

Interview – Kristin Anabel Eggeling

Written by E-International Relations

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Kristin Anabel Eggeling works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen and a Visiting Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies. She also serves as Co-chair of the Diplomatic Studies Section of the International Studies Association (ISA). Kristin's teaching and research focus on international diplomacy, digitalization, global tech policy, everyday politics, and ethnographic methods in International Relations. Her scholarly work has been widely recognized, earning her the Anthony Deos Early Career Award in 2023 for emerging scholars in Diplomatic Studies, awarded by the ISA. Her research has been published in leading social science journals, including the *Review of International Studies*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *Global Studies Quarterly*, *International Political Sociology*, *Millennium*, *Big Data & Society*, *Geopolitics*, and *Qualitative Research*.

Kristin holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of St Andrews (2019) and has pursued studies in liberal arts, philosophy, politics, international relations, literature, and writing at the Universities of Maastricht, the Australian National University, Oxford, and St Andrews. In addition to her academic roles in British and Danish institutions, Kristin has professional experience working with the German Chamber of Commerce in Doha, Qatar, and the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium. Kristin's academic publications can be found on her Google Scholar profile.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

The ideas for my academic research always begin in the middle of things, in media res. I will give you two examples. I wrote a PhD thesis about the politics of seemingly banal, apolitical practices of nation-branding through which countries present themselves on the world stage. The idea for this research project developed when I was living in Doha, Qatar, after graduating from my master's in 2013. I wasn't working in academia then – indeed, my first professional task was to find a supplier of industrial pipe insulation tapes for the expanding Qatari energy sector. Yet, while I was living in Doha and working on this or that project, I often found myself gaping at the speed of the city's development and the endless resources the Qatari government seemed to pour into the development of their national 'brand' through architecture, sporting events, and cultural and educational institutions. I got the chance to go back to university and back to writing the following year, and so I took it.

A similar dynamic led to the formulation of the research project I am currently working on with colleagues at the University of Copenhagen on Europe's agenda to attain 'digital sovereignty.' I first encountered Europe's dependency on other parts of the world for its technological development as a political issue by holding my ear close to the ground in Brussels and listening to the day-to-day concerns of policymakers and diplomats. This happened during fieldwork back in 2019 and 2020, before the spread of Covid-19. Already then, people in Brussels were using a term, 'digital sovereignty', that sounded strange to me, and I started to wonder what they meant by it. All this is to say that I get my inspiration out there, in the 'real world,' and most of my research is driven by the underlying question of what it means to live in today's globalizing and digitalizing world.

A quick note on methodology: My academic journey was profoundly shaped by a summer school experience at the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research at Syracuse University in 2017. During this time, I had the

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opportunity to experiment with ethnographic methods and learn from distinguished scholars in the field, including Frederic Schaffer, Lisa Wedeen, and most notably, Timothy Pachirat. They encouraged us to observe social life in various settings, such as the campus gym, library, bus, and, most memorably, ‘Destiny USA,’ one of the largest malls in America. Even now, when I conduct fieldwork, I recall the experience of observing power dynamics in the 99-cent store in the mall’s basement. It was at that moment that I truly began to understand how politics, including international politics, permeates every aspect of life!

How do you view the balance between the opportunities provided by digital technologies and the potential risks to traditional diplomatic practices, particularly in terms of trust-building and confidentiality?

Digitalization is an inherently social process. Of course, there are technical dimensions, but I have always been most interested in what digitalization, and technological change, more broadly, *mean to* practitioners of international relations, particularly civil servants, and diplomats. Digitalization is alive in how specific technologies and devices are used, discussed, and thought about. That makes me a social constructivist, perhaps a practice theorist in IR language.

My research has consistently shown that technologies, in and of themselves, hold little inherent meaning. Instead, their potential risks and opportunities are largely shaped by the consensus within the community on their appropriate use. This perspective has led to some surprising insights. For instance, digital tools like smartphones, when used in closed-door diplomatic meetings, play a crucial role in building and maintaining spaces of confidentiality and trust. Just as you and I might text a friend for advice before deciding, diplomats, too, rely on tools like WhatsApp or Signal to test a negotiation position or gauge the atmosphere in the negotiation room. Ethnographic observations and interviews in Brussels have particularly highlighted this practice, reassuring us of the positive impact of digitalization in diplomacy.

All this is to say that the digitalization of diplomacy is a situated practice. I will forever be skeptical of arguments that present us with simple, straightforward answers about some singular tool, platform, or digital format to somehow ‘revolutionize’ or ‘change’ all of diplomacy or any other aspect of IR. The same goes for purely digital analyses of the political world, say through large-scale social media analyses or experiencing distant forms of ‘measuring’ something purely through its digital traces. I find myself agreeing still with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who said in *The Interpretation of Cultures* more than fifty years ago that he was not “impressed with the claims that...computer engineering or some other advanced form of thought is going to enable us to understand men without knowing them.”

Your research on the Gaia-X project touches on digital sovereignty. How do you think the concept of digital sovereignty is reshaping international relations and the global balance of power?

Exciting question! My short answer is that we don’t know yet. The discourse on digital sovereignty and its related narratives (such as ‘strategic autonomy’ and ‘technological sovereignty’) is still unfolding and finding its political footing. In recent years, there’s been a surge of publications on this topic, and we’re excited to contribute to the debate with a constructivist analysis of how this discourse shapes fault lines and expectations in EU politics. In other words, anyone interested in studying the international relations of the 21st century would do well to explore the emerging field of global technology governance.

In your article on blended diplomacy, you discuss the entanglement of digital technologies in diplomatic practice. How do you envision this entanglement evolving over the next decade, and what implications might this have for diplomatic training?

The entanglement—and its contestation, the second line of argument in our article—is likely to intensify in most diplomatic encounters. I say “most” because we’re already witnessing a splintering of certain diplomatic practices and settings, reverting to almost comically old-fashioned analog formats (like meetings without phones), particularly if we move up the diplomatic hierarchy.

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That said, it is likely that most diplomatic interactions will increasingly rely on technological tools and devices. For instance, a research and development unit within one of the major institutions of the European Union is currently experimenting with AI tools, large language models, and text generation to alleviate the workload and anxieties related to diplomatic conventions and protocol. As observers and chroniclers of international politics, we must closely monitor how these digital tools are utilized by the people and places we study. Personally, I focus on two key questions: First, what do these digital tools mean to the people using them, and what is the context of their use? Second, how do these local meanings inform or contribute to our broader theories and conceptions in international relations? As an IR scholar and social scientist, I see it as my task to understand how social actions, especially those involving technology, reflect more than just themselves. These actions can reveal a great deal, particularly about some of IR's most central concerns, such as the relations of politics and power.

Your work on COVID-19 and ethnographic fieldwork suggests new directions for research methodologies. How might these adaptations in research methods influence our understanding of international relations in the long term?

What an intriguing question. I think of methods, theories, and the substance and themes of research to be related, entangled, in a 'bundle,' a term I borrow from the organizational ethnographer Davide Nicolini. This concept of the 'bundle' is not just a theoretical construct, but a practical tool that can guide our research in these challenging times. The article you mention emerged from a moment of despair, anxiety, and insecurity about how to proceed, which often characterizes ethnographic work. To get a sense of the state of mind that I was in when writing it, I encouraged everyone to read the acknowledgments. In general, acknowledgments are a great way to get to know a writer and the origin story of a particular piece of scholarship. So much to explore there!

But I am going off-topic. Yes, the coronavirus pandemic presented, in more pessimistic terms, a 'rupture' and, in more optimistic terms, an 'opening' for ethnographic 'fieldwork.' How can we do immersive participant observation when we are stuck in our living rooms and must keep a distance from others? In the article, I think of this moment as a moment of 'tragic serendipity,' a profound and unforeseen unfolding of events that forced me and many others to completely change our research plans. This was not just a challenge, but a call to action, a moment that demanded a radical rethinking of our research methods. The article plays with the 'inverted commas' that scholars in international relations and other social science disciplines often put around the term 'field' in their research, suggesting that we use this term metaphorically in the first place. This is perhaps painfully obvious, but it helped me rethink and reconfigure my ethnographic practice in a crisis. Suddenly, I could no longer travel to my physical field site; I started expanding my sense of the 'diplomatic field' and followed my research participants' practice into online or hybrid sites, such as webinars, videoconferences, email newsletters, and podcasts.

Going back to the idea of the bundle, if the method of 'following the field' (borrowed from the anthropologist George Marcus) led me into these places, that must mean that diplomacy also happens here. How we use our methods tells us something substantive about what we are trying to study. 'Mapping the 'field' or following our research objects into the myriad places they go tells us, once again, that IR is all around right here, in plain sight.

What are you currently working on?

The digitalization of diplomatic practice and the many dynamics surrounding the meeting between diplomacy and digital technology (in practice and political substance) remain two of my main research avenues. As for most of the last decade, I approach these themes in an ethnographic sense, constantly looking for lived experiences, complex interactions, and unexpected connections. I recently spent a month doing fieldwork among diplomatic actors in Silicon Valley and cannot wait to start writing about it. Finally, I have a topic close to my heart, a hobby horse, if you will. I play a lot of tennis to balance sitting at my desk, emailing, reading, writing, or answering interview questions for a blog. For the last year and a half, I merged my passion for playing with my passion for writing. My first paper on the politics surrounding the global tennis circuit will be forthcoming later this year. I hope others will be interested in reading it!

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

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Spend time noticing the world around you. All the questions that could ever be interesting to ask are right here in front of you.