**Online Appendix**

**‘Taking trust online:**

**Digitalisation and the practice of information sharing in diplomatic negotiations’**

This document serves as the online appendix to the manuscript ‘Taking trust online: Digitalisation and the practice of information sharing in diplomatic negotiations’. It contains three sections that detail the practical as well as ethical dimensions of our research beyond the scope of the original article.

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# Interviewees and questionnaires

Table 1.1. provides an (anonymized) overview of the interviews cited in the manuscript. Table 1.2. provides an indicative overview of our interview guide. We worked with both semi-structured interviews as well as more informal and ethnographic interview techniques[[1]](#footnote-1).

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| **Table 1.1.** | **Interviewees** |
| **Diplomatic Rank/Job** | **Date** | **Mode** | **Record** |
| Diplomat | 13-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 14-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Ambassador | 15-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 16-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Ambassador | 20-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat and Spokesperson | 20-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat and Spokesperson | 23-11-2018 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Ambassador | 19-03-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 25-03-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Ambassador | 26-03-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Spokesperson | 26-03-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Ambassador | 27-03-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Deputy Ambassador  | 28-03-2019 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 02-05-2019 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 20-06-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 28-06-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 04-07-2019 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat and Spokesperson | 12-11-2019 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| EU Commission Advisor | 04-12-2019 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Council Spokesperson | 19-12-2019 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 23-01-2020 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| EU Commission Staff | 16-04-2020 | Phone | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 21-04-2020 | Phone | Recorded |
| Ambassador | 04-05-2020 | Phone | Transcribed |
| EU official | 14-07-2020 | Face-to-Face | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 14-07-2020 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 29-01-2021 | Online | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 01-02-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 04-02-2021 | Online | Transcript |
| Diplomat | 09-02-2021 | Online | Transcript |
| Diplomat | 24-02-2021 | Online | Recorded |
| Diplomat | 01-03-2021 | Online | Recorded |
| Deputy Ambassador | 10-06-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Ambassador | 18-06-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 21-06-2021(1) | Online | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 21-06-2021(2) | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Ambassador | 24-06-2021 | Online | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 24-09-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 27-09-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 29-09-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 14-10-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 15-10-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |
| Diplomat | 18-10-2021 | Face-to-Face | Transcribed |

For reasons of assured anonymity agreed upon with the interviewees, we can neither list their rank nor their nationality next to the date of the interview as this would make them more easily identifiable (e.g. there was only one PSC Ambassador from Germany or Hungary in a certain month and year). In the manuscript, we cite interviews with diplomats in the following positions: COREPER I, II and PSC ambassador, deputy ambassadors, Head of Mission, Antici, Mertens, Nicolaidis, diplomatic members of various Council working groups including the Politico Military Group, Working Party on the Environment, Working Group on Relations with the European Parliament, Mashreq/Maghreb Working Party, and Digital Policy Working Group, EU officials working at the European External Action Service and in the General Secretariat of the EU Council, and PERMREP spokespersons; from the following member states (in alphabetical order): Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, the UK, Slovenia, and Sweden.

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| **Table 1.2.** | **Interview questions** |
| **Interview type** | **Examples** |
| Semi-structured interview about *trust* | * One of the opening questions would be the following: “Let’s say a new draft file lands on your desk [with details depending on the context], what is the first thing you do?” Usually, interviewees would, then, mention contact with the capital and consultations with colleagues. This would be the opening to ask about cooperation and information sharing.
* How do you decide whom to contact? How do you rely on your colleagues? How do they rely on you?
* How do you decide which information to share, and with whom?
* You mentioned trust before, could you expand on what you meant when you said \_\_\_? How would you say trust matters in your work?
* You said you trust this particular colleague, why is that? How does this relation differ from other relations with colleagues?
* What would happen without trust?
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| Semi-structured interview about *digitalisation* | * Could you walk me through a usual workday? What do you do, who do you interact with and how?
* Do you mainly work from your office / the PERMREP? Do you use a file sharing system with your colleagues?
* How do you mainly communicate with your colleagues? How do you meet with them? Which tool could you not do your work without?
* How much time do you spend on a computer, or on your phone every day? Do you ever switch your phone off? Do you have a different phone for professional and private use?
* Are mobile phones allowed in meetings? What can they (not) be used for?
* Does anyone else use your phone? Has access to your email account? Your Twitter/Social media account?
* What is your (your PERMREPs) protocol on using social media / Twitter? Did you ever get a social media training?
* Do you have any experience with virtual meetings? What works well/less well about them?
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| Ethnographic interviews | * If I come in tomorrow and do your job, what do I need to do?
* How is the pandemic impacting your work? What do you struggle most with? What do you miss most about your work day?
* Are you looking forward to negotiations the coming weeks? Why (not)?
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# Research ethics

The substance of our work and our way of doing research bring up questions of research ethics. First, there is a general question of how to research and write about confidential practices and the doings of a professional field often considered to be ‘secretive’[[2]](#footnote-2). When engaging with participants in Brussels and asking them about the ins and outs of multilateral work, conducting negotiations, and for this article particularly, *sharing information*, we worked cautiously to create an environment of open exchange, such as anonymization of interview records, multiple options for participants to op-out, safe file storage systems, and detailed ‘plain language statements’ on how we will (not) use fieldwork data when requested by participants.

Studying diplomatic communities usually means ‘studying up’[[3]](#footnote-3), meaning that the social hierarchy between researcher and researched is skewed in favour of the latter. This was true in many ways for us, two young female academics, especially when engaging with senior diplomats, generally identifying as male. According to Nader[[4]](#footnote-4), studying up is a research direction aimed at uncovering relations of influence and power; in our case: understanding how elite political actors conduct their work. In this, we are committed to representing our participants impressions and experiences as accurate as possible without, however, taking or presenting them at face value. Instead, the aim of the analysis is also to ‘break’ with the voices and opinions of our participants. This is what interpretivist scholars have called an essential element of ‘reflexive scholarship’: “the necessity and degree of reflecting on one’s perceptions…of breaking with one’s entanglement with the field and of sociologically distancing oneself from the member’s perspective”[[5]](#footnote-5).

# The impact of Covid-19

Like for so many others[[6]](#footnote-6), the Covid-19 pandemic complicated our research. During the first Covid-lockdown (Spring-Summer 2020) and in subsequent waves since, research possibilities became curtailed by the imposition of travel restrictions and social distancing measures. In many ways, however, we were more privileged than others to keep working with our ‘field’, as large parts of the EU diplomatic field migrated deeper into virtual settings and some previously tangential aspects of how diplomatic work was conducted (such as videoconferences or WhatsApp channels) became central sites of everyday diplomatic exchange[[7]](#footnote-7) .

As the pandemic closed off ‘traditional’ fieldwork options[[8]](#footnote-8), we looked for alternative strategies not based on ‘being there’ or physical immersion to stay connected to Brussels and our participants’ experiences. Much has been written over the past two years on ‘remote research’, ethnography at a distance or fieldwork through a ‘zoom screen’, and we adopted a strategy of following the Brussels field into its new and extended virtual sites[[9]](#footnote-9). Some of them, like public webinars, were openly accessible and indeed made it easier to get in touch with ‘Brussels’ than ever; whereas others remained behind closed (virtual) doors, like the example of the Defence Council meeting ‘broken into’ by the Dutch journalist used in the manuscript. Questions of access thus remained, but the conditions of the pandemic also opened new ways into following developments in the field and put our way of engaging with practitioners in the same mode of how they engaged among themselves: via the screen.

We also continued to speak directly to our existing (and new) research participants via email, videocall, phone call or text message. This was only possible because we had built up relations, rapport, and trust to research participants for months before the outbreak of the pandemic. The way we tried to manage this was to set the right ‘tone’ for our research, taking it always as a ‘privilege’ and never as a ‘right’[[10]](#footnote-10) to get access to the EU diplomatic field, both in normal times and in times of crisis.

Our mode of engagement created a clear symmetry between our way of exchanging with participants and their ways of exchange with each other that we were academically interested in. The use of digital tools and the performance of trust when using them thus not only became relevant as *a research object* but also as *a research method*: while conducting this research, we were ourselves experiencing what we were substantially studying. This dynamic has created additional challenges in the context of researching trust as a fragile social relation while we were ourselves part of such relations. Such research realities can be described by the concepts of ‘positionality’ and the ‘use of the self’[[11]](#footnote-11). Especially during the pandemic, our engagement with the field was shaped by two ‘I’s, an ‘us’ and our respective and collective relations and position with/in it[[12]](#footnote-12). On the one hand, we were lucky to have conducted long-term work in Brussels before the pandemic and thus had existing networks, and indeed, relationships of trust to a large number of practitioners. These pre-existing ties opened otherwise unlikely channels of communication into the email inboxes, phone lines, and WhatsApp chats of EU staff and diplomats. On the other hand, we were already familiar with the dynamics of the field (when are meetings held, who are key journalists to follow, etc.), which made it easier to know ‘where to look’[[13]](#footnote-13). Our long-term engagement with the field made it possible that we could pick up conversation threads at the highly uncertain onset of the crisis in March 2020; and that, a year on as vaccines are starting to be rolled out and most of us have grown accustomed to the rules of social distancing, even begin to conduct face-to-face interviews again.

Saying any of this is not to do away with the privileges or partialities or subjectivities of knowledge production necessarily involved in qualitative work, but to put them on the page and make them transparent[[14]](#footnote-14). As MacLean et al[[15]](#footnote-15) put it in the early days of the pandemic: “these additional [practical and] ethical considerations regarding whether and how we can conduct fieldwork need to be acknowledged explicitly and discussed clearly in our writing”. To submit this appendix alongside the manuscript is therefore, similar to its substantial discussion on trust, an act of information sharing. Mirroring its argument in the realm of research methods, its aim is to make what is presented more trustworthy[[16]](#footnote-16) (and suspend (at least some) uncertainties about its origins.

1. Such as Nicolini’s ‘Interview to the Double’, see Davide Nicolini, ‘Articulating practice through the interview to the double’, *Management Learning*, 40:2 (2009), pp. 195–212. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Corneliu Bjola and Stuart Murray, *Secret Diplomacy: Concepts, Contexts and Cases* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016); Marieke De Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ﻿Laura Nader, ‘Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up’, in Dell H. Hymes (ed.) *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1972 [1969]), pp. 284–311. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nader, Up the anthropologist [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sophie Merit Müller, ‘Becoming the Phenomenon? An Alternative Approach to Reflexivity in Ethnography’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22:9 (2016), pp. 706-07. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Annika Lems, *The (Im)possibility of Ethnographic Research during Corona*, *Max Planck Institut für ethnologische Forschung* (June 11, 2020). Available at: https://www.eth.mpg.de/5478478/news-2020-06-11-01 (Accessed: 3 October 2020); Monica DeHart, *Thinking Ethnographically in Pandemic Times – Items*, *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences* (May 21, 2020). Available at: https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/thinking-ethnographically-in-pandemic-times/ (Accessed: 2 February 2021); Marnie Howlett, ‘Looking at the “field” through a Zoom lens: Methodological reflections on conducting online research during a global pandemic’, *Qualitative Research,* 22:3 (2021), pp. 387–402; Peter Krause *et al.* ‘COVID-19 and Fieldwork: Challenges and Solutions’, *PS - Political Science and Politics*, 54:2 (2021), pp. 264–269; Lauren M. MacLean, *et al.* ‘Disrupted Fieldwork: Navigating Innovation, Redesign, and Ethics during an Ongoing Pandemic’, *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*, 18:2 (2020), pp. 1–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Kristin Anabel Eggeling and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘The Synthetic Situation in Diplomacy: Scopic Media and the Digital Mediation of Estrangement’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:1 (2021), pp. 1-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Christia and Lawson 2021 and Zuckerman Daly 2021 in Krause et al 2021: 266-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kristin A. Eggeling ‘Embracing the “inverted commas”, or How COVID-19 can show us new directions for ethnographic “fieldwork”’, *Qualitative Research* Online First (2022), pp. 1-17; Larissa Versloot, ‘The Vitality of Trusting Relations in Multilateral Diplomacy: An Account of the European Union’, *International Affairs,* 98:2 (2022), pp. 509-528. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lee Ann Fujii, ‘Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities’, *PS - Political Science and Politics* 45:4 (2012), pp. 717–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cecilie Basberg Neumann and Iver B. Neumann, ‘Uses of the self: Two ways of thinking about scholarly situatedness and method’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015), pp. 798–819; Christine Sylvester, ‘The Elusive Arts of Reflexivity in the “Sciences ” of International Relations’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 41:2 (2013), pp. 309–235. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On the ‘I’ in fieldwork in political science see Lisa Wedeen, ‘Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13 (2010), pp. 255–272. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Roni Berger, ‘Now I See It, Now I Don’t: Researcher’s Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Research* 15:2 (2013), pp. 219–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kristin Anabel Eggeling, ‘At Work with Practice Theory, “Failed” Fieldwork, or How to See International Politics in An Empty Chair’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50:1 (2021), 166; Can E. Mutlu, ‘How (Not) to disappear completely: Pedagogical potential of research methods in international relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015), pp. 931–941. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. MacLean, L. M. *et al.*, ‘Disrupted Fieldwork’, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On trustworthiness as a mark of good social science research see Cai Wilkinson, ‘Ethnographic methods’, in Laura J. Shepherd, (ed.) *Critical Approaches to Security Studies: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013) p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)