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On Brokers, Commodity of Information and Liberian Former Combatants

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates research brokers and commodification of information. When combined with inherently asymmetric research relationships and successful gatekeeping, brokers create demand and become indispensable. Potential negative effects of brokerage and commodification of information are discussed through experiences studying former combatants in Liberia. There bargains with brokers who could facilitate access to this hidden population resulted in a vicious circle as brokers confirmed what researchers wanted to hear. The attention to this issue was first brought by subsequent ethnography and participant observation, which also offer the promise of an ethically defensible way of collecting information.

Introduction

As daily references to ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ illustrate, debates about truth have become an everyday occurrence in the second decade of the 21st century. In 2016, the Oxford University Press chose ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Some might however point out that there is little new in this broader trend, which merely underlines the intimate relationship between ‘truth’ and power. For instance, Orwell (1939) commented Hitler’s tyranny in Germany by warning that ‘[i]t is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the Leader says so.’ In his later work, he described a world where this had happened,

While now seeping into public awareness as many premises long taken for granted are questioned, researchers have been aware of the complexities of ‘truth’ for much longer. If nothing else, as producers and peddlers of knowledge, researchers have almost by necessity encountered the idea of information as a commodity. The commodification of information becomes apparent in the inherent asymmetry of the actors involved in fieldwork research: we researchers enter the field for the sake of evidence that we

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can base our arguments on. This makes us dependent on those who can provide this material, whereas our counterparts are less dependent on us (for examples, see the other contributions in this special issue, as well as Adler and Adler 1991, pp. 177–178, Turner 2010). Relational asymmetry results in methodological problems especially when access to information, if not the information itself, become commodified. Conflict settings further exacerbate these processes as access to information becomes curtailed, and ‘truth’ a polarised thing. (Jenkins 2015, Käihkö 2018)

This article investigates research brokerage from the perspective of commodification of information, and departs from the encouragement to reflexive thinking regarding fieldwork assistants found in a special issue edited by Middleton and Cons, and the questions posed by them (2014, p. 285): ‘what are we not seeing by not talking about these workers of the field? In what ways might reintroducing fieldworkers back into the discussion of fieldwork not only expose uncomfortable truths but also open up new and productive possibilities?’

The special issue this article belongs to however focuses on a broader category of research brokers, defined in the introduction by Maria Eriksson Baaz and Mats Utas as ‘key person[s] being in-between the researcher and the researched, who regulate access and flows of knowledge between them.’ While a broker in more general meaning can be defined as ‘a middleman, intermediary, or agent generally; an interpreter, messenger, [or] commissioner’ in a way that similarly applies to virtually all fieldworkers, more common definitions include ‘a retailer of commodities’ or ‘one who acts as a middleman in bargains’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2019). It is hence not far-fetched to suggest that commodification of information—exchange—is often a central issue in research brokerage.

Following Davies’ (2002) view that reflexivity contributes positively to research methodology, the methodological issues of brokerage and commodification of information are discussed through the author’s experiences with former combatants in Liberia in 2012–17, during which I spent 15 months in the country. Like Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Ellen Furnari and Rachel Julian, as well as Swati Parashar and Mats Utas do in this special issue, reflecting on personal experience allows drawing from real cases where brokers assumed positions of power towards researchers, and not least the author. The study of former combatants in the post-conflict context of Liberia offers an illustrative case for discussing the methodological issues connected to commodification of information and research brokers. The subject matter of conflict highlights these issues. For instance, former combatants constitute a so-called hidden population (Singer 2013) in Liberia, and many who belong to this population today do so unwillingly. Facing more immediate everyday struggles and the (however unlikely) prospect of a war crime court, many former combatants want to remain unseen. Both invisibility and fear give opportunities for gatekeepers to control access to this population.
Drawing from my own experiences, I describe how the inherent asymmetry of fieldwork relations, gatekeeping and commodification of information can combine into a particularly problematic form of brokerage: brokers may not only became indispensable to researchers but also become incentivised to portray themselves as central to beliefs, narratives and stories to which a version of truth they constructed gave value to. At worst, this results in a vicious circle, where brokers confirm what they believe researchers want to hear in order to retain their invaluableness, and hence continued access to various commodities. This vicious circle results in varied ‘truths’ which correspond to what researchers are set out to prove in the first place, or whatever brokers believe will benefit them most. To reiterate, commodification of ‘truth’ may be inevitable, but it also poses methodological issues that require consideration.

This article continues as follows. The first section offers the context of Liberia, and introduces a research project that investigated command structures among Liberian former combatants where the author was involved in. This project offers two examples of employing research brokers, both with their own advantages and disadvantages. The second section focuses on research brokers, and the factors that led to the vicious circle mentioned above. The third section introduces ‘David’, the most central broker in the research project. I discuss how David’s narratives that had confirmed the hypotheses became increasingly questioned by information collected elsewhere. The fourth section concentrates on brokerage and commodification of information through the example of David, and presents the stakes at play. The fifth section focuses on participant-observation in this context. Participant-observation raised awareness about the issues of brokerage in the first place, and continued to offer a way around some of the challenges of commodification of information. The concluding sixth section returns to the relationship between power and ‘truth’. While brokerage can indeed result in skewing of research results, as the more powerful party it is ultimately our—not the brokers—responsibility to do better.

**Researching Former Combatants in Liberia**

Turning the country’s already troubled history worse, war arrived in Liberia on Christmas Eve 1989 with rebels led by Charles Taylor. For the next 6 years the country was effectively divided between warring factions, most of which could be identified with certain ethnic groups and external backers. Thousands were killed, many more lost their homes and fled to neighbouring countries. Violence that had uprooted refugees soon followed across international borders, risking the stability of the whole Mano River region.¹ This first war ended in a 1996 peace agreement, which paved way for presidential elections overwhelmingly won by Taylor the year later. Unable to bring peace, Taylor soon faced renewed rebellion (Käihkö 2015). By the
time he left to exile in August 2003, Liberia had experienced war for 14 years, and was widely perceived as an archetype of a devastated post-conflict country ripe for renewed conflict. With destroyed economy, damaged societal fabric and thousands of former combatants with little to reintegrate to, even a decade into the post-conflict Liberia thus appeared to offer a good case for investigating former combatants and their networks. Following unspoken assumptions regarding fixed command structures in Western state militaries, these wartime networks were expected to have remained intact. This notion of continued command chains remains a staple in much of research of Liberian former combatants, both implicitly (Hoffman 2017) and explicitly (Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014, Themnér 2015).

It was a research project premised on such assumed continuation of wartime command chains that first brought me to Liberia in March 2012. While I had, in part because of my military background, already spent over a year in East and Central Africa, I had never been in West Africa, nor had I fully understood that it would take a month before I would begin to understand Liberian English. Finding former combatants to study would equally pose difficulties I had hardly considered beforehand. In my defence, there was both little time to think about such questions that in hindsight appear fundamental, nor many opportunities for such preparations. Besides, the idea was that I would spend the first few weeks with more experienced colleagues who had made arrangements with local brokers paid to solve such practical issues for us.

This resulted in two different approaches for accessing information, with the differences reflecting the disciplinary backgrounds of my colleagues. The first one included semi-formal introductions to people the first broker had identified as key informants, and who—it was hoped—would later be willing to hang with me during my first 7-month stay in Liberia. These introductions were made over club sandwiches and one or several drinks in a Monrovian hotel that had seen its best days, or sitting and smoking cigarettes outside the homes of these informants in more rural settings.

The second approach was offered by the second broker, who, with more local help outside the capital identified a number of former commanders as potential key informants. These informants were subsequently invited to a more business-like interview in our motel. After initial interviews one of these informants was selected for further study. In a signed contract, he promised to provide access to people who fought under him during the war. Effectively, he was paid to talk to us, and to make sure that his former subordinates would come to us at designated times for interview. The original broker then acted as a translator and facilitator, but had mostly subcontracted the bulk of the task to the local brokers and the former commander. While this may or may not have been the case with some meetings arranged through the first broker as well, in this second alternative
each of the four layers in this chain from the main brokers to the local brokers to the former commander to his fighters were openly paid after interviews. As is often the case (Middleton et al. 2014), little of this was discussed in the methods sections of the resulting publications.

Both approaches had their own advantages, and ultimately built on brokers who enjoyed at least some trust among the potential informants, which we tried to exploit to the fullest (for comparison, see Jenkins 2015). The first approach provided few immediate gains in terms of information, but established potential for more personal relationships that I could begin to develop during the months of subsequent ethnographic fieldwork. The second approach benefited from more formulated research goals and a ready arsenal of questions, which led to a wealth of information collected within a short period of time.

As was to be expected, the two approaches also came with specific disadvantages. In the first alternative, few of the informants identified by the broker (who was not a former combatant herself) turned out to be useful for the study of former combatant networks. Most had no intention to contribute to research without financial compensation, the provision of which I felt uneasy about. Not only was I afraid that this would skew narratives, but as the bulk of my fieldwork was conducted in semi-rural settings I expected news to travel. The worst-case scenario was that no-one would be willing to talk to me without getting paid first. The four-wheel drive and the driver we had rented had also raised expectations. Several years later, they continued to be mentioned by some of the people we have met.

In the end my worries mattered little. About half of the informants turned out to be civilians, and the majority of the remaining combatants either not the kind of commanders they were introduced as, or turned out to have been involved in the early stages of the first war. While previous research on Liberian former combatants has largely lumped together people from various backgrounds and wars together, it feels reasonable to assume that not only were the two wars qualitatively different but that time too plays role in the investigation of identities and social relations. It simply felt misguided to focus on people who had been combatants two decades earlier, when even in the best case the most recent war experiences came from almost a decade ago.

The second alternative resulted in no deep personal relationships during the interviews, but one of the interviewees later became one of my main informants after I began to hang with him at his business establishment during evenings. Years later ‘Musa’ (not his real name) revealed that many of the people interviewed were in fact not former combatants at all, but simply curious youth who lived nearby and who perhaps saw an opportunity to earn quick cash: we provided a can of soda, a packet of crackers and $5 for less than an hour of their time—all in all a great deal at the time. Neither
should it be forgotten that the brokers had a contract to fulfil, and interviewees to deliver in order to receive their $50 reward.

**Truth, Power and Brokers**

As the idea of the post-truth society with ‘alternative facts’ well illustrates, truth equals to belief, and is inherently a function of power (Jackson 1987; see even Robben 1995). In the case of our research of former combatants, a theoretical hypothesis regarding lingering wartime chains of command had been crafted, which we then set out to test. As noted, this was most immediately done through a list of questions. The first problem was that there was no alternative theory or systematic attempt to disprove the hypothesis during fieldwork. Anton Blok has highlighted the importance of posing questions regarding the broader context, even and especially if this leads to questioning one’s original hypothesis (Blok 2001; see also Hoffmann 2014). While it is reasonable and often necessary to depart from a hypothesis when examining messy realities, stressful environments can lead the researcher to reaffirm pre-existing assumptions in what has been called confirmation bias. Much of what we did, from asking former commanders to act as brokers to provide people who fought under them during the war for interviews to laughing off a case where what our informants said obviously contrasted with what we observed hardly tested, but rather proved the hypothesis. This was the direction my research too was heading to after I stayed in Liberia following the departure of my colleagues.

Aside from our lack of scepticism and alternative explanations, what had led to the vicious circle where our interview data could only confirm the hypothesis? Three factors stand out: the inherent asymmetry of fieldwork relationships, the brokers’ successful gatekeeping and the commodification of information. These combined in a particularly problematic brokerage, where brokers not only became indispensable but also confirmed what was expected of them.

That brokers became part of this process should not have come as a surprise, as they were given a role and encouraged to play it out. The brokers were assigned importance as former commanders and ‘big men’ who continued to control their former subordinates, but also rewarded financially for proving that they could actually do so with the money provided by us: the hypothesis was that they had a position of authority that originated from the roles they played during the civil wars, and which continued a decade into the post-conflict. In what reminds of the idea of Gerald Berreman about ethnographers (but arguably even other researchers) and their informants being both performers and audience to one another (Berreman 2007), here the story became a means of empowerment—if not transformation—for the former commanders: because of the financial means provided by us the former commanders were able to broker benefits to people close to them in exactly the manner the hypothesis
posed they would do, as well as to earn money and other commodities during the research. All this was used as evidence to confirm the initial hypothesis.

Middleton and Cons emphasise the condition of employment as a factor that contributes to the ‘commodification of ethnographic labour’, which ‘directly shapes the data obtained through these working relationships. Ethnographic labour here cannot be divorced from the logics of capital’ (Middleton et al. 2014, p. 284). It is immediately necessary to recognise that this commodification is hardly limited to our relationships with those we work with. Considering that evidence and arguments underpin the development of academic careers in a competitive environment characterised by the maxim ‘publish or perish’, this commodification is also at the core of the research profession. Yet it is also clear that the logics of capital are not equal to all parties involved in research. As discussed in depth by the editors of this special issue in the introduction and touched even by other contributors, researchers enjoy many privileges often unattainable by those we work with. This, and the fact that we need brokers more than they need us, emphasises the inherent asymmetry of our relationships. This asymmetry becomes even more pronounced when brokers succeed in establishing themselves as gatekeepers, for instance between a population difficult to access and researchers who only have a week or two to collect their raw material that they will spent much longer working with.

Cohen (1975; see also Boissevain 1974) has argued that political brokers are defined by their power to manage meaning, and their subsequent ability to create a demand. This effectively makes brokers indispensable. Julie Schiltz and Karen Büscher have observed how indispensability of brokers extends even into the realm of research. For them, brokers alone possess the ‘capacity to actively shape and reshape the research process, from the set-up to the results’ (Schiltz and Büscher 2018, p. 126). From this perspective, brokers not only mediate information but also effectively manage meaning. In other words, they control the emphasis and contents of significance. Yet according to Cohen, brokers do not only bring together patrons and clients because they have mutual needs. Through meaning-making brokers in fact create this kind of demand, typically in a way that makes the broker indispensable to both patrons and clients. A broker thus seeks (through the management of meaning) to contrive indispensability for itself, and it is on the perception of his indispensability by both patron and client that the broker’s success rests… The broker who becomes dispensable ceases to be a ‘broker’ in any meaningful political sense. (Cohen 1975, p. 79–80)

While it could be argued that asymmetry alone makes us forever dependent on brokers and that brokers always shape research, it is important to recognise that brokers’ capacity to do this varies. Neither is everyone who participates in our research indispensable. Equally important is to point out
that this control of significance does not need to equal to wilful manipulation, as Cohen appears to suggest. Like all other people—including researchers—even those we work with ‘come to the field with their own preconceptions, values and belief systems’ (Turner 2010, p. 210). Even further, brokers’ own identities and social positions shape the possible venues for research (Jenkins 2015, p. 145). While they can open some doors, this can come at the cost of closing others.

Asymmetry in relationships, successful gatekeeping and commodification of information can lead to situations where researchers offer incentives to brokers to portray themselves as central to beliefs, narratives and stories to which a version of truth they construct gives value to. At worst, the bargain results in a vicious circle where brokers confirm whatever they believe researchers want to hear in order to retain their invaluableness, and hence continued access to various commodities. Ultimately, one ends up with varied ‘truths’ which at worst correspond to what researchers are set out to prove in the first place, or whatever the brokers believe will benefit them most. To reiterate, commodification of ‘truth’ may be inevitable, but it also poses methodological problems that require consideration.

As researchers we often rely on brokers. This is especially the case with sensitive topics, such as armed conflict and civil war. There are three issues that permeate war, and hence influence attempts to study it: use of violence, polarising interaction between belligerents and instrumentality in the sense that organised violence equals to continuation of politics between these belligerents (Käihkö 2018). It is these three that ultimately explain much of the insecurity highlighted in the introduction to this special issue, as well as contributed to the difficulty of accessing former combatants in Liberia.

Despite the fact that there are thousands of former combatants spread across Liberia, finding them is not easy for two reasons well captured by the former combatants I worked with. First, as argued by Musa, ‘war [is] not written [on] anybody’s skin.’ In other words, most former combatants do not appear any different from other people, and thus offer a population hidden in plain sight. Like in many other contexts that have suffered an armed conflict, even in Liberia lingering fears of legal consequences of participation continue to make researching these events difficult. More immediately, many former combatants clearly identify some of their actions during the civil wars to have been of questionable legitimacy, if not to themselves then at least to the broader society. Compared to their everyday life and struggles, for most the war also felt increasingly peripheral over a decade after its end.

Former combatants were thus difficult to identify and to get them to tell about their experiences. An additional problem was that, as Musa and several other former combatants I worked with pointed out, ‘anybody can call themselves anything after the war.’ In other words, people who grew up
during times of war know enough about it to present themselves as former combatants to those who did not. Those presenting themselves as former combatants may in fact not be who they claim to be. This was indeed even the case with Musa himself, who had been initially identified by the brokers as a former commander. While a former combatant, Musa never commanded troops on the frontlines. This suggests that the ambiguous and typically undefined term of commander—in Liberian English ‘general’—was likely often lost in translation in Liberia, and that the adoption of a Western military conceptual apparatus with its many implicit assumptions can easily lead one astray (Käihkö 2017). It was nevertheless first in 2013, and only when I lived together with Musa for the second time, when I began to fathom his wartime status, and only then gradually.

This second problem of impersonation is made more acute by the first problem of access, as this understandably leads to reliance on the more limited number of individuals willing to divulge information, while reinforcing the potential for gatekeeping, and hence brokerage. While this concerns all field research, the case of David, the only person accessed through both approaches used to study the Liberian former combatant command chains, exemplifies the inherent dilemma of research brokers and commodification of information. David’s case suggests a relationship characterised by dependency. Able to establish himself as indispensable, his interests began to influence all the subsequent aspects of the research process.

**David, the Research Broker**

As most other Liberians, ‘David’ (as he is called in subsequent research) had no job, but survived by hustling. One day an acquaintance appeared, and told him that a foreign researcher had hired his organisation to interview people and collect information about the situation of former combatants, and especially former commanders. David offered himself as one in what amounted to the beginning of a long-term relationship between him and a group of foreign researchers, which resulted in theories of continued wartime command chains where his participation has played a major role. David’s poor situation marks him different from many other brokers, who tend to come from more privileged backgrounds.

It was clearly beneficial for David to associate himself with the organisation that likely falls in the category of what Mats Utas in his contribution calls a ‘virtual research shop brokering access to ex-combatants’. David got paid all along the way, from the initial interview to a more substantial brokerage where he presented a group that fought under him during the war to a researcher to me moving to his house to live together with him for over 4 months in 2012 (I paid him rather paltry $25 dollars per month for his own room—the best in the compound he was guarding—and on a handful of
occasions offered him food or beer in a nearby street restaurant which served internal organs instead of more expensive meat). At least once he was able to ask and receive money from foreign researchers even when they were outside the country. David clearly turned the relationship into an opportunity, brokering different kinds of services from housing and security to information for several of us. But the benefits were clearly mutual, as we enjoyed access to former combatants, who were almost literally at our beck and call. This said, it took me some months to realise that the ‘thick’ narratives I had collected from other former combatants were increasingly conflicting with the original hypothesis which envisaged former commanders like David as political fixers in the post-conflict. During a rather uncomfortable process, I began to suspect that we had used our questions to suspend our respondents in webs of significance of our own making.

It was far from conflicting narratives alone which instigated the nagging doubt that something was amiss. Increasingly, it was observation of everyday life that became the main evidence against our first impressions. As Howell (2017, p. 17) explains,

[as we all know, and what those who undertake qualitative research often fail to appreciate, is that what the people we study say they do and why is often very different from what they actually do. This becomes apparent only through long-term fieldwork.

In retrospect signs of things being not quite as interviewees said had been there from the start. For instance, one of our questions sought to measure trust between former commanders and their fighters through a hypothetical case whether the latter would borrow their mobile phones to the former. Despite the positive responses, when one former commander lost his mobile phone during the interviews he was visibly upset when he was unable to borrow one. Yet because the interviews were conducted in a secluded motel, observations in general were rare. This made it easier to disregard them as evidence—especially if they contradicted the hypotheses which interview data seemed to confirm. According to Howell (2017), such moments of serendipity are not chance events, but depend on wisdom accumulated through time.

My later participation in informants’ everyday lives, especially when I lived together with them, provided ample opportunities for observation. For instance, I was able to get a measure of how much David—and other former combatants—actually interacted with each other. In what can be taken as evidence of the lack of existing command structure or even lack of any kind of contact between fighters of a particular unit a decade after the war, I was able to find at most five people who fought under the same commander during the more recent second war. Even these five were spread out across Liberia. Triangulation with neighbours, friends and other acquaintances too began to punch holes into the neat original hypothesis
seemingly backed by the initial interviews, where each combatant received about an hour of our time. These contradictions did not always result in meaningful simplicities, but rather increased my awareness of intense complexities of Liberian social realities. Similar complexities especially began to characterise my view of David as an informant. Five years after first meeting him I remain in a similar ambiguous situation as where Joe Sacco was left with his Fixer in the graphic novel of the same name (Sacco 2004), to which Danny Hoffman deservedly first drew attention to in his pioneering article on research assistants (Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014). There are simply so many contradictions between David’s stories and those told by people close to him that drawing any conclusions from them appears risky.

Brokerage and Commodification of Information

To be frank, David was constantly inconsistent in his narratives, which made him undependable on statements of fact. This quality was something that was first brought up by David’s neighbours. While they needed to maintain cordial relations with him in order to use the well in the compound he was guarding, in private they time and time again cried out ‘that man can lie!’ To give only one example of how this influenced my research, in David’s narratives he possessed three different wartime identities: he claimed that he was a former commander who fought for Charles Taylor as a part of the Navy Division, a militia group, but was also a member in Taylor’s elite Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU). On top of this David carried an old identity card from the Armed Forces of Liberia bearing the rank of captain. While David claimed that the card belonged to him, he had no explanation why it bore a different name (the picture had long since faded beyond recognition).

While it was in theory plausible that David possessed any two of the three identities, the story only became more complicated with time. In 2015 and 2017, I repeatedly met the politician David identified as his godfather, and who had employed David for years during and after Taylor’s reign. These discussions revealed that the two had met when David was associated with a fourth security outfit, the Special Security Service (SSS) that protected top politicians of the Taylor administration. The politician nevertheless described David as ‘peripheral’ in the way some continue to associate themselves with security officials in Liberia today: not part of the service and hence not trained, but working for them in exchange for small money and services, if not future employment opportunities. The politician saw David as a subordinate ‘underman’ and scoffed at the idea that David was a commander of any kind, or even a member of the ATU during the war. Already in 2015, the politician hinted that he considered David unreliable. Two years later he wanted nothing to do with David after David embezzled a considerable sum of money and stole goods from their mutual acquaintance. These accounts were confirmed by another
long-term associate of David. Whatever the truth, it is implausible that David was simultaneously a member in four different security organisations. After knowing him for over half a decade, I still do not know what David did during the war. This alone is alarming.

While David’s behaviour is interesting, I do not consider the factual contradictions in his stories to even amount to what Michael Jackson (1987, p. 22) has called ‘lies as useful truths’ (see even Davies 2002, p. 81). This idea of lies as a form of truth naturally questions the idea that any kind of ‘pure’ truth exists in the first place. Neither do I care much whether the empirical ‘facts’ in David’s narratives are true or not: in many cases it is inconsequential whether a certain event took place or not, whereas it is more interesting to understand why an event still matters years after war. When it comes to David, the most important thing for me was not that the contents of these narratives shifted and failed to add up, but why he believed his made-up narratives were useful in the first place.

While I find it hard to blame David for anything—he was in a precarious position and provided me my first home in Liberia—his open expectations of monetary reward admittedly made me uncomfortable. I assumed these expectations to be the result of his relationships with other foreign researchers. In all fairness, these kinds of expectations of reward were far from uncommon among Liberians in general, and former combatants in particular. Many Liberians were very clear about their expectation of being rewarded for divulging information. During the 10 months I spent in Liberia in 2012–13, I repeatedly experienced attempts where others sought to assert themselves in a position of power over my research. A few of these attempts were organised, as groups of people who claimed to be former combatants invited me to a meeting where they asserted that I could access information through them—and only through them—in exchange for monetary reward (see the contribution by Mats Utas in this issue for his similar experience).

Information was thus indeed perceived of as a commodity. Such expectations were of course reasonable in a context where foreign researchers like I have already invested more money than most Liberians will likely possess at any one time during their lives to just travel there in order to access such information. Until the end of my last stint in Liberia in March–April 2017 it was not extraordinary that informants interrupted a discussion I considered rather casual and asked what I had brought them from abroad. In the end, David and other would-be-brokers gradually lost interest in me and my research because of my repeated refusal to pay them. It was this lack of interest that forced me to expand my sources of information, which in turn resulted in the encounters that ever more conflicted with our previous ideas, reinforced not least by David.

David exemplifies how brokers can strategically assume useful identities of the kinds discussed in literature on post-conflict settings (Shepler 2004, Utas 2005, McMullin 2013). The upshot is that truth appears in varied lights, in
a form of belief supported by commodified stories. Drawing conclusions from these kinds of shifting truths remains a risky business. This is also the reason why my interest regarding David is methodological. I have dared to use little if any factual information provided by him in my subsequent research.

While social realities are complex and often messy, claiming that something that does not exist exists can potentially have huge consequences—especially when suggested by researchers who are invested with power through our assumed expertise. The idea that wartime command chains have survived until the time of writing raises questions about our responsibilities as researchers. Considering that the structural requirements for waging war are ideology and organisation (Malešević 2010), suggesting that these command chains continue to exist would mean that one of the two components required for war to return to Liberia is already in place. Liberia, in other words, is a fire waiting to be lit. The core assumption of the continuity of wartime command chains is not only contested by many Liberians—several of whom were baffled about the idea in 2017 and, for instance explained the mobilisation potential by structural factors, such as poverty. Their reactions prompted me to focus on this issue in the first place. An investigation of how the command chains functioned during the war also questioned the assumptions that rose from bureaucratic Western military organisations. Brutal but individual acts of coercion have obfuscated the fact that the warring factions in Liberia possessed much less coercive power than their Western equivalents. Much remained ad hoc, fluid and based on consent, with the great mobility of combatants alone questioning assumptions based on tight-knit military units in the West (Käihkö 2016, 2017).

Despite the challenges that continue to test Liberia, the implication that thousands of Liberian former combatants are ready for renewed war feels unfair. Liberia is in many ways getting better in ways I did not perceive during the first years of my fieldwork. To put it differently, I am worried that the methodological problems posed by David and others who commodified research have led to questionable results, which can have real negative consequences for Liberia and Liberians. To repeat, it matters little if David lied to us or not—what matters is whether people like him are encouraged to confirm something that does not exist, and which can now harm those we should be helping.

**Participant-Observation, Brokers and the Commodification of Information**

The above can be taken as a rather gloomy view of research brokers and the commodification of information, especially when there is no reason to believe that they are limited to Liberia alone. These kinds of methodological issues are arguably common in all field research, and there is little new in the confounding problems of paid informants and confirmation bias.
Conflict settings only intensify these issues. In this final section, I describe how I sought to alleviate them through participant-observation. After all, it was participant-observation that first raised my awareness about brokerage, and later allowed me to work around people like David.

As Davies (2002, p. 67) describes, participant observation ‘in its classic form... consists of a single researcher spending an extended period of time (usually at least a year) living among the people he or she is studying, participating in their daily lives in order to gain as complete an understanding as possible of the cultural meanings and social structures of the group and how these are interrelated.’ After the departure of my colleagues and with David’s interest in me waning with every passing day, I was forced to widen my horizons. New encounters led to narratives which contrasted with what David and other brokers had told us. Observation of everyday life too began to question the notions of networks based on wartime command chains. Soon I moved to South-eastern Liberia, where I knew only a handful of people. The county I lived in soon witnessed cross-border raids to neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire. As former combatants were blamed for these attacks, the security officials who soon arrived paid particular attention to this group. It became very difficult to research wartime organisation during the months that followed. I escaped this unwanted attention to outlying rural areas, where I for the most part lived with former combatants.

After a rather rocky start, I found the majority of the over 300 former combatants with whom I worked with during the next 5 years through common acquaintances (who may or may not have been former combatants), usually in rather casual encounters. About a tenth of this number of people became key informants, with whom I engaged with repeatedly for at least several dozen hours, if not living together with them for months. Most of these encounters were briefer, consisting of typically rather informal discussions, where I tried to probe for new questions, and find answers to existing ones. Throughout I sought to work with as broad spectrum of informants as possible. Interaction with female combatants remained difficult due to prevailing gender norms. This I still regret as little thought to them had been given in the initial project, possibly because of the Eurocentric assumption that equates combatants with masculinity (see Vastapuu 2018).

Living together with former combatants allowed the observation of whether words matched deeds. When it came to our original hypothesis of lingering command chains, they did not. I witnessed little of the interaction between David and the people who claimed had been under him during the war. The case was similar with other former combatants I encountered. With the benefit of hindsight, this was not altogether surprising. In comparison with veterans of the Armed Forces, former combatants lacked the legitimacy and benefits connected to the state. Unlike veterans, former combatants received no pensions, nor did they possess formal organisations that sought
to further their interests. While objectively government soldiers might not always have been very different, Hoffman has observed that in the region rebels were understood primarily by their violence against civilians, rather than enemy combatants (Hoffman 2011b, p. 38). As a result, few want to identify as ‘rebels’ in contemporary Liberia. In contrast, especially among the ethnic group that dominated the military before the civil war, veteran status remained an important and largely positive identity marker.

Practical reasons mattered as well for the discrepancy between words and deeds regarding lingering wartime command chains. As transport was expensive physical proximity had major influence who people associated with, at least before mobile phones became more prevalent. As a result, the most important networks were typically those consisting of family and neighbours—not people from wars a decade or two ago. This of course does not mean that former combatants did not continue to interact with each other. But when they did, especially the interactions of the rank and file were better explained by other factors than command chains. Several former commanders who were assumed to possess the power to mobilise force for elections and war alike reluctantly confirmed that while they could likely still call on people, many of these would not be combatants, and the ones with better things to do would ignore the call. While this admission was difficult as it diminished the status of these commanders as political brokers, they too ultimately believed that it was broader structural factors like poverty that trumped. In 2012, none of these factors were probed for the simple reason that we never thought of them, while the brokers we employed were clearly not in the position to say that they in fact were not. In my case, it was only the accumulated observations and contrasting narratives which led to questioning pre-existing assumptions.

After I had spent about a year in Liberia, in 2015 some of my informants in Monrovia insisted that I visit their friend, whom I soon recognised as a broker for at least two other foreign researchers I know. After the saga with David and other brokers, I had sought to maintain my independence from anyone who sought to control my research. Even further, I knew this former commander to be close with one of these researchers. I was wary of associating with him lest I break the unwritten rule and damage their relationship. When I finally agreed to visit him, he turned out to be quite unlike David. Educated, articulate and witty, I immediately understood why our common friends believed that it was good for us to meet. It was soon clear that this broker could fix and facilitate any kind of research I was interested about and translate Liberian realities into concepts more readily useful in an academic study. While I kept him at some distance, I greatly enjoyed his company, not least because he became the only informant with whom I could elaborate on my and other’s ideas about the war—including
the issue of command chains. I still remain in touch with him at the time of writing, just like I try to do with many of my other informants.

Another reason why I was cautious about establishing a deeper relationship with this broker was that he already possessed significant influence in the work of two other ethnographers. Here I was reminded of Hoffman’s observation. Having directed many researchers and journalists to his collaborator Mohammed Tarawalley, Hoffman was ‘aware that he plays a potentially outsized role in these narratives of war’ (Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014, p. 304). As David’s example illustrates, this problem is not limited to one person. On a more general level it nevertheless highlights the necessity to discuss who we work with, and which population we can convincingly speak of. While I was happy to exchange ideas with the commander, he never became my main source of information, nor indispensable to my work.

Finally, a few words need to be said about instrumentalisation of informants, which is an often-neglected ethical issue in field research. On the one hand, it needs to be asked whether it is ethical to treat informants as mere instruments for accessing data, who can then be discarded after use. While this kind of bureaucratic attitude can indeed correspond to the much-coveted ‘objectivity’ prevalent in positivism, the following instrumentalisation appears outright heartless with human beings, even if commodification is used to frame the relationship as exchange. The case is worse in situations where informants actually take risks on behalf of researchers. This can be the case in conflict settings, where the presence of violence alone raises a multitude of ethical dilemmas that need to be considered (as discussed in the introduction to this issue). While maintaining distance or framing research relationships in terms of exchange is one way to diminish responsibility, these hardly wash away the negative consequences research may entail to those who participate in it in one way or another. On the other hand (and as discussed by Mats Utas in his contribution), it needs to be asked whether this kind of instrumentalisation will be paid in kind, and encourage brokerage from the side of those we work with. Is this not why it is commonly accepted that paying for information is a bad idea if one expects truthful answers?

It is perhaps here the real promise of participant-observation materialises in the form of qualitative transformation of the relationships with those studied. The way trust is established in personal relationships has already been mentioned. In my work trust became an issue especially during the months I spent in the southeast. Some officials and former combatants suspected or hoped that I was there to recruit mercenaries to overthrow the new government in Côte d’Ivoire. As late as 2017—5 years after I had first lived there—I was told that in one gold mining area most people still believed that I work for the Central Intelligence Agency. This continued to be amusing for the person I had lived with. While he had thought the same when we first met, after days and
weeks of living under the same roof he had come to accept that I was, after all, just a student. Nevertheless, his attempts to convince his neighbours and acquaintances of the same appear to have failed.

This case exemplifies how relational depth tweaks the terms of an asymmetric relationships in a way that emphasises different kind of exchange. Instead of money, it becomes friendship (Bourgois 2003), time and other information that lead to information. Ideally these relationships result in a situation where participant-observation equals to studying others with them. In this sense, ethnography becomes a transformative experience for everyone involved. The counter-argument of course is that it may be equally unethical to deny those we work with monetary compensation for their efforts or other benefits. Not only do we receive salaries for doing research, almost all of the former combatants I worked with were cash-strapped. Finally, participant-observation may also allow for increased and more transparent self-reflection of the kind what Hoffman and Tarawalley (2014) did.

Ultimately, time may well form the main factor in this kind of research that focuses on hidden populations associated with politicised and violent. Perhaps the truth will come forward if one does not pay, but stays for an answer. In my case, time was required for observation, which then led to the questioning of the original hypothesis. While Sacco too was clearly troubled by the growing doubts concerning his relationship with his Fixer and the influence this relationship had on his investigation, in the end Sacco appears to have found peace. Not only had he found other ways to get the information he had come for but also he had furthermore accepted the fact that his lingering questions regarding the Fixer would likely never be answered: while Sacco was never able to penetrate the narratives offered by his Fixer, he at least understood that these narratives should not be taken at a face value. In many cases this is good enough, or at least a good start. It is my hope that this reflection of the case of David helps to illustrate some of the issues at stake.

Conclusions

This article has reflected over truth, commodification of information and research brokers through half a decade’s experience of researching former combatants in Liberia. There brokers fed researchers ‘truths’ and narratives that served the interests of both the researchers and the brokers. This led to a vicious circle, where the brokers confirmed what the researchers wanted to hear. Thanks to the authority vested in researchers and the subsequent policy consequences our research may have, it is problematic if such research relationships produce conclusions that do not correspond to reality. This is especially the case in post-conflict societies. As noted by Schiltz and Büscher (2018, p. 128), ‘Researchers play a key role in the production (and reproduction) of the dominant narratives on post-conflict societies, narratives that in turn influence national and international
humanitarian, development and political interventions.’ By suggesting that wartime command chains linger 15 years into the post-conflict is akin to arguing that Liberia remains at the brink of war. Liberia and its citizens would certainly benefit from the shedding of its reputation as a volatile post-conflict area, in no small degree upheld by researchers. After suffering 14 years of war and with many things radically improved it appears indefensible to deny them this opportunity. We should simply do better.

In my case it was participant-observation that gave rise to awareness regarding the problems with research brokerage in the first place, when narratives and observations began to increasingly conflict with the information provided through brokerage. Especially in conflict settings, participant observation also offers a promise of a more ethically defensible way to collect information. Finally, ethnography and participant-observation suggest a compelling way of escaping this dilemma connected to commodification through the tweaking of the terms of the inherently asymmetric relationship between researchers and informants. Ideally, participant-observation refrains from instrumentalising relationships with those studied, and equals to studying others with them. This naturally necessitates taking into account the wishes and needs of our research partners, but also makes them the inductive starting point of our research. We should actively encourage our partners to tell us off if our original hypotheses do not make sense. Yet it remains uncertain whether this is possible if their—and our—focus remains on commodities. Neither is this always avoidable, as commodification can also come in the form of political influence, for instance (Hoffman and Tarawalley. 2014, Hoffmann 2014).

Our power as researchers is based on the political potential of our work. If there was no potential, it could be argued that there should be no research either as it would not matter. While this article has worried about the methodological issues of research brokers that can lead to political problems for Liberia and practical problems for Liberians, these issues too are exacerbated in conflict settings. In such contexts fear is ubiquitous, which in turn contributes to polarisation. Yet relational depth too can result in strong commitment to causes promoted by those we work with. As a result, in polarised contexts we can at worst exacerbate conflict. Uncritical favouring of one side over another is nothing we should engage in, even if refusing to do so risks the very relationships that have been cultivated over a long period of time.

Notes

1. To date no comprehensive account of these wars has been written. The most used work on the first war remains Ellis (2007), and the best overall account is likely offered by Gerdes (2013). Hoffman (2011a) has well captured the regional implications of the war.
2. A comparative case is offered by those former rebel leaders and government officials who emphasise their past roles to engage in what can be called politics of threat. Lacking any other means of influence, they claim that they still exert authority over former combatants. In reality, past election results alone prove that the influence of most of these actors waned fast in the post-conflict (Käihkö 2015).

3. In comparison, the cheapest hotel room in the vicinity was $50 per night. During the later trips I have not paid for accommodation.

4. As Whyte (1992) well illustrates, the end results can of course be messier.

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