

Chapter 16

The Ethnographic Approach in the Digital Scenario: Classic, Virtual, or Digital Ethnography – A Question of Definition or a New Methodological Shift?

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the goal is to formalize the main differences between the applications of ethnographic techniques when they are framed in virtual or digital methods. To be more systematic in presenting these differences, a synoptic table will be offered. This table will examine the main breaking points between the methods and will be used to organize a marked comparison between studies chosen from the most cited articles of the last 20 years. In addition to testing the effectiveness of the proposed classification scheme, the purpose of the comparison conducted between the most cited articles will be to highlight where the changes that have occurred can lead to advances in the method and where these changes have become new limits on which it is necessary to continue to reflect in order to develop the methods involved and place them clearly in line with the evolution of the digital scenario.

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INTRODUCTION¹

The most widely accepted definition of the classical ethnographic method states that “Ethnography usually involves the researcher’s participation, [...], in people’s everyday lives over a long period of time, observing what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:3). Following this statement, the ethnographic method allows to analyze, study, and interpret micro-systemic aspects of the social context through the direct observation/participation of the researchers in the field of the researcher, that for an extended period of time are part of a social group, building interpersonal relationships to observe, describe and analyze the salient and peculiar aspects that distinguish this scenario both from a cultural and a social point of view. In other words, one could conceive of the ethnographic method as a field research that uses techniques and methods that allow the researcher an in-depth analysis of the context, with the assumption of the perspective of the subjects that inhabit it and interpretative processes mediated by direct experience. The method, thus conceived, refers to a narrative aspect that integrates, on the one hand the information collected in the field, and on the other the metacognitive analysis carried out by the ethnographer (Masullo, Addeo, Delli Paoli, 2020:27). Ethnography, centered on the active role assigned to observation, therefore, does not disdain the use of listening to everything that is on the scene (spontaneous conversations become in their correct elements of investigation), the reading of pre-existing documents as additional sources of information for adequate interpretations or direct questioning of the subjects observed to share meanings and collect feedback on the interpretative processes developed (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016).

The elements just listed have characterized the ethnographic method by bringing to attention some important features now gradually challenged by the rapid advent of the digital society. Contemporary ethnography aims at an extremely dilated and increasingly dematerialized concept of field, also due to the spread of new information technologies and Web 2.0, which has allowed the digital transposition of social elements and sociality classically the object of investigation with ethnographic method. The Internet logic has drawn spaces and languages for relations, actions and practices and social research examines these to understand the complexity of social change: the digital scenario, without doubt, has shown itself to be a not insignificant frame for social science in the last 20 years. This is due to its power of identity building, information and knowledge sharing in the architectures of relations and networks made by users via Computer mediated communication (CMC). So today, it is useful to retrace its reshaping steps, looking at the breakpoints of the adapting and arising capacities of social researchers in web (Internet)-based methods, taking digital technologies into account. For Arvidsson & Delfanti (2013:14), today, social researchers are involved in the actual pervasive presence of internet and digital technologies in daily human life, and they consider this presence as a manifestation and a direct element of social change. In fact, the primary purpose of social science is focused on social change, so the first question that launched our study regarded how today social scientists can study it in the digital scenario. Through the digital scenario, according to Natale & Airoidi (2017:11-18), the application of new methods starts by focusing on four potential units of analysis as objects by which to develop any empirical digital research:

- The media context, fundamental in discussing socio-technical features of data and its effect on results. Society reflects itself through media and it is necessary to be confident with the media environment to understand the reflected phenomena correctly.

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