Narrative in Social Research: Between Tradition and Innovation

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Abstract: The interest of sociologists in narratives has become more profound in the last few decades due to the growing awareness that narratives are an inherent part of everyday life and are directly linked with the construction of our identity. Narrative takes on an even more significant role when contextualized in a contemporary society in which technologies are increasingly ubiquitous and are embedded in our everyday life. In this article, after having carried out a theoretical overview of the role of narrative in sociological analysis, we focus on the techniques of social research that adopt the narrative approach in the understanding of contemporary society. On this point, the main characteristics and the similarities and differences between traditional and emerging digital empirical techniques, are examined. In particular, the so-called digital methods and the subsequent changes in the implementation of social research are explored, taking into account the sociological need to identify a narrative dimension capable of making connections between the complex set of digital traces, information and data.

Keywords: narrative, qualitative methods, digital methods, empirical research, everyday life

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Introduction

In last few decades there has been growing interest in approaches to narrative in the human and social sciences (Riessman, 1993; Somers, 1994; Mishler, 1995; Czarniawska, 2004). In the mid-1980s, in fact, a renewed interest in a multiplicity of models of knowledge that recognize the interpretative methods, uses and functions of rhetoric in scientific research and the potential and value of narratives (Bonet, 2005) led to the 'narrative turn' (Riessman, 2008). In the period preceding the 'narrative turn' – a period marked by the passage from modernity to the post-modern era and a decline in the absolute and objective conception of science - many scholars in fact contributed to the development of narratives not only in social research, but also in the natural sciences (Bonet, 2005).

Dilthey, for example, dealt with the scientific status of history; Max Weber focused on the interpretative process of social action; Alfred Schutz highlighted the role of the relationship between action and forms of symbolic mediation, arguing that meanings as socially constructed are the result of personal interactions and conversations.

According to Hyvärinen (2016), the pre-history of narrative sociology was mainly focused on the biographical tradition, i.e. the use of narratives as research materials. Hence, in "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America", Thomas and Znaniecki's (1984) collected letters from immigrants as source material for sociological analysis, reversing the behaviourist paradigm and underlining the difference in attitudes and values in social action. Within the tradition of the Chicago school, life stories were a technique used by Shaw; Jerome Bruner then introduced two forms of thought, comparing knowledge deriving from the narrative mode with that from the logico-scientific mode; Paul Ricoeur explored the relationship between temporality and narrative through phenomenological theory.

An increasing interest in language during that period, together with the diffusion of social constructionist ideas and the development of qualitative research, created a context in which the narrative turn began to develop: a deeper, more specific interest in narrative in the social sciences that can be found in the edited Biography and Society collection by Daniel Bertaux (1981) and Elliot Mishler's book, Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative (1986).

Starting from this context, this article aims to provide an overview of the role of narratives for sociological analysis from both a theoretical and a methodological point of view.

The first section, through an analysis of the main characteristics of the narrative process, explores how narrative allows sociologists to understand the increasing complexity of everyday life in our contemporary, technologi-

cal society, in which common sense and identity are closely interconnected. The second section deals with the role of narrative in social research: having analysed the main methods that use narrative to understand everyday life, we identify the key characteristics and the similarities and differences between traditional and emerging techniques. These new techniques are connected to the increase in the use of digital devices and to the so-called 'data deluge', which has led to changes in the implementation of empirical research.

In the final section, we illustrate how digital technology could open up new possibilities in the field of narrative in empirical research. By adopting the distinction provided by Richard Rogers (2013a) between the 'digitization' of methods and 'natively digital' methods, we examine some features of the emerging techniques aimed at analysing the narratives embedded within multiple aspects of everyday life, narrated by contemporary individuals within new digital environments.

Narrative in the analysis of everyday life in contemporary society

Narrative has been the subject of several - at times controversial - definitions and analytical approaches.

Before starting an analysis of these, it is necessary to make some distinctions between terms such as the 'story', 'tale' and 'narration' which are usually considered synonymous, but which actually refer to three distinct concepts. While the first concerns the events that are the subject of a certain discourse and the second covers the discourse in itself - i.e. the statement through which a certain set of events is communicated - narrative refers to the act of telling, meaning the act by which in a given situation, someone tells something to another (Jedlowski, 2000).

In general, "a narrative can be understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. In this way a narrative conveys the meaning of events" (Elliot, 2005, p. 3). This definition encapsulates three interconnected aspects that underline the value of narrative within sociology (Elliot, 2005).

The first aspect is that of the temporal dimension, since the narrative represents a sequence of events. Time is a fundamental variable for understanding social action, as it is itself embedded in time, and understanding time is narrating (Jedlowski, 2000).

The second aspect is the fact that the events underpinning a narrative are meaningful. Starting from a traditional sociological conception which places the understanding of the meaning of behaviour and experiences from

the perspective of the individuals involved at the centre of the analysis, narrative can foster empathy in an individual who "can externalize his or her feelings and indicate which elements of those experiences are most significant" (Elliot, 2005, p. 3). According to this approach, "narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18). Taking into account the ideographic dimension - that relies on the richness and depth of the singularity and not on generalization - narratives allow the person to organize the world from their own point of view, providing connections and patterns of interpretation. These patterns are a way for them to reaffirm and construct their own identity through a narrative (Bichi, 2000). In this regard, according to Somers (1994), the meaning of the events characterizing a narrative is not given by their chronological order, but is provided by an "emplotment" that "allows us to construct a significant network or configuration of relationships" (Somers, 1994, p. 617).

The third aspect involves the social nature of narrative, given that it is produced for a specific audience and within a specific social context. According to Poggio (2004), narration is a form of social interaction for several reasons:

1. It does not take place in a vacuum but happens within a communicative and transitive interaction that implies an interlocutor. In other words, it establishes a connection with one or more recipients and a negotiation of the agreement on what is narrated. More specifically, a narrative moves within a dynamic and relational discourse which follows two main directions: a) 'to ourselves', as the narrator's discourses and descriptions contribute to the construction of their identity; b) 'to significant others', i.e. the recipients of the communication, situated in a specific field of action for which the narrator believes that the construction of that specific detail is significant (Melucci, 2001).

2. It is deeply connected to the use of language, i.e. a dialogical construct based on the human relationship. Hence, the social world is inconceivable without the mediation of language because it orients and orders the meanings (Montesperelli, 2017).

3. It is a social construction that connects events by giving them a meaning. Narrative can be therefore be considered as an interpretative process, i.e. the result of a world of shared and situated meanings (Jedlowski, 2000). This means that narrating is never a neutral action that is independent from the identity of the person who is narrating, from their motivations, or from the context in which the narration takes place (Bichi, 2000, p. 58). In other words, narratives are situated in a framework that is constructed by several subjects, objects and actions that are part of the social world of

the subject themselves (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000); they represent the basis of our collective imaginary, i.e. the set of tacit knowledge that we usually share with all the members of the groups to which we belong, and that allows us to live together (Pecchinenda, 2009).

In short, we can say that a narrative identifies a connection of events which follow a chronological, logical, and argumentative sequence (Atkinson, 1998). More specifically, narratives can be conceived as constellations of relationships embedded in time and space and constituted by a causal 'emplotment' (Somers, 1994, p. 617). This means that narrations allow the subject to identify the causes and motivations, selecting and connecting the events and actions in a causal relationship, i.e. reconnecting them to a logically coherent structure. From this perspective, the cognitive dimension of narratives is found in this ability to find meaning in everything that is disconnected and dishomogeneous (Longo, 2012; 2017).

All these characteristics have made narrative central to sociological analysis.

Narration is indeed the main form of human communication (Bichi, 2000) and a person is a "*homo loquens*" (Longo, 2005) because of their natural tendency to narrate aspects of their own being and their own life (Longo, 2005), representing and giving meaning to experiences in the form of a narrative. The opportunity to narrate also has a direct relationship with identity (Montesperelli, 1998): "we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (Somers, 1994, p. 606). In this regard, Somers (1994) introduced the concepts of ontological narratives, i.e. the stories that social actors use to make sense of their lives and that are used to define who they are.

Another aspect of the connection between sociology and narratives is provided by their contributions both to developing social bonds and to building shared interpretations of reality. Sociology focusses specifically on these two dimensions: first, as actions embedded in social relations, and second as a means of accessing the ways in which subjects attribute meaning to their own reality.

The interest of sociologists in narratives is also a result of the awareness that they are part of everyday life. They mark time, build meaning, foster memory (Poggio, 2004) and thus they can allow social researchers to gain a better understanding of the context. The world of everyday life - i.e. the internalised experience that encompasses common sense - allows for social interaction and fosters the sense of mutual belonging (Montesperelli, 1998); it is constantly marked by the stories that we create every day. Moreover, given that everyday life is characterized by a common sense that is the result of a social construction, most narratives can be conceived as the way in which this construction is realized (Shultz, 1967; Jedlowski, 2000).

The analysis of narrative to explore the world of everyday life acquires a specific meaning when contextualized in contemporary society which, due to its increasing complexity, needs to be read starting from the significant fragments of reality from these everyday stories (Longo, 2017).

The society we live in today is a narrative moment (Maines, 1993), since the contemporary individual has the tendency and the need to express themselves and communicate their actions, feelings, and opinions in a multiplicity of ways. He or she is a subject who shares their feelings to affirm their own identity and contribute to the collective conversation (Lupton, 2014). This is due to the fact that the development of the Internet and ICT have opened up new channels through which individuals express the narratives of their everyday lives (Romney, Johnson & Roschke, 2017; Thumim, 2009), writing status updates, commenting, liking content and posting photos. People often use the opportunities provided by the web to construct their own narratives, to talk about themselves and reflect on their actions and opinions (Bennato, 2015). The world of blogs, social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Storify), forums, etc. shows us an environment of media culture that revolves around the individual and collective narrative (Boccia Artieri, 2012). Within these environments, individuals are used to expressing symbolic artefacts, events and activities and to textualizing and visualizing their life in a digital form, through narrative.

The Internet is thus deeply connected with our habits and becomes a space where our opinions and news develop dynamically. This has an impact on the representation of our identity, which can be conceived as the visible product of our connections and input (Boccia Artieri, 2012). This complex and multifaceted configuration gives rise to the need to investigate the narratives underpinning the digital society and highlights the importance of identifying appropriate methods and tools to address their analysis and interpretation. As Deborah Lupton argues, "the investigating of our interactions with digital technologies contributes to research into the nature of human experience, it also tells us much about the social world" (Lupton, 2014, p. 2).

The use of narratives in empirical research generally falls within the qualitative approach, based on the centrality of individuals and aimed at understanding this phenomena, their subjective meanings, and the contexts in which they are generated. Based on these assumptions, life stories, in-depth interviews, case studies, and ethnographic observations have been the traditional qualitative techniques used to explore the social experience of the narrators, to understand the social world of which they are members (Bichi, 2000) and to reveal the world of meanings in all its complexity. However, as will be seen in the following sections, the need to adopt a narrative approach also in the analysis of digital contexts, is opening up new theoretical and

methodological issues and challenges that have different peculiarities from those traditionally recognized in the methodological literature. These narratives, which are developed in the digital context, weave together images, texts, and videos, and hence call for specific techniques and tools capable of interpreting the complex nature behind multimedia and interactivity.

Narrative in social research methods

In the previous section we have examined how narrative acts as an important cognitive tool which can be adopted in sociology to explore the world of everyday life, conceived as the intersubjective world of meanings. It is through the particular form of reality construction provided by narrative that it is possible to understand the peculiarities and changes taking place in the world in which we live. Narrative allows us to reconstruct a story of the subject within the stories of others along the dimensions of space and time; it provides an interpretation of events, practices and experiences, giving meaning to what is considered significant for the subject (Besozzi & Colombo, 2014). As Burner claims (1988), the narrative approach, in contrast to logical thinking based on a formal apparatus of representation of reality which is considered objective and external, develops and connects a set of events with social and relational contents (Besozzi & Colombo, 2014).

According to Longo (2005) most social research methods are based on the narratives collected by the researcher. Depending on the cognitive aim of the research, the researcher can either use them as source of data to be generalized (in case of quantitative techniques), or consider them in their uniqueness in order to identify the connections that link the biographical and social dimensions (in the case of qualitative techniques).

More specifically, among the different techniques that focus on narrative, one of the most common ways to collect stories is to stimulate and solicit them through the use of the interview (Poggio, 2004; Marradi, 2005; Addeo & Diana, 2010).

Considered in its different meanings as a dialogue (Guidicini, 1968) - a conversation with a specific aim (Bingham & Moore, 1924) - the interview is an interaction between two or more subjects aimed at providing relevant information on a cognitive object for research purposes (Tusini, 2006).

As highlighted by Addeo and Montesperelli (2007), the common aspect underlying these different definitions concerns the relational nature of the interview, as it is a form of social interaction or conversation undertaken by two or more people. In their view, an interview can be considered as a specialized form of communication in which several people engage in verbal and non-verbal interaction to achieve a cognitive goal (Fideli & Marradi, 1996).

In methodological literature, interview techniques can be classified into structured, semi-structured and unstructured according to the three different criteria of structuring, standardization and directivity (Corbetta, 2003; Bichi, 2005). While the structured interview provides the interviewees with a limited opportunity to express themselves (since the same questions are asked to all the interviewees in the same order so that the answers can be compared and analysed for statistical purposes), the semi-structured and unstructured interviews aim at understanding and constructing intersubjective representations, so both the interviewer and the interviewee have more freedom to interact and communicate with each other.

It is within the unstructured interview, in particular, that narrative practice is generated, as a deeper level of interaction is developed between the interviewee and the interviewer. These types of interviews are non-directive techniques - part of the broader family of qualitative method - that allow the researcher to understand the world of everyday life, the point of view of the subject and their peculiarities through a flexible approach tailored to each subject (Diana & Montesperelli, 2005).

In these types of techniques, the interviewer, starting with the introduction of the main theme of the research, leaves the respondent free to answer by expressing themselves using verbal and nonverbal codes (Pitrone, 2009). This is because the cognitive aim behind the interview is to reach an understanding of the everyday life of the subject who - following the principle of the centrality of the respondent - is the true expert of the context in which they live, and thus of their own biography (Diana & Montesperelli, 2005). In this way, the narrative dimension of an unstructured interview lies in the opportunity given to the interviewee to narrate their life using their own language, activating a process of (re)construction of their personal experiences and of their social identity. An interview about the world of everyday life can represent a particular encouragement to narrate, to reconstruct one's own identity (Montesperelli, 1998) and to give voice to everything that cannot be detected through the use of standardized techniques. Especially in some types of non-directive techniques, such as the hermeneutic interview, the phenomena to be analysed can be closely assimilated to the narrative text, giving rise to some important implications on the side of the narrator: their identity is formed narratively, through the ability to reflect on their life, to establish a narrative continuity between their different experiences. Through narrative, the interviewee makes experiences and events which would otherwise be too heterogeneous and meaningless, organized and intelligible (Montesperelli, 1998).

An important aspect of this type of interview relates to the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, which at times recalls the communicative processes of everyday life conversations (Addeo & Montes-

perelli, 2007). However, it should be remembered that the interview situation is artificial because it cannot be conceived as "a natural reflection of the real conditions outside the field of research" (Melucci, 1998, p. 307). The interview is a different situation from true conversation: in contrast to spontaneous everyday life conversations, the interview – the aim of which is to pursue a cognitive goal, takes place in a research context (Fideli & Marradi, 1996). Moreover, since the situation is artificial (i.e. specifically created for scientific aims and characterized by the presence of an interviewer) this can generate a series of distortions, such as social desirability.

Another important issue that makes the interview different from other forms of social interaction concerns the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. This usually takes on an asymmetrical format, as it is the interviewer who stimulates the respondent to answer (Addeo & Montesperelli, 2007). Clearly, non-directive techniques partly reduce this asymmetry as the interviewer has the task of creating a condition of listening in order to put the interviewee at the centre of the interaction. In this way, through an in-depth interpretative process, the interviewer tries to grasp all the peculiarities of the verbal and non-verbal language that is used during the narration.

As anticipated in the previous section, the so-called *homo loquens* (Longo, 2017), in contemporary digital society expresses themselves and their experiences in a multiplicity of ways and channels that generate new scenarios in the social sciences, both on a theoretical and a methodological level. Digital technology in fact opens up many possibilities in the field of narrative (Given, 2006), due to the rise in user participation in the creation of online content. It is now common for individuals to report on their own everyday lives, sharing and commenting on their experiences (Marres, 2017). The increasingly pervasive use of the Internet makes it a phenomenon embedded in multiple contexts of everyday life (Roberts et al., 2016). The use of wearables - devices that allow the subject to be permanently connected to the web - is one example of this pattern. In other words, the sociologist today has to deal with a multiplicity of sources, from which it is possible to trace narrations and interpret their meanings. This is because the contemporary subject crosses, with extreme rapidity and ease of access, more "finite provinces of meaning" (Schultz, 1967; Bennato, 2012) than in the past[1].

When the narrative is expressed in a digital context, the nature of the data (text, imagine, video etc.) and the whole design of the research can radically change (Given, 2006). First of all, the interlocutor (i.e. the user) to whom the subject addresses their narrative, is not the interviewer or the

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[1] In this regard, according to Deborah Lupton (2018), everything we learn is digitally mediated.

researcher, but the sometimes blurred mass of people who inhabit the web. There is, therefore, a significant transformation in the nature of the narrative relationship, moving from "one to one", to a potential "one to many". This change, in fact, has an influence on a great many aspects.

 In contrast to an interview, in which the subject is asked and urged by the interviewer to narrate in a specific and predefined research situation, in the digital context the subject narrates more naturally and without any interference.

As stated by Noortje Marres (2017), the information provided by digital infrastructures are not the 'designed' data that are usually collected by traditional research methods and that are characterized as 'single purpose', i.e. for a scientific aim. Instead, digital media technologies allow us to access and analyse different types of unsolicited materials, such as text, photos, videos, tags and so on (Robinson, 2001), that are produced 'naturally' as part of social life. Hence, most of the data of digital platforms, being 'naturally occurring', *user generated contents*[2], are already available, thereby addressing a recognized, methodological problem related to the 'artificial quality' of the data. (Marres, 2017).

Within the debate on the naturalness of digital data, Marres also recalls the doubts expressed by some sociologists who state that "platform-based and other forms of digital data are formatted in ways that agree with specific social methods, such as network analysis and conversation analysis" (Marres, 2017, p. 46). From this perspective, "online data is not 'natural' data, insofar as digital content and digital action is often highly formatted" (Marres, 2017, p. 46). Another issue relates to the concept of 'data' itself, that in the digital context can be configured in a variety of ways. On this subject, Bruno Latour and others (2012) adopted the term 'trace': while data implies a specific architecture, such as the database, the trace is more minimal and maintains a reference to the device from which it was detected (Marres & Weltevrede, 2013; Marres, 2017).

The absence of the researcher/interviewer leads to other differences from the face-to-face research setting: the subject may feel freer to express themselves, revealing things that they would not discuss in a traditional interview context (Seale et al., 2010). This means that the digital context could potentially be conceived as a tool for exploring more sensitive topics that are often hard to discuss using traditional face-to-face techniques (Seale et al., 2010; Lee, 1993). Moreover, according to Seale et al. (2010, p. 596), "Internet communications might change the factors that in face-to-face situations result in a particular performance of an idealized self, or "front". Of course, also

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[2] User generated contents (tweets, posts, comments etc.) generate new communicative acts but are also intentionally uploaded by users to social media platforms.

on the Internet the narrations must be interpreted in the light of distortions such as social desirability, connected to specific strategies for visibility of the users (Boccia Artieri et al., 2018; Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

However, an important issue of investigation in a digital environment is the impossibility of being able to grasp all the non-verbal aspects of communication that represent a fundamental cognitive source supporting narration: the para-linguistic aspects, for example (the intonation and the volume of the voice, the accents, the rhythm and the speed of the speech, the use of the pauses, etc.); mimicking (body movements, gestures, facial expressions etc.); and proxemics (the placement of the respondent in the space etc.) (Addeo & Montesperelli, 2007). This information, that allows us to understand the communication process in its complexity and entirety, is lacking in the digital artefacts. But it is not only the lack of non-verbal signals that can have an impact, but also the absence of the interviewer, which could, on the one hand, favour a greater freedom of expression in the subject narrating. On the other hand, however, it implies renouncing the hermeneutic sensibility, the 'art of listening', the empathy that allows the subject to reconstruct their most significant experiences.

The interviewer is therefore a fundamental figure who facilitates an in-depth exploration of specific issues employing a cooperative approach, hence avoiding certain distortions. Moreover, the entire interview process, considered as a verbal interaction that is missing in the Internet environment, can also stimulate reflection (Montesperelli, 1998). Another important question concerns the type of narrative message produced on the web: it can be a social network post, an image, a photo, a video, an article on a blog, or a message on a discussion forum. While the information collected through the non-directive techniques - however polysemic - is characterized by a certain unitarity giving a valid empirical basis within which the researcher can move, the information collected on the web is various and unstructured. This requires the researcher to reconstruct the horizon of meaning that binds these elements together as well as giving rise to the need to tackle the complex methodological issues that represent the new frontiers of social research.

These aspects make us reflect on the meaning of digital narratives. In fact, although the empirical basis of these is richer and more accessible, they also raise important questions regarding the interpretative process that must be implemented by the researcher.

The naturalness of digital data poses a series of questions regarding the interpretation of the narrative act in the sphere of its meaning - something that is given intentionally by the subject. For example, in the "one to many" communication that often characterizes the Internet environment, reconstructing the cognitive framework that includes a common sense, culture,

and a values system through which to interpret and give meaning to the narrative, is a highly complex task (Goffman, 1990). Hence, the digital context can generate forms of 'suspended' narration, i.e. narration that needs an interpretative act on the part of the researcher and is therefore empirically controllable[3]. The narration is also fragmented, since it is expressed in different forms and ways. Consequently, the researcher has the task of selecting, collecting, organizing, analysing and interpreting these new semantic units that underlie the micro narrations of the Internet. Picking up from a difference proposed by Shultz (1967) between the agent subject who 'lives significantly in the social world' interpreting their own world and actions and 'the significant interpretation of such living through social sciences', clearly the categories of this dichotomy become more distant in the digital context. In the light of these characteristics, it is not easy to interpret digital narratives, despite the fact that in recent years there has been a growing interest in the techniques recommended for analysing these types of narratives, as we will see in the following section.

Narrative and digital methods

The increasingly valuable source of information, traces, data (Edwards et al., 2013; Rogers, 2013a) provided by the development of digital technologies opens up new opportunities for investigating everyday life, social relationships and identity, but at the same time gives rise to the need to reflect carefully on the traditional empirical apparatus of social enquiry. All these aspects, which encapsulate a variety of theoretical, methodological, technical and ethical questions, converge in the analysis of the so-called 'digital sociology' that, according to Nortje Marres (2017), can take on three different and interrelated meanings.

The first concerns a substantive dimension: digital sociology deals with the topics of social enquiry; it represents a fundamental societal phenomenon, since digitization affects every sphere of our life and determines societal, cultural, political and economic changes. More specifically - as highlighted in the previous section - new digital technologies are embedded in multiple aspects of everyday life, creating new environments through which individuals can share the narratives of their life experience.

The second meaning relates to the platforms used for engaging with the audiences and public of sociology; in other words, digital sociology refers to the channels, contexts and tools that sociologists use to communicate and share their knowledge with scientific communities and the public.

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[3] On this point, criteria such as those adopted in the qualitative interview (adequacy, consistency, conformity) should be developed to reconstruct a meaningful picture.

Finally, the last aspect of digital sociology - which is the specific subject of this section - focuses on the methods of social research, i.e. on the means and on the potential new ways of analysing contemporary society. The methodological challenges that underpin important epistemological issues are complex and delicate, given that they require the social researcher to tackle a complex mix of different elements, such as human beings, technological devices, infrastructure and data. In this regard, using the idea expressed by Deborah Lupton (2014, pp. 42-43), "sociologists in general should develop new ways of 'doing sociology' in response to the digital age. In particular, if practitioners of the discipline are to retain their preeminent position as experts in social research, there are various ways of approaching research into the digital society. This is not to contend that more traditional social research methods should necessarily be discarded in favour of those using new digitised approaches. Sociologists should both investigate the various approaches that can be adopted to undertake digital social research and continue to question these approaches themselves for how they shape and interpret the data they produce."

In order to move through the wide variety of research tools in the digital context, it is helpful to adopt the classification provided by Richard Rogers (2013) between the 'digitization' of methods and the 'natively digital' methods. The former refers to the many existing empirical research techniques that have been adapted for the web and the digital context: web surveys, netnography, and network analysis represent, for example, the development of traditional techniques used in social research. This branch of methods also refers to the so-called digitised data objects, i.e. the information, traces and data that have migrated to the web (Rogers, 2013a). The second class of methods refers to the "natively digital" methods which are the 'new' methods specifically designed according the distinctive features of digital devices (Rogers, 2013a). Within this discussion, Rogers (2015, p. 2) also specifies that "digital methods seek to learn from the so-called methods of the medium, that is, how online devices treat web data. Thus, digital methods are, first, the study of the methods embedded in the devices treating online data".

While the discussion on 'digitised methods' is quite entrenched, since it is based on assumptions and approaches that, although different, belong to the previous versions of traditional empirical research methods, the discussion on 'natively digital' methods is still open.

Regarding this aspect, Richard Rogers and his research group created the Digital Methods Initiative. In particular, they developed a set of tools designed to detect and analyse social network data and metadata, and to monitor online media outputs[4]. Most of these are based on web 'scraping' in order

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[4]   All the tools are available on the official website of the Digital Methods Initiative.

to capture the digital traces. For example, the *Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset (DMI-TCAT)* and *Netvizz* tools (Rieder, 2013) allow for the extraction of data from different sections of the social network platform for research purposes. Another interesting technique is that of *issue mapping,* aimed at the detection, analysis and visualisation of contemporary current affairs on the Internet (Padovani et al., 2009; Rogers, 2013b; Rogers, 2015).

Within this scenario, it is also necessary to underline that most of the techniques aimed at detecting and analysing the narrative dimension underlying the multiplicity and variety of data are based on quantitative methods, often of a textual nature. On this point it is important to take into account the development of text mining approaches such as sentiment analysis, which is a computational analysis technique aimed at studying the "subjective elements in a language" (Ampofo et al., 2015, p.166). In any case, computational automated research techniques run the risk of reducing the complex reality in which we exist, solely by mapping recurrence patterns which sometimes do not provide significant results. For these reasons, according to the latest trends of social research, the complex dynamics of the online information produced could be explored by combining quantitative and qualitative methods into a boarder methodology linking automated analysis with more adaptive methods (Ampofo et al., 2015).

One digital qualitative technique used to explore the discourses and the interactions on the Internet (often as a support of a quantitative technique) is netnography (Bowler, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2014; Bartl at al., 2016). According to the classification of methods provided by Rogers, this is a digitalised method derived from traditional ethnography. According to Kozinets (2010, p. 7), netnography is in fact "a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the Internet's influence on contemporary social worlds". More specifically, it is a participant-observational research based on online fieldwork that uses communications in the digital environment as a source of data in order to provide an ethnographic understanding and analysis of a cultural or communal phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010).

Netnography usually deals with the study of virtual communities; it allows the researcher, who is embedded in digital environments, to study social interactions online. The specific focus of this type of technique are the conversational acts of two or more people who express and share their opinions, culture, and feelings, developing specific visions of the world and a shared representation of identity. These conversations usually take place in forums, chats and social networks that represent the field of this technique. Netnography has different, quite specific characteristics: for example, it usually enables the researcher to use a large and varied quantity of information that is easily available online; this also means that they have the opportunity

to explore real-time conversations which, since they are online, are constantly updated.

Compared to ethnography, netnography reduces the costs (e.g. travel expenses) and the time required for the entire search (gathering information, transcription of interviews). An important aspect of this type of technique is the non-intrusiveness of the researcher, who can observe and analyse the interactions between users in a non-invasive and sometimes anonymous way. Both the observation and analysis are delicate phases, due to the diversity and variety of information collected that can be in the form of texts, images, audio and video. This highlights the highly complex nature of the empirical basis on which this technique is based. It therefore requires the researcher to be able to connect the multiplicity and variety of information and digital traces in a logical, and coherent interpretative framework, identifying the narrative thread that ties them together. The need to gather together many different elements is a typical feature of digital methods that call on researchers to organize and connect the semantic units that underpin these elements into a narrative plot.

While a large part of the discussion on digital methods focuses especially on techniques of collection and analysis, there seems to be less interest in the process of interpretation, which, in our opinion, plays a central role in attributing meaning to a heterogeneous set of data. In other words, it is necessary to use sociological imagination and heuristic procedures to try to identify the common thread through which to build a coherent and meaningful narrative structure.

The heuristic dimension required by the treatment of digital information could lead researchers to adopt an abductive method. Traditionally, social research has been based on either deductive or inductive reasoning. In the former, the hypotheses are deduced starting from a theoretical framework and are verified through empirical observation. In the second, broad generalizations are made from specific observations. Instead, abductive reasoning is a form of logical inference that starts from an observation, and seeks to find the most likely explanation for it. In other words, it can be thought of as the "step of adopting a hypothesis as being suggested by the facts...a form of inference" (Peirce, 1998, p. 95). This type of reasoning produces new knowledge, i.e. information that is missing from the premises, and opens the way to new conclusions. Abduction also acts as inference or intuition and is directly aided and assisted by personal experience (Kolko, 2010). From this perspective, abduction can be traced back to a process based on clues that exploits and makes the best use of serendipity – understood as the ability of the eye to pick up a clue and to grasp an accidental idea, placing it within the framework of logical inferential reasoning (Sacchetti, 2012). In the same way, the manipulation, organization, analysis and interpretation of digital traces

can follow an abductive sensemaking reasoning based on observation and serendipity in order to come to the best explanation. The researcher hence identifies new semantic units in digital environments and in the heterogeneous, untidy and unexpected multitude of traces and data, thus coming to an understanding of the relationships between the various elements and, more generally, among seemingly unrelated pieces of information.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the relationship between sociology and narrativity. Narrative is able to reveal the voices of the individuals as they talk about their experiences and "construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories" (Somers, 1994, p. 614). In other words, "people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives" (*ibidem*, 1994, p. 614).

We have also analysed how narrative takes on an even more significant connotation when contextualized in a contemporary society in which technologies are increasingly ubiquitous and are embedded in our everyday life. The contemporary individual indeed reflects and reshapes their own experiences through the narratives they often produce in digital contexts. This has led social researchers to use narrative practices to reduce the complexity of the world of shared and situated meanings. From a methodological point of view, while traditional techniques are used to collect stories by "stimulating" them through the use of the interview, the emergent digital techniques are based on the assumption that digital technologies allow us to collect "directly" a set of traces, information and data. The so-called data 'deluge' (Given, 2006; Savage & Burrows, 2007; Edwards et al., 2013) produced by the digitization of our lives, poses a number of questions regarding the need to identify the narrative plot underlying such data.

Despite the quantity and variety of information, there is the perception that the new techniques of empirical research, while on the one hand enabling the reconstruction of general patterns of analysis, on the other hand return a fragmented narrative in which it is difficult to get back to the 'narrating self' and enter into the depths of their vision of the world. It is therefore fundamental for the researcher to have the ability to connect the multiplicity of digital traces and contribute to the reflective interrogation of the empirical material emerging from digital contexts within a meaningful framework. Without a significant analytical and interpretative effort, the mass of information collected risks being reduced to a sterile aseptic synthesis of disconnected data. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink methods

by linking them to the cognitive objectives that have always been central to sociologists, such as identity and everyday life (Lupton, 2014). Within this complex framework, sociologists, with their competence in social analysis, therefore take on a central role in the design and implementation of suitable tools to detect, analyse and interpret the complexity of digital societies at situated, networked and system levels (Housley et al., 2017), connecting methodological issues to ontological, epistemological and ethical issues.

Acknowledgment

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