Chapter 4

The Distinctiveness of Online Research:
Descriptive Assemblages, Unobtrusiveness, and Novel Kinds of Data in the Study of Online Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of research investigating online phenomena has pushed scholars to develop and practice new methodological opportunities around an increasingly wider array of contents, tools, and applications hosted and enabled by digital technologies. Yet, this chapter argues, while most studies have focused on online research methods' ability to offer vast, increasingly real-time data, few have considered the deeper theoretical implications of a fast-changing and fast-expanding digital ecosystem, particularly in respect to the widespread availability of new research objects and new classes of data online. Using three examples from research in online advocacy conducted in the past four years on Kiva.org, the world's first Web-based person-to-person microfinance platform, the chapter documents how, at the intersection of novel methods, emerging digital affordances, and new classes of data, there lies a possibility to capture and express the distinctiveness of online methods.

INTRODUCTION

Online research methods are gaining substantial ground among social researchers, as demonstrated by a flourishing array of case studies and the considerable attention given by scholars to contemporary trends and events related to social media (the Arab Spring providing the most compelling example). With most studies focusing on the *immediacy* of online research methods, alias their ability to offer quick, vast and increasingly real-time data relevant to social research, what appears to be lacking is a reflection on what new media (the Web in particular, in the context of

this chapter) is offering to academic research at a deeper theoretical level. Although dealing with a wide range of aspects of online social research, scholarly works have in fact rarely addressed a discussion on the theoretical innovations the Web urges us to confront with.

Undoubtedly, the Internet is having a major impact on research methods at every stage (Fielding, Lee & Blank, 2008). It attracts scholars across disciplines around the pervasiveness of the social practices it hosts, while letting companies and, increasingly, ordinary citizens, to master research endeavors thanks to an increasingly sophisticated and easy-to-use array of tools for analysis. Similarly to how *Internet Studies* have been progressively moving from a phase of expansion through systematic documentation of users and uses (Wellman, 2011), online research methods appear to require a shift from a phase of expansion in terms of development of scholarly-relevant tools and research outputs, to one of thick theoretical reflection. Nonetheless, while Internet Studies have witnessed a progressive shift away from conceptualization centered on the duality of online and offline dimensions of interaction, for example, human behavior and sociality by incorporating concepts like "networked individualism" (Wellman, 2002) in mainstream research, online methods research still suffers from a rather diffused (and partly justified) dependency from offline or traditional methods.

The proliferation of Web 2.0 platforms (also called *user-generated sites*), offering richer and more diverse classes of data within the framework of new models of participation and social engagement, appears to provide a more substantial research agenda than one expressed through the expansion of study subjects or data about them. As suggested by Rogers, we should be more open to approaches and language proposed by the Web, capturing the "ontological distinction between natively digital and digitalized...objects, content, devices…that are 'born' in the new medium… as opposed to those that have 'migrated' to it"

(2009, p. 1). Rogers' innovative approach to social research methods thus provides a suitable starting point for coupling known research methods with the "repurposing" of "digital-native mechanisms for social and cultural research" (2009, p. 2). The growing awareness, shared by a handful of scholars, that research methods should be enriched or even shaped around the Web's characteristics by engaging with the "technological flow" (Beer and Burrows, 2007) should be more systematically explored, especially in light of a fast-evolving research field.

Websites like Kiva.org, the world's first online person-to-person microfinance and a champion of contemporary Web-powered advocacy, empower micro-entrepreneur around the globe by connecting them with potential lenders willing to offer zero-interest loans. Beyond mastering an innovative approach towards global poverty alleviation, Kiva.org makes available to researchers the participation patterns of a community of over 750,000 lenders, interacting across a flourishing array of digital points of presence, and offers for the first time a database of over 770,000 microfinance projects, presenting an unprecedented subset of variables of investigation for advocacy research. Kiva might represent an appropriate milieu to exemplify the Web's ability to power what Savage terms novel "descriptive assemblages" (2009), heterogeneous aggregates of previously unlinked data able to enhance social research's imagination and to offer conceptual bridges across disciplines through data architectures and emerging research objects. Building upon this idea, this work will employ rich empirical evidence from a longitudinal multi-method study on Kiva.org and other online advocacy platforms (conducted in the past four years) to document how, at the intersection of novel methods, emerging digital affordances and new classes of data, lies a possibility to capture and express the distinctiveness of online methods, advancing theoretical discussions around innovation in social research methods.

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