

BOOK REVIEW

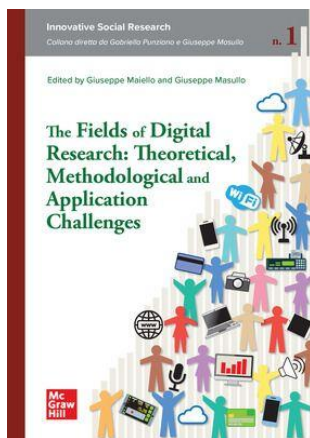
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THE FIELDS OF DIGITAL RESEARCH: TOPICS AND DEVELOPMENTS. IN THE FIELDS OF DIGITAL RESEARCH: THEORETICAL, METHODOLOGICAL AND APPLICATION CHALLENGES.

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by *Stefano Cesare**

The advent of Web 5.0, characterized by the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI), has led to an increasing recognition of the importance of digital technologies in understanding culture, society, and the human experience. Today, the vast amounts of data generated by the interaction between users and digital devices have taken on great importance namely. Everything we do online becomes data: every authorization, transaction, access, or piece of information we read constitutes valuable data about our profiles. The ubiquitous presence of digital technologies in people's lives has raised the question of whether there is need to adopt a new paradigm in the social sciences – known as digital turn, which is based on algorithms and computers (Stefanizzi, 2021). In this context, the book *The Fields of Digital Research: Theoretical, Methodological and Application Challenges* highlights how emerging



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technologies have transformed research in certain fields, forcing researchers to update their methods and approaches. The text explores the challenges sociologists face when conducting research in digital society, emphasizing two main research directions: one concerns real-world phenomena that can be better analyzed online, while the other pertains to phenomena that originate and develop within the digital field. At first, efforts were made to adapt traditional methods to the digital world, but over time it became clear that the digital space offers its own unique potential to be leveraged. In this context, the current debate points out that digital data are different from traditional data and raise theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues. Digital methods are a major innovation in social research, but to be effective, they require both technical skills and solid theoretical foundations. Although they are more recent and innovative, they cannot fully replace traditional methods, which are backed by a long and established theoretical and methodological experience. As Caliendo and Gandini (2019) point out, it is important to remember that digital technologies may not always be appropriate for studying certain social phenomena in the most complete and exhaustive way. Thus, the book emphasizes the importance of developing critical, transdisciplinary, and intersectional approaches in digital social research, encouraging researchers to understand and integrate the ways in which digital technologies are conceived and studied in other disciplines and beyond the academic sphere. The book mentioned before consists of 19 chapters, divided into five parts that correspond to specific study topics. The first part, entitled "New theoretical and methodological challenges for the study of digital", analyzes and explores key themes in the discussion, including digital citizenship, the concepts of space and time, and the influence of algorithms, among others. The first chapter by Attinà and Izzo delves into the concept of digital citizenship, emphasizing its connection with the idea of a desirable digital age. This perspective places individuals in a state of perpetual development, situated between the online paradigm and its imminent transition into the offline world. Therefore, it is essential for the authors to establish solid ontological principles and statutes that can adapt and functioning as influential factors in a digital society. The authors thus reflect on the issue of citizenship and digital citizenship, and whether these terms can be interpreted through an educational lens. The mistake we might make is to consider digital citizenship as equivalent to televoting or mere participation, when in reality these are only aspects and not the whole picture. As Jenkins (2006) notes in this contribution, regarding the concept of "convergence" between old and new media, we are witnessing the birth of a new participatory culture, in

which mastering technological tools ensures the basic conditions for the exercise of citizenship in today's society. Subsequently, Piemysl Pisar analyzes a case study related to the field of advertising marketing. In a world where digital is increasingly present in everyday life, the online advertising industry is also growing rapidly, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. As Taylor (2020) argues, the ways in which advertising is conceived have changed, and companies are also required to rethink and reinvent their advertising approaches, moving toward new forms of digital marketing. Through a study conducted on 270,250 online advertisements, it emerged that the performance of online advertising particularly programmatic advertising is highly optimized. The study was composed of two parts. In the first phase, the sample was analyzed using statistical models; subsequently, the knowledge acquired during the first phase was useful for developing a financial control model, tested on as many as 31 advertisers. The ultimate goal was to improve the effectiveness of online advertising by developing "a financial control model" that has the potential to enhance online advertising performance and mitigate costs. The test revealed that advertisers do not use tools to implement online advertising performance, but with this financial control model, the performance of online advertising increased. In the following study, Felaco and Pelliccia used a methodology that integrates principal component analysis and cluster analysis to establish distinct user profiles related to their knowledge of the TikTok algorithm, as well as their positions on content moderation mechanisms and Algospeak. In a world where algorithms represent a fundamental part of the Internet and daily life, they have influenced the condition of information presentation and consumption, as well as participation in public life (Gillespie, 2020).

The starting question was: "What are the users' experiences and assumptions regarding Algospeak and automated content moderation systems, particularly concerning their knowledge of how the TikTok recommendation algorithm works?". Their perspective allows them to help in rejecting a certain perception of algorithms, instead emphasizing the users' ability to challenge the "shadow ban." In the fifth study, Punziano conducts research to investigate the involvement of scientists in public and institutional communication. The study focuses on the strategic models and topics employed by experts during Vaccine Day amid the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to clarify the challenges faced by public communication. As Rogers argues, the choice of tools for extracting, organizing, and constructing analysis represents a delicate moment in digital methods (Rogers, 2013); for this reason, the media intelligence platform Volocom was used for digitizing information which, together with

a Python script, enabled the transcription of TV broadcasts aired on major Italian channels. The initial goal was to explore who the visible experts on TV were and the different related representations during the vaccination campaign; among these, a strong male predominance among the experts emerged, along with a differentiation in the representation of experts across the various TV channels. The sixth study, written by Lenzi et al., is the last of the first section; the study's main focus is urban vitality in the neighbourhoods of Rome. Urban vitality is a concept that represents and describes the liveliness, energy, and dynamism of urban areas. To study it, various approaches exist, differing both in tools and operational definitions. In addition to classic social research tools, such as questionnaires, the use of Big Data also emerges (Niu and Silva, 2021), which include social media data. Regarding the initial objective of understanding urban vitality in Rome, the data obtained are promising, although with some limitations. For example, high-vitality areas often coincide with attractive structures such as monuments, bars, or shopping centers, or some areas show vitality throughout the day, while others (such as universities) only at certain times of day.

The second section, entitled "Identity and the Construction of Meaning in the Digital", focuses on the impact of digital technologies on social and cultural identification processes. Through the exploration of digital spaces, the investigation centres on how these spaces can serve as platforms for individuals to express themselves and engage in new social interactions. This section pays particular attention to younger generations, who are the primary beneficiaries of online services. The first contribution by Martino and Villano offers a revaluation of the relationship between identity development, adolescence, and digital technology from a critical-pedagogical and media archaeology point of view. When thinking about digital media, they should not be perceived as simple tools, but rather as the result of human action. McLuhan said that the medium is the message; here, the separation between humans and media requires resolution. Studies on the digital, approached from various perspectives for over a decade, converge on one point: the recognition of the primary role of new media in the processes of subjective identity construction. The focus is on social networks, interpreted as sets of procedural interactions and informational structures that replace traditional ones and determine new forms of individual socialization, triggering a mechanism that transforms the urgency to exist in the world into the obligation to be connected and to participate through appearance (Boccia Artieri, et al. 2017). Adolescents today face self-construction processes that are deeply influenced by constant exposure to digital media and the blurring of the boundary

between real and virtual. These transformed experiences can generate new educational needs, which is why a media education is proposed one that integrates existing approaches with greater attention to adolescent phenomenology and the aesthetic dimension of the digital experience. An education that stimulates critical thinking and promotes practical awareness of the ongoing intertwining between real and virtual. Also in this section, we can find the work developed by Coppola, Capuano, and Nufria, which highlights the complex and contradictory nature of young people's relationship with religion. In particular, in recent years, the percentage of people identifying as atheists has grown significantly. To analyze this phenomenon, the research is structured around three questions: the first is "What are the main motivations that lead one to identify as an atheist?", the second "What attitudes do atheists show towards other religions?", and the last "Is it possible to identify a typology among the atheists participating in the community?"

The research used the technique of netnography, a term coined by Robert Kozinets, who used it as a tool to analyze discussions among Star Trek fans. Through the analysis of 235 posts published in the Italian community "Ateismo e Agnosticismo Realistico" on Facebook. The community in question presents a high level of interaction, with a mainly male and adult composition, and low youth participation. It is hypothesized that Facebook, being a less attractive tool for the younger generations, is no longer the preferred medium for youth, who also appear to be less interested in religious topics.

The third section, titled "Inclusion and New Methodological Challenges in the Digital", examines how resources provided by the digital society contribute to the inclusion of people with disabilities. These resources create online spaces where this group can learn, develop, express themselves, and interact with others. Moreover, it explores the challenges faced by this group in the offline society, which remains limited and non-inclusive. Battisti and Dalvit thus provide an analysis of disability and the resulting inequalities in South Africa. Their study examines the various methodological obstacles that arise when conducting research on platforms and social self-representations of individuals with disabilities in a multicultural, post-colonial, and highly unequal context. By anonymously formulating research questions through the exploration of each social media platform, the authors used a "cross-platform" perspective to critically consider the South African context and delve into self-representations. In this South African context, it emerged that the accessibility issues of these platforms are exacerbated by some of the highest connection costs in the world, consequently making them unaffordable for a

large portion of people with disabilities. In addition, the constant production of content, graphic editing, and video post-production are key to online visibility, which implies a significant commitment for a creator with disabilities. In the second study of the third section, we can find the contribution of Masullo, who, together with colleagues, adopts a digital ethnographic approach to examine the primary social representations of parents who are part of a community committed to addressing the challenges faced by children diagnosed with developmental autism. The essay refers to children suffering from specific learning disorders, which are disorders based on neurobiological dysfunctions that interfere with the normal process of acquiring reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, differing depending on the impaired abilities. The essay highlights the challenges that parents face in accepting this condition, particularly within the school context. It also explores different approaches to addressing this issue, which can be categorized into two main dimensions: benevolent enabling and parental responsibility. The research made it possible to analyze and interpret the opinions and perceptions of a Facebook group of mothers with children with learning disorders, allowing the identification of both the reasons why they access online communities and four types of parental profiles. It is important to clarify that the research results are limited to the examined community. It seems that the motivations driving these mothers to join online communities are linked, on the one hand, to the search for ways to improve their child's school/social path and, on the other, to the need for support and comfort. In this sense, cyberspace becomes a place for discussion and release aimed at identifying the best possible advice for facing personal difficulties. The third section concludes with the contribution of Antonelli, who examines the relationship between school inclusion and information and communication technologies (ICT). Antonelli adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyze the inclusion tactics used by three major Italian institutions. The analysis highlights the potential barrier to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the university context. Universities still represent one of the main spaces of social life, contributing, as institutions, to breaking down the material and immaterial barriers that exclude certain categories of students. As Chiang (2020) argues, they play a key role both in the implementation of services and in the recognition of a culture of disability, emphasizing the following aspects: providing a safe and welcoming space, spreading positive aspects of disability, educating the university community and beyond not to discriminate against people with disabilities. Following the pandemic, the country's digitalization has accelerated - just like in the rest of the world which invites reflection on the power of

blended learning, while being careful not to consider it as the solution to every problem, since its overuse could lead to a reversal of perspective. The fourth section, titled “Movements, Deviance, and Processes of Online Discrimination”, includes essays that clarify the dual nature of digital platforms. On one hand, digital platforms provide a space for emancipation and the emergence of new forms of social engagement, such as environmental activism. In this section, we can find the contribution by Ambrosio et al., who delve into the phenomenon of environmental activism in Italy. They focus on the impact of digital technologies on activists’ approaches to promoting change, analyzing the distinctions and connections between online and offline activism. The report offers a comprehensive examination of the current state of activism in Italy, also shedding light on the constraints and opportunities offered using digital resources. The essay emphasizes the difficulty today in distinguishing between online and offline life, stating the challenges in identifying differences in online and offline actions based on specific characteristics. Furthermore, regarding the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics, types of activism, and the perception of social media, the data suggest that men tend to show greater participation in offline activities compared to women. When comparing European data with studies conducted in Italy, these reveal a gender gap in political participation, with men participating more in institutional and party activities, while women participate significantly less than men (Caputo, Felaco, Monaco, 2019). In the following study, Caroleo and collaborators highlight a negative aspect of digital technology specifically, its role in enabling the spread of hate speech directed at individuals belonging to the LGBT community. Online hate speech, along with cyberbullying, has become a significant issue in many countries, with the potential to harm individuals, social cohesion, and democracy. These sensitive topics are at the centre of public and social debates seeking ways to contain the phenomenon on social media. The researchers conducted an analysis of interactions between users on digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Using digital methods, they created a list of queries that could be considered offensive according to the LGBTQ+ community. Nowadays, online platforms have implemented policies and tools to combat the use of offensive language. With the help of both automated and human moderators, online content is continuously monitored to determine what can remain and what must be removed. However, these countermeasures do not always prove effective. In fact, the study shows that there are many different ways to bypass content moderation, such as not including hashtags in posts, making it difficult to trace these posts. These posts can only be flagged by users to

be reviewed by moderators.

Also in this section, we can find the contribution of Padricelli, who presents a reflection on models of online participation and new forms of action in the digital landscape within the context of social movements. The research delves into a case study related to the No Tav movement, an Italian network that since the 1990s has opposed the construction of the high-speed railway line between Turin and Lyon. Through empirical results from interviews with the initiative's promoters, the study sheds light on the processes related to new temporary forms of participation and innovative communicative repertoires for collective action. In the logic of the Internet, the digital expressions of social movements have redefined the forms of knowledge sharing necessary for the development of struggles, supported by collective identities both at symbolic and organizational levels (Pilati, 2018).

In the final study of the section, Michelangelo and Pascali demonstrate the convergence of criminality within the digital landscape. The advent of digital technologies has provided criminal organizations with a favourable environment for expanding their operations online, leveraging their strategic approach. The authors state that researchers may face new obstacles related to ethics, deontology, and civil law when attempting to improve research procedures to effectively investigate deviant events. Indeed, the problem arises from the fact that cybercrime does not seem to have simple and direct definitions. It would be difficult to assume that a distinct criminal order could emerge from this phenomenon, whose boundaries are hard to define. Such an order would differ from other criminal acts not only due to the use of certain material techniques in the perpetration of crimes, but also, and above all, due to its coherence and consistency in relation to both the objectivity and subjectivity it comprises. The articles collected in the final section, titled "Lifestyles and Choices in the Digital Age", highlight how digital technologies influence decisions related to lifestyles, consumption, and other significant aspects of everyday life. In recent years, academic interest in this area has grown, with numerous studies showing how the social environment and digital resources are key in shaping choices related to leisure. In particular, there has been a proliferation of virtual communities and thematic forums, often linked to major search engines, which play an increasingly central role in the selection of hospitality structures. These phenomena have helped to redefine the concept of tourism, especially in relation to the postmodern debate, which values experiential tourism as a key element in individual self-determination paths. The first essay in this section is by Capone and collaborators, who analyze the potential of digital ethnography

through an in-depth examination of an online community. The study focuses specifically on a Facebook group in the redefinition of the concept of pilgrimage, taking the Camino de Santiago de Compostela—one of the most important pilgrimages in the world as a case study. The research begins with a preliminary analysis of an online community about the Camino de Santiago, where a significant number of users interact to share their pilgrimage/travel experiences. The research then unfolds in two phases: in the first phase, historical and cultural aspects of the Camino phenomenon that contributed to its fame were analyzed, along with a review of the sociological literature concerning pilgrimage and travel. In the second phase, a digital ethnography was conducted, highlighting the main collective representations developed around the Camino, as well as the subjective reasons that group members provide to clarify their idea of travel, which refers to the need to live a deep and enriching experience. The research shows how Facebook proves to be a true social space where meanings related to spirituality and travel are built and shared, contributing to a better understanding of the motivations behind the choice to undertake the Camino and the importance of online communities in supporting and sharing this experience. Indeed, there are testimonies from people who have already undertaken this journey, encouraging others to overcome their fears and embark on this unique experience. The analysis also shows that the group conversations offer a valuable opportunity, especially for women, to re-evaluate themselves in response to early challenges posed by prevailing stereotypes about pilgrims. Following this, we can find work by Bellafronte et al, who focus on analyzing digital reviews from the TripAdvisor platform. The study centres on the examination of destinations, itineraries, and traveller profiles, starting from a widely used digital product: online reviews. Through contextual analysis, it was possible to situate the phenomenon of saltworks tourism in time and space. From this, a trend was reconstructed, revealing an interesting cyclical pattern, with a progressive decline in the following years. By comparing this result with data from the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), this evolution was interpreted as part of a global trend in tourism, which is also reflected in the reality of the world and the Italian saltworks. The main findings show that this emerging form of tourism is closely linked to new dynamics of mobility and the growing influx of travellers. In the concluding contribution, Caputo and collaborators return to focus on digital tourism experiences, paying particular attention to a feature introduced by Airbnb during the COVID-19 pandemic. This feature involved offering digital experiences tied to specific locations, aimed at users unable to travel physically but still eager to explore the world and

gain new knowledge remotely. The study begins with the hypothesis that there is a relationship between users' geographic location and the location of the digital experiences they choose. To verify this, the authors combine a content analysis of reviews with a digital ethnography, aiming to identify the factors guiding user choices and to outline meaningful spatial clusters. In conclusion, the research group sought to offer a comprehensive overview of digital research practices, focusing on areas where the impact of emerging technologies is particularly significant. This required a rethinking of methodologies, pushing researchers to adopt innovative epistemological, technical, and operational approaches. In all the studies analyzed, it clearly emerges how crucial it is to possess both technical skills and solid theoretical foundations in order to effectively use digital methods in sociological investigation. These tools undoubtedly represent a significant evolution for social research. However, despite their innovative and creative nature, it is essential to apply them with the same methodological rigor as traditional methods, which, although less advanced from a technological standpoint, have a long history of scientific validation and consolidation. Being relatively new, digital methods are still in the process of building the systematized knowledge base that will allow them to fully mature over time.

“The Fields of Digital Research: Theoretical, Methodological and Application Challenges”, contributes to the debate about the implications of the complex interactions between digital technology, social research and social life. The different papers collected in this issue look both at *epistemic concerns* related to the nature of digital data and *normative concerns* related to the consequences of digital social research. On the *epistemic side*, it critically analyses the changing nature of the data collection process, the place and role of technological objects, affordances and applications, the influence and entity of digital biases by at the same time looking at the methodological principles which are not easily dismissed by the new availability of data and the strengthened potentials of methods and techniques. On the *normative side*, social research in the digital context also raises several ethical dilemmas deriving both from institutional deregulation and innovative challenges.

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