Chapter 21
Digital Mixed Content Analysis on Digital Platform Social Data:
The Revival of a Research Technique and Its Declination Between Mixed and Digital Methods

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ABSTRACT

The explosion of platform social data as digital secondary data, collectible through sophisticated and automatized query systems or algorithms, makes it possible to accumulate huge amounts of dense and miscellaneous data. The challenge for social researchers becomes how to extract meaning and not only trends in a quantitative as well as in a qualitative manner. Through the application of a digital mixed content analysis perspective to data analysis, in this contribution, the author will present the potentiality of a hybrid digitalized approach to social content. This perspective should be seen as an applied example of organizing a framework to guide the application of integrated methods of content analysis (quantitative and qualitative) but also integrated objects of analysis (individuals, relationships, and digital actions) on digital platform social data and to address their varied nature.

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of platform social data as digital secondary data, collectable through sophisticated and automatized query systems or algorithms makes it possible to accumulate huge amounts of dense and miscellaneous data (Amaturo & Punziano, 2017). A challenge for social researchers is how to extract meaning and not only trends in a quantitative as well as in a qualitative manner (Punziano, De Falco, &Trezza, 2021). However, an integrated research proposal is not only limited to this. The digital scenario, conceived/considered as an extension of the society, in the perspective of a critical digital sociology

(Marres, 2017) should be approached following the well-known Rogers' mottos (2009): *follow the medium*, *follow the native* and *follow the thing*. This attitude reflects the mindset of moving as digital natives but with the expertise and experienced eye that a digital researcher must have (Lupton, 2015). This is not an easy challenge, but it is certainly the main one for those who want to approach analyzing data as complex in nature, shape, and content as those present on social platforms. Actually, the starting point of this contribution is reflected in the statement which maintains that all the content circulating on social platforms, considered as social networking site where it is possible to interact with other users but also with the content that these users leave on the Net, is mainly made up of text in conjunction with images, videos, links, geographical location, enriched by information related to forms of sharing, engagement (such as with the use of reactions, likes and comments, among the other), as well as of relationships and connection. In this particular combination resides the essence of *digital platform social data*.

The aim of this chapter is to show the main possibilities that the *digital mixed content analysis* approach can provide to the researchers when they deal with *platform social data* enhancing a perspective where a *hybrid digitalized approach to social content* can be highlighted. In pursuit of this goal, a definition for the *digital mixed content analysis approach* will be proposed below. Subsequently, in the chapter it will be exposing the characteristics that make the research object of this approach - *digital platform social data* - an incredibly powerful object of interest for social research. Then, the path of choices that are posed to the researchers who intend to follow such approach will be given further clarification. In the end, acute reflections, critical and prospective, for the approach will be developed.

DEFINING THE DIGITAL MIXED CONTENT ANALYSIS APPROACH

With respect to the possibilities introduced by the *digital mixed content analysis* approach, it would be fair to start by saying that something bigger is going on. In the years leading up to the digital turn (Lupton, 2014; Marres, 2017), viewed as a paradigm shift in social sciences, a new approach has been increasingly retrieved: The technique of *content analysis* is used to extract secondary meaning from information that allows researchers to recover and examine the nuances of behaviors, perceptions, and trends, from existing content produced with different purpose compared to those of research (Schreier, 2012; Krippendorff, 2018).

Nevertheless, it is not just the approach that is finding a renewed space in social research. Every kind of data is nowadays available on the Net in large quantities and the digital scenario in its transition from the interaction among human actors and between human actors and the product of their actions (posts, comments, reactions, and so on) shifts the whole socio-cultural reflection on this topic. This shift led to a real transition from the classic Internet Studies that aimed to investigate how much and what part of the culture was on the Net to Digital Methods that make the Net not a replicated scenario of society but an object with its own dynamics, characteristics and infrastructure that cannot be investigated with a mere transposition of the frameworks classically used. Therefore, rather than talking about *web content analysis*, which found its memorable place in the Internet Studies, here it is preferred to talk about *digital content analysis*. So, Digital Methods can be considered as a set of research and strategy approaches using data produced in digital environments to study socio-cultural changes (Rogers, 2009, Caliandro & Gandini, 2016) using the knowledge about the Internet and the context of the Web not only as an ontological structure but also as a resource method to study people's behavior and social groups. The digital environment provides a permanent research context that offers scholars a range of techniques

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