

## BOOK REVIEW

**Angela Delli Paoli**

**LA NETNOGRAFIA NELLA RICERCA SOCIALE**

Roma, Franco Angeli, 2025, pp. 152

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Angela Delli Paoli's *La netnografia nella ricerca sociale* is both a timely and necessary theoretical-methodological contribution within the rapidly evolving field of digital studies. Published in the series "Strumenti per le scienze umane" by FrancoAngeli, the book addresses a significant gap in the literature, offering a critical reflection on epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues which, while present in the current discourse on qualitative research in digital contexts, are not always examined with sufficient depth.



As stated in the introductory chapter, the book has multiple aims: to explore how the digital environment impacts ethnographic practice; to analyse the way netnography challenges and reconfigures the assumptions of traditional

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DOI: [10.13131/unipi/0n24-2e13](https://doi.org/10.13131/unipi/0n24-2e13)

ethnography; and to provide practical guidance to preserve the qualitative nature of the method against the risks of excessive datafication. The volume is structured into ten chapters, leading the reader through the full design of a netnographic study: from its ethnographic roots and the implications of digitalisation for the social sciences, to the operational, analytical, and ethical issues that arise in fieldwork. It opens by addressing the epistemological foundations of netnography (Chapter 1), framing it in relation to Marradi's (2007) distinction between "standard" and "non-standard" approaches, which roughly correspond to quantitative and qualitative paradigms. From the outset, Delli Paoli argues that netnography should follow a qualitative path: one that privileges ideographic focus, inductive reasoning, and holistic interpretation. This triad (attention to particularity, interpretative openness, and striving toward totality) acts as a compass for the book.

Chapters 2 through 4 revisit the origins and development of ethnography, from positivist evolutionary models to the interpretive turn led by Geertz (1973). Special emphasis is placed on the concept of *thick description* and its textual translation into the digital context. Chapter 4 distinguishes between digital ethnography and netnography, the latter defined by Delli Paoli as «a prolonged, and more or less participatory, observation of digital communities and cultures, aimed at producing a deep interpretation and description» (p.11). This definition, though methodologically distinct, echoes the systematisation offered by Kozinets (2015).

From this perspective, the book adopts a holistic stance, in which culture is conceived as a complex system not reducible to discrete elements. The focus is not on individual variables, but rather on the web of meanings that connects practices, representations, and social relations. This interpretive orientation, inspired by Geertz's anthropological legacy, is reframed in light of digital environments and provides the conceptual backdrop for the entire volume.

Among the most significant issues raised early in the book is the transformation of identity as an object of observation. While classical ethnography dealt with physically situated bodies and recognisable subjects within observable communities, netnography engages with dematerialised, distributed, and often fragmented identities. This does not imply a loss of reality, however. As Delli Paoli explains, «regardless of their correspondence to actual persons, representations possess their own reality and constitute the core of netnographic attention» (p. 45). The digital self, even when strategic, manipulated, or fictitious,

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generates meaningful social and symbolic effects, which must be read within the semiotic and relational context that gives them form.

The main epistemological risks posed by digitalisation include the opacity of information, the illusion of immediacy, the spread of fake or automated identities, and the ambiguity between identity and its representation. In this context, the distinction between factual fidelity and conformity proves especially useful in questioning how digital traces are used and in avoiding naive interpretations.

For Delli Paoli, the digital is not just a new field of inquiry but a different mode of expressing, negotiating, and performing identity. Hence, the need for a netnography that can read these texts in depth. Rather than objectifying the digital, the book emphasises the textual nature of its artefacts and the centrality of interpretive work: «in digital contexts, the self exists as text» (p. 45).

This same perspective reinforces the centrality of meaning: digital traces are not mere data, but narratives—often contradictory, ambiguous, or fragmented - that must be reconstructed in relation to their original context and the symbolic dynamics that shape them.

From Chapter 5 onward, the book engages with the practical design of netnographic research, discussing its main components and operational phases: the specificity of digital fields (Chapter 5), observation strategies (Chapter 6), data collection techniques (Chapter 7), and analytical procedures (Chapter 8). Each chapter includes examples from both Italian and international literature, chosen as useful tools for researchers, whether novice or experienced. Notably, the book does not aim to be a traditional methodological manual, but rather a guide to complexity. This is reflected in the discussion of the digital field as something constructed rather than merely discovered, defined less by geographical coordinates than by trajectories of meaning and symbolic relations. The author expands on the proposals by Rogers (2013) and Airoldi (2018), distinguishing between meta-fields and contextualised fields, and proposing strategies such as *follow the medium*, *follow the object*, and *follow the people* as ways to navigate them. These are not just sampling techniques, but epistemological decisions that shape the research process and its meaning.

The holistic character of the approach emerges precisely through this capacity to embrace the complexity of the field without reducing it to discrete units. In netnographic terms, the digital field is not a platform but a narrative environment where content, interaction, and relations intertwine in a dense network of meaning. The focus of the study is thus not only on what is said, but also on how it is said, to whom, in what

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context, and with what implications. This multi-level attention enables a dense description of the field, consistent with both the anthropological heritage of ethnography and the phenomenological approach of Schutz (1979).

Another relevant element is the book's ongoing reflection on the researcher's positionality. Access to the field, choices about observation methods (ranging from *lurking* to simulated participation), as well as the collection of digital traces and online interviews, all demand a high degree of reflexivity. Far from being merely technical aspects, these decisions raise epistemological and ethical questions. They interrogate the relationship between subject and object, the asymmetry between observer and observed, and the risk of naturalising what is, in fact, a socially and technologically mediated interaction.

The book adopts a critical stance against technicist or computational approaches to qualitative research. Netnography, in this view, is not just a technique but an interpretive practice. As noted in Chapter 8, netnography is inherently multi-method, requiring continuous circularity between data collection, analysis, and interpretation. These are not sequential phases, but interdependent moments in a single knowledge-making process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Coding cycles, the creation of analytical categories, typology-building, and the reflective use of classification tools all become devices for organising field experience without flattening its complexity. Here, interpretation is not the final step, but a constitutive act of knowledge, embedded from the outset in the observational practice.

Finally, Chapter 9 explores the ethical dimension of netnographic research. Ethics is not presented as an afterthought or a concluding matter, but as a transversal concern embedded in the entire methodological framework of netnography. Rather than being a list of rules to apply after the fact, ethics is framed as an ever-present dimension throughout the research process.

One of the most compelling aspects of this discussion is the challenge it poses to the traditional dichotomy between public and private, especially in light of online identity practices. Digital platforms do not merely reproduce offline boundaries; they constantly redefine them. What is visible is not necessarily accessible; what is shared is not always meant for a general public. This makes it difficult to rely on traditional ethical criteria, such as the assumption that anything public is automatically fair game for research.

Delli Paoli argues that the digital realm «requires us to rethink and re-code established principles» (p. 127). These include informed

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consent, anonymity, and the assessment of exposure risk for those observed. Digital information is often ambiguous: it may appear public but be experienced as private; it may be accessible yet not intended for archiving or research purposes.

This leads to a strong emphasis on the researcher's responsibility. It is not just a matter of complying with institutional norms, but of developing an ethical reflexivity that informs every step of the research process. The author refers to a genuine "ethics of digital observation", one that moves beyond quantitative frameworks to confront the ambiguities of online presence.

From this perspective, every access choice, every data collection method, and every representational strategy has consequences. Epistemic responsibility is not limited to the proper use of data, but also includes an awareness that to observe is to intervene - that even observation alone can produce social, relational, or symbolic effects.

In conclusion, the book opens a broader reflection on the future of netnography as a constantly evolving approach. Delli Paoli writes that «netnography today is a continuously re-elaborated approach, able to adapt to the changes in digital practices» (p. 9). This flexibility is both an operational strength and an epistemological feature: it means reading digital contexts without reducing them to rigid frameworks. Netnography, in this sense, does not merely observe; it interrogates, deconstructs, and interprets. As the author suggests, it can be seen as a "torch" capable of illuminating emerging phenomena and reframing established problems in light of digital transformations (p. 139).

This methodological openness also allows netnography to engage with new and controversial domains, such as interactions between human beings and artificial intelligence systems. In these hybrid spaces, where people attribute agency and intentionality to algorithmic entities, a netnographic perspective can offer critical tools to analyse how meaning is constructed, stabilised, or transformed.

Therefore, the book's conclusion is not a closure, but an invitation to further exploration. In a time when qualitative research risks being reduced to automated data collection, this book stands as a powerful and necessary call for researcher responsibility, not only for what we observe, but for how we choose to observe.

Ultimately, this is a book that was needed: one that restores depth and meaning to qualitative research in the digital age, without nostalgia and simplifications.

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