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IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award Report

The Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award supported my fieldwork in Taiwan this summer significantly. This pre-dissertation exploration in Taiwan enabled me to find potential participants, build connections with them, and collect a variety of sources. My dissertation plans to look into online platforms branding themselves as global communities and contributors on these platforms. However, due to anonymity and uncertainty of online spaces, it was difficult to build trust with contributors and recruit them to participate in my study only through our online interaction. The fieldwork in Taiwan, therefore, plays a crucial role in moving my project forward.

To find potential participants, I attended Crossing's first offline event, "Taiwanese Girls and the Middle East," which took place in Backstage Café in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan. In the event, Crossing invited three contributors to give a talk and interact with more than five hundred audiences. These contributors had constantly shared their experiences in the Middle East and their perspectives on the issues pertaining to the Middle East on Crossing's platform. Hence, it provided me with a great opportunity to understand the ways in which the website attempted to strengthen its connections with its users and local communities. I was also able to get a better sense of the people who had contributed or subscribed to Crossing. At the end of the

event, I introduced myself and my project to the editors and contributors and invited them to participate in my project.

After meeting contributors and editors in the event, I was able to schedule interviews with them in the following weeks. The contributors shared their motivation for joining Crossing and their interaction with editors and users which are invisible on the website. Understanding the contributors' thoughts and experiences enabled me to analyze their roles in building online global communities in more complex ways. Thus, interviewing them enriched my research questions and directions since I got access to valuable sources which cannot be found on the website. Moreover, after talking with the contributors, I built stronger connections with them. They agreed to participate more in-depth interviews in the future. Hence, I will be able to ask follow-up questions when writing my dissertation.

In addition to contributors, I talked with two Crossing's managing editors, Hsiang-Yi Chang and Hsin-Ping Lin. They shared with me how they selected contributors and how they curated content on the platform. Learning their decision-making process helped me to delineate the ways in which Crossing attempted to facilitate cultural exchanges and build global communities more specifically. Since Hsiang-Yi Chang is also one of the founders of Crossing, I was able to explore development and transformation of the website. What they shared with me during interviews helped me understand Crossing more deeply. Because the platform was newly established, there were very little information and publication about Crossing available to the public online or from the press.

The editors further became an important hub for me to find other types of useful sources after interviews. They offered me documents and data related to Crossing such as PR documents or website statistics, which enabled me to consider the broader picture of the website before

zooming into specific issues. The editors also allowed me to conduct participant observation in their office. Since their office was located in Commonwealth Magazine Company, the owner of Crossing, I learned not only their discourses and practices in workspaces but also their relationship with the company. Besides sources about themselves and the website, they further introduced contributors whom I have not met so that I was able to recruit more potential participants for future interviews.

Through participating Crossing's event, interacting with its contributors and editors, and finding helpful sources and connections, I have decided to conduct an in-depth case study focusing on Crossing for my dissertation. Before my field trip to Taiwan, I was struggling to make a decision as there were a few online platforms similar to Crossing to some extent. It was the fieldwork that helped me affirm Crossing as a fruitful site for my analysis. Since one of the main goals for my dissertation is to interrogate the relationship between online and offline communities, the offline sources about Crossing that I found in the fieldwork will add meaningful conversations to my textual analysis of its online platform. The Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award helped me complete a critical stage of my dissertation. I am truly grateful for the opportunity and support from IRIS.