

Methodological Article

Clues for the Paradigmatic Development of Online Qualitative Methods



Pistas para o Desenvolvimento Paradigmático dos Métodos de Pesquisa Qualitativa On-Line

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ABSTRACT

Objective: in this paper, we problematize how online methods were reduced to mere adaptations from previous data collection techniques, and then discuss how some of the idiosyncratic properties of the online scope may drive the development of future, paradigmatic, online qualitative methods. **Proposition:** we identified five clues for the paradigmatic development of online qualitative methods: (1) the new socialities allowed by online interactions; (2) the processes involved in asserting identities and selves online; (3) the increasing difficulty in distinguishing what is private and what is public online, and what does privacy mean in this context; (4) the increase of participants' agency in online qualitative research; and (5) the declining distinction between offline and online social phenomena. **Conclusion:** by using ontological and epistemological assumptions that do not consider the specificities of online experiences, and by focusing excessively on adapting known methods to the new settings, we researchers are bound to conceive the online experience and operate in it using offline categories. This way, we might be missing the opportunity to develop native, paradigmatic, online qualitative methods that, ultimately, would allow for a better understanding of the phenomena we investigate.

Keywords: qualitative methods; online research; data collection; data analysis; methods development.

RESUMO

Objetivo: neste artigo, problematizamos como os métodos de pesquisa on-line foram reduzidos a adaptações de técnicas anteriores de coleta de dados e discutimos como as propriedades idiossincráticas dos ambientes on-line podem impulsionar o desenvolvimento paradigmático de métodos qualitativos on-line. **Proposta:** identificamos cinco pistas para o desenvolvimento paradigmático de métodos de pesquisa qualitativa on-line: (1) as novas socialidades que emergem das interações on-line; (2) os processos envolvidos na afirmação de identidades e *selves* on-line; (3) a crescente dificuldade na distinção entre privado e público no ambiente on-line, e o que a privacidade significa nesse contexto; (4) o aumento da agência dos participantes em pesquisas qualitativas on-line; e (5) a crescente indistinção entre os fenômenos sociais em seus contextos on-line e off-line. **Conclusão:** ao utilizar ontologias e epistemologias que não consideram as especificidades da experiência on-line, e ao focar excessivamente na adaptação de métodos conhecidos aos novos ambientes, nós pesquisadores ficamos limitados a conceber a experiência on-line e a operar nela através de categorias off-line. Dessa maneira, perdemos a oportunidade de desenvolver métodos nativos e paradigmáticos de pesquisa qualitativa on-line, que poderiam proporcionar um melhor entendimento dos fenômenos que investigamos.

Palavras-chave: métodos qualitativos; pesquisa on-line; coleta de dados; análise de dados; desenvolvimento de métodos.

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Someone who discovers a new world cannot
in one glance know all its properties.

— Voltaire (1734/2007).

INTRODUCTION

Online research has been part of the academic landscape since the 1990s. From then on, it has been used, by and large, to reduce costs; automate data collection; contact hard-to-reach participants; spread samples geographically; reduce participants' inhibitions; facilitate the use of artwork, images, audio, etc.; among other conveniences (Genoe, Liechty, Marston, & Sutherland, 2016; Krantz & Reips, 2017; Wood, Griffiths, & Eatough, 2004). More recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic limited or even shut researchers' physical access to the field, online research has also helped contact participants remotely. Countless studies around the world moved online with significant changes in their initial objectives, and it is not unreasonable to believe that the ways in which participants engage with researchers "are, and will continue to be, implicated going forward" (Howlett, 2021, p. 2) (see also Weissman, Klump, & Rose, 2020 for a localized example of how the pandemic affected a research field). More than ever before, reflecting on the ontological and epistemological issues concerning online research methods has become a pressing issue.

Methodological discussions about online research go back to its very beginning, in the 1990s (e.g., Coomber, 1997; Hewson, Laurent, & Vogel, 1996; Michalak & Szabo, 1998; Robbin, 1992; Schrum, 1995). Understandably, these early concerns regarded credibility. Because access to the web was limited in the 1990s, bias and generalizability were prime issues back then, and reviewers and editors needed to be convinced that online studies were rigorous (Stanton & Rogelberg, 2001). In this context, online researchers had few incentives to develop paradigmatic methods, that is, methods tailored for the new (online) scope. Instead, they held on to traditional and accredited methods, simply transposing them to the new research environment. Online research methods, then, came to be, often and to a large extent, mere adaptations of previous methods (Mawer, 2016), with these adaptations focusing almost exclusively on data collection techniques. The value of online research was reduced to its convenience and its methodological discussion narrowed to the ethical ambiguities of the new scope (for more on the reducing the methodological debate to ethical issues, see: Battles, 2010; Morison, Gibson, Wigginton, & Crabb, 2015).

Yet, the lack of paradigmatic development of online methods struck quantitative and qualitative research

differently. The nature of quantitative research, with its sharp distinction between collecting and analyzing the data, and its abstract and standardized analyses (Creswell, 2009), asserted the use of online research simply as a convenient medium for collecting data. Although quantitative researchers might speculate about fundamental changes in their methods (e.g., Jank & Shmueli, 2006), their methodological concerns regarding online research have not changed much since the 1990s. The bulk of their discussion, even the most recent, centers on issues such as biases, reliability, validity, transferability, variability, data integrity, and accuracy (e.g., Anwyl-Irvine, Massonnié, Flitton, Kirkham, & Evershed, 2020; Klein, Tyler-Parker, & Bastian, 2020; Man, Campbell, Tabana, & Wouters, 2021; Miller, Guidry, Dahman, & Thomson, 2020; Pozzar et al., 2020; Pronk, Wiers, Molenkamp, & Murre, 2020; Upadhyay & Lipkovich, 2020; Welch, 2020).

This is not to say that online technology does not affect participant selection in qualitative research. Crowdsourcing platforms, such as Amazon's Mturk (or even social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), which are now ubiquitously used for quantitative studies, can also be used to advertise qualitative research and recruit participants, triggering all the concerns related to the algorithm-managed social life. However, qualitative researchers, who collect and analyze their data in parallel, quickly saw their concerns growing well beyond ethical and sampling issues. They realized they needed different skills to operate online (e.g., O'Connor & Madge, 2001), that they should use "online methods as a distinct methodological practice, rather than as a reproduction of traditional techniques using the Internet" (Bouchard, 2016, p. 59). Online research strategies based on previous, face-to-face methods should not be employed in an insensitive way (Riley, Evans, Griffin, Morey, & Murphy, 2015) because "a tool kit of qualitative methods cannot simply be transposed onto an online setting" (Gregory, 2018, p. 1611) (see also Kaun, 2010). Instead, researchers should consider the opportunities and limitations that are specific to online research (Willis, 2012), let go of the tradition and adapt (Kozinets, Scaraboto, & Parmentier, 2018). Ultimately, doing online qualitative research would require shifting basic epistemological assumptions (Murthy, 2008, p. 838) and questioning "a priori

methodological certainties” (Baym & Markham, 2009, p. 8).

Claims like these sprout the fundamental assumption of this paper: if the online scope is substantially distinct than those which originated traditional qualitative methods, if it has specific properties, operates by its own rules, allows for different interaction patterns, etc., then it would require equally distinct ways of conducting qualitative research in order to realize all of its potential, to tackle it using its own terms. Mere new data collection techniques would not suffice. We should also be looking for new analyzing techniques and even new methods per se. The challenge, though, as Marres (2012) posits, is to identify the possible ingredients of these novel online methods and techniques. What are the ‘clues’ for this paradigmatic development of online qualitative research methods? Where to find them?

In this paper, we explore five of these ‘clues’ to the paradigmatic development of online qualitative methods, resulting from a systematic review of the literature. Each ‘clue’ reveals an idiosyncratic attribute of the online scope that might support future developments of online qualitative methods. The clues were found in: (1) the new socialities allowed by online interactions; (2) the processes involved in asserting identities and selves online; (3) the increasing difficulty in distinguishing what is private and what is public online, and what does privacy mean in this context; (4) the increase of participants’ agency in online qualitative research; and (5) the declining distinction between offline and online social phenomena.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

To identify in the literature what could be the most fertile topics for this methodological discussion, we searched the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) for any English-written journal article discussing online qualitative methods. Our search argument, which returned 281 articles published between 1997 and 2021, was

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(TS=("online research" AND method)
AND LANGUAGE: (English) AND DOCUMENT
TYPES: (Article)).
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We then screened these articles in two rounds. In the first screening, after reading titles and abstracts, we excluded 187 articles using the following criteria: (a) articles in which the expression “online research” meant a simple internet search (11 articles); (b) articles reporting researches ‘about’ the online scope (63 articles); (c) articles simply reporting an online research per se, featuring no methodological discussion (110 articles); and (d) spurious results from our query (three articles).

For the second screening, we downloaded and read 89 of the 94 remaining articles (we could not access four of them, and one was duplicate). We, then, selected out those articles exclusively addressing quantitative methods (35 articles). Because of the deeper contact with the articles, we found eight additional articles that did not address any methodological issue whatsoever. We ended the second screening with 46 articles. A schematic account of the screenings is presented in Figure 1.

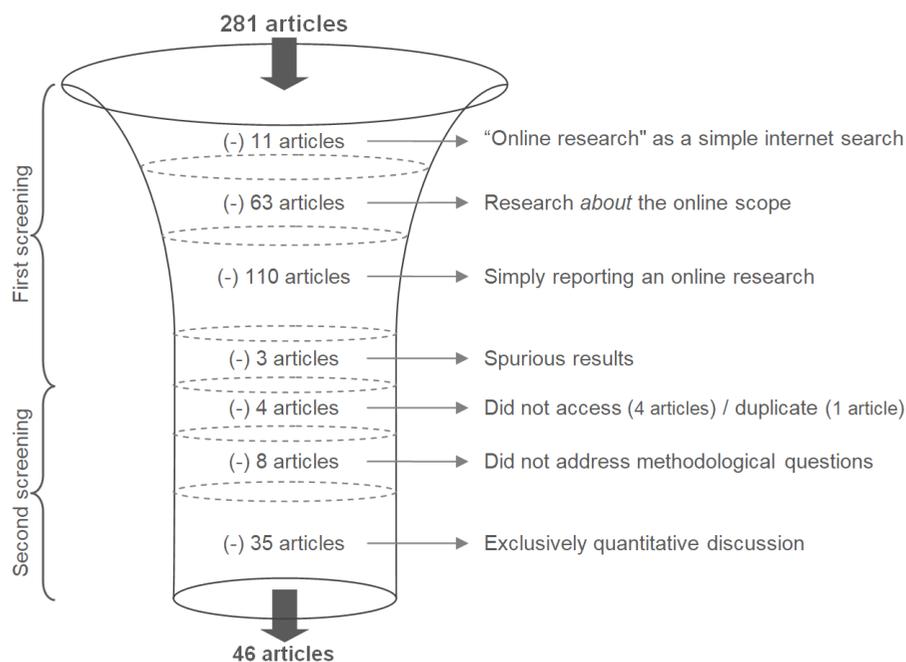


Figure 1. The literature review sampling process.

Source: Authors.

Identifying the clues

By reviewing the literature, we found that scholars first assumed that their challenge was to mimic previous forms of interaction. They were still based in the erroneous “physiognomic notion that the face and the body are the only ‘true’ sources which can reveal the character of a person” (Featherstone & Burrows, 1995, p. 5), which meant a sharp distinction between the online scope and the ‘real world.’

However, the online scope is not a surrogate reality. It is a legitimate part of ‘real world’ and online interactions are an authentic form of human interaction. Online research is not a poor reproduction of other research strategies. In fact, it offers new opportunities. Untied from the old assumptions, researchers are discovering that “mediated approaches can be immersive in ways not typically discussed or even previously realized” (Howlett, 2021, p. 5) (see also CohenMiller, Schnackenberg, & Demers, 2020), that “an oral culture is different from a written culture, and the culture of the Internet is different from both” (Holge-Hazelton, 2002, p. 4), and that asynchronous communication occurring in a non-physical space “should not be seen as inferior data, rather it is different” (Wood et al., 2004, p. 515). Ultimately, they are concluding that, in order to enact traditional methods online, they need to rely on entities that are not those for which these methods were designed, thus, they conclude, the difference between online and offline research includes not only material conditions but also its ‘substance’ (Marres, 2012).

Now, researchers are being challenged to move forward by asking questions that could only be answered using online research (Griffiths, 2012); making use of “new technologies for data collection, analysis and visualization enable[ing] the further elaboration of existing methods and the development of new ones” (Marres, 2012, p. 141); and eventually “know[ing] the world in ways not previously possible with tools still to be envisaged ... [a prospect] that will have widespread methodological implications for social research” (Lee, Fielding, & Blank, 2017, p. 13) (see also Kozinets, 2002).

Next, we discuss five ways to ‘know the world in ways not previously possible,’ that is, five idiosyncrasies of the online scope, retrieved from the literature review, that might foster the paradigmatic development of online qualitative methods.

New socialities

One of the greatest challenges that online qualitative researchers face is the ‘ontological complexity’ of the online scope (Corti & Fielding, 2016). The intrinsic capacities of online technology, such as its ubiquity, and its innumerable

alternative uses not only “shift how people make sense of and live their everyday lives” (Baym & Markham, 2009, p. 7), but also enable the creation of new social phenomena. “Each technological development enables new means for forming and maintaining social relationships, while rendering some types of social relationship less critical or obsolete” (Fischer, Lyon, & Zeitlyn, 2017, p. 614). Researchers are increasingly convinced that the online scope constitutes a different kind of sociality, hence the need for methodological development.

For example, participants tend to consider online conversations more reserved than face-to-face interviews (which are normally conducted in public spaces). Because of this, online conversations tend to be longer than in-person interviews and participants tend to expose more intimate details about themselves (Howlett, 2021, p. 7). Researchers’ experience shows that by using online conversations it is easier to address sensitive or personal issues that would otherwise be difficult to discuss face-to-face, especially if anonymity is granted (Genoe et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2004).

The former assumption that online interactions could never attain the same richness of in-person meetings is being replaced with the discovery of new ways to embed in the field remotely and to access previously unobserved angles of these fields. Researchers detected that mediated approaches can, ‘paradoxically,’ yield a fuller picture of their participants who, in a more casual environment such as those of online research, are prone to show particular aspects of their lives and identities, aspects that they would not disclose in a typical face-to-face setting (Howlett, 2021).

But online qualitative data is not only richer. Researchers’ immersion in the field should be carefully considered because data collected online might demand additional or even new techniques for its analysis. Besides, the dynamics of interaction between researchers and participants are likely to also occur when people interact online outside of research contexts. Online interactions might change the way social relations operate.

Another interesting assertion is made by Schiek and Ullrich (2017). They demonstrate how the exam of asynchronous online communication offers the opportunity to inspect early stages of social constitution of meaning. This would provide researchers — especially qualitative researcher, who are usually interested in understanding meaning and experience — with a window to the boundaries of sociality, enabling them to grasp processes lying between subjectivity (internal dialogue) and objectivity (public discourse), that is, experience that is not socially consolidated. Think, for instance, of the reflexive tone employed in social media posts. And, again, the appearance of an ‘observable internal dialogue’ is not just about researchers’ access to a new kind of data. It is also a new and complex social phenomenon.

New phenomena and new methods elicited by technology “will, of course, co-occur and will quickly converge” (Fischer et al., 2017, p. 612). Ontological changes demand epistemological and methodological changes, for what else but ontological changes could “bring into sharp relief previously assumed and invisible epistemologies and practices of inquiry”? (Baym & Markham, 2009, p. 7).

Identity, self, personas, and avatars

One of the reasons for the early distrust of online research is the fact that people may falsify their identities online. Behind screen names and avatars, people could very easily present false selves. This ‘license,’ granted by technology, would allow people not to ‘be themselves,’ if such thing could ever be possible.

At the same time, though, researchers are using the internet to observe participants in informal settings — at home, for example — and access aspects of their identities not easily disclosed anywhere else. That became especially clear in the COVID-19 pandemic when “more of our ‘real lives’ (including both our work and social engagements) are happening virtually” (Howlett, 2021, p. 9). These new windows to participants’ lives help researchers explore the intersections of their identities, which can be meaningful (Craig et al., 2020).

Deeper developments, though, come when researchers become aware that the notion of identity in the online scope may not be univocal. For example, multiple aliases, personas, and avatars may all be performed by a single person. Conversely, a single persona or avatar may be managed by several people (not to mention the internet bots, which also shape, sometimes decisively, the online landscape — for more on bots and fraudulent behavior in surveys, see Pozzar et al., 2020). However, the aliases, personas, and avatars do not function simply as pointers to an external identity or self, nor do they function only as local representations. They are more than pointers and representations; they are something akin to what is called identity. That is why online researchers must provide anonymity not only to the participants’ actual names but also, in many cases, to their screen names.

Thus, researchers had to replace their assumptions that people use the online scope to create false selves, to forge identities different from whom they really are. Identity has been displaced and cannot be “grounded [anymore] in the assumption that one’s self is located in the physical body that exists as an essential and classifiable object in a state of nature” (Broad & Joos, 2004, p. 924). It is possible that the masks worn in ‘real-life’ (even to ourselves, psychologically speaking) have their effects enhanced online. However, that would not be a misleading feature of the online scope. It would be a real feature of the world, which includes our

experience online. Because of the inherent characteristics of technology, we exert more freedom regarding our self-assertion online, and the evolution of online interacting tools is a testimony to that. Are not they increasingly centered on identity assertion? Methodologically speaking, deploying avatars can be used to explore the possibilities of pushing the boundaries of one’s own self, an opportunity provided by the online scope (Gregory, 2018, p. 1613).

Furthermore, one might reason that if the online scope is where online selves (which are real selves) are produced, and if that production occurs under the terms of cultural contingencies (Broad & Joos, 2004), then online identities may be indexes of (cyber)culture. More broadly and abstractly, it means that researchers would not need to rely on offline concepts to understand the online scope, but could use immanent particularities of the online phenomena to accomplish that. “At heart, the production of online selves in simulated communities must continue to return to the question of what cyberspace is and how it is constituted” (Broad & Joos, 2004, p. 943).

Public, private, and privacy

Working online, researchers have access to a tremendous amount of private interactions and private stages of the construction of selves and identities. However, many times, this is possible only because these private processes are publicly disclosed. The ambiguous character of a sizeable portion of online data, sitting somewhere between private and public, both enhances the online research potential and, at the same time, causes most of the ethical concerns of online researchers (Broad & Joos, 2004).

The way we interact online is forcing us to reconsider the notions of ‘public’, ‘private’, and ‘privacy’. Our notions of public and private are extensions of spatialized metaphors into other domains, such as communication, behavior, emotion, and ethics. But metaphors can only go so far, especially because their ability to convey certain meanings is very context-sensitive. When the context changes, the metaphor supporting the notion may not function properly, rendering the notion imprecise and anachronistic. That is why the use of public and private as methodological, analytic, or ethical categories need to be reexamined in the online context (Giaxoglou, 2017).

Online and physical contexts are different and those differences demand new considerations. For example, researchers are finding that, as the limits between private and public are being blurred, the notion of research field is also compromised (Howlett, 2021, p. 10). In addition, new social practices allowed by the internet reinforce its distinctiveness. For example, “in such contexts we imagine and stage forms of public selves in semi-public contexts

where known and unknown audiences merge, blurring the boundaries between what would have been conceived as private and public” (Giaxoglou, 2017, p. 242).

Problematic definitions of public and private have also consequences for the notion of privacy. The lack of a sharp contrast between what is public and what is private online shifts the understanding of privacy and its social value. For example, there is evidence that people accept digital surveillance and restrictions in their privacy rights for the sake of prosocial responsibility, especially for the sake of public health such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kokkoris & Kamleitner, 2020). More evidence that the notions of public, private, and privacy are changing across society is found in the “subdued reactions to increasingly regular cases of personal data being lost, stolen or leaked from financial organizations, insurers and government, which are regarded more as inconveniences than major scandals” (Fischer et al., 2017, p. 616).

Once more, not only ethical issues concerning the access of online data are at stake here. The issues regarding the notions of public and private within the online context have also to do with new interaction patterns that ensue when a whole generation tends to consider that all major aspects of their lives are public (Fischer et al., 2017), and with the psychological, sociological, and methodological effects of dissolving the boundaries of one’s privacy.

Participants’ agency and power balance

This topic appears in the literature in many contexts and under many expressions. Some call it “[participants] active engagement” (Kenny, 2005, p. 416), others prefer “active strategies of inquiry” (Broad & Joos, 2004, p. 929), “participatory research methods” (Marres, 2012, p. 161), or a “more symmetrical relationship with [the] participants” (Howlett, 2021, p. 8). Regardless of the chosen words, we are talking about the “active role [of participants] in the enactment of social methods” (Marres, 2012, p. 160) and their “greater agency and power in [online research] exchanges” (Howlett, 2021, p. 8).

A fundamental premise behind this topic is that online qualitative research methods and tools might be used to foster and better capture participants’ active engagement and group interaction (Kenny, 2005). For example, compared to traditional (in-person) focus groups, their online counterparts allow a larger number of participants to engage in asynchronous, multi-threaded, and multi-sited discussions that can endure for weeks or even months, which is unpractical otherwise. Online settings also dilute the pressure to conform to the group. At the same time, using multimedia (text, audio, images, videos, drawings, etc.) facilitates self-expression. Activity logs provide detailed

data about participation and interaction patterns while, by offering the option of participating anonymously, researchers should reasonably expect even more sincere statements, especially while researching sensitive matters. In sum, online methods facilitate the enactment of participants’ selves and ideas.

Online research also brings more symmetry to the traditional power balance in research situations (which used, in the past, to favor researchers). For example, as we saw in the topic concerning identities, remote interviews granted researchers an entry visa to participants’ personal lives and to their less apparent identities. However, in this case, technology works both ways. Many times, researchers’ personal lives and spaces are also exposed, implying they need now to think more carefully about how they want to be seen (Howlett, 2021). Additionally, technology increases participants’ control over when and how researchers access the “field” (Howlett, 2021, p. 8) and over what they (participants) want to disclose (Craig et al., 2020). It is easier (and more socially acceptable) not answering a call than skipping an in-person interview. In addition, by using online settings, one could always select more carefully what to show and not to show, blurring the background or even turning the camera off, for example.

But changes are not restricted to data collection. Online qualitative methods allow a broader range of actors interfering with data analyses and presentation, opening a space of intervention that might lead to a redistribution of methods (Marres, 2012). Such redistribution would mean that data is not simply ‘extracted’ from participants. Instead, researchers could develop more “collaborative spaces where data and analysis can be volunteered, discussed, coproduced, and shared [among participants and researchers]” (Morrow, Hawkins, & Kern, 2015, p. 539). In other words, online qualitative research methods allow researchers and participants to interact in such a way that the whole research community “meaningfully becomes invested in the researcher’s work through consultation and critique” (Murthy, 2008, p. 847). That is, in an online research, the whole data set, if not the research process itself, may be put within participants’ reach. This may evolve into collaborative researches, in which participants become partners (Giaxoglou, 2017, p. 247). In a concrete example, Meredith, Galpin, and Robinson (2020) reported on the attention required when scholars, professionals, and lay people are put together in an online forum for a research. The research team had to manage discussions so that all participants were equally treated as co-researchers, avoiding lay people shying from debating with professionals or professionals felling patronized by scholars.

However, those are not simple moves. Increasing participation and redistributing the roles in research “can

be taken as an invitation to move beyond ‘proprietary’ concepts of methods, that is, beyond the entrenched use of method as a way to monopolize the representation of a given field or aspect of social reality” (Marres, 2012, p. 161). This would mean, at the very basic level, for example, that insights about how to treat the data and even about the very research subject might come from any participant. In such scenario, researchers would find themselves decentered from commanding knowledge creation. New online qualitative methods can unsettle the well-established division of labor within the knowledge production system. Suddenly, we would not know for sure who can define what is and what is not research, and we would have to learn a new set of relations between ‘researchers’ and ‘participants’ — expressions we might even find useless to describe new roles —, which should emerge from research practices themselves (Marres, 2012). Researchers would then need to develop a working relationship with their participants, rather than merely rapport (Howlett, 2021) and, by dissolving the notion of what is to be a researcher, online research can ultimately break academia’s monopoly of scientific discovery in favor of a more popular science (Corti & Fielding, 2016).

The offline-online breach

As we have shown, for some time, scholars implicitly treated online social experiences and interactions as reproductions of their ‘real’ counterparts. Nevertheless, there is no ‘pure’ or ‘genuine’ social landscape to be contrasted with the online scope. Online experiences and interactions are real and part of the whole. Epistemologically speaking, any attempt to confine social research to online or to offline scopes is somewhat arbitrary because social phenomena occur ‘across’ them (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2009; Ignacio, 2012). In that sense, developing online qualitative methods would require ‘overcoming’ this artificial offline-online breach.

Circumscribing the online or the offline portions of social phenomena is an analytical tool and not the result of an empirical duality of ontological statuses (Numerato, 2016). That is why we chose to use the expression online ‘scope’ in this paper, to denote the intentional (although not always conscious) character of the concept extension. Online experiences are not disconnected from other experiences of life. They are simply mediated through a specific technology that shapes our interactions by enabling certain actions and restricting others (Morrow et al., 2015). We, online researchers, must consider this and “be open to continually reflect on our research process as we conduct our research as well as develop new techniques if faced with new situations” (Ignacio, 2012, p. 239).

What could be some of these new situations and what consequences they entail for online qualitative research? First

that, despite the differences, it is pointless to favor in-person collected data based on its superior authenticity — even more as the boundaries between offline and online scopes become more and more blurred (Morrow et al., 2015). Seeking authentic data by staying outside the internet should now be considered an immigrant — as opposed to a native — way of thinking, or, to use a cherished distinction for qualitative researchers, an etic way of thinking, instead of an emic one.

For example, written data collected online may have — and often has — an oral nature (e.g., O’Connor & Madge, 2001; Williams, Clausen, Robertson, Peacock, & McPherson, 2012). However, what does this imply for its analysis? Should researchers use techniques developed to analyze oral speech or the ones developed to analyze written texts? How should they use other non-verbal communication modes such as chronemics (pacing and timing of speech, length of silences, etc.), paralinguistic (variations in volume, pitch, and quality of voice), kinetic (facial expressions, eye contact, body positioning, etc.), and proxemic (use of interpersonal space) (Salmons, 2016) to analyze online interactions? What about ethical concerns? Verbatim quotes of online data should be avoided in order to maintain anonymity, since the excerpt could be easily searched online (see Battles, 2010), whereas qualitative reports traditionally presented many of these excerpts from interviews and observations in order to enhance its authenticity and contextual disclosure.

Another distinct consequence of the offline-online breach is that “the virtual-material interface itself was not problematized and the researcher’s position was assumed to be largely that of a disembodied, outside observer” (Morrow et al., 2015, p. 534). ‘Real’ researchers observing a (reified) online space might easily assume that they hold a neutral and potentially omniscient position. However, “there is no way to avoid how the mechanics of a technological platform can elicit some forms of engagement, negate other types of interaction, and not have some influence on the qualitative research process” (Gregory, 2018, p. 1612). Conceiving hermetically sealed categories does not work either for online research particularly or for social research in general. Against this offline-online breach, there is the evidence of the “reverse influence” exerted by the online scope on the broader social landscape (Morrow et al., 2015, p. 532) and on the broader methodological universe (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Marres, 2012). Researchers can overcome these apparent oppositions by changing their approach to the field and the categories used to understand it, seeking methodological solutions such as “shifting the interaction from offline ‘co-location’ to online ‘co-presence’ through the use of communicative technologies ... actively constructing a new digital and socially meaningful space for interactions that was neither our present locations, nor a

common physical setting” (Howlett, 2021, p. 7) (see also Beaulieu, 2010).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The online social landscape is a compelling reality. Take social media, for example, “an undisputed game-changer, a massive global social experiment, blamed for altering the outcome of elections and redirecting the course of history,” which is, at once, “a mess of fake news and misinformation, the future of advertising and earned media and the basis of some of the world’s most powerful and profitable companies” (Kozinets et al., 2018, p. 232).

Such words do not describe a partial or incomplete social experience (at least not more than any other particular social experience). *Au contraire!* As more and more of our lives are being lived online and “online social phenomena is becom[ing] integrated into wider social and cultural life” (Fischer et al., 2017, p. 612), it is pointless to consider online research partial or incomplete. In fact, it may now be more generalizable than before (Howlett, 2021).

Yet, there are scholars who still believe that mediated approaches are second choice (Howlett, 2021). Claims for “careful crafting” and “methodological, procedural, technical and ethical considerations” (Reips, 2002, p. 244) were responded with adaptations of traditional methods, not designed with the online scope in mind. However, no researcher needs to think of a blog as an online diary anymore (for more on diaries and weblogs, see Kaun, 2010). And there is no point asking if online communication is as expressive as face to face communication. The point is that online experience is a reality in its own right and “mediated approaches can generate valuable insight not otherwise available through the use of in-person methods which may actually be richer and more insightful” (Howlett, 2021, p. 12).

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Exceeding the scope of this paper, we might use some methodological imagination to envision how researchers’ practices would be immediately affected by the onto-epistemological shifts we propose. For example, because social dynamics are rarely centered on individuals, its investigation corresponds, often and to a large degree, to the investigation of (any form of) public discourses. Considering what was discussed here about online sociality and identity, researchers might focus on public online ‘profiles’ and ‘voices’ rather than this or that individual, provided these voices do represent important aspects of the social dynamic. New paths to the development of online qualitative research would also ensue from the new and particular uses of language to which online qualitative researchers must become acquainted, be it to interact in an online interview or to analyze data from any online session (which can be compared to an observation). This would allow researchers not only to understand and adhere to a ‘netiquette’ but, ultimately, to develop an emic standpoint from which real paradigmatic development of online qualitative methods would ensue.

Restating Kuhn, while the critical elements of a current paradigm have not yet pointed to its alternatives, they are already implied. When there are many of these signs, “a decision between alternate ways of practicing science is called for, and in the circumstances that decision must be based less on past achievement than on future promise” (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 157-158).

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