

Chapter 8

Doing Web Surveys During Uncertain Times: Reflections From a Research Experience on the COVID–19 Pandemic in Italy

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ABSTRACT

The chapter will focus on using a web survey administered using social networks as a gathering point to collect data on people's risk perception and their undertaking of protective behaviors during the Italian COVID-19 crisis. This was an unprecedented moment in the digital age when there was no possibility of physical contact due to the limitations imposed on coexistence by the health emergency to stem the spread of the virus. This is when digital connections are the only link among people, and the only tool that can be used for doing social research is trying to satisfy the desire for knowledge without limiting the potential for knowledge production even in times of profound uncertainty and several limitations. Analyzing the participants' feedback on web surveys during times of deep uncertainty allows the authors to show what is clearly happening to social research currently. The discussions will be supported by an auto-ethnography conducted on comments left by the respondents to the survey.

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INTRODUCTION: PANDEMIC, CRISIS AND DESIRE FOR KNOWLEDGE¹

The COVID-19 Pandemic has changed the idea of “normality” on a global level, redefining systems, patterns, values, and priorities; all this has given rise to a desire for knowledge and understanding both from ordinary citizens and decision-makers, both eager to understand the now overturned and revolutionized dynamics of the world and everyday life.

The etymology of the word Pandemic is «from the Greek “pandemos” pertaining to all people, from pan- all plus dēmos people» (Online Etymology Dictionary). Thus, a Pandemic involves people worldwide and differs from the word epidemic that indicates a more restricted area, such as a community. In essence, a Pandemic is a global epidemic. The term Pandemic does not indicate the severity of the disease but its diffusion, so the word Pandemic refers to its geography. In addition to contagion geography, another element that needs to be considered when defining a Pandemic is the disease’s novelty. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a Pandemic as “the worldwide spread of a new disease” (WHO, 2010). The novelty of the disease is crucial because it deepens the uncertainty faced by the affected communities.

A Pandemic in disaster science and crisis management can be described as a transboundary crisis (Ansell, Boin, and Keller, 2010; Goldin and Mariathasan, 2014; Quarantelli, Lagadec, and Boin, 2006; Boin, 2019) or a catastrophe (Quarantelli, 2000, 2006). In a catastrophe, most likely, neighboring communities cannot help and compete for scarce resources (Quarantelli, 2000; 2006). Unlike emergencies and disasters, catastrophes make impacted communities more vulnerable since they cannot seek help from neighboring communities. There is a loss or a lack of facilities and response personnel. Also, while disasters are considered “local” because they impact circumscribed communities, catastrophes call for the national government (Quarantelli, 2000; Quarantelli et al., 2006). COVID-19 definition of transboundary crisis provides a better idea of the event’s level of management and governance. Transboundary crises, as the words say, do not have boundaries. The boundaries to which a transboundary crisis refers to are legal, political, geographical (Boin, 2019). Pandemics are well-established examples of transboundary crises (Baekkeskov, 2015).

COVID-19 includes all the elements that make it difficult to manage transboundary crises, which are (Boin, 2019):

- the existence of multiple domains and multiple manifestations: transboundary crises may involve several countries;
- the incubation and rapid escalation: transboundary crises level of development varies, escalating or being reabsorbed and then exploding again;
- the difficulty in pinpointing where a crisis started and how it evolved exactly;
- the involvement of multiple actors with conflicting responsibilities: transboundary crises can generate crises of governance and leadership;
- the lack of ready-made solutions: transboundary crises require a non-routine response.

Although it is true that the Pandemic is not a new threat to humanity, it should be emphasized that the COVID-19 emergency has some unique connotations. COVID-19 is the second declared Pandemic of the twenty-first century after the H1N1 influenza (swine flu). On March 11th 2020, The WHO declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a Pandemic, with diffusion to 114 countries, 118,000 cases, and deaths (WHO, March 11th, 2020). The WHO delayed declaring COVID-19 as a Pandemic, even though it had warned the international community on more than one occasion. The declaration of COVID-19

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