Chapter 20
Tales of Love and Pandemic:
An Example of Small Data Research on Wattpad

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ABSTRACT

The main argument of the chapter is the analysis of the reading and writing behaviour on Wattpad during the phases of lockdown in Italy for the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic represents the first great event of 'data society' reactions making several authors reflect on various aspects and thoughts about social impact of tech ecosystems. Nowadays, it becomes essential to understand the role that digital technologies and media have had to soothe feelings related to social isolation and physical distancing measures. Thus, as widely acknowledged, besides providing data for social research in many aspects of life, the digital context also suggests above all innovated methods enforced by the physical distancing. This research has explored about 600 stories edited on Wattpad that have been selected through the query "Covid." The aim of the analysis is to map collective imaginary of users about the COVID-19 pandemic within a digital medium for fanfiction, combining three fundamental approaches of digital methods.

INTRODUCTION

When the Pandemic status was declared in March 2020 and the lockdown became the instrument to contain the health crisis and reduce the number of contagions as much as possible in Italy, each of us suspended relational and research activities in presence, trying to restore order to everyday life. From the first weeks in which the crisis took shape, there was a need to find new ways of doing research, as we were temporarily deprived of traditional tools, and to closely observe the ways of narrating the pandemic of some narrating communities.

The case presented here attempts to describe the heterogeneous production of stories written within Wattpad, a social reading and storytelling platform, during the first wave of the pandemic. The constel-

lation of stories belonging to different narrative genres can be interpreted as a choral narrative of the cultural trauma one is participating in. Storytelling, the act of narrating through the written word, is thus the way to interpret and attribute meanings to this human experience, but it is also the result of the culture in which it develops. In the case of Wattpad, this is not only a culture within the community, but also the socio-technical culture of the platform itself.

In order to analyse this small world of narrators/readers producing the multitude of pre-narratives, digital methods inspired by the research programmes of digital sociology and the digital humanities were used.

We will thus begin by defining the context of the pandemic as a cultural trauma, interpreted in which carrier groups and media contribute to creating the idea of ontological evil (Alexander 2003: 2006). The role of the media, especially the digital media, has been to produce information and to shorten the distance between peoples. This has resulted in an exponential increase in the use of platforms and consequently in the production of data on the one hand, but also in information disorders (Di Salvo, Milan 2020) on the other. Immediately afterwards, the digital methods and tools used for automatic data extraction and processing will be described, reviewing the most recent studies of digital sociology research programmes. Finally, data analysis with data visualisation will be presented, focusing on two macro areas: user representation and content analysis.

THE PANDEMIC AS A CULTURAL TRAUMA

Developing as a traumatic event able to affect the social actors' conscience, likewise happened with the spread of Hiv/Aids, the Twin Towers attack and Holocaust, the Covid-1 outbreak has soon turned into a crisis resultanting in a loss of stability of meanings and signs recognisable by the community experiencing, in a time span of a few months, states of shock, panic, worry, acceptance and even negation forms. (cf. Cohen 2001). However, the event is to be recognised from its representation, essential to turn it into a cultural trauma, completely (Alexander 2006 [2003]). Thus, a fundamental contribution is given by the media which have been telling the pandemic and the invisible virus with the help of images, using the analogy with a war bulletin against an enemy attempting our liberty day by day, health, physical contacts, normality, everyday life, indeed: in this battle the strategic role of some social agents (carrier group), such as the politicians and Healthcare workers, has become stronger. The construction of the ontological evil occurs with the use of the media; the absence of the mankind in symbolic places, open spaces, schools, churches, make us feel under attack. In this mediatic scenario the White Coates, doctors and nurses become the new heroes; nurse Elena Pagliarini has become the symbol of a draining struggle against the virus, the image of herself resting on a computer keyboard, recalls the picture of rest of the hero, like Eracle Farnese, icon of the deadly nature of courage and divine force of the hero (heroine, in the specific case). The daily bulletin has anonymised thousands of victims and hundreds of deads in the absence of the ritual of death due to the prohibition of funerals, intensifying the idea of the siege: the Covid-19 pandemic does not allow any rest, not even to bury the victims with dignity. These episodes are frozen in the collective memory, through the images of lines of military lorries full of coffins leaving Bergamo or even pictures of deceased wrapped in burial shrouds left in makeshift places. In addition to this narration, we see the creation of the National day of memory for Coronavirus victims and also the leitmotivs which have marked the weeks since March 9, 2020, «andrà tutto bene», «torneremo ad abbracciarci», «ne usciremo migliori», «insieme, ce la faremo») all this as a strengthening of the sacrifice

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