The aim of this chapter is to outline a way to establish ethnographic comparability that involves a tertium comparationis, that is that involves a ‘third’ element in relation to which two or more phenomena are to be compared. I take the view that phenomena are comparable not due to intrinsically comparable characteristics, but because comparability is established through interaction with the research object. This understanding follows Karen Barad’s (2007) definition of a phenomenon as “the ontological inseparability of agentially intraacting ‘components’” (pp. 308–9). Barad especially refers to two kinds of components: those that are being investigated and those that are involved in doing the investigating, including the researcher. Thereby, not only comparability, but the research object—or phenomenon— itself comes into being in the way it exists in the research project by and through the research process itself. Research methods contribute to the creation of comparability and thus it is important to understand how different methods create comparability in different ways and how different constellations of comparability have consequences for other aspects of the method. In this chapter I start out with a somewhat awkward dichotomy of ethnographic methods on the one hand and comparative methods based on a tertium comparationis on the other. I let each of the two methods represent a different pole of comparative methods in order to clarify the different orientations between methods implying inside views, process orientation and mobility vs. those favouring outside views, result orientation and immobility.

Ethnographic research tends to shun comparison of the latter kind. I argue that one important reason for the incompatibility between comparison based on a tertium comparationis and ethnography lies in their different spatial constellations. By re-arranging the spatial constellation of ethnographic and comparative research, I suggest a combination of the two that makes it possible to create a comparability involving a tertium comparationis, without violating ethnographic
standards. Even though the discussion is illustrated by examples from my empirical research on media harm, the point I want to make is purely methodological. It is not the aim of this chapter to provide insights into the regulation of media harm, even though this may be a side-effect of my methods discussion.

“You do two or two-and-a-half years in Java in which all you do is live with the people, write down everything, and try to figure out what the hell is going on…” explained Clifford Geertz in an interview in 1991 (Olson 1991). To some, this quote may resonate a naïve anthropological attitude of the late 19th and early 20th century, but Geertz expresses a crucial orientation of ethnography that also applies to more theoretically informed versions: that it is about persistently trying to figure out “what the hell is going on here”, without settling on the first, second or twenty-fourth interpretation that comes to mind.

It is the difficult task and the art of ethnography to ask this simple question and to appreciate the complexity and infinity of its answers. The ethnographer may have a research question and she may focus on specific phenomena or processes, but she goes to the field site with an unsettled idea of how the constitution of this phenomena or processes may be, and of how her question is eventually to be posed. She sets herself the task of learning to formulate her question and describe phenomena or processes in accordance with the specific way in which they exist in the field site—her description is done from the inside.

What I call an ‘inside description’ is a modification of the interpretive ethnographic ‘inside perspective’ or ‘inside logic’. My version of ethnography is inspired by the praxiographic approach (Mol 2002) that is less interested in the human perspectives, experiences or interpretations of a certain culture and more focused on the socio-material enactment of practice. ‘Inside description’ is not about promoting the view of the native humans. It is about the specific ways in which the phenomenon studied exists in the world, about the ways in which it is entangled (Callon 1998) with other socio-material entities, about how it works, how it is enacted and unfolds; about what I refer to as the practice’s or the field site’s existence. Note, that I do not attempt to say that an ‘inside description’ is more authentic or truthful than approaches that apply a priori and ‘outside’ classifications to empirical data. An ‘inside description’ is fabricated in intra-action among researcher, instruments, research object etc., just like any other research account. Methodologies, research designs and vocabularies are activated and it is in the mutual involvement of these and the research