The Potential of Digital Ethnography for Sensitive Topics and Hidden Population

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate the potential of digital research when the digital is both the *topic* and the *instrument* of research. The digital is an interesting *topic* of social research when *technology* intersect *society*, that is in those fields where technology give new rise to some social issues directly impacting mainstream social problems (such as identity and sexuality). In the case of sexuality, for example, the digital offers discursive spaces to legitimate sexual minorities identities, especially when their sexual models do not conform to social norms. For these topics digital ethnography may be a distinctive method to study social change deriving from the digital. It seems to be particularly appropriate to study phenomena born digital and to investigate generative and productive (and not just reflective) digital identities and cultures avoiding the contrived situation of an interviewer asking people direct questions and allowing to document the performative use of language. In other words, it gives access to sensitive topics and hidden population which would otherwise be less visible. By using the case of sexuality and providing a typology of the main topics in sexuality research investigated through digital ethnography, the paper demonstrates that the digital is associated with a variety of social transformations and presents several important dimensions of sociological inquiry which cannot be framed uncritically positive but are fundamentally marked by normative ambivalence (bad and good dimensions).

Keywords: digital ethnography, netnography, digital sociology, sensitive topics, sexuality.

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1. Introduction

The terrain of digital research is quite complex, variegated and rapidly changing, engaged in a progressive transformation, and sometimes taking conflicting and contradictory directions. The development of digital research is parallel to the deep penetration of the Internet in our social life. Recent technological developments, coupled with ubiquitous mobile devices which make it possible to be always connected and the "internet of things" which incorporate technology in our daily materiality, increase the scope and range of online social spaces and the forms and time of participation widening the opportunities for user-generated content. Due to the embeddedness of digital technologies in the structures of society in many different, complex and even contradictory way, we cannot anymore consider the digital as a separate social world. The distinction between real and virtual, material and immaterial, bounded and unbounded spaces, in group, outgroup become confused and overlapping (Veltri, 2021; Rabelo, Bhide, Gutierrez, 2019).

The digitalization is contributing to change and shape practices, symbols, identities and shared meanings of our society, so becoming central in understanding culture and society, human experience and social world since computer software and hardware actively constitute self-hood, embodiment, social life, social relations, social institutions, in a word us as humans (Lupton, 2015). To assume that technology informs social life is not to be meant in terms of technological determinism endorsement but in terms of recognition that technology is co-constitutive of social life (Latour et al., 2012). Thus, the digital is likely to entail broader societal transformations. Marres (2017) offers as an example of this transformation the *suicide* which shifts from an intimate phenomenon to a public-facing genre in the digital society through the last suicide notes published online.

The viral and ubiquitous use of smart and wearable devices, the integration of intelligent computational systems into existing architectures, have caused what has been called the *data deluge*, the increase in volume and variety of digital traces which can be used for research or other practical purposes (Marres, 2017; Edwards et al., 2013; Given, 2006).

Obviously, the question of new social formations, phenomena and practices arising through internet access is different and separated from the question of methods to carry out social research using ICTs. However, these two themes co-occur and need to converge (Fielding et al., 2008): "The opportunities for social scientists will be driven both by changes in societies and advances in our research methods" (Fisher et al., 2008). However, the interaction between digital technologies, social research and social life have

received limited attention. Indeed, it is in this interaction that the distinctiveness of digital research emerges.

In this paper we look at digital ethnography as a distinctive method for studying the area where technologies result to be embedded in social life by using sexuality as an example of this.

The choice between traditional or digital research or both of them should not be taken arbitrarily or prematurely excluding one arena or the other. Instead, it should be based on the research topic since some fields (such as sexuality or many others) seem to be more appropriate than others for a digital investigation. The paper aims to investigate such topics and their distinctiveness for digital research and digital ethnography in particular.

The paper is organized as follows. The second section highlights the peculiarities of Digital Social Research, the third section highlights the key features of digital ethnography meant as not a mere transposition of ethnographic to the digital environment. Sections 4, 5 and 6 discuss the objects which can be more appropriately investigated through digital ethnography leveraging on the example of sexuality and the features which make this approach able to study sensitive topics and hidden population (particularly its unobtrusiveness and attention to language and discourse).

Section 7 reviews the digital ethnographic research on sexuality and propose a typology which highlights how digital research is able to detect social change. Finally, discussion and conclusion are drawn.

2. The Digital Social Research

Digital research cannot be merely conceived as a digitalization or computationalization of social research. Social research methodologists have been using computational techniques before the rise of digital society. Moreover, digital research encompasses computing and also includes observation of interactions and online narratives (for example in the case of digital ethnography). Instead, as Marres (2017: 39) points out "[…] It is not the digitization of methods as such, but rather the digital re-mediation of established social research method in contemporary society that raises new methodological questions […]".

Digital research cannot be defined neither by digital methods when the digital is merely viewed as a tool for researching social phenomena. Indeed, the digital can be the topic of social inquiry, the instrument of research or both of them (Marres, 2017). The potential of digital research maybe lies at the intersection, when the digital is both the topic and the instrument.

With the embeddedness of the digital in our daily lives, the generation of *native digital data* (Rogers, 2013) about social life becomes not only routinized but a constituent part of social life and everyday practices.

Such data generation may be *intentional* as in the case of:
- data deriving from people acting in social network or blogging for example commenting on an event or posting photos or videos about their private life;
- data deriving from people searching on the web through keywords on search engines.

It may also be *unintentional* as in the case of *transactional data* deriving from the internet of things and particularly both from transactions in the daily use of smartphones, credit cards, shopping cards, tablets, and so on and from the automatic recording of data from material objects connected to the internet such as sensors for health monitoring, house automation, and driving aid (e.g. recording of domestic energy consumption or internet usage) (Marres, 2012; Amaturo, Aragona, 2019).

The debate about the implication of technology for social research can be viewed over a continuum with two polar positions: an optimistic and a pessimistic perspective (Marres, 2012).

The optimists recognize the opportunities in the democratization of social research: the proliferation of recording, analysis and visualization capacity enabled by digital technologies would support new forms of amateur-led social research so enhancing the empirical and analytical possibilities of social research.

The pessimists predict the end of social research as we know it, due to technologies making obsolete the entire methodological apparatus of social research and a progressively privatization of social research, confined in the laboratories of big IT firms (Savage, Burrows, 2007). This prediction has been fortunately averted.

With reference to objects and research questions, digital research can be focused on *technology* being aimed to analyze digital practices and processes or on *society* with the aim to deepen the understanding of social phenomena beyond online setting. When focused on society it can complement traditional offline research. For example, digital research may help to analyze *social structure* and *organization* particularly the network structure and density of particular cluster, elite or the structural holes and influential actors in social movements through the analysis of online social media communication. Moreover, it can complement the analysis of *social change* through content and sentiment analysis of online discussions.

If it is undeniable that questions related to *social stratification* and *inequalities* related to age, gender, ethnicity and social class can be better answered through

conventional methods rather than digital ones (Edwards et al., 2013), in some particular cases digital research can substitute traditional offline research.

Indeed, the embeddedness between *technology* and *society* give new rise to some social issues directly impacting mainstream sociological problems such as digital identities formation, digital inequalities, which can be better understood through digital research.

With reference to methods, the debate articulates around 2 extreme positions. On the one hand, those who emphasize the potential of innovative and *natively digital methods* (Rogers, 2009) which need to be medium-specific, need to take into account the specificities of affordances, infrastructures, algorithms and devices, embrace the methods built in the medium in ways that render them productive for social research. On the other hand, those who stress the continuity in methodology development discussing the digitalization of mainstream methods like ethnography, content analysis, diary, social network analysis or survey research as not changing the epistemic quality of social research but affecting research techniques, in particular data collection through automatic data capture and interactive visualization for example (Herring, 2009; Savage, 2010; Lee et al., 2008; Murthy, 2008).

In this paper, I take an in-between position by concentrating on the distinctiveness of a mainstream method – ethnography – in a digital networked environment as a particularly appropriate approach to study social change deriving from the digital (so connecting *technology* and *society*). Indeed, in some fields technology drives the social inquiry toward some transformations which can be caught through digital ethnographic approach.

3. Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography is the online transposition of ethnography. Like all the other methodological transpositions of traditional methods it cannot be considered as a mere adaptation.

The practice of opening ethnography to social spaces developing on the Internet have been defined in different ways and conceptualized sometimes as a specific *technique*, sometimes as a more extensive *research approach* (Varis, 2014): *Netnography* (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2010, 2015); *Cyber Ethnography* (Morton, 2001; Escobar, 1994), *Ethnography of Virtual Spaces* (Burrel, 2009), *Ethnography of the virtual word* (Boellstoorff, Nardi, Taylor., 2012), *Virtual Ethnography* (Hine, 2008), *Internet Ethnography* (Boyd, 2008), *Ethnography on the Internet* (Beaulieu, 2004), *Internet related ethnography* (Postill, Pink, 2012); *Digital Ethnography* (Murthy, 2008), *Webnography* (Puri, 2007), *Expanded ethnography* (Beneito-Montagut, 2011); *multi-sited ethnography* (Marcus, 1995). A previous systematic literature on the

contributions adopting empirical digital ethnography found that the most common label is *Netnography*, followed by *virtual*, *online* and *digital ethnography* (Delli Paoli, D'Auria, 2021).

We find that the label *digital ethnography* is more appropriate than *netnography*, *virtual* or *online ethnography* to describe the generative and dual nature of *the digital* as not a separate realm but a methodological resource for studying society at large.

Digital ethnography can be defined as the *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) of societies, communities, groups after observing their digital life in their elective fields. Differently from its offline parallel, the field of digital ethnography is not defined in geographical, physical or ethnic terms. Instead, the field is built in discursive terms. It can be a contextual field, represented by a specific media, a defined online space such as blogs, forums and communities which represent the privileged sites of digital ethnography at its origin (Kozinets, 1998). However, the diffusion of algorithms, standards in the recording of metadata and data mining in the information organization, revolutionize both the spaces of online discussions - which develop in non-linear directions from one media to another (Airoldi, 2018) being delimited online by content through the use of tags and algorithms - and the data capture for research purposes. Thus, the digital ethnographic research opens its boundaries beyond central media to cross-media digital spaces, to decontextualized narratives aggregated through common domains (such as a tag or a hashtag) called *meta-fields* (Airoldi, 2018; Caliandro, 2018) or *expandend ethnography* (Beneito-Montagut, 2011).

Delli Paoli and D'Auria (2021) in an attempt to classify the different practices of digital ethnography deriving from the literature distinguish 4 types on the basis of the field (if *contextual* or *meta fields*) and the scale of data (if *small* or *big data*):

- *meta digital ethnography* based on big data and meta-fields which temporarily aggregates dispersed content deriving from the daily practices and narratives of users about a shared object;
- *Social media ethnography* based on small data and meta-fields deriving from the aggregation of comments, messages, posts and activities from social media and social apps;
- *Contextual digital ethnography* based on small data and contextual field, bounded digital settings with a stable community of members and definition of situation such as discussion forums, online communities and blogs;
- *Cross-media ethnography* based on big data and meta-fields deriving from online and offline field settings.

The *search* of the right field (*field definition*) is an important step in a digital ethnographic research and can be considered as already a form of *research* following what Rogers (2015) defines *search as research*.

Digital ethnography implies to approach the digital *from the inside out* (embedding in the research process its infrastructures, affordances and practices) instead that *from the outside in* (by merely adapting traditional methods such as content analysis or ethnography to the digital) (Marres, 2017). Research design should consider both the technical infrastructure of the medium and the practice of its user for a real emic perspective (Venturini et al., 2018).

It requires a 'technologized' researcher (Beneito-Montagut, 2011) able to use a digital language based on the affordances of online environments (the socio-technical architectures of media): mentions, tags, likes, retweets, shares, hashtags become methodological sources for selecting online spaces for discussion, filtering content, sampling comments, posts, texts, images, videos and other multimedia and hypertextual materials, building categories of analysis.

It is not a mere technological question since the features of the technology structure the forms and meaning of social interaction online.

Understanding the technical side of digital fields and their affordances is not only essential in the research design (field definition and research questions) but also in making sense of the results.

Think for example to what Race (2015) defines the *intimate infrastructures*, the technical performances and shared strategies related to profile pictures used on Grindr for signaling user's desires and expectations to prospective partners: for example users, in order to signal their willingness to sexual encounters, change their profile picture with headless torsos (Blackwell, Birnholtz, Abbott, 2015).

In general, technological affordances such as anonymity, privacy, geolocation and hashtag are significant expedients through which individuals perform their sexuality online and affirm their sexuality discourses.

Moreover, understanding the formulation of algorithms helps to both foster sampling and interpreting findings. Algorithms for filtering and selecting partners in dating apps are not neutral but sometimes integrated with discrimination (O' Neil, 2016), as with dating apps and their sorting and filtering demonstrated to perpetuate sexual racism in the choice of potential dating partners (Robinson, 2015).

This to say that in digital ethnography is equally important the *natively digital methodological array* (Rogers, 2013; Caliandro, 2018) supposed to be essential for digital methods and the use of the same principles valid for digital methods, such as that of *following the medium* (Rogers, 2013) which prescribe to the researcher to be guided by the ontological properties of the medium.

The nature of participant observation of the offline ethnography seems to change in the digital context. Instead that referring to the high level of involvement of the researcher in the daily life of a group so implying necessary an overt role, in digital ethnography it refers to participate in the technological, cultural, and social contexts deriving from cross-media and cross-field observations in an overt or covert way (with the researcher informing participants about the research or invisibly observing digital activities and narratives respectively).

4. The distinctive object of digital ethnography

Digital research can orientate social inquiry around new objects and populations. For these objects digital ethnography may introduce a new social ontology, a new perspective on the social world besides conventional individual attributes such as gender, age, education, race and focused on more granular, *high-resolution descriptions* (Marres, 2017; Castellani, 2014).

The example of sexuality may help to understand the point. Sociologists have stressed the generative aspects of online sphere on sexuality. Some (Waskul, 2014) have used the term *techno-sexuality* to indicate the close interrelationship between digital spaces and sexuality including altogether desires, practices, relationships, and identities. Digital research has investigated the role of online spaces in sexual identity work and in shaping sexual selfhood projects. The digital is for sexual minorities a space to affirm and contest the meaning attached to their respective identity categories, where they discursively justify and find a legitimation for their sexual desires especially when their sexual models do not conform to social norms. We can say that for sexuality research the digital can be considered productive and not just reflective of emerging identities and cultures (Dowsett et al., 2008). Sexual minority groups, sexual invisible groups and/or deemed sexually deviant groups find in the digital (social media, dedicated platforms and communities, location-specific networking, dating apps, etc.) a way to overcome the constraints of society and social and physical spaces.

Consider for example the case of *asexuality* which can be defined as a lack or a low level of sexual attraction. Asexuals challenge the sexual normativity of society (Cerankowski, Milks, 2010; Chasin, 2011) and the naturalization of sexual attraction as a universal and essential component of identity. Asexuals find in the online asexual communities the way to cope with a sexual affirmative context, to affirm and legitimize their identity based on new languages and new types of non-sexual relationships, new forms of intimacy, attraction and desire dependent on emotional bonds instead that physical ones, in so doing

disaggregating sexual and romantic attraction, sexual desire and attraction (Delli Paoli, Masullo, 2022). For these people the digital represents a "real" space of affirmation, for overcoming the sense of loneliness, improving the capacity of reflexivity and acceptance, for building a social and a communal identity (Carrigan, 2011).

Asexuals cannot be studied through traditional methods because they exist purely online as community and offline are geographically dispersed people with no offline contacts. Because here members have only internet interactions, their social life and behaviors can be studied solely by examining their online discussions through digital research (Garcia et al., 2009).

Following Latour (2005) a social phenomena can be considered a network of interfering actions. When these interactions are exclusively online mediated there is no risk to exclude from the observation significant face-to-face interactions and we can say that there is a close alignment between the research object and the medium (Venturini et al., 2018). This to say that maybe the potential of digital research can be better seen when the digital is seen as both topic and resource for social analysis.

5. Unobtrusiveness as an opportunity for sensitive topics and stigmatic population

Differently from data from surveys, interviews, focus groups which are the artefacts of social researchers (Housley et al., 2014), digital data are unobtrusive, naturally occurring, less intrusive than traditional methods as they allow for researcher invisibility. While the former are single-purpose since they have been planned and operationalized by the research for scientific scope, the latter are a product of already occurring interactions, they have been produced as a part of social life, for a range of scope other than research (sociality, self-hood projects, self-presentation, etc.). Reactive methods such as interviews and surveys may be biased by social desirability or by the some tendency to bias behaviors as a response of being under scrutiny. We do not aim to analyze here the treats to the traditional methods deriving from this, as their survival after years of digital research demonstrates that they are not in crisis or at risk, remaining essential in dealing with some sociological issues and research questions such as those where conventional individual attributes (e.g. race, age, class, etc.) are relevant. Instead, we aim to demonstrate that the unobtrusiveness of digital research may be particularly appropriate in some cases being adaptable to study phenomena difficult to study through face-to-face encounters.

Unobtrusive approaches are not distinctive of digital research being used also physically in the hidden observation of daily interactions. This has been

defined elsewhere as *Passive observation* (Delli Paoli, 2021) when the researcher - while physically present in the field - does not participate in community life but acts as a mere spectator (Cellini, 2008) with brief and superficial interactions with the actors observed. This is the case, for example, of Ishii's (1994) research on adult-child interactions observed from benches in public parks, of Nash's (1975) research on passenger interactions studied through observations on buses or of Lofland's (1972a; 1972b) analysis of public interactions through observations in bus stations waiting rooms of Press and Johnson-Yale's observation of women in hair salons to monitor their talk about Oprah or Levine's (2007) observation of school yearbooks to investigate engagement of televisions among American youths. Although not being distinctive of digital research, the unobtrusive observation is far less time consuming in digital research.

Consider again the case of *asexuality* which questions traditional operational definitions and instruments used to measure sexuality based on identity, attraction or behavior by challenging the assumption that attraction exists equally for all respondents, not including the possibility that respondents are not attracted to anyone and forcing often them to choose among an attraction to both sexes, a prevalent attraction to the same sex, an exclusive attraction to the same sex.

Another example could be the *barebacking* phenomena – gay men using to seek condomless sex with other men – who produce online new sexual subcultures, new ways of being and new cultural forms (Dowsett et al., 2008). Or we can consider the problem of *digital intimacy* and its racism in the choice of partners on dating apps.

Moreover, we can consider the issue of *sexual deviance* which finds online "back places" (Durkin, Forsyth, Quinn, 2006) through which reject pathology and validate deviant desires and practices such as pedophilia.

All of these sexual issues can be hardly investigated asking people direct questions.

Thus, digital research may be the choice when it is appropriate to avoid the contrived situation of an interviewer asking people direct questions about their response to the object of investigation both in the case of physically difficult-to-reach populations or stigmatic groups (migrants, disabled, LGBTQ+, etc.) and in the case of sensitive topics such as sexual deviance but also criminality, illegal acts, illnesses, health concerns and interests, stigmatic phenomena.

This characteristic of digital research is defined by Kozinets as "voyeuristic" (Kozinets, 2015: 88).

6. The importance of language

Another important feature of digital ethnography is that it allows to document the explicit language of informants without the risk of obtrusiveness and disturbance of direct research involvement providing researcher with the emic (insider) and ethical (outsider) perspectives for more holistic insights.

For minority identities language has a performative role since they are not pre-discursively built but are negotiated in digital spaces. Identity formation is the effect of linguistic and semiotic practices based on the available epistemologies constituting those identities. Digital spaces are often places for *indexicality*, for creating and disseminating links between linguistic forms and social meanings (Barrett, 2002) and to challenge conventionalized associations embedded in sexual normativity (Foucault, 1978). This is very important when in order to affirm themselves, such minority identities need to build an extra-discursive reality dismantling the mechanisms involved in essentializing identities and maintaining naturalised gender and sexual binaries intact such as in the case of asexuals.

The performance of identity in online spaces takes place entirely through discourse (Markham, 1998). In the use of language often emerges the tension between the macro-level normativity of society and the micro-level contesting of it in order to negotiate the normative status of their own identities, desires, behaviours and practices (Kulick, 2014; Motschenbacher, 2009).

Language is used to define their own identity but also to perpetuate an exclusionary discourse, to exclude and remove those who do not quite fit, sometimes to offend and alienate outsiders. Think for example the discursive norm of referring to women as "cumdumptsters" or to use the homophobic slur "fag" (to mean failed masculinity) as normal social discourse in 4chan (Bailey, Harvey, 2019).

7. Digital ethnographic research on sexuality

Starting from the types of digital ethnographic research (Delli Paoli, D'Auria, 2021) synthesized in the section 3, in this section I will propose the main topics in sexuality research investigated through digital ethnography and their implication for social inquiry.

A first branch of research dealt with *contextual digital ethnography* on online communities, blogs and forums (such as the asexual communities, the LGBTQ+communities, the lesbian communities, etc.) focuses on *digital minority identities*. Thanks to digital ethnography this research stream has demonstrated how the digital spaces configure as spaces of refuge for sexual minorities,

stigmatized sexualities, contested and marginalized offline identities, how they represent spaces to explore their sexual identities, affirm sexual identities outside of the boundaries of acceptable sexualities mitigating structural barriers faced by individuals who locate outside social norms and how they sustain sexual subcultures and boundary work (Carrigan, 2011; Delli Paoli, Masullo, 2022; Fraser, 2010; Alang, Fomotar, 2015). Such digital empowerment which allows to overcome the sense of social invisibility and loneliness, may also have negative societal implications legitimizing, validating and proselytizing practices outside the boundaries with reference, for example, to deviant sexualities. Deviant sexualities constitute online subaltern counter-discourses with similarly oriented others from around the world on their identities, interests and needs, as in the case of *zoosexual* communities (human-animal sex) (Kavanaugh, Maratea, 2016; Maratea, 2011) or in the case of *bareback* sex (men seeking sex without condoms) (Dowsett et al., 2008), *pedophilia* and child *pornography* (Holt, Blevins, Burkert, 2010).

Overall, this research stream testifies that online spaces can be both sites of protections (for minority identity), backspaces (for deviant sexualities) and productive of anti-politics through their power of collectivizing stigmatized sexual desires in ways that are difficult or impossible offline. Think for example at the antifeminist politics emerging from 4chan (Bailey, Harvey 2019) or the anarchist protest again normative forms of sexuality or marriage emerging from the asexual community (Chasin, 2013).

A second research stream focuses on *online and offline sexual selfhood projects* through *cross-media ethnography*. This research stream focuses on the dual role of online and offline contexts in shaping contemporary sexualities and reconciling identities by mixing digital ethnography with in-person observations or interviews. On the one hand, it demonstrates how some identities reinterpret social categories to make them more elastic, flexible and fluid and compatible with their sexualities in the real life as in the case of *heteroflexibility* applied to people who led a heterosexual lifestyle but remain open to same-sex relationships (Carillo, Hoffman, 2018), or in the case of *gender omniscience* which extend the evangelic emphasis on sex as mutual pleasure to combine religion (love for Jesus) and interest in non-normative sexual practices such as pegging and erotic cross-dressing (Burke, 2014) or in the case of *sexiness*, expressed through sexy selfies to perform smartness and maturity (Naezer, 2018). On the other hand, they concentrate on the complex relationships that in LGBTQ+ dating apps are experienced among mobile media, public and private spaces, intimacy, co-situation, visibility and invisibility and everyday contexts (Choy, 2018).

A third research area analyzes *self-identification strategies* through *social media ethnography*. It focuses prevalently on posts, messages and practices adopted in

dating app in order to analyze the ways user manage the porous public-private boundary of the app, manage their reputation on the app, on the motives for private messaging other users and the culturally prescribed limits to them which drive toward a plausible denial or minimization of sexual intentions and sometimes cause contradictions between the stated intention and the actual use (Ahlm, 2017; Blackwell, Birnholtz, Abbott., 2015).

A fourth research stream explores *intimacy, sexual hierarchies, and digital discriminations* via *meta digital ethnography*. Through meta-analysis of large-scale online dating trends and digital ethnography, this research stream investigates the practices used to entice and select potential partners, the racist mechanisms behind partner selection, the ways in which discourses of race, gender and sexuality are articulated and based on hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity and how they shape the way in which daters experience interracial dating and romance. They show how powerful hegemonic discourses of *race* and the *racial other* find its way in the last place one might expect it such as in interracial dating website driving the attention towards implicit forms of racism and inequalities (Esquinas et al., 2019; van Schijndel, 2019).

8. Discussion and conclusion

As the case of sexuality demonstrates, the digital is associated with a variety of social transformations and presents several important dimensions of sociological inquiry which cannot be framed uncritically positive but are fundamentally marked by normative ambivalence (bad and good dimensions).

While this sociological implications are important in their own right, we cannot consider them separated from the methodological question. First, because they affect social life and social research simultaneously (Marres 2017). Second, because they can be better studied through digital research particularly when they pose challenges to traditional research methods, as for sensitive topics and hidden population. In these cases, we need to approach the digital both as a topic and a method of social inquiry and digital ethnography may be helpful in this. First, because it leverages on the naturalistic character of digital data and traces allowing a high-resolution access to social life and discourses produced within it. This feature is particularly relevant for studying phenomena born digital or difficult to reach population and difficult to investigate topics and social phenomena where language and discourse play a generative and performative role and give access to groups, topics and phenomena that would otherwise be less visible (such as the exploration of sexual selves).

We are aware that such data are embedded with technological affordances and suggest looking at them with a technological mindset. We are not worried

about the fidelity of digital narratives and discourses because in the topic proposed it is not the veridicity of information to be important but their veridicity for participants: "When people perceive things to be real, they will be real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928). Within digital spaces the self exists as a textual body. This textual body exists as a separate "entity" from the physical body, an entity which may also be false in "real" terms. Being false or not, in real world digital selves produce real consequences: "real becomes a double negative; simply put, when experiences are experienced, they cannot be 'not real'" (Markham, 1998: 120). The example of the married couple formed by David and Amy Taylor, unemployed and obese in the real life and slim and professionally realized in their Second Life, who had their marriage destroyed by Amy's discovery of the virtual affair of David with a sex worker in Second Life, make the point clear (Ashford, 2009).

The example of sexuality with its sensitivity and involvement of hidden population, demonstrates how digital research may help to overcome real world assumptions and definitions of gender and sexuality and to analyze sexualities without pre-determined categories which would hidden many digital identities.

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