Chapter 4
The Future of "Digital Research"

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ABSTRACT

Sociology is a discipline inevitably based on interpretative categories of social reality derived from a specific historical phase. In a period that is increasingly defined as a new era or digital society, can sociological knowledge not be upset by this overload of changes of every kind and nature? And can these changes not involve all identity components of sociology, namely theory, research, and the usability of its knowledge? Given this, it seems rather evident that this volume is the sign of the times and testify the variety and flexibility of digital methods. The author limits to dealing schematically with two methodological components that are constitutive of the digital revolution: the shift from the traditional and glorious ethnography to the new and emerging netnography, especially as regards the qualitative side, and, on the more properly quantitative side, the overwhelming and boundless spread of big data. A brief and selective description of these "transitions" will be complemented by a thoughtful evaluation of their potential for the future in the peculiar field of inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

The *web society* (Cipolla 2015), without calling into question other more challenging terms, requires, in various ways, the deployment of techniques and methodologies of social research that can only be digital in nature. This volume is a good and documented demonstration of this. This chapter is aimed to draw various hints towards the future of digital research. We will do this in an extremely synthetic way, using a necessarily schematic form of exposition, aimed, however, at giving an account of the radical change, if not an authentic revolution, taking place around us and, as sociologists, inevitably also within us (Cipolla 2021). Since we are faced with a challenge without any exemption either of merit or of method, it is not so easy to understand the future that awaits us in the face of ever new tools and knowledge[1]. From an epistemological point of view, we can call for the emergence of a "fourth paradigm" (Lombi, 2020) after those historically established, or simply take the path of *mixed methods*[2] or, again, rely on a process of integration between technique and content[3] that overcomes or recomposes the information overload produced by technology which fractionalizes us and attack us from all sides (Cipolla, 2019)

almost forcing us to be eclectic[4], to put aside or put a little in the shadow our human dimension, in favor of artificial intelligence, algorithms and various bots[5].

Along this empirical perspective, which cannot but follow its society, what do we mean by "digital research"? It is obvious that with this question we are entering a theoretical-practical labyrinth that is not easy to untangle and that can be unraveled in many ways. Here, in this sense, we can do very little and limit ourselves to a definition, just beyond, of what can be meant by this type of digital investigation. Thus, in the following paragraphs, we will deepen, but only in outline and for guiding labels, two basic paths that the sociological research has recently undertaken and is developing with particular momentum and attached complexity, both on the old footsteps of quantity and quality, and on the current hybrid, eclectic, difficult, if not improperly, dichotomized ones. On the qualitative side I am referring, as we will see later on, to the shift from classic ethnography (or qualitative research?) to the current and rampant Netnography or digital ethnography and on the quantitative side, to the arrival of *big data*, alongside the traditional and common *small data* - and this, I want to specify right away, with all the many and profound methodological implications and, therefore, of merit (results) of the case.

A first framing question we need to ask ourselves is that concerning digital methods in, for or of social research (Caliandro, Grandini 2019). Setting aside the hypothesis of *virtual methods* (Hine 2005), assuming the principle that digital inquiry is not a work confined to communicative processes (Caliandro, Grandini 2019) and involves new epistemological orientations, acquired that the old social relations cannot be confused or assimilated to the new technologically mediated connections[6], the sociological research that today compete necessarily can be traced, in my opinion, to four well distinguishable (although interconnected) areas.

A first type of research in this vein can be defined as *traditional, but with technical contributions of a digital nature*. By now, sociological research conceived in the classical sense that does not include computer-assisted tools or digital techniques, I do not believe that it is even conceivable anymore. During its necessary evolutionary and longitudinal developmental cycle[7], this cannot but be intersected by many contributes of a digital nature. Both in the overall research design, with its basic research questions, in the co-institution of the elementary information (data collection) and their consequent processing and analysis, and their inescapable interpretation and dissemination or, better, their expendability of the whole, the facilitating and supporting intervention of the digital cannot be denied, without however posing itself in this sense as aseptic or neutral. No technique, in fact, is ever really neutral (Bordoni 2020: pp. 9 and following).

More pervasive appears to be a second type of investigation that substantially transforms, thanks to the web, a classic traditional research in a *sociological research carried out through digital techniques and methodological procedures*. This transfiguration goes beyond the concept of change and for many reasons presents us with a new kind of investigation that, while still following the necessary methodological cycle mentioned above, is actually very different from the original historical model, for example in sampling, information gathering and so on.

Another evolution derived from the changing times consists in setting up research designs that, with respect to a given topic, *contemplate at the same time thematic and technical excursions in both online and offline practices* for a final integrated outcome that is certainly enriched by the confluence in a single explanatory stream of the two different streams just mentioned. As far as I can understand it, this is a horizon that sociological research will pursue for the force of social happenings more and more towards the future, drawing from it certain and overall heuristic advantages.

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