

Chapter 3

Going Digital: Challenges and Opportunities for Social Research Methodology

Felice Addeo

University of Salerno, Italy

Valentina D'Auria

University of Salerno, Italy

ABSTRACT

The digital society is a research object that still lacks a clear and shared definition, as it is always in progressive and whirling transformation. From a methodological point of view, digital society is then a fruitful ground for experimentation and innovation. However, the unceasing flourishing of online social practices and the innovative ways to frame into data the online activities of individuals make the knowledge drawn from the web always uncertain, revisable, and at high risk of obsolescence. Social research tried to face the challenges posed by the digital society first by adapting the established social research methods to the new digital environments and then creating new ones. Neither approach has been able to define which are the most valid and reliable methodological tools to study the digital society, nor to draw a shared vision that would allow social research to advance. This chapter discusses the challenges and opportunities that the digital society poses to social research methodology and reflects on the need for new epistemological and methodological positions.

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DIGITAL CONTEXTS

The society in which we live is permeated by technology, which mediates most interpersonal relationships, exchanges of ideas, official or personal communication. Thanks to the fast development of technological devices and to the spread of the Internet, huge amounts of data, content and information broke through the barriers of the private sphere to become increasingly available, shareable and public.

Nowadays, online contexts have become increasingly prolific with data and information accessible to (almost) everyone, so interest in them from a social science research point of view can be said to be

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growing exponentially; but it was not always so. In fact, it is possible to trace two phases that describe the relationship between social sciences and the study of the Internet. In the beginning, social sciences looked with suspicion at everything related to the Internet, which was considered as a subordinate context and not worthy of study. The main reasons for this attitude were mainly linked to the way people were used to stay on the Internet at the beginning of the digital era: very little information was shared, even less was socialized, the identities of users were hidden behind nicknames and avatars. Thus, social spaces were considered, both by ordinary people and by social researchers, as contexts detached from reality, lacking any link with it. This period is referred to by Rogers (2013) as the period of cyberspace, where cyberspace was defined as a “space without place”, where everything that happened had nothing to do with the real world. Thanks to the changes in the use of new technologies, the enormous diffusion of smartphones and PCs to stay “always connected”, the emergence of the Social network with the need to create “real accounts” on social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and so on) with public identities and no longer hidden by nicknames, the creation of ad hoc platforms dedicated to buying and exchanging review and opinions on the items or the services bought (e.g. Amazon, Booking, TripAdvisor, and so on), there has been a change of direction whereby the social sciences have started to take an increasing interest in these contexts. These developments have also made it possible to go beyond the real-virtual dichotomy to embrace a broader and more elastic concept of reality: an environment where the real and the virtual are closely interconnected through a flow of events that call on each other. Rogers notes: “virtual interactions supplement rather than substitute for the *real* and stimulate more real interaction, as opposed to isolation and desolation” (2013: 20). We are well aware that social actions are linked and contaminated, in many ways, by the new digital devices, their infrastructures and their respective uses, so social research is called upon to consider, both epistemologically and methodologically, digital environments as real socialization contexts, within which it is possible to measure, analyze and study social dynamics (Marres, Gerlitz, 2016; Marres, Weltevrede, 2013, Amaturro, Aragona, 2016).

In fact, it is precisely since the emergence and spread of social media that online and offline realities have stopped being two separate contexts and have become a single context with increasingly blurred contours. Today, moreover, social media are the greatest example of a participatory web (O’Reilly, 2005), where users stop hiding behind fictitious identities to share ideas and produce content in broad daylight. hence the expression “prosumers” coined by Toffler (1980).

So, the social research began to be very interested in such contexts, which were first considered as socialization contexts in their own right, almost like a separate “virtual society”, and then as extensions of real contexts where users engage in amateur content production (Rogers, 2015). The Web began to be a fertile ground for the social sciences, which sought from the outset to study its contents, the dynamics and the contexts of exchange, the functioning of online infrastructures, and to use it as a tool for data collection. In other words, social research can benefit twice from the study of digital networks: they can be an interesting research object and, at the same time, a good way to collect information about subjects and practices thanks to the use of computational tools and software. Studying digital society has no longer meant moving away from reality, as it was once thought by the majority of scholars. On the contrary, the new digital contexts have given researchers the possibility to study both old and new topics that have always been addressed by social research, such as personal identity, power relations, inequalities, social dynamics and much more.

Social sciences have made an effort to adapt their offline analytical tools to purely online contexts and, subsequently, this effort has been funneled into the possibility of building ad hoc tools to study the web. However, neither the adaptation of traditional techniques nor the creation of new ad hoc tools for

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