Chapter 15
Nethnography and Social Network Analysis for Studying Online Social Space

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contributes to the current methodological debate on digital, internet-based studies in social research. Based upon an introductive analysis of the research's perspectives, trajectories, and stages that have brought the online social spaces into social research, the chapter focuses on the advantages of combining quanti-quali approaches for approaching online complexity. In particular, the authors offer a deep discussion concerning the value, the methodological, and ethical challenges of netnography and social network analysis (SNA) methods for inquiring online social research by proposing a possible emerging methodological framework guiding further empirical studies.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary social life, practices of everyday life, and networks increasingly diffuse and situate themselves also into digital spaces, affecting and shaping 'analogue' interactions. The pervasiveness and the embeddedness of 'virtual reality' in human experience make online sociality a growing, consistent, - and, for some extent, even the dominant – driver of people's contemporary relationships. As social researchers, it seems increasingly indispensable and timely to study how the internet changes individual and collective everyday lives, and how it challenges the understanding and the conduction of sociological, interpretative research too. Although the 'experienced sociality' and the 'studied sociality' are interconnected and mutually influenced, the chapter focuses on the opportunities and challenges posed by

the internet and online data in the taken-for-granted frameworks for how naturalistic, and interpretative social research are conceptualized and then performed.

Studying internet-related social phenomena is not a new trend in the social sciences, since the approaches for the investigation have changed along the technological development and the cultural significance of the internet space. Yet, several challenges of conducting internet research have triggered a strong confront among researchers from the outset.

Indeed, in addressing the question: *when, and then how the online fields and data can be in the service of an interpretative sociological research work?* conceptual and empirical responses did not occur without intellectual and practical concerns and neither by following a unified and common research's perspective, which clearly makes evidence of how qualitative methods "to study online social interactions are still undefined and in flux" (Addeo et al., 2020: 12). Literature helps researchers to establish the boundaries of and define the online social space, by identifying three main scenarios: *online communities, communities online* and *primarily offline communities* (Kozinets, 2002; Garcia & Standlee, 2009). Nevertheless, the definition of the method and its context of application still appears complex for qualitative scholars, whereas they "have been compelled to reconsider basic principles and practices of qualitative inquiry, with important critiques of a priori methodological certainties" (Baym & Markham, 2009: viii). This is also reflected in the gap between quantitative and qualitative scientific communities and their productions. While there have been considerable advancements and increasing interest in the use of *quantitative* techniques in analyzing online and social media data – including structural network analysis, web scraping, list mining and digital mapping – the *qualitative* strategies represent a smaller part in the scientific production.

For all these reasons considered, the chapter first discusses different theoretical and methodological directions which are being used to conceptualize and investigate the internet, by introducing some empirical works in this research landscape. For increasing awareness among under-graduated or graduated scholars, and for supporting any social researcher who wants to engage his/herself in investigating the internet, we provide an extensive and critical discussion concerning its crucial advantages and potential issues. We then outline an approach and show an empirical case for probing into socialized digital space combining netnography and social network analysis (SNA) to facilitate readers' understanding of the use of the digital space for social research.

BACKGROUND

The study of electronic communications and online networks is not new. Indeed, CMC were being examined very early in different research fields, while the studies addressing online communities are relatively more recent. The ongoing narratives from most of the authors involved in online fieldwork (Kozinets, 2015; Murphy, 2008; Costello et al., 2017) agree in distinguishing internet's epochal mutations in two phases, defined web 1.0 and web 2.0; so, the paths of internet research evolve accordingly, either for quantitative or qualitative inquiries and across various scientific fields. Simply put, in the first phase, the internet was mostly conceptualized as *a tool* (Markham & Stavrova, 2016: 231) for collecting data by adopting traditional methods of questionnaires and interviews for the new medium. While the second phase depicts the internet's interactive stage, wherein people's engagement with the digital space began more active, both as distributers of internet-mediated communication and information transfer, and as producer of digital contents. Such a change in the use of the medium makes qualitative research-

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