Reviews

Qualitative Research in Digital Environments: A Research Toolkit (2017), London: Routledge. Caliandro A.; Gandini, A. ISBN-10: 1138188697

Alessandro Caliandro and Alessandro Gandini's research framework and toolkit for digital environments offers a unique approach to a research through a development of a "natively digital" methodological framework. Originality of the proposed approach is twofold: firstly, it offers a methodological approach that lies between traditional qualitative research adapted for digital environments and quantitative big data analysis, as will be explained later; and secondly, it bridges academic theory with industry practice. Drawing upon their own experience, socio-cultural research and the latest developments in digital media, the authors introduce concise guidelines and ready to use procedures for conducting research in digital environments that can be potentially useful to media researchers, professionals as well as educators.

This review highlights key features of each of the two parts into which the book is divided – [1] theoretical foundations of the methodology and [2] practical applications – while discussing the logic behind the proposed approach, as well as the usability of the toolkit for its diverse audiences.

To begin, the first part provides a theoretical background and a framework upon which the proposed qualitative approach to researching in digital environments is built. By 'digital environments' the authors refer more specifically to social media, which are defined here as comprising social and cultural environments. As the authors state, such a perspective enables the researcher to gain greater understanding about what actors do within social media spaces and how their activity is embedded within cultural and social environments. However, this generalisation lacks a more critical discussion about the relationship between online and offline environments, as well as between social and digital media.

To put the proposed methodology in the context of numerous methodological approaches to research in the digital environments and illustrate the breadth and diversity of the discipline, in the third chapter 'Digital Methods for Qualitative Research' the authors briefly mention contributions such as Big Data analysis (Chen et al., 2014), Software Studies (Fuller, 2008), Digital Humanities methods (Berry, 2012), Digital Ethnography (Murthy, 2008; Pink, et al., 2016), the Digital Methods paradigm (Hutchinson, 2016; Rogers, 2013) and Online Methods (Fielding et al., 2008; Salmons, 2016). Without further discussion on either acknowledgement or rejection of those works the authors focus on three selected publications on which the methodology is grounded.

Firstly, they draw upon *the Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet* by

Hine (2005) from which they focus on Hine's 'digitised methods'. The key approach here is 'adaptation' of traditional offline research techniques to the study of online environments. Unlike strongly criticized 'virtualisation' that uses traditional research techniques such as surveys, interviews or focus groups through online means, a process of adaptation uses natively digital data and takes into consideration the 'affordances' of digital media. Digital data, as defined by the authors, are "natural' data sources originating from the daily use of both human and nonhuman online activity' (chapter 1, 'Digital Data'). The specificity of such data is that they provide social knowledge on what digital actors *do*, rather than who they *are*. Affordances set specific opportunities as well as constraints on actions within each specific platform (e.g. limit of 140 characters per tweet) and therefore influence the researched object and reality.

Secondly, the authors make use of *Digital Tools for Qualitative Research* (Paulus et al., 2014) in which various online tools are acknowledged as valuable sources for supporting the researcher in the everyday practice of research (e.g. NVivo, Zotero or Google Drive).

Lastly, the key methodological point of departure, is Rogers' (2013) *Digital Methods*. Concretely the authors built on his overarching epistemological principle 'follow the medium', suggesting that one should embrace the natural logic of the internet to gather, order and analyse digital data, and employ inherent functions characteristic for the specific 'medium' (e.g. tags, links, or hashtags) when designing 'natural' methods of research. Drawing upon this theory and bringing it to practice, the authors introduce research methods that are not only adapted to digital/online environment but instead are born there – thus 'natively digital', which is the main original contribution of this publication.

In order to investigate socio-anthropological objects such as social formations, cultural discourses and self-presentation strategies, the authors combine the 'follow the medium' principle with Actor Network Theory (an approach that understands social formations as a result of actors' activity rather than as the starting point for analysis) and Multi-Sited Ethnography (an ethnographic technique studying global fluxes of mobility and communication). As a result, in a simplified way, the authors define a three step methodological strategy: 1. 'follow the thing', 2. 'follow the medium', and 3. 'follow the natives'(meaning "to follow the native practices through which social actors construct the social order as well as the native categories they use to frame and justify it", ch.3). This means that a research in online environments should begin with identification of an object (e.g. a phenomenon, a political issue or a brand), then a researcher should trace its flow within defined online environments, and lastly observe specific social and cultural formations naturally emerging around it as a result of interactions among participating actors. Even though not explicitly articulated in the book, the proposed approach can be considered as a mixed method research: from determination of an object's significance by its quantification to qualitative interpretation of the related social

formations or cultural discourses. To conclude, coming from the theoretical foundations to a simplified three-step strategy meets the books aim to serve as a theoretical 'toolkit' for research in the digital environments.

Moving onto the second part of the book, the focus here is on the practical application of the proposed methodology. The authors begin with pointing out a number of key digital tools for data extraction and continue with a demonstration of main techniques for social media network analysis and content analysis.

The fifth chapter 'Digital Tools' focuses on data extraction and collection methods. Not only it presents a list of online tools for each of the main social media platforms, blogs and forums, but furthermore it serves almost as an instructional manual on how to practically use them. Accompanied by print screens and sample case studies it makes up a real toolkit to be immediately used, however with some exceptions: proposed tools for Instagram and Facebook data extraction, a 'DMI Instagram Tools Package'and the 'Netvizz' (respectively) are no longer available. In this respect, it reduces the strength of the suggested 'toolkit', on which authors comment in the footnote "this book is not so much about using and programming digital tools for collecting and analysing online data, but rather is about the application of systematic methodological frameworks and procedures for developing robust social research projects within online environments". The readers are then left to develop a custom-built piece of software and for the purpose of which are encouraged to learn the Python programming language.

As mentioned earlier, the authors clearly oppose the virtualisation of traditional qualitative methods. Therefore in the sixth chapter the authors demonstrate their approach to rather 'adaptation' of the traditional Social Network Analysis for digital environments, which is mainly based on slight modification and digital contextualisation of the basic terms and modes of visualisation. In terms of applicability, the digital social network analysis is recommended to study [1] a structure of the network, [2] key influencers and [3] flow of conversations. The second technique, a content analysis in digital environments, is grounded on a key premise that as Big Data can also be considered a huge mass of networked text that is subsequently a subject for further qualitative exploration. Both methods, the social network analysis and the content analysis, are supplemented with a number of examples and case studies that illustrate their practical applications. Among the case studies, two are worth mentioning for their almost step-by-step description: a social network research on hipster cultures on Instagram and a research mapping the vegan discourse on Twitter.

Overall, the book is systematically and logically grounded on solid theoretical background. It suggests a novel comprehensive methodological approach in the contemporary digital research that challenges traditional methods of research and creates a methodological

framework that draws upon analytical tools and approaches so far mainly used individually for particular business purposes. The benefit of the 'natively digital' approach is that it enables researchers to qualitatively analyse large sets of data that would not be achievable by methods of traditional research. However, the lack of acknowledgement for other methodological approaches makes an impression that the proposed methodology is the one-and-only appropriate way to do research in digital environments. The book's strength lies in the interconnection of the theoretical backgrounds with concrete examples and case studies that demonstrate employment of tools, techniques and methods for collection, analysis and interpretation of digital data. Each case study is accompanied by a number of complementary visual elements, such as graphics and print screens for even better comprehension. Together with a straightforward writing style and a concise summary at the end of each chapter, the book - especially the second part with a detailed description of tools and techniques - is suitable for students. The methodological approach, as outlined in the first section of the book, is potentially a good resource for educators and researchers as a new and complementary perspective on conducting a mixed method research in online and digital environments.

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Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: in this series we respond to Dan Laughey's article in MERJ 2.2, where he proposed a canon of 'classic' media and cultural studies texts, by asking contemporary media educators to reappraise the utility of a key text for media teaching and study at the time of writing. Here, Melissa Shani Brown, revisits John Berger's Ways of Seeing, in light of the author's death in 2017.

'Our principal aim has been to start a process of questioning.'

This note to the reader of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is a reminder that the best academic texts for students are those which aim to be a starting point for further discussion. The excellence of this book resides in the deceptive simplicity of this aim: to provoke a process of questioning – of images, their varied places in society, how they may work upon us as social beings, and also how we might work with them.

Berger's arguments have been influenced by feminist, Marxist, and post-colonial perspectives, though he does not explicitly name such influences. Though ostensibly a response to traditional art criticism this short work lends itself to media educators in introducing at a basic level what it might mean to think critically about images and society. The seven 'essays' are numbered, and three of consist solely of sequences of images of paintings, photographs, advertisements. Berger (drawing on Walter Benjamin) begins with a general discussion of what it might mean to think about images in a social context, and therefore the necessity of considering the impact of photography upon how we think of 'pictures'. He then moves to different case studies, considering the representation of women, images of/as objects, and publicity.

Ways of Seeing (1972) aims to be accessible. This is partly due to being derivative from the BBC television program which preceded it – this was not originally aimed at academics but at a broad viewership. I would highly recommend using the documentary alongside the book, since they both expand upon each other in terms of argument and content, and also because Berger makes use of each medium – explicitly highlighting the use of music or moving images in the

documentary, and space and page-breaks in the book – in ways that can provoke students to consider the effects of these different media on how he communicates his central ideas.

Academic works written before the widespread use of the internet, or mobile media, are often questioned for being inapplicable by virtue of this. This book on one hand avoids some such criticism since a significant proportion focuses upon art, and the increased reproducibility of digital images reinforces rather than diminishes some of his initial argument. The book lends itself to students as something to be questioned, to be compared to their own time and contexts: the last page of the book contains the single line: 'To be continued by the reader …' (p. 166). I have been struck in classroom settings by how often students are able to draw direct relevance from it to the images and contexts they themselves are familiar with. In a recent class, undergraduate students searching online quickly drew comparison between images of women in one of Berger's 18th Century French oil paintings, a 1950s American pinup, a Japanese Manga cover, a current perfume advertisement, and photographs from their own social media. They also compared Berger's contrasting pages of a magazine (luxury ads facing news photographs of refugees) to their own media platforms, where shocking images are likewise interspersed with advertisements, funny pictures, messages from friends, but in an unending stream, rather than a static page.

In conclusion, *Ways of Seeing* (1972) offers a good starting point for students just beginning to engage with media and cultural studies. Though not referring to contemporary contexts, this in itself lends itself to educators since it is precisely the relevance to their own contexts, the images that they see every day, that students need to learn how to evaluate.

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