**Chapter 29: Access**

Chris Land, School of Management, University of Leicester, UK

Scott Taylor, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK

**Abstract**

Accessing organizations, occupations and individuals for data collection is one of the most talked about aspects of doing qualitative research. Many researchers tell ‘war stories’ of being refused access, tips and hints for gaining it, and dream of impossible-to-reach settings that they would really like to collect data in. In this chapter, we review the historical and contemporary debates that surround access to draw out four key dynamics. First, we ask why researchers attempt to gain access; second, we ask what it is that researchers are attempting to access; third, we examine how access negotiations are conventionally reported, and how this creates spoken and unspoken stories; and finally we explore the implications of abandoning formal overt attempts to access organizations to conduct qualitative research.

Keywords: organization, management, access, qualitative, ethics, covert.

**Introduction**

At one stage while writing this chapter we began negotiating organizational access to collect data. We had funding in place. We had what we thought were some interesting research questions and ideas. We clearly articulated our intentions to gatekeepers not to disrupt the work being done within the organization. We provided assurances that we would talk back to respondents about our analysis when complete. We like to think we are relatively skilled at gaining access to do research. And, of course, we really wanted to do the research.

We had a series of requests rejected. In one case we were unable even to speak to organizational gatekeepers directly and were rebuffed by an external public relations company that handled all requests for access to the company founder. This left us with several options: keep going by asking for access elsewhere at other, perhaps less intrinsically interesting (Stake, 2005), organizations; return the research funding and abandon the research; find data ‘outside’ the organizations that would allow us to develop our ideas; or adopt covert methods and try to enter the organizations by, for example, applying for a job there. Each of these possibilities exemplifies the continuous opportunities to re-consider or give up that are produced by negotiating access if it is approached as an iterative, non-linear, dynamic process (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016). Our frustration at this recent experience, combined with our reading of recently published accounts of access negotiation, brought us back to our ongoing attempts to understand the processes of entering and leaving the organizations that we try to collect data in or from. Previously, we have written about the political and ethical constraints placed on research when we make promises of individual and organizational anonymity during access negotiations (Taylor & Land, 2014). There we argued that blanket promises of anonymity, whilst conforming to institutionalised procedures for ethical research practice, may in fact create barriers to engaged research and to the realization of our wider moral obligations as academics, specifically our obligation to inform and contribute to social and political debate. This chapter builds on that argument to unpack the common conception of access as a time-bounded, instrumental activity. Here, we look in more detail at how, why, and to what ends researchers seek access, and finally consider how research can continue in the absence of access, or at least in the absence of ‘access’ as it is conventionally understood: formally agreed permission, granted by organizational gatekeepers, to openly collect data. As we do this, we review both historical and contemporary contributions to understanding access and emphasise the temporally situated nature of what constitutes ethical practice in negotiating access.

We are keen to include a discussion of how to research without access in this chapter, because failing to gain access is always a risk with social research and, we would argue, an increasing one in certain areas (such as slow qualitative research or politicised critical management research). Our own experience, and the experiences of others, suggests that researchers are being confronted with more barriers to access, and therefore more challenges to collecting the kind of data that have formed the basis of many qualitative studies of management and organization. There are, we think, multiple facets to this. First, there are simply more people working in the field of management and organization studies who are requesting access to organizations – more established researchers, more doctoral researchers, and more undergraduate and Masters students seeking access to organizations for their dissertation research. This is not a new dynamic. Established academics were complaining about relatively large numbers of post-graduate students making access more difficult in the 1980s (Buchanan et al, 1988: 55) and student numbers have grown significantly since then. Second, as we have argued elsewhere (Land and Taylor, 2010), some of the most interesting organizations that researchers seek access to have the most compelling reasons to deny entry to collect data. Companies with a value proposition based on their brand, or on a high-profile reputation for organizing ethically, for example, find reasons to deny access because of the very activity that makes them interesting to us, even when individual and corporate anonymity are promised. For example, one organization we unsuccessfully tried to access recently has based much of its branding activity on organizational self-representation as a radical, anarchistic upstart in an industry dominated by large conglomerates. Whereas multi-national corporations in the industry are regularly challenged in the media for their ethically problematic products and marketing campaigns, the implicit, and often explicit, value claim is that the company we wanted to research is more ethical, more authentic, and less exploitative. As marketers in the company regularly mobilise a language of democratic, counter-cultural organizational and alternative managerial practices, our suspicion is that their reluctance to being researched was founded on a concern to control media representation and public discussions of their company and organizational practices.

Third, and perhaps paradoxically, we observe an increasing amount of publicly available information surrounding organizations, mostly as a result of the Internet’s facilitation of self-publication and social media activity through means such as Facebook and Twitter. This makes it easier, as we argue below, for access to be denied for two linked reasons: first, when gatekeepers tell us we can already find online what we need to know to write about the organization, implying that nothing is hidden; and second, because gatekeepers equate researchers with those who write critically or negatively about organizations online. Again, this is not exactly new. Almost 40 years ago, in one of the most cited pieces written on organizational access, Buchanan et al. (1988) advised researchers not to mention ‘interviews’ or ‘publication’ when approaching organizations. For the managers they negotiated with, such words conjured up images of exposés in newspapers, something quite removed from the realities of academic research and publishing. Instead, they chose to ‘tell potential respondents that we want to learn from their experience by talking to them and that we will write an account of our work, which they will see’ (Buchanan et al, 1988: 57). For the increasing number of brand-based organizations in which social reputation is crucial, the potential risks are even greater today, suggesting that access to that part of the economy is increasingly difficult.

As described above, at one stage in our current research project we found ourselves in the position of having no access whatsoever ‘inside organizations’. A complete lack of access presents, we think, significant problems for the conduct of meaningful social research that aims to represent the experience of work and to analytically locate that experience in relation to wider political, economic, social and cultural changes. We can, of course, decide to ‘give up and move on’ (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016), as we and many others have on various projects, leaving an incomplete piece of work to gather dust on a shelf or gradually go out-of-date on a hard drive. However, we think there are more creative ways to deal with denial of physical access to organizational space, approaches that researchers have perhaps been too quick to dismiss. These alternatives can certainly involve time-consuming engagement with institutional research ethics committees and frameworks. These internal institutional gatekeepers may prevent researchers from even leaving campus and result in a different, perhaps even more frustrating, form of access denial. Notwithstanding, if social research in management and organization studies is to continue in the varied forms that it has taken, then it is incumbent on researchers to continue to be creative in thinking through *how* we gain access, *why* we want access, and *what* it is that we want to access. To do this, we argue that it might be useful to take inspiration from the social research community working outside higher education, such as investigative journalists or documentary makers, and to argue for alternative approaches to access, both institutionally and in published writing.

To work through these issues the rest of the chapter is structured as follows. First, we revisit classic contributions to the issue of access. We suggest that most of these focus on the practical ‘how’ of accessing and departing, or what Buchanan et al (1988) refer to as ‘getting in’ and ‘getting out’ of the field. Researchers are encouraged to read these accounts as ‘tales of the field’ (Van Maanen, 1988), and to feel a comforting kinship that assuages the suffering many feel they have experienced at the hands of awkward or obstructive gatekeepers and respondents. Second, we ask ‘why’ researchers would want to gain access to organizations. Whilst this question can be answered with the obvious ‘to do research’, this raises a broader question of why we want to conduct research at all. Some academics may be driven by the imperatives of career, promotion, research assessments and performance measurement, but we think most researchers, and especially those with a more critical approach to studying management, work and organization, are motivated by a desire to understand the lived realities of work, to locate those realities within a wider social context, and to communicate that understanding to a wider audience through writing and teaching. Indeed, this is the ambition for social scientists laid out more than 50 years ago by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*. Such research requires a deep understanding of the practice and experiences of those working in organizations: a reality that is rarely captured well in publically available, corporate publications, anonymous blogs written by aggrieved ex-employees, or by quantitatively analysed survey tools that abstract both experience and context to a narrow range of discrete variables. This raises two further related issues. First, writing about work and organization is an inescapably political process. Merely wishing to represent particular sets of interests, groups, members, or particular types of organizations, is a political act. The choice of whether to use research to give voice to senior management at De Beers, or to give voice to the miners working for that organization in Botswana or South Africa, will generate very different representations of the company and its business practices. It is both a political and an academic decision, guided by what has been written previously, and what the researcher deems to be of wider significance and importance in their field. When academics are blocked from accessing specific research sites, or from exploring contentious topics, whether by organizational gatekeepers or by institutional ethics committees, this is already a political act, shaping what can be seen and what can be said within academic discourse. As Jacques Rancière has argued, contra Althusser, one of the key functions of the police today is not to interpolate, or hail, a subject that will recognise themselves in the call, but to shift attention *away* from what might unsettle the dominant political distribution of the sensible – what can be seen and what can be said – by encouraging us to ‘move along! There is nothing to see here!’ (Rancière, 2001: 22).

This in turn suggests another, perhaps more profound question of what an ‘organization’ actually is, and thus *what* the research is seeking access *to*. Our third focus in this chapter is therefore to examine something that is largely overlooked in methodological discussions of access: what we trying to access. In this section we argue that access often assumes a physical space, with live actors moving around in it. This may be too narrow a conception of what it is we are trying to access as qualitative researchers. Here there are two sub-themes. We consider the nested and contentious nature of social relations within organizations, drawing on Carmel’s (2011) idea of ‘social access’, to argue that gatekeepers and key respondents we approach can actually prevent us accessing some groups within an organization at the same time as affording access to other social groups. Second we look to social media as a source of qualitative data in the virtual sphere where the formal boundaries of an organization can leak out or spill over into public discourse, for example through blogging. Finally, we consider what can be done in the event of a complete failure to access an organization. Here we review the argument for covert research and describe an innovative method of provoking engagement from within organizations practised by British documentary film-maker Louis Theroux.

Throughout, we draw on key contributions to understanding access from within organization studies published in journals (e.g. Alcidipani and Hodgson, 2009; Carmel, 2011; Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016; Irvine, 2003; Irvine and Gaffikin, 2006; Karjaleinen et al., 2015; Pettica-Harris et al., 2016), the ‘confessional tales’ (Van Maanen, 1988; Whyte, 1964) most often published as appendices to book-length ethnographies (e.g. Kunda, 1992), and recent debates in social science methods and methodology on access. It has been conventional to claim that little has been published on access (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009). This is not the case any more, especially if we look to reflexive methodological writing in the wider social sciences. The challenge today is not to find published material on negotiating access; rather, it is to understand the methodological implications of how and why we seek access, or fail to achieve it, which can stretch from the start of the research process to the end and beyond, with implications for all aspects of what we write.

**How to gain access: Classic and contemporary tales of the field**

Every research methods textbook contains a chapter, or part of one, with guidance on negotiating access and finding data. As an activity, it inevitably forms part of every qualitative empirical study, whether data is naturally occurring or generated by the researcher. Doctoral and new researchers are often asked about their plans for gaining access, first by supervisors and subsequently by anyone listening to research plans. In this version of the debate access is, first and foremost, a practical concern.

One of the most commonly cited contributions to our understanding of organizational access was published almost 30 years ago. David Buchanan, David Boddy and James McCalman (1988) reflected on their trials in gaining access to study technological innovation in organizations. This book chapter is remarkable for its longevity and influence. The title and discussion frame access as a linear process of ‘getting in, getting on, getting out, and getting back’ that starts with first contact and negotiating access, moves on through how researchers need to conduct research by getting on with their respondents, before moving on to departure from the field (with the possibility of returning later for follow up research). As a frame this discussion suggests that data collection is temporally bounded to the middle two sections of the process. Perhaps echoing early anthropological accounts of entering and leaving the field, researchers are encouraged to think of the organization as a foreign land, spatially and culturally separate from the academic workplace. Data collectors have to think of ways to blend in with the locals, always remaining cognisant of the need to make a clean break, in order to analyse the data collected in as objective a way as possible.

This approach is an echo of the methods used to collect respectable and robust datasets to inform mid-20th century ethnographies in management and organization studies. Melville Dalton (1959) and Donald Roy (1952) in the US and Tom Lupton (1963) in the UK are most often cited as pioneers of anthropological methods to explore modern organization. All three write of how easy it was to a) find a job in an interesting organization and b) ‘lose themselves’ in the work, community, and experience. Researchers always, as far as we know, departed the field with data in hand to work with and write up whilst located in a different organizational context: the university (see also Whyte, 1964). This was not always a clean or complete detachment. Lupton, for example, told stories of inviting respondents to the university to hear him present an analysis of their working lives, creating a living form of respondent validation and satisfying his own wish to be inclusive. Buchanan and colleagues, in contrast, advise keeping a distance between analysis and the presumably more prosaic concerns of the researched. They suggest writing a descriptive account of what was researched, to share with the respondents, and to treat this as a ‘base document’ to be used later when preparing academic manuscripts. Strongly recommending that academics do not share draft research articles with respondents, their own practice was to ask respondents what kind of a report they wanted, treating the structure and focus of the requested report as offering ‘further insights into current management preoccupations and interests’ (Buchanan et al, 1988: 64). Somewhere in between these two approaches lies the work of Irvine and Gaffikin (2006) who, in a key contribution that helped revive this debate, note the importance of published research being meaningful, faithful, and interesting to those from or around whom data were collected.

These accounts of fieldwork are located at an essentially practical level. They do not relate the process of negotiating and maintaining access to the nature of the research itself. This raises two issues. First, like managerial preferences for particular types of report on a research project, negotiations over access can be a source of data in themselves (Land and Taylor, 2010). Second, the very idea of accessing data that is ‘out there’ in the field carries certain epistemological commitments. The first of these issues is well illustrated in Karen Ho’s (2009) ethnographic study of Wall Street investment banks, in which she was ultimately unable to gain the full access she had hoped for as a working investment banker. Instead, her book begins with the processes of trying to get access to, and then find employment in, these organizations. Her inability to gain full access as an investment banker thus becomes a crucial source of information about the professional cultures of banking and their maintenance of an exclusive, elite status for employees, encouraging distance and isolation from outsiders. In a similar vein, Simon Carmel, echoing Schwartzman (1993), notes that ‘the very processes of gaining access are likely to demonstrate aspects of the culture being studied’ (2011: 552) so that a discussion of such should be an essential part of any ethnographic study (see Karjalainen et al., 2015, for a similar argument in relation to large knowledge intensive companies).

Rather than glossing over, or ignoring, questions of access, in these accounts ‘getting in’ is used as a valuable source of information about the forms of exclusion that constitute distinct organizational ‘insides’. This carries significant potential for unpacking the wider political processes of *organizing* that constitute, but are often absent from accounts of, specific *organizations*. For example, Judy Wajcman (2004) has criticised ethnographic perspectives in science and technology studies, and specifically actor-network theory (ANT), for privileging an ontology of presence when accounting for the organization of innovation or scientific research in a laboratory. Whilst careful attention to the concrete activities of humans and non-humans in a laboratory setting can tell us much about how science is actually done, and progresses our knowledge beyond participants’ own accounts of scientific method, what it cannot do its tell us about the wider social processes that constitute the laboratory in the first place, including those processes that systematically exclude particular types of actors from this setting. For example, an ethnographic study of a male dominated scientific institute could tell us about how those men do science, but not how the institute itself is constituted by extensive processes of social organization, stretching from the family, through education, and into HRM, recruitment and organizational development, that simultaneously reproduce cultural gender norms and exclusionary practices. This social inequality has site-specific impacts, but these are invisible if we are only studying the organizational dynamics within the research site itself. As in Ho’s study discussed above, the explicit use of access as data can shed light upon such practices, though this depends as much on the identity and body of the researcher, as it does on their training or skills as a researcher, a point that brings into question the very idea of an objective knowledge of ‘organization’ and suggests a more situated form of knowing.

The most common ways of speaking about access carry distinct epistemological commitments, treating ‘access’ as if it were a process of gaining entry to a physical space, ‘out there’ somewhere. The question of when and where ethnographic research starts, and the methodological commitments of understanding ‘access’ in terms of data that is ‘out there’ in the field, is developed by Taylor (2015) who argues that these tales contain implicit epistemological commitments. These are drawn out in Taylor’s thoughtful reflection on longitudinal qualitative data collection processes and their particular challenges. She argues that negotiating access to organizations for a temporary research presence, such as that of classic organizational ethnographers, implies an objectivist perspective. For example, the commitment to returning to the university to gain distance and objectivity regarding the field (Whyte, 1964), or the idea of validating data by seeking confirmation from respondents on the accuracy of descriptive work (Buchanan et al., 1988), both seek to overcome the subjective entanglement of the researcher *in* the field through development of an external perspective. The implication is that qualitative work requires distance and objectivity in order to produce value-free knowledge that is somehow more ‘rigorous’ than a more explicitly situated account. Research participants provide data, which the analyst then takes away to assess, explain and develop theory from. The other end of the continuum that Taylor proposes finds researchers negotiating access for more collaborative, less hierarchical, more subjectively representative purposes. The epistemological framework of a research project may thus frame how access is negotiated, to what end, and what the outcome of the research can or cannot achieve. This is a quite different and more thought-provoking way to think of access. It moves beyond ‘access’ as an interesting story, or an additional data source, to seeing access as a means of clarifying how the knowledge produced from the research may be bounded in its political potential.

Taylor’s observations and argument are present in a different form in Cunliffe and Alcadipani’s (forthcoming) examination of access. They propose three perspectives on access: instrumental, transactional, and relational. Each of these approaches to negotiating and maintaining access is located according to how closely the researcher and researched engage, with each other, each other’s working contexts, and the purpose of the research. An instrumental approach, for example, is closely bounded by the researcher, with the sole purpose of getting in and getting out, with data in pocket. A relational approach, on the other hand, is founded on a ‘fluid relationship between researcher and research participants characterized by integrity, trust, and mutuality’ (p7 – see also Irvine (2003) on the issue of trust and confidentiality). The need for reflexivity is especially prominent in this latter approach, to ensure that the politicised nature of access as an ongoing, nonlinear process is recognised.

A second contemporary contribution to this developing debate (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016) explores the ‘how’ of research access from an ontological perspective that is fundamentally practice-oriented. These authors weave their experiences as participants on a North American doctoral programme to provide a reflexive account of negotiating access for fieldwork and propose a more dynamic way of seeing research, in which researchers continually interact with potential informants, academic institutional settings, and their selves. Researchers are encouraged to continually ‘re-strategize’ in the face of challenges such as denial of access or realization that a field does not in truth exist in a meaningful sense, and is therefore unable to be researched. This is a considerably more purposeful set of reflections than Taylor’s, in the sense that there is an underlying instrumentality to the reflections and how they are conceptualised. Access here, reasonably given the situated nature of the reflection in a doctoral programme, is a means to an end, and therefore subject to a less politicised, more bounded reflexivity.

The practice of epistemological reflexivity in relation to access is further extended in Crowhurst & kennedy-macfoy’s (2013) introduction to their *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* special issue on gatekeepers. They note how contributions to their special issue all locate gatekeepers as central to the conduct of research, and therefore as ‘equally deserving of both methodological and theoretical reflection’ (457). In the reflexive accounts the editors curate here, gatekeepers emerge from a conventional objectivist perspective (cf. Taylor, 2015) to become complex social actors who are in part constituted by researchers in the field. In particular, power relations are proposed as key to understanding both the ‘how’ of research access and what its negotiation means for the conduct of empirical work. As researchers we can, and perhaps should, reflect on how our identities are inflected by our construction of gatekeepers and entrances to research sites, and which entrances are more open to us. For example, in his work on hospital emergency rooms, Carmel (2011) found that he was able to quickly establish connections with the predominantly male junior doctors, perhaps due to a similar middle-class, masculine identity, but that this in turn made it harder for him to establish similar relations of trust and open communication with the nurses. Finally, Crowhurst & kennedy-macfoy (2013) acknowledge that the how of negotiating access for social research is changing as a result of social media use. They argue that individuals and institutions are much more difficult to identify, or define as gatekeepers, when data are hosted by social networks and websites. This is an issue we return to towards the end of this chapter.

**Why try to gain access: The ethics of negotiating entrance and exit**

Epistemological and ontological reflections, and the practise of reflexivity, also point to another way of thinking about access, addressing why we as researchers try to negotiate entry to organizations. The accounts reviewed above suggest three purposes: curiosity about a private or partially hidden culture, instrumentality (i.e. to collect data in order to produce knowledge), and to inform political action or change. Most researchers would probably present answers to the why question in terms of curiosity, either empirical (‘what really goes on in there?’) or theoretical (‘is that how organizations and management really work?’). This is the respectable rationale within our professional community for trying to gain entry to organizations, and one on which we can also build access negotiations with gatekeepers. Instrumentality also features, and is occasionally referred to. Sometimes this can take the form of a pragmatic instrumentality; many of the dissertation supervision meetings we have with undergraduate or post-graduate students centre on who they know that would allow them access to collect data. Negotiating access in the sense of identifying why we want to gain access to data or informants is clearly only partly an intellectual or methodological process.

Equally, the practice of research ethics does not exist only as a methodological or intellectual concern in relation to access. As we note below, it became more difficult and less acceptable to conduct covert research during the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the decline in use of this research method can be attributed to the development of university research ethics committees (Institutional Review Boards in North America). We have heard many stories of comical, sometimes farcical, verbal or written exchanges between researchers seeking approval and members of these committees. Qualitative research, open-ended or ethnographic fieldwork in particular, seems to cause trouble when colleagues and university managers are asked to give the host institution’s blessing to a research design. These interactions could simply be categorised as the unnecessary intrusion of inflexible bureaucratic rules into a professional process but Monaghan *et al.* (2013) offer a more nuanced interpretation. They argue that the superficial rationality and reasoned format of research ethics committees disguises a frustrating, decontextualizing unreason. The ‘ethics creep’ they observe in these committees has significant consequences for the researcher’s emotional wellbeing, and in its implications that social research is untrustworthy, especially qualitative inquiry. The primary institutional concerns of ethics committees seems to go far beyond the immediate concerns of ethical research conduct, focusing on more managerial issues of legal liability and institutional reputation.

To give an example of this, one of us supervised a doctoral research project exploring drug use in the workplace. Whilst the concept of ‘drugs’ in the study was drawn so widely as to include alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, even a more restrictive focus on illegal narcotics would still have encompassed a large proportion of the adult UK population (Smith and Land, 2014). Despite this, and based largely on misunderstandings of the size of the population the study was drawing upon, the university research ethics committee took a full year, from a three year PhD project, to grant approval, and even then required such significant changes to the process for recruiting respondents that access was made much more difficult than it should have been. Whilst some of the reasons offered for the committee’s reluctance seemed to be honest concerns with researcher safety and respondent anonymity, these were based on an almost complete lack of knowledge concerning the size of the population for the study, and an almost wilful disregard of the breadth of the operational definition of ‘drug’. In attempting to clarify the committee’s expectations, conversations with a non-academic administrator, who functioned as a de facto gatekeeper to the committee, suggested that the main concern was that if the research would explain why drug use occurs at work, this could be seen as condoning such behaviour, and thus bring the university into disrepute. Indeed, a concern for the university’s reputation was part of the research ethics committee’s remit, so this was, apparently, a legitimate concern.

However, this ‘concern’ only makes sense if there is an elision of the distinction between explanation and understanding, on the one hand, and approving of, or condoning, on the other. Whilst we are used to seeing such a slippage in mass media reporting on terrorism, which regularly equates explanation with moral justification and is concerned first with condemning terrorism, and only secondarily, if at all, with understanding it. This confusion, on the part of the committee, was compounded by their apparent ignorance of even basic sociological facts concerning the size of the target population and context of drug use in the UK. Whilst our own estimates placed the population for the study in the millions, the responses of the ethics committee suggested that they thought the researcher would be working with a tiny population who probably all knew each other. Given that most members of the ethics committee were not from the social sciences, and that the secretary/gatekeeper had a professional background in catering management, these misapprehensions may be understandable, but that makes them no less mistaken. Sadly, our access to the research committee in our own institution was so problematic that it took a full year just to get the permission to recruit respondents. Leaving aside the farce that a concern with the ethical treatment of human beings nearly derailed a state research council funded project, and with it a researcher’s extremely promising academic career, this example shows how access today, at least in UK higher education, does not depend entirely on the researcher’s motivations. The ‘why’ of access must also account for the sometimes contradictory motivations of institutional bodies such as funding councils and ethics committees, as well as their specific blind spots and areas of ignorance.

**What are we trying to access? Cultures, organizations, experiences**

As noted above, ethics committees can have difficulty understanding what social researchers are trying to gain access to. In proposals, researchers often promise anonymity to individuals and organizations, partly as a means to protect employees and institutions from harm. This principle has become an almost obligatory commitment to the point of thoughtless reflex, but has recently been challenged both as a principle and as a practical pledge (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). As we have argued elsewhere, the automatic assumption of anonymity as a norm for organizational research is particularly problematic when the status of ‘subject’ is extended to an organization. It is underpinned by an anthropomorphic extension of human rights to an organization that is both ontologically and politically problematic (Taylor and Land, 2014; cf. Bakan, 2005).

There are two main issues that arise here concerning the ontological status of ‘the organization’ to which access for research is sought, both relating to the question of whether an organization is a coherent entity. As we noted earlier, the language of access and ‘getting in’ works on the basis of a spatial metaphor of organizations that conceives of them as relatively coherent and bounded physical entities. This may have made a certain sense when researchers were thinking mainly of large-scale industrial organizations behind walls that could be approached as a foreign land, but today the organization is more often conceived as a network, or value-chain, comprised of varying links, only some of which may be underpinned by traditional stable employment contracts that assume physical co-presence within a single location. Some organizational members will be sub-contracted, self-employed or employed by intermediaries such as agencies providing temporary work. In other cases, value productive activities include ‘work’ undertaken outside paid employment, encompassing prosumers or co-creators (Zwick et al., 2008), as with Facebook where users actually produce the media content and employees only manage the platform (Beverungen et al., 2015). Similar examples would be Uber or Airbnb, which neither own the primary capital used to deliver services – cars and property – nor directly employ the front-line service delivery workers – car and property owners (Srnicek, 2016). In such a context the very idea of ownership and who is inside or outside the organization, and thus who or what the researcher needs to gain access to, is much less stable than simple metaphors of ‘getting in’ might suggest.

The second point applies to even the most stable, physically co-located organization. Most ethnographic researchers are concerned with organizational cultures, but the literature has long recognised that organizations are not single, unitary cultures but fragmented or plural (Martin, 1992). Organizations are nested social systems, and gaining access to sub-cultures, or sub-groups within these, is always and necessarily a political process of gaining ‘social access’, not only physical access. To gain effective social access means establishing some sort of rapport and trust with key actors and groups but, as Carmel (2011) notes, successfully negotiating social access with one group might actually impede social access with another group. To take a very simple example, if the main gatekeeper and sponsor for access is a senior manager, then those further down the hierarchy, or trade union representatives, are likely to be mistrustful and suspicious of the researcher. This goes beyond ‘getting in’ or even ‘getting on’ in the organization, suggesting a need to ‘get around’ in the organization, moving between social groups (Carmel, 2011). Whilst this makes sense from a conventional ethnographic perspective that seeks to map out the various cultures and structures of interaction that make up the everyday achievement of organizing, it falls back on the objectivism that Taylor (2015) has critiqued. It assumes that the researcher both should, and can, move neutrally between social groups and account for them all objectively. A contrasting view would suggest that researchers necessarily enter organizations as politically engaged actors, already located within the social context of the organization, and within the wider social context that it is a part of.

This last point takes us back to our earlier arguments against the promise of unreflective anonymity. Organizations can be represented as powerful social actors and held up as exemplars or villains in political discourse. By automatically assuming anonymity of our case organizations, researchers take themselves out of public debates over organization and its effects. This public discourse has been amplified by the ease of communication that the Internet and social media have enabled. As such, we would suggest there are strong arguments in favour of identifying *some* research sites and *some* individual participants. For example, identification may contribute to a researcher’s obligation to be accountable to a funder in disseminating research as widely as possible to facilitate impact. Participants may also request to be named, perhaps to claim an act that they are proud of. Finally, Tilley & Woodthorpe (2011) note the distinction between anonymity and confidentiality, and in particular the possibility that the former does not guarantee the latter. Again, this is particularly salient in research that makes use of data from social media and the Internet.

**Emerging from ‘failure’: The consequences of denial of access**

Peticca-Harris et al. (2016) set out useful and thought-provoking strategies for the researcher confronted with closed doors and lack of access. Ultimately, a lack of entry to an organization or lack of participants willing to share their experiences of work and management may lead us to switch topics, abandon a project, or come to terms with failure. This is, in some ways, a positive attitude toward lack of access, a form of ‘moving on’ in which the researcher accepts the death of the project, to explore what else is practicable or possible. The research idea may resurface in a different form, the reading might be useful elsewhere, and perhaps the conversations with gatekeepers will result in an invitation to collect data on something else.

Karjalainen et al. (2015) also explore denial of access, in their open discussion of a partially ‘failed’ project. They gained access to two large consultancies to collect data on work-life boundaries, but were then denied by a further three. Two things emerge from their reflection: first, how time and energy consuming access negotiation can be; and second, how rich the process can be if treated reflexively and analytically. They conclude that access negotiations, especially negotiations that are superficially unsuccessful, must be understood as methodologically and empirically valuable. This point is echoed by Cunliffe and Alcadipani (forthcoming: 2) in their observation that ‘the experience of gaining and maintaining access can itself tell us a lot about practices, processes, and power in the organizations we want to study’.

However, we also think that a flat denial of access may also open up further possibilities for researchers. After a long period of categorisation as unethical or unnecessary, fresh arguments have been made recently in favour of covert research. Calvey (2008) provides the strongest argument for covert methods in the negotiation of access to fieldwork settings, noting that there is a ‘submerged tradition’ of this practice that is often neglected. He argues that research ethics approval processes unreflectively separate covert and overt methods. In this process, ‘covert’ has taken on connotations of unreasonable or even illegal deception. In addition, gaining informed consent from participants has often come, according to Calvey, to mean adherence to an instrumental, formulaic process which neither respects nor honours subjects. He also notes that the boundaries between ‘data’ and ‘not-data’ are inevitably blurred for qualitative researchers hanging around in organizations, implying that we all practise a degree of covert-ness. This in turn means that qualitative social research occupies a continuum of overt/covert, rather than a location on one side of a dichotomy.

Calvey’s argument for covert research focuses on the quality of data. However, he also raises ‘public interest’ justifications for collecting data in this way, citing Goffman’s (1961) study of asylums and Dalton’s (1959) analysis of the moralities of management practice. Both studies are highly influential and still regularly cited in our field; neither would exist without the option of conducting research covertly. This tradition continues in some studies of work and organization, in for example Jenny Chan and colleagues’ work on Foxconn, in which she undertook paid employment in the company in order to examine its employment and management practices, without informing the company officially (Ngai et al., 2016). In such cases there is a strong argument that information on unethical employment practices should be collected and analysed for the public good, and that such trumps the rights to privacy of a fictional subject, the corporation. Covert research should therefore be considered more regularly, where appropriate, with the encouragement of research supervisors, ethics committees, and methodologists writing in textbooks and collections like this. It is also worth noting, with Calvey (2008), that being covert is often part of a researcher’s practice when conducting research close to home in universities. We can see this most clearly in two recent autoethnographies of higher education (e.g. Sparkes, 2007; Parker, 2013). This approach to collecting data is clearly covert, inasmuch as most members of the organization around the researcher have not been apprised of the fact that they are being defined as respondents in a research project. It also raises interesting ethical questions concerning the grounds on which an employee might legitimately be prohibited from speaking about their own work experiences.

There are of course dangers to conducting research covertly. Within the profession, some colleagues will continue to think of covert research as inherently unethical, unreasonably deceptive, and as betrayal of respondents. Some journals may refuse to publish analysis based on covert research, and it could be a significant risk for early career or doctoral researchers. Outside the academic setting, covert research may be critiqued as unreliable. It clearly demands strong, clear professional, collegiate, institutional support, before and during fieldwork.

Our second alternative to denial-of-access comes from outside the academy. Methodologists sometimes note the similarities between what qualitative researchers do and how investigative journalists work. Such a comparison can, we think, be helpful in relation to the practicalities of collecting data. British documentary maker Louis Theroux has been exploring specific subcultures for many years, often focusing on peculiarly American communities, in an attempt to shed light on their wider host culture. Watching Theroux’s films as a researcher, the level of organizational and individual access he accomplishes is striking. Many of the communities he enters are constitutionally secretive, ‘dirty’ in a sociological sense, or illegal. Despite this, Theroux is able to negotiate time with community members, and to film them explaining how they live and why they follow the belief systems they do.

Despite his experience and skill, however, Theroux has been unable to access one community, the Scientology organization. Legally categorised as a religion, Scientologists are notorious for their reluctance to permit ‘outsiders’ (i.e. non-believers) into the physical and social spaces where belief is practised. The film team specifically wanted to avoid interviewing ex-believers or to make a documentary about their failure to gain access, both common fallback positions when organizational doors remain firmly closed (Theroux, 2015). Theroux decided to develop a third approach, which he calls ‘negative access’, based on recent developments in film-making and recent Scientology responses to critical accounts.

First, Theroux avoided the convention of interviewing ex-members by instead filming re-enactments of their experiences within the organization. This directed role-playing allowed Theroux and his subjects to explore questions of responsibility and discipline more closely than in an interview format. Role-play is, interestingly, a well-established but very neglected research method in the social sciences (Robinson, 2004; see Johnson (1994) for a classic and insightful use of the method). However, this was just the initial stage of the ‘negative access’ negotiation. Scientologists have developed an approach to what they understand as attempts to make critical or negative accounts of their organization. It involves them attempting to ‘turn the tables’ on the researcher or journalist, by making a negative or critical film about them and their work.

Theroux realised that he could work with the interactions created through the Scientologists’ attacks on him to provide layers of emotional and moral depth to his understanding of the organization and thus its representation in film. This, it seems to us, is an intriguing way of gaining access to the experience of an organization, without actually entering its buildings or negotiating formal access to it. As a further alternative when denied access, we think it is worth considering. Provocation of the kind that Theroux practices will of course bring dangers to the researcher, particularly if the organization or community being provoked is powerful. However, as an approach, carefully used, it might also result in more politically engaged research by generating unusual insights into power-full organizational forms.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have sought to examine the process of research access in terms of *how* we gain access, *why* we need access, and *what* researchers are seeking access to. By presenting some of the practical, ontological, epistemological, and ethical challenges of securing access to research sites, we have tried to highlight the non-linear, contested, and institutionally specific nature of ‘access’ for academic researchers. In this we have emphasised the ways in which a reflexive engagement with this process can provide new sources of data, and encouraged an ethical and political responsibility for our relations with those we research, the wider publics that our research addresses, especially in how we represent our relations with the former to the latter in our accounts of doing research.

In the final section we also considered what to do when access, conventionally understood, is blocked. Here we think that it is important for social researchers to recognize that changing organizational forms and new technologies of communication can provide both new research tools and new ways of understanding and analysing what ‘organization’ is, where it lies, and how we might gain access to it. We have also suggested that further debate is needed concerning issues around anonymity in organizational research and over how institutional ethics committees think about social research and the responsibilities of a university to the wider public good. If academic research is to remain relevant to the world outside, then academic researchers may need to engage with other traditions of research, including more covert forms of investigation, regularly deployed by investigative journalists, or the kinds of ‘negative access’ suggested by documentary makers. A formal rejection of access by organizational gatekeepers need not mean the end of a research project. With some creativity and reflexivity, even an outright refusal of access can be a valuable source of data and can open up alternative avenues of investigation that may, ultimately, be more informative than having a single gatekeeper hold the door open for you.

Perhaps, like Kafka’s unlikely hero in *The Castle*, we will never gain access through the front door, and may never feel that we really made it into an organization at all. However there are many ways into an organization, and organization spills over into many other locations, as when workers and officials from Kafka’s castle leak out into the streets, homes and bars of the surrounding town. In this sense the tale of our own struggle to find an organizational entrance, and map its many connections may prove as informative as being granted easy access to what the organization’s gatekeepers want us to see.

**References**

Alcidipani, R. and Hodgson, D. (2009) ‘By any means necessary? Ethnographic access, ethics and the critical researcher’, *Tamara: Journal of critical postmodern organization science*, 7(4): 127-146.

Bakan, J. (2005) Th*e Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. New York: Free Press.

Beverungen, A., Böhm, S. and Land, C. (2015) ‘Free Labour, Social Media, Management: Challenging Marxist Organization Studies’, *Organization Studies*, 36(4): 473-489.

Buchanan, D., Boddy, D. & McCalman, J. (1988) ‘Getting in, getting on, getting out, and getting back’, in Bryman, A. (ed.) Doing Research in Organizations. London: Routledge, pp.53-67.

Calvey, D. (2008) ‘The art and politics of covert research: Doing ‘situated ethics’ in the field’, *Sociology*, 42(5): 905-918.

Carmel, S. (2011) ‘Social access in the workplace: are ethnographers gossips?’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 25(3): 551-560.

Crowhurst, I. and kennedy-macfoy, m. (2013) ‘Troubling gatekeepers: Methodological considerations for social research’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16(6): 457-462.

Cunliffe, A. and Alcadipani, R. (forthcoming) ‘The politics of access in fieldwork: Immersion, backstage dramas, and deception’, *Organizational Research Methods.*

Dalton, M. (1959) *Men Who Manage*. New York: Wiley.

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*. New York: Doubleday.

Ho, K. (2009) *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Irvine, H. (2003) ‘Trust me! A personal account on confidentiality issues in an organizational research project’, *Accounting Forum*, 27(2): 111-131.

Irvine, H. and Gaffikin, M. (2006) ‘Getting in, getting on and getting out: Reflections on a qualitative research project’, *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability*, 19(1): 115-145.

Johnson, C. (1994) ‘Gender, legitimate authority, and leader-subordinate conversations’, *American Sociological Review*, 59(1): 122-135.

Karjalainen, M., Niemistö, C. and Hearn, J. (2015) ‘Unpacking the problem of research access(es): The case of large knowledge intensive companies’, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 10(3): 274-293.

Lahman, M., Rodriguez, K., Moses, L., Griffin, K., Mendoza, B. and Yacoub, W. (2015) ‘A rose by any other name is still a rose? Problematizing pseudonyms in research’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(5): 445-453.

Land, C. and Taylor, S. (2010) ‘Surf’s up: Work, life, balance and brand in a New Age capitalist organization’, *Sociology*, 44(3): 395-413.

Martin, J. (1992) *Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Monaghan, L., O’Dwyer, M. and Gabe, J. (2013) ‘Seeking university Research Ethics Committee approval: The emotional vicissitudes of a ‘rationalised’ process’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16(1): 65-80.

Ngai, P., Yuan, S., Yuhua, G., Huilin, L., Chan J. and Selden, M. (2016) ‘Apple, Foxconn, and Chinese workers’ struggles from a global labor perspective’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 17(2): 166-185.

Parker, M. (2013) ‘University, ltd.: Changing a business school’, *Organization*, 21(2): 281-292.

Pettica-Harris, A., deGama, N. and Elias, S. (2016) ‘A dynamic process model for finding informants and gaining access in qualitative research’, *Organizational Research Methods*, 19(3): 376-401.

Rancière, J. (2001) ‘Ten Theses on Politics’, *Theory & Event,* 5(3). Online at <http://www.after1968.org/app/webroot/uploads/RanciereTHESESONPOLITICS.pdf>

Robinson, D. (2004) ‘Role playing’, in Lewis-Beck, M., Bryman, A., & Liao, T.F. (eds) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*. London: Sage.

Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J. and Kitzinger, C. (2015) ‘Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice’, *Qualitative Research*, 15(5): 616-632.

Schwartzman, H. (1993) *Ethnography in Organizations*. London: Sage.

Smith, C. and Land, C. (2014) ‘Pharamacological routes to everyday exceptionality’, *Culture and Organization*, 20(4): 269-287.

Sparkes, A. (2007) ‘Embodiment, academics and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(4): 521-550.

Srnicek, N. (2016) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.

Stake, R. (2005) ‘Qualitative case studies’, in Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition, pp.443-466. London: Sage.

Taylor, R. (2015) ‘Beyond anonymity: Temporality and the production of knowledge in a qualitative longitudinal study’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(3): 281-292.

Taylor, S. and Land, C. (2014) ‘Organizational anonymity and the negotiation of research access’, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 9(2): 98-109.

Theroux, L. (2015) ‘My Scientology Movie by Louis Theroux: ‘I felt like I’d been blooded’’, *The Guardian*, 14/10/15 - <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/14/louis-theroux-my-scientology-movie-i-felt-like-id-been-blooded>, last accessed 22/10/15.

Van Maanen, J. (1988) *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Whyte, W.F. (1964) ‘The Slum: On the Evolution of Street Corner Society’, in A.J. vidich, J. Bensman and M.R. Stein (eds) *Reflections on Community Studies*. New York: Harper & Row. pp. 3-69.

Zwick, D., Bonsu, S. and Darmody, A. (2008) ‘Putting Consumers to Work ‘Co-creation’ and new marketing govern-mentality’, *Journal of Consumer Culture,* 8(2): 163–196.