings are important: Reporting from five Short-Term Network Stays

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WARCNET PAPERS

WARCnet
webarchive studies

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WARCnet Papers
Aarhus, Denmark 2023

WARCnet Papers ISSN 2597-0615.

Niels Brügger: *Why onsite meetings are important: Reporting from five Short-Term Network Stays*

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Published by the research network
WARCnet, Aarhus, 2023.

Editors of WARCnet Papers: Niels
Brügger, Jane Winters, Valérie Schafer,
Kees Teszelszky, Peter Webster,
Michael Kurzmeier.

Cover design: Julie Brøndum
ISBN: 978-87-94108-19-5

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The WARCnet network is funded by the
Independent Research Fund Denmark |
Humanities (grant no 9055-00005B).



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Why onsite meetings are important: Reporting from five Short-Term Network Stays

Niels Brügger

Abstract: This WARCnet Paper reports from five Short-Term Network Stays that were made to collect data for a book chapter. Focus is on the often unacknowledged benefits that are a part of data collecting as onsite interview sessions, including tacit knowledge that it would have been difficult to obtain through online meetings only.

Keywords: web, online, onsite, tacit knowledge

SHORT-TERM NETWORK STAYS

One of the funding instruments of WARCnet are the Short-Term Network Stays (STNS). This funding scheme is intended to support knowledge exchange among the members of the network and/or information gathering at one of the participating research institutions or web archives. STNS are based on the idea that it is important to be able to visit a research institution or a web archive onsite, even in a time when online meetings have become commonly used (and in many cases with good reason).

Since its beginning in 2020 the WARCnet network had been forced to operate in the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic, but gradually the imposed travel restrictions were lifted, and network members could start travelling and thus use the STNS funding instrument.

This WARCnet Paper reports from five Short-Term Network Stays that I made to collect data for a book chapter. Focus is on the often unacknowledged benefits that are a part of data collecting as onsite interview sessions, including tacit knowledge (Gascoigne & Thornton, 2013) that it would have been difficult (if not impossible) to obtain through online meetings only.

COMPARING NATIONAL WEBS ACROSS NATIONAL WEB ARCHIVES

The overall aim of the five STNS was to collect data for a book chapter with the working title “Comparing national webs across national web archives: Methodological challenges of doing transnational studies of entire web domains” that is to be published in the edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Transnational Web Archive Studies* (Taylor & Francis/Routledge, forthcoming 2024). The chapter investigates to what an extent the analyses of the Danish web domain’s history based on the holdings of the Danish national web archive Netarkivet could be performed for another country’s web domain based on this country’s national web archive(s). The study is guided by the following research questions: “What does the web archive landscape look like for a researcher who wants to make a transnational study of different nations’ web domains across different web archives? — and how does the differences and similarities of the web collections affect how the researcher can navigate this landscape?” (Brügger, 2024, forthcoming).

To a certain degree one could investigate the research questions based on information that was obtained from the national web archives’ websites. However, this information is often very superficial and not extensive enough. Thus, the best way of providing in-depth expert knowledge about the practices of how the collections were made and how they can be made available to a research project about a national web domain is to conduct research interviews with relevant staff. With a view to also get access to the tacit knowledge it was decided to benefit from the STNS funding scheme.

The study is based on expert knowledge collected in a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with web archive staff. Interviews were made with a selection of European web archives, following the same interview guide. Interviews were made with the following five web archives, in each case based on STNS funding allocated by the WARCnet network:

- the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA), France,
- the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), France,
- the Bibliothèque nationale du Luxembourg (BnL), Luxembourg,
- the Royal Library (KB), the Netherlands,
- the British Library (BL), UK.

A couple of months before the interviews a contact person at each institution was contacted and asked to invite the relevant staff to participate, based on the different clusters of questions in the interview guide that were each aimed at different staff groups (technical, curatorial, legal, management). The contact person did participate in all sessions (in some cases on and off due to other meeting commitments during the stay).

The Institut National de l’Audiovisuel, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France

Although travel restrictions were lifted in 2022 the COVID-19 pandemic continued to play a trick on the first two STNS planned for France in October 2022. A few days before travelling I was sick with COVID, and the visits had to be postponed until December 2022.

The first visit, with the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, took place 14 December 2022 at the web archive's premises at Tolbiac in Paris, and it lasted for a couple of hours, including a brief guided tour in the INA's facilities. The interview was conducted with only one staff member in a meeting room, but during the interview another staff member joined the session for some 10 minutes. In summary, meeting onsite made the interview session quite informal, and being 'disturbed' during the meeting added to this, and introduced a certain dynamic because new angles were introduced.

The following day the web archive at the Bibliothèque nationale de France was visited, also located at Tolbiac in Paris. This meeting lasted for almost six hours, including coffee breaks, lunch, a presentation of the BnF Datalab, and an extensive guided tour at the BnF premises. In the morning three interviewees participated in the interview session, after lunch another interview session was conducted with five participants, of whom two were coming and going during the session, and one was online. The first session took place in a meeting room at the floor where the web archive staff was located, the latter was conducted in a meeting room at the BnF Datalab. At all sessions a large number of documents were presented on a screen in the room, and also documents that were not prepared before the meeting were found and presented. All in all sitting in the same room and being able to go to the screen and point out specific sentences, numbers or graphs in the documents, fostered an informal atmosphere where new topics could be taken up and included in the interview. In summary, moving between rooms, having different people come and go during the day, having informal breaks, and being able to discuss a great variety of documents created an informal and a dynamic context which made it possible to go in and out of the interview guide in a seamless way and to get closer to the tacit knowledge that underpinned the web archiving activities.

The Bibliothèque nationale du Luxembourg

The interview with the Bibliothèque nationale du Luxembourg took place at the library in Luxembourg city 18 January 2023. The meeting lasted four hours, including a lunch before the interview session and a guided tour at the library's premises after the interview. As was experienced in Paris the more informal gathering at a break (in this case a lunch) made it possible to get a sense of how the organisation worked, what they valued in their work, which challenges they struggled with, and what the day to day routines were like. In the beginning of the interview session three staff members participated, and a fourth participant joined later which added to the dynamic of the session. During the interview session documents were presented on a screen in the room, and new documents were found and presented when relevant.

The Royal Library, the Netherlands

The Royal Library of the Netherlands was visited 9 March 2023, and the interview session took place in a meeting room at the premises of the library in Den Haag. The meeting lasted four hours, including coffee and lunch breaks, and a guided tour of the library was

included after the interview session. During the four hours nine different staff members participated in the interview session, and a wide range of documents was presented on a screen in the room, and several new documents were found during the meeting. In summary, the meeting was very dynamic with a great variety of angles on web archiving being presented by the many different staff types. Also, the informal setting of the meeting facilitated the process of obtaining tacit knowledge.

The British Library

The British Library was visited 13 March 2023 at the library's premises at Boston Spa in West Yorkshire, England. The British Library's premises at Boston Spa is where some of the web archive staff are working, and since the interview should focus on the tasks that they performed the interview was set up there. The meeting lasted for three hours, including a lunch break and a brief guided tour, and two staff members participated. In addition to the valuable interview it was important to see the premises at Boston Spa, including the office landscape where the web archive staff worked, because it helped better understand the physical context in which the web archive staff were located.

CONCLUSION

In all five cases I did get invaluable information about how the web archives operated, including to what an extent it would be possible to replicate the Danish study of a national web domain in each of the five countries.

Much of this information could also have been collected in online meetings, but moving the context of the interview sessions from the online world to an onsite venue added a number of important insights that I would not have been able to get if meetings had been online only. The main benefits include:

- being able to share a great number of documents on a big screen in the room we were sitting in proved to be very important, because the possibility of pointing out things on the screen enabled a more dynamic and lively interview context where new topics could be taken up, the dialogue could seamlessly drift out on various sidetracks, and details could be dived into more easily,
- changing the concrete context of the interview sessions also proved to be very important for the final interview result, including moving between different rooms and having different staff members come and go during the meeting; this added a certain dynamic to the interviews, where new avenues could be followed as people joined the meeting, even for a shorter time, and it opened up spaces where relevant topics that were not included in the interview guide could be debated in a more informal way,
- as anyone who has attended a conference knows one profits a lot by the informal chat at breaks, and this also proved to be the case at all five meetings; the informal breaks constituted very important physical knowledge exchange spaces since this was where much of the unspoken tacit knowledge was

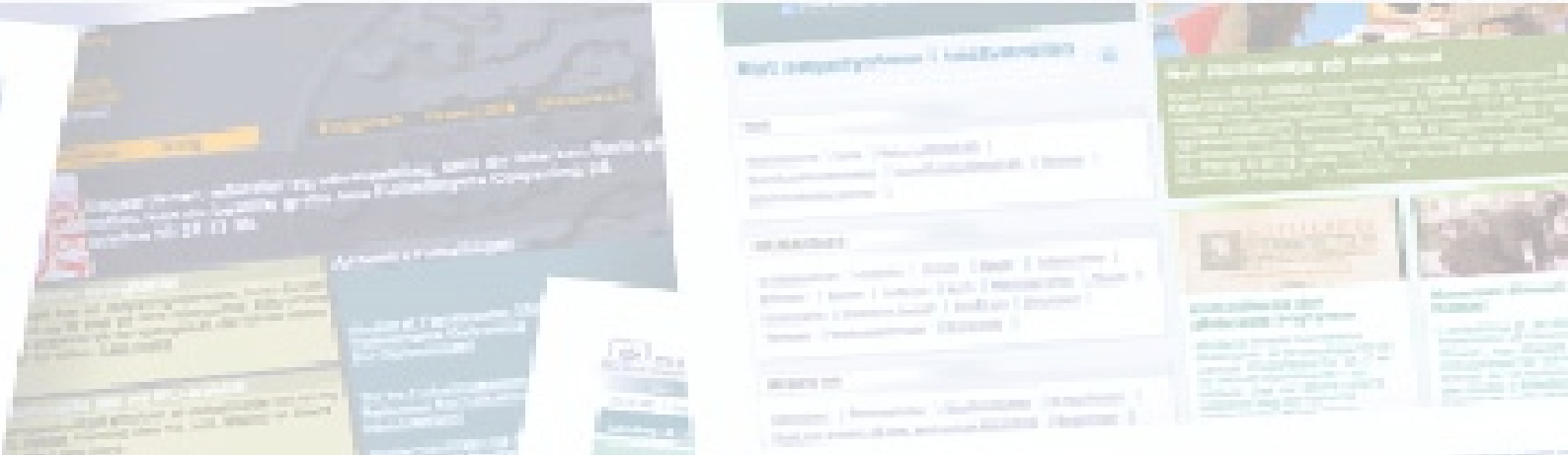
‘communicated’ — knowledge that would never have been made available had we only followed the interview guide (although it was a semi-structured guide), or had the meeting taken place online,

- getting an impression of the physical localities where web archiving collections were created added an important dimension to the interviews, since this can in some cases help explain why a given web archive operates as it does; also, it was relevant to see the rooms that were provided for researchers to work with the collections onsite,
- finally, time also plays a role, the meetings lasted between two and six hours, and it would have been very demanding to make the interviews online only, and there is no doubt that a certain degree of ‘Zoom fatigue’ would have made the interviews less focused, since “video conferences are exhausting” (Shoshan & Wehrt, 2022).

In summary, despite the resources spent on travelling (time and money) there is no doubt that the interviews became more complete and of better quality because they were made onsite. Changing the interview context from online to onsite allowed me to perform more dynamic interviews and to get access to tacit knowledge about the web archiving activities that helped me better understand how the web archiving organisation worked in practice. In particular this latter point about how web archives operate as such and within their organisation was not included in the interview guide, but its importance as background information for the understanding of how web archive collections were made only became obvious for me during the interviews, and would never have been so had the interviews not been made onsite.

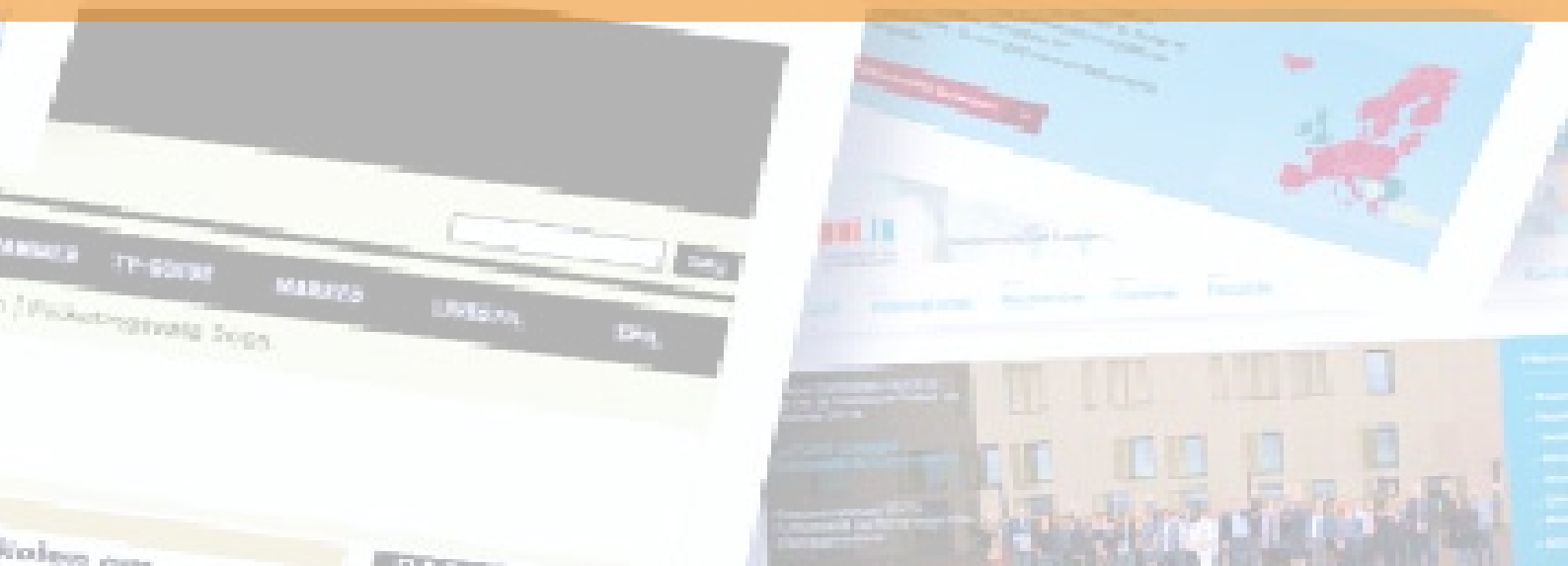
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The aim of the WARCnet network is to promote high-quality national and transnational research that will help us to understand the history of (trans)national web domains and of transnational events on the web, drawing on the increasingly important digital cultural heritage held in national web archives. The network activities run in 2020-22, hosted by the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, and are funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark | Humanities (grant no 9055-00005B).



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