

Chapter 10

What Happens When the Way to “Follow the Medium” Changes? A Reflection About Emerging Perspectives in the Post-API Era

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ABSTRACT

Digital methods allow social researchers and IT professionals to work together to produce instruments to comprehend current social phenomena. To develop these tools, they felt the need to “follow the medium” by reorganizing their data collection and analysis strategies on what they learned from the medium. For many years, digital research has been based on application programming interfaces (APIs) querying, an approach based on the extraction of records of data made available by the platforms through their programming interfaces. But what happens when the way to “follow the medium” changes? This contribution addresses the methodological challenges and the potential alternatives in research activities that affect the researchers’ role due to recent restrictions. Two examples of research experience conducted before the APIs’ closure are proposed in order to lead towards an initial reflection on its critical effects.

INTRODUCTION

Re-Imagining Social Research: The New Scenario

The role assumed by digital technologies in the last 30 years has driven social science to a scenario where

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«Web-mediated research [...] is already transforming the way in which researchers practice traditional research methods transposed on the Web» (Amaturo & Punziano, 2016: 35-36). The new methods, which emerged with the advent of CMC (computer mediated communication), in the 1990s after adapting traditional approaches to cyberspace logic revolutionized techniques and research actions, reaching a paradigmatic way that permits researchers today to «observe and study social phenomena in digital context, taking account of the web not only as object of study, but as well the role they play in relation with it» (Rogers, 2013: 14). The prolific field of study of Digital methods, in fact, allows social researchers and IT professionals to work together to produce instruments that are useful for gathering organized data that can give back the current description of a social phenomenon its diachronic changes as well.

The increase of social media platforms in the last ten years and the chance to collect large datasets through the Application Programming Interface (APIs), has driven this field of study to define its instruments and tools for the study of digital native data provided by digital platforms.

Starting from this background, what happens when the way to “Follow the medium” (Rogers, 2009) changes?

The *APIcalypse* (Bruns, 2019) that followed the Cambridge Analytica case in 2018 inevitably led us to reflect on the instability of digital data sources and the dangers of anchoring research to a deterministic perspective with a technological inclination. Starting from the closure of APIs, this contribution aims to understand and describe the potential of new research methods in facing obstacles and limitations that could emerge during the research phases.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal brought up several ethical questions about users’ privacy, improper data use and social network’s sharing practices (*ibid.*), to which Facebook immediately responded with a tightening of *terms of service* (TOS) on public APIs services, reducing the functionality on Pages, Groups and Events in April 2018. Finally, in the summer of 2019, the platform definitively declared closed access to any data download, enabling third part tools. This was a critical decision for digital research and its addiction to the study of social phenomena, ranging from political mobilization to cultural consumption. The versatility offered by the Facebook API was precious, indeed, because it helped researchers to constantly move between quantitative and qualitative moments of the analysis (Venturini, & Rogers, 2019). In fact, digital methods reduced the gap between rich but scarce qualitative data and large but raw quantitative data, making it possible to study collective dynamics not excluding individual interactions (Venturini, Jensen, & Latour, 2015).

The current restrictions inevitably have acted on the way academics can do research, imposing limits not only on the amount of data and the range of time that can be analysed (consequently penalizing longitudinal research), but also on possible methods and topics that can be covered without violating social networks’ TOS.

So, in light of APIs’ closure, researchers who continue doing research through social networks are forced to look for alternative paths, not only by changing their tools, but also the way of viewing and thinking about the research itself. With the matter of data access becoming a problem, questions related to the alternative practices for data collection are posed. Were digital methods based only on the APIs’ interrogation techniques? Which are the main problematic effects for doing online social research emerging from the APIs restriction? The re-enactment of the closure event and the focused literature review offers help in replying to these questions in order to understand how the repertory of the online research actions and techniques for alternative research paths is composed. The description of two research experiences carried out in 2016 and 2019 will help reflect on alternative ways (already working before the APIs shutdown) to study social phenomena in the digital environment. The open conclusion

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