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Fragments of presence: doing ethnography in the control rooms of the police
This paper will present some methodological challenges in my ongoing criminological PhD-project “Knowledge during crisis: the police control rooms’ construction and use of knowledge in event driven policing”. The project aims to explore decision making processes carried out in the control room of the police. The control rooms play a significant part in the initial understanding of the event driven parts of police work, as they are the receiver of calls made to the police. I focus on sense-making in the initial phase of events. The project explores what shapes and defines the decisions made, how different forms of knowledge are constructed and made plausible through the use of technologies, registers and various practices, as well as how doubt and uncertainty is dealt with when knowledge is limited and action must be taken rather quickly.

I have conducted fieldwork in three Norwegian police control rooms; one long-term field work in the largest control room, as well as shorter fieldworks in two control rooms of medium size.

Often described as being “the hearth of operative policing”, the control room is very close in time to the events taking place, and close to the caller’s descriptions of what is happening. Still, they are physically far away from the actual event. Another central aspect of their work is also what makes them very different from patrols; the control room keeps track of all incidences taking place in the police district at a given time, demanding that the officers shift between tasks and deals with several incidences at a time, making their work shift between the fragments, and the whole.

In this paper, I would like to present some of my experiences doing ethnographic research in control rooms. I will focus on how the nature of the control room also shapes my research. I will also discuss how the researcher is perceived and positioned by the officers in the study, and how this is subjected to ongoing negotiation throughout the fieldwork. In this discussion I will draw upon Brown (1996) and how she categorizes researchers based upon their affiliation with the police.