The application of ethnographic method in the study of digital media

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ABSTRACT

Digital media raise methodological issues of some relevance. The following article tries to be a contribution to the qualitative analysis of Social Networks through the use of media ethnography. We deal with issues such as time and space and with how these dimension get transformed in digital environments; the very definition of environment and social network; an effective communication; the constant flow between online and off-line activities; the role of the "digital" researcher, his/her influence on the subjects' actions, his/her actual competence about the media and the balance of the management of situations that cross online and off-line environments, ethics and the protection of privacy. The figure of the ethnographic researcher changes, while ethnography represents – perhaps – one of the most effective methods for a research that maintains a phenomenological basis, helping to understand the meaning and value that certain tools, used for specific purposes, can take on for the youngest users.

Keywords: *Media Ethnography – Social Network – Facebook – Activism – Youth*

Applicazione del metodo etnografico nello studio dei media digitali

I media digitali pongono questioni metodologiche di un certo rilievo. L'articolo che segue cerca di essere un contributo all'analisi qualitativa dei Social Networks attraverso l'utilizzo della media ethnography. Si affrontano questioni quali il tempo e lo spazio e come queste dimensioni si trasformano negli ambienti digitali; la definizione di ambiente e rete sociale; la comunicazione efficace; il flusso continuo fra le attività on e off line; il ruolo del ricercatore "digitale", la sua influenza sull'operato dei soggetti, la sua stessa competenza mediatica e l'equilibrio della gestione di situazioni che passano da ambienti on e off line, l'etica e la protezione della privacy. Cambia la figura del ricercatore etnografico mentre l'etnografia rappresenta – forse- uno dei metodi più efficaci per una ricerca che vuole avere una base fenomenologica che aiuti la comprensione del senso e del valore che determinati strumenti, utilizzati per scopi specifici, possono assumere per l'utenza più giovane.

Parole chiave: *Media Ethnography – Social Network – Facebook – Attivismo – Giovani*

Introduction

This article presents a reflection on the application of the ethnographic method to the digital media. The opportunity comes from the necessity to identify the most appropriate methodology for a PhD research which has examined the online and offline media activism of ten young Italian people. For two years we have observed the Facebook profiles of ten young people, five of them politically active and five of them socially active within some associations.

At the origin of this research lie, in particular, two solicitations that I had during the years of my studies in Media Education both as a student and as a professional. I will start from the second solicitation, in chronological order, to better clarify my point. In a TV show of political information, Al Gore, Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, declared that "*the Arab Spring has had the Internet as a tool*"[1]. Gore's point and the Arab Spring itself led me to reflect upon the activism of young Italians, upon such phenomena as "Ammazzateci Tutti!"[2], "Indymedia"[3], "Movimento 5 stelle,"[4] "Libera,"[5] the "No Tav"[6] movement and others. In particular, the possibility that the Arab Spring really had the net as a tool, has guided my interest in the socio-political use of the Web 2.0 by teenagers and young people under 21, not in a group but individually.

Many researches show that Italian teenagers and young people have been growing up with commercial TV, accused of containing too much violence, sex, reality shows, commercials, animated cartoons[7] and that young people watch TV from 1 to 4 hours a day[8]. They also turn out to be great mobile users, spending a considerable quantity of time[9] on their devices whereas their educational outcomes are under the OEDC[10] average and their interest towards politics would be almost non- existent. Italy's

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[1] A. Gore, Nobel Peace Prize winner, 2007 as host at "Anno Zero", TV show hosted by M. Santoro on Rai Tre channel, 19.05.2011

[2] Ammazzateci tutti, giovani uniti contro le mafie (Kill us all, young people united against mafias), <http://www.ammazzatecitutti.org/>, last view 07th August 2013.

[3] Indymedia, <http://italy.indymedia.org/>, last view 07th August 2013.

[4] Beppe Grillo's blog, <http://www.beppegrillo.it/movimento/>, last view 07th August 2013. For further details: Mosca, L., & Vaccari, C. (2011). *Nuovi media, nuova politica? Partecipazione e mobilitazione online da MoveOn al Movimento 5 stelle.* Milano: Franco Angeli.

[5] Associations, names and numbers against mafias, <www.libera.it>, last view 07th August 2013.

[6] No Tav, La valle non si arresta (No Tav, the valley doesn't give up), <www.notav.info>, last view 07th August 2013.

[7] There are many available texts about Italian television. Some examples are: Aroldi, P. M., (2004). *La Tv risorsa educativa.* Milano: San Paolo; Aroldi, P. M., & Colombo, F. (2003). *Le età della Tv.* Milano: Vita e Pensiero; Bertolini, P. (2002). *I bambini giudici della Tv.* Milano: Guerini e Associati.

[8] Telefono Azzurro-Eurispes (Blue Phone- Institute for Political, Economic and Social Studies) 2012, p. 2.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] <http://www.na.camcom.it/contents-sa/instance4/files/document/10004478Capitolo5.pdf.> Last view 05th August 2012.

National Statistics Institute records it at less than 5% of the total national sample[11]. In other words, we rarely see a committed facet of Italian teenagers and young people but this commitment exists, as the above-mentioned Movements prove.

At this stage, the question that I asked myself was: how does the financial crisis with the specific problems of our country, such as the cuts to funding for school, academic research and welfare, the corruption of the political class, organized crime[12], and the infiltration of the second into the first one, cause a reaction from our teenagers and young people? How much is the web used to shape these reactions? Many researches show us some data about the use of the internet by young people in terms of time spent and activities performed[13], but more importantly, how can the Internet and Web 2.0 be a tool for their reaction and their commitment? What do kids do online? How? How does their online activity cross their offline life? How do online and offline merge in an environment that has no boundaries and where both dimensions are so intertwined that they have become a single dynamic flow of activity?

Media Education and Media Literacy are essential in education. The results which a digital literacy, when politically and socially conscious, could reach seem to have become strikingly manifest, at least in Europe, Maghreb and the Middle East, during the so-called Arab Spring, in the months of the riots in Iran[14], preceding that, and in the following months, in Europe, with the Spanish Indignados movement. And I'm only considering Europe and the Mediterranean area.

The second of the two statements I mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, which led me to undertake this work, is by Jacques Gonnet, a member of the French study group on Media Education Clemì[15], who said at a conference:

> … [there is a] fundamental link between democracy and media education: there is no possibility of making a
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> newspaper, a magazine under a dictatorial regime because freedom of thought is not tolerated. School, a place

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[11] Istat (2011). Citizens and new technologies. Statistics and Report. Roma.

[12] An example, Saviano, R. (2006). *Gomorra. Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno di dominio della camorra.* Milano: Mondadori.

[13] Livingstone, S. et al. (2010). *Risks and safety on the internet. The perspective of European children. Full findings and policy implications from the EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 years old and their parents in 25 countries.* European Union and LSE, London. <www.eukidsonline.net>; Telefono Azzurro-Eurispes (2012). *Report on Childhood and Adolescence.* Milan; Unicef, Istituto degli Innocenti (2011). *Child Safety Online.* Florence.

[14] Particularly notorious became the video of Neda's killing, the Iranian young woman accidentally shot during a demonstration in Teheran, although it has been seen more on TV than on Twitter, where it "rebounded".

[15] French research center on Media Education.

of initiation into the values of a society, is part of and reveals itself, thanks to the media, in a political view of the world. Media education becomes an initiation to democratic practices, means promoting a culture based on the rigor of the argument and the mutual enrichment through the diversity of opinions.[16]

This statement by the French scholar has induced me to reflect on how and where young people and adolescents should get their formative experiences in the media? School? Family? Peers? The three things combined? Something else? Does school adequately prepare young people to use the media, in a way that is not just "mechanical" basic literacy but a broader discourse of participation and democracy? As it clearly emerges from the statistical research at a national and international level, the interest shown by young people towards politics and social participation is low, and so are the OEDC values about educational and academic outcomes as well. Maybe school does not adequately prepare our kids? If we add to these elements the fact that family is perceived by children themselves as ignorant on the subject of new media17, how could young activists, including the ten who have decided to participate in this research, specially chosen for their activism, understand that this particular type of media can play a role in achieving their socio-political objectives? Is it just a matter of generational choice among the available means?

We are talking about subjects who are widely expert in the use of these technologies, they usually run a Blog, Wikis, they post informative videos about what happens around them. Can we identify in these actions the signs of an "active citizenship"? The ways in which some forms of political involvement are spreading among young people in some countries of the world would lead us to answer this question affirmatively, but what is interesting in terms of research is to reconstruct the "educational paths" of adolescent subjects with relation to their "style" in using modern communication technologies, to understand if school plays (or could play) an important role, maybe implicit, and which is the role of extracurricular education.

The hypothesis of this work is that there could be or it is possible to activate in the adolescents some active aspects of the social and political life. We have to understand what are the significant experiences, the educational stages, the family and school environments in which some kinds of awareness were born.

Starting from this hypothesis, this study had three objectives: to investigate the kind of online and offline socio-political activity in which the ten subjects of the research were engaged; to understand the structure of their social networks; to identify the most significant experiences in the education to the digital media and political and social activism; to try to understand the meaning and the importance, from a phenomenological point of view, of their engagement18.

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[16] Gonnet, J. (2002), Medi@tando Conference. Igea Marina, RN: Italy.

[17] <http://www.na.camcom.it/contents-sa/instance4/files/document/10004478Capitolo5.pdf.> Last view 05th August 2012.

[18] Capobianco A., (2014), *Media Activism on and off line by Italian adolescents and young adults.* Doctor Europaeus in Pedagogical Sciences, University of Bologna, Unpublished PhD thesis.

The variety of the purposes and the complexity of the work's nature has required me to work in an interdisciplinary manner concerning the theoretical framework and the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods of research, even if maintaining a main qualitative approach which is expressed, in particular, by the number of observed subjects, by the duration of the observation and by the in-depth interviews done with the most active group of subjects during the two years of observation. In particular, from the methodological point of view, I made reference to media ethnography. The choices made in the media ethnography context represent the focus of this article which has no pretension of exhaustiveness, given the peculiarity of the web of being a continuously changing subject, but it tries to represent a possible way of working in this field. A first step, in this work, is to set a series of theoretical prerequisites which have been a reference point for this study.

Ethnography and Media Ethnography

In this study, in terms of the ethnographical method and of the media ethnography, even if we maintain on the background a wider literature, I make especially reference to two authors. The first one is the ethnography founder, C. Geertz (1973), the second one is C. Hine who has largely examined the matter of its application to the digital media and Social Networks in her many works.

The ethnography envisages for its nature a participated observation. The researcher must enter in depth in the context, in the environment where the observed subject lives, with the awareness of the influence that he/she can exercise on the behavior of the observed subject (Geertz, 1973).

Geertz states that:

> "doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, «thick description»".[19]

Geertz used to distinguish between two types of ethnography description, "thin description", which is a mere description of a fact, and "thick description", which represents the object of ethnography; a deep reflection and interpretation of a fact, of its meaning and its value[20]. That is what this research has tried to reach, a deep understanding of the meaning of the young activism that uses the digital media to express itself.

Now the question is to apply ethnography to new digital communication media.

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[19] Geertz, 1973, p. 6.

[20] *Ivi*, p. 7.

The Internet is considered a "cultural object" and, as such, something existing, recognizable and investigable. What makes the Internet a cultural object are, as it always happens, the talks made about it[21]. When people, the users, the media talk about the Internet, they are recognizing it as a "cultural object". As Hine (2000) states, the same technology can have many different cultural meanings in different contexts and, at the same time, can be seen as created by a cultural context. The perception of what's the use of a media and what it does symbolize has an influence in determining its use. Hine also says that web users are themselves involved in the construction of technologies, and this happens in two ways: through the practice by means of which they understand the web and through the contents they actually produce[22]. Tufte (2001) states about this that "Identifying and analyzing ritualized media use in everyday life provides the key to a deeper understanding of contemporary everyday cultures and the role of the media in these"[23].

The use of ethnography to investigate the web has been widely discussed in the last 15-20 years. In 2006, Wilson was speaking about the "paradox of conducting a non-traditional ethnography in a non-traditional non-place, using traditional tools"[24]. Since then, several things are considered in a very different way. Since 2005, in particular, Social Networks have spread over, further increasing the availability of communication media; we've also stopped using such terms as "virtual reality" or "non-place", considering this spaces as new spaces of reality that get connected to offline life within one flow, as Castells states in his many works. So, an important issue on the use of ethnography on the Internet concerns the matter that we must forget the dichotomy "virtual world"/"real world", "online"/"offline". Since the mid-Nineties, researchers have been speaking of a state of suspension between these conditions[25].

What happens when there is a connection between an online and an offline place? According to Hine (2010), the space of the offline place reaffirms itself online[26]. The Internet presents a multi-temporal and multi-spatial order[27].

"This is particularly apparent in the use of time and space to insert the online world of the Internet into offline context, and vice versa. It is through these processes that offline events are portrayed meaningfully on the Internet, and events on the Internet are portrayed offline, for example in the media."[28]

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[21] See Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Hine, 2000.

[22] Hine, 2000, p. 38.

[23] Tufte, 2001, p. 125.

[24] Wilson, B. (2006). Ethnography, the Internet, and Youth Culture: Strategies for Examining Social Resistance and "Online-Offline" Relationship. *Canadian Journal of Education* 29, 1, 307-328.

[25] *Ivi*, p. 308.

[26] Hine, 2000, p. 114.

[27] Ibidem

Sociologists M. Cavallo and F. Spadoni (2010), state that cyber-space is a new forum where reality and virtuality do meet, and when users enter with a login, they don't get disconnected from society, which actually accompanies them in their relationships, in the experiences that they live, in their goals[29]. That's not a "virtual reality" but a "real virtuality" in the sense that these occurrences are not fictitious or potential in the future, they do belong to and have effect in reality[30]. As a consequence, in our society we should consider the Internet as a real social dimension, which is to say an expression of what we are[31]. As Sade-Beck (2004) states, therefore, a re-examination of the ethnographic field of work is necessary[32].

Space and time in media ethnography

The main issue in the application of ethnography to the web is the re-definition of the concepts of space and time. What is it that makes any old space an ethnographic space? In which way can we consider time on the Internet?

In her book, Hine (2000) explicates the concept of place, from classic ethnography to its application on the Internet. A characteristic of the classic ethnographic method was travel which was something important, especially in the case of tribes who used to perform particular sacred rites. Going on site, the ethnographer could "breathe" the context, observe, ask questions, interview people, take pictures of them, in short, live with them. Therefore, the question for an ethnographic study of the Internet is: how is it possible to live in an online setting? For how long? 24 hours a day? Is it possible to analyze an object, a website for example, without participating in it and call it an "ethnographic" work?[33]

What makes the Internet a cultural place? According to Hine (2000) the answers are two characteristics that we find in the web: the presence of relationships between the users and the texts they produce. The Internet was already considered a place of relationships when the first online chat, the first forums, and the first discussion groups appeared. The same scholar states that:

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[28] *Ivi*, p. 115.

[29] Cavallo & Spadoni, 2010, p. 69.

[30] *Ivi*, p. 52.

[31] Cavallo & Spadoni, 2010, p. 53.

[32] Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 9.

[33] Hine, 2000, p. 21.

> Between the poster of one newsgroup message and the author of a response, a space opened, and that space was a cultural context[34]

and the texts become new ethnographic material available for analysis by the researcher and we pay attention to the context in which the texts are inserted. It is particularly important to know the situation in which a text is added in order to judge its meaning.

Again according to Hine (2000) another important step for the ethnographer is to be experienced of what it means to be a user of a specific media[35]. The personal experience as user of the researcher herself, what are her skills regarding this Social Network, for instance and how aware she herself is of the negotiation of her identity, particularly in the relationship with the subjects of the research.

As Hine (2000) states again,

> An ethnography of the Internet can look in detail at the ways in which the technology is experienced in use. In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings *of those in the setting and participating in those processes. (...) The aim is to study how the status of the Internet is negotiated in the local context of its use*[36].

Writing in ethnography

One of the main characteristics of the ethnographic method is writing, which is the result of the interpretations made by the researcher, criticized by quantitative scholars for its hybrid nature with narration[37]. The ethnographer writes his/her personal interpretation of the environment and this is influenced by the culture, the values and the meaning given to it by the researcher him/herself.

Therefore, as Geertz states, an ethnographic description is interpretative[38]. It gives information from another Country, another context, and with the material that is produced in an extended time, especially of a qualitative kind and with a high participation, we:

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[34] *Ivi*, p. 17.

[35] *Ivi*, p. 23.

[36] *Ivi*, p. 4-5.

[37] See Bailey, 2006; Bryman, 2012.

[38] Geertz, 1973, p. 20.

can given the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them[39]

Several authors have wondered how an observation taking place on the web can be participant. What does the relationship between the researcher and the observed subjects look like? The first one watches from the distance what the second one writes and produces[40]. To observe a website does not require its maker to know that he/she's being observed. The website is public and access is free; in this case the relationship researcher-subject changes in an important way, as the direct interaction and the consciousness of being observed that can cause a change in the subject's behavior are missing.

The launch of a Social Network such as Facebook in 2005 has confused the issue further because, in order to be able to follow a person and access his/her contents, the researcher must be a "friend" of his/hers. This has led back to the awareness of the presence of a different individual who, in that moment, is observing. This way we go back to the issue of the influence exercised by the researcher on the subject or the context.

The use of ethnographic methods on the web

The use of ethnographic methods with the purpose of investigating the Internet phenomenon is quite recent, and this is because in the Nineties the researchers made the mistake to not look where activism had moved, that is in the new electronic and digital communication media that one by one were being made available to users[41].

Several issues must be kept in mind when we use ethnographic tools on the web:

- Ethnographers who study the web, usually try to adjust classic methodological tools to this context and speak of the web as an environment based on connections, differences, heterogeneities and inconsistencies and space, made of flows, has a role in the organization of social relationships (Castells, 2001).

- The Internet transforms the act of writing into "speaking"[42] and this kind of communication implies two important factors to be taken into account: the first one is the lack of a face-to-face relationship that makes the non-verbal body language unavailable; the second one has to do with the time needed to process a though into a

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[39] *Ivi*, p. 23.

[40] Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 8.

[41] Wilson, B. (2006). Ethnography, the Internet, and Youth Culture: Strategies for Examining Social Resistance and "Online-Offline" Relationship. Canadian Journal of Education 29(1), 307-328.

[42] Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 3.

word, which is different in the face-to-face relationship and in the thinking-writing relationship of web communication. As a consequence, the result of the communication itself is different, because the second one is more organized[43].

- The Internet is a huge data bank, even though they're not tangible data, they're not on paper, they're not a book.

- It's a data bank that, on Facebook or Twitter, users modify every time they update their profiles[44].

- Qualitative researches need to be made on shared texts[45].

In the light of these considerations and in the specific case of my study, I had to decide which could be the best way to use ethnography for the Social Networks. What is true for one website, that has an only author who does not immediately compares his/her idea with other people's, is not true for a Social Network where people are linked in a community of hundreds of people. How many "friends" does one have on a Social Network? How many of them is he/she really in contact with? How many of them do interact with the observed subject and how? These and other questions have accompanied the construction of the various tools used for this work.

Resolution of the methodological issues

So, the observation on the web makes some methodological issues arise about the level of involvement of the researcher. The ethnographic method implies an involvement, a participation between the researcher and the subject of the research, but as we saw, the use of this method with digital media confuses the issue.

In the case of Facebook, which is the case of this PhD research, because all the subjects were using their profiles to make public their socio-political activity, the researcher must be a "friend" of the subject's if willing to read the materials published by the subject on his/her wall. This means that the subject of the research knows that somebody is observing him/her and his/her activities and this brings back up the usual problem of the ethnographic method: the subject can change his/her behavior.

At the same time, there is another issue: the observed subject can enter the researcher's profile, because a relationship on Facebook is mutual, and access his/her wall. This means that the researcher can in turn be observed, perhaps more than the traditional researcher used to be. The materials posted by the researcher can be downloaded or shared by the subject and, last but not least, the researcher can influence the subject of the research with his/her posts, such as videos, links, photos or other.

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[43] *Ivi*, p. 5.

[44] *Ivi*, p. 7.

[45] Markham (1998), mentioned in Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 5.

Another question, in the case of this kind of observation, is what is the best choice between showing the real personal profile, that the researcher habitually uses on the Social Network, or showing a fake profile, especially created for the research work, as it sometimes happens. What can the reaction of the subject of the research be, in front of an especially created profile that shows no previous history, that appears to be measured and calculated as for what is published? The subject could refuse to be in contact with a profile of this kind. In the period of my search for the subjects, a girl refused to participate in the study, explaining her choice with the impression of being under the Big Brother's lens, while she didn't want to be "watched". This is a matter of great tact. The only solution I could adopt to show my "good intentions" as a researcher who would have respected their privacy, used their materials only anonymously, only selecting materials regarding political or social activities, never letting be known matters of a personal kind, was to play "on the same level". I should create a confidence relationship with the subjects I was trying to involve in my research (Orgad, 2005)[46]. For this reason, I decided to open my personal Facebook profile to the research.

In my personal attitude towards the media, this has led me to two choices: first, there are groups of young activists clearly known, also to the Police, for violent acts, where some people have been reported or even arrested. For my personal safety, I've decided not to get in touch with these groups[47]. Second, I've reinforced my habit, already put into practice before, not to post pictures of minors.

Hine (2000) speaks of a researcher's proficiency in using a certain media. It's always difficult to self-evaluate one's own skills, and to do so one should move on an objectivity level.

I am a Facebook user since 2008, which implies, at the beginning of the research work, 4 years of experience on the Social Network. I use the platform to share any possible kind of communication, links to newspaper/magazine articles, videos, images. I know the basic communicative possibilities such as posting a status, sharing other people's materials, tagging friends, deciding who can access my posts individually, as a group or totally excluding the "public" function. I do carefully inform myself every time the System changes its privacy settings, I have informed my contacts that I do not wish to be tagged in the pictures that portray me and I periodically check the availability of images of me with Google web search in order to make sure there are no pictures coming from the Social Network. I have chosen a profile only open to "friends", and drastically limited the pages which I "like" in order to minimize the circulation of my materials. So, the ten subjects have had access to part of my private life, to my political, religious, social views, and to recreational materials. Our exchange has been total. I won't deny that, in the beginning, the idea of having granted access to ten young strangers has caused some embarrassment. However, the observation has actually lasted almost two years, from the moment of the first contact with each one of them to the end of the research. During this time, some "familiarity" has grown with some subjects, a mutual recognition that has tempered the embarrassment. This element has also been related by the subjects interviewed in depth at the end of the work, to whom I've asked how had it felt to be observed.

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[46] Orgad, S., (2005). *From Online to Offline and Back: Moving from Online to Offline Relationships withe Research Informants*. In C. Hine (Ed), *Virtual Methods. Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. (p. 51-65). New York: Berg.

[47] Some of the subjects of this research have been threatened by opposing groups.

A Social Network like Facebook, with its "diary", represents a precious data bank. At any moment it is possible to access the posts of the subjects of the research, even the oldest ones. This characteristic of this platform gives a valid solution to the issue of "time" on the web. The researcher doesn't need any more to be present 24 hours a day on the subjects' page or to download everything right away. Facebook stores all data, proving to be a precious resource.

Mixed methodology, online and offline

The investigation tools used for this study have been of different kinds: an observation of the subjects' online production evaluated through a quantitative collection of data, a closed-question questionnaire, some in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation of some offline activities. A crucial issue in choosing these tools is the fact that their use implies a constant passage from the researcher-subject online relationship to their offline relationship. The relationship established between me as a researcher and the subjects has constantly moved from this side to the other side of the screen[48]. Face-to-face encounters have intersected with communications via Facebook mail and the observation of online activity. Being invited, I've attended some offline activities organized by the subjects, and then again the questionnaire was sent via Facebook. At the end, there has been one more offline meeting with some of them for the in-depth interview.

Communication with the subjects of the research, what "language" to speak?

If the triangulation of qualitative-quantitative and online-offline investigation tools offers a larger quantity of data on one hand (Hine, 2000), on the other hand, how to manage this relationship on the two sides of the screen has been one of the important issues of the methodological aspect of this study. What approach to follow? What "language" to speak? How much can the fact that I'm exactly twice the age of these subjects and that I belong to an Institution such as the University of Bologna matter? How much to leave to a more "relaxed" relationship given by the greater spontaneity of relationships among young people and the communication on a Social Network and how much to keep a more "professional" attitude given by my role that also implies my ethical responsibility as a researcher? The solution was to choose a linguistic attitude and a relationship-wise approach that would keep these two elements together as much as possible. On one hand, to maintain a professionalism that would assure the subjects about the use of their data, about the seriousness of my research work and, on the other hand, to keep an attitude not too far from the simplicity and linearity offered by the Facebook media, through which we've mainly been in touch. In fact, in every communication having as a goal a further contact (in the case of the request for completing the questionnaire or the request for the in-depth interviews or the invitations to events organized by them), although using friendly informal communicational ways, also with the use of emoticons, by means of the tools made available by the Social Network, it has always been fundamental to clarify the purpose of the new investigation form, the respect for privacy, the way in which they would have

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[48] Orgad, 2005, p. 51.

happened, the fact that the material was at their complete disposal at any time, should they be willing to look at it, in addition to the availability of the complete text at the end of the work.

Management of the face-to-face appointments

All of the reached subjects have a Facebook profile and, from the third subject on, they've actually all been contacted, as suggested by the second one, via email on this Social Network, indicated by the subjects themselves as the easiest and most immediate way to reach people.

During my first email contact on Facebook:

- I didn't immediately ask for their "friendship" on the Social Network so as not to be considered invasive or indiscreet in asking access right away to the materials published on their personal page and to avoid giving the subjects I was contacting the idea of being watched by the "Big Brother", actually the impression indicated by those who refused to participate in the work;

- I introduced myself as a PhD student in pedagogy, I explained how I had got their name and who was the contact source. The source him/herself was included in the email for reference;

- I briefly explained to the potential new subject of the research my goals and their role;

- I asked for their age because, in case of underage subjects, I should have asked by Law for their parents' authorization to participate in the work;

- I asked them for an appointment to introduce each other face to face and present the research in detail.

During the face-to-face appointment:

- I asked them if they were interested in being part of this work;

- I asked them to become "friends" on Facebook and/or tell me a Blog or website where to follow their activities, in case they had one;

- At the end of the appointment, I asked them to introduce me to a friend engaged in the same kind of activities.

- I asked them, moreover, the possibility to follow some of their public activities.

I've registered some of the most interesting reactions in relation to my presence at the subjects' offline activities. With one of the subjects, called Giacomo in this work, it was easy to see each other in local demonstrations and at public meetings of the Party. In these cases the greetings were spontaneous and also accompanied by the ritual physical contact that usually accompany a greeting in Italy (a

handshake or a kiss on the cheek). On the contrary, in two occasions I was "erroneously" invited by Giacomo to two appointments with his group of high-school students at the Union's headquarters. I'm saying "erroneously" because he had included me in a sort of mailing list on Facebook that informed me of his union activities. During the first one of these appointments, Giacomo made it openly clear to me that my presence was useless in that occasion. He thought that what I was going to see wouldn't be of any use for my research. I did not insist and left. It is part of the choices related to the methodology of this study not to be insistent or intrusive there where an unclear reaction to my physical presence was envisaged. During a second meeting, again with the same purpose, namely the communication to high-school students, in the hall made available by the Union, Giacomo allowed me to stay but introduced me as a friend from University, "something too long to explain" and moved on.

Given the amount of his political and trade-unionist activities and of his online presence, Giacomo was selected for an in-depth interview. Which never took place. The appointment was postponed several times due to his study and activism engagements and once because some communication was not read in time. As previously chosen, on a methodological level, I decided not to ask any further, passing the request to another subject.

On the contrary, Francesco invited me to the booths of his Party and to the presentation of his motion in favor of the candidate he was supporting. Once we met in person, his attitude was very welcoming and smiling, he greeted me with cordiality, happily accepted the in-depth interview also leaving room for a further dialogue between us and he made his pieces of writing regarding the motion available to me for my research work.

Similarly Elena, whom I met for the first time in a cafe in the university area, devoted much time to me telling me about her political and voluntary activities and making her contacts available to me. Not only this, but she invited me to an event she had organized in the section of the Party she collaborates with, and she is in charge of, using it as a meeting place for me and Dimitri, another subject of the research. She said yes to the in-depth interview and revealed to me that she had followed my activities abroad related to this study.

So, different reactions that put me from time to time in the condition to keep a "friendly" attitude but with the firm intention to maintain a confidence relationship based on their tranquility about the use of their data, of their profiles, of their images. Considering that during two actual years of contact both on Facebook and in everyday life, nobody have quit research, all 10 of them have completed the questionnaire, 4 out of 5 have allowed me to interview them with no problems and no one has ever asked to look at the material while in progress, given the opening of my personal Facebook page for the use of this research that has also lead to comments and to the sharing of materials, I think I've succeeded in establishing a confidence relationship with the subject.

A "temporary" research

According to Hine (2000), it's not so important for the ethnographer to share the same time or the same offline space of the subjects of the research, what's important is how the ethnographic project is conceived and that the researcher pay attention, when registering the material, to the specific moment

and context in which the text itself is produced[49]. Being technology, the Internet is not always the same in the course of time, it's a process in progress and the negotiation of what it is, of what we can do with it and of how to understand it is also in constant progress[50].

This is one of the reasons why this study can be considered as "temporary", (Caronia, 1997) related to a specific time and place that might be different tomorrow. Other reasons for the uncertainty and singularity of this study are related to the fact that this sample includes ten young people, therefore a non-statistically relevant number, who live in the same city but were born in different places, who attend University, who have been living for twenty years under a mainly right-wing government, who have been contacted and observed in a period of world financial crisis, who are activists and who use a certain media that, in this specific case, is a Social Network, Facebook, as it appears, regarding its communicative possibilities but also as for its privacy settings, in 2012/2013. It's all temporary, provisional. That's actually the reason why, as suggested by several authors (Bailey, 2006; Bryman, 2012), I'm specifying the passages made in this study in a detailed way so as to allow a deeper understanding and a possible repetition of them, also indicating the critical points.

The observation on the web

The observation of the ten subjects on the web lasted, in fact, about two years but the period of particular interest for this work went from September 2012 to September 2013. During this year, three months were analyzed in depth, characterized by some peculiarities.

The month of October 2013, that has seen many student demonstrations, sometimes related to political parties, sometimes to trade unions, sometimes independent.

The month of October 2012 characterized by the political campaign for the Centre-Left Primary Elections.

The month of February 2013 characterized by the political campaign and by the Political Elections.

The observation on the web caused, first of all, some ethical issues to arise[51]. The materials published by each subject were not only political and social but also private, belonging to the family and friends sphere. I made an "arrangement" with the subjects about the material that I was going to use for the research and this excluded any reference to their private life and that of their contacts. Therefore:

- I did not collect any photos of friends/relatives as they do not participate in the research;

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[49] Hine, 2000, p. 23.

[50] *Ivi*, p. 29-33.

[51] See Bailey, 2006; Bryman, 2012; Corbetta, 2003.

- I only used for the research photos with public subjects/objects, cartoons, memes or other images related to political and social posts;

- I did not take into consideration any photos shared by others on the subject's profile that were of a personal nature and not meaningful of a social-political activity (such as sports, school or academic activities, free time in general…)

- The names of "friends" who have posted or commented political or social material on the subject's wall have been reduced to the initials to avoid a possible identification;

- When a post or comment on a subject of the research's wall was done by another subject of the research who is in touch with him/her, I kept the given name of the second subject;

- I deleted the profile images in the comments, both of the friends and of the subjects;

- The material has always been at the subjects' disposal.

After the identification of the three months most rich with posts related to political or social issues, the available material was collected and copied to file. Each linked article was opened and copied completely, each video was viewed, each cartoon or image was analyzed, each personal status was recorded, as well as the statuses of political or socially important figures that the subjects decided to share. All the material consists of several hundreds of pages and the data have been divided by thematic fields and by the quantity of contacts and comments.

The purpose of this observation was to record a communication activity: which tools made available by the Facebook platform have been used; how extended is the network of contacts of the single subjects, and with how many are they really in touch; how many comments does each theme draw; what are the subjects' main references, including public figures in general (but always related to social or political activism), or information sources.

The collected material has undergone a quantitative treatment that is visible in the following evaluation form (Table 1):

- Subject: _____

- Number of friends on the Social Network _____

- Preference to which pages with social or political contents (Like)
  1.   _____
  2.   …
  - Number of links to articles _____
    Month of October 2012   _____

    Month of November 2012 _____
    Month of February 2013   _____
- Article sources

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    1.        _____No. of articles from this source during the 3 months
              _____
    2.        …
•  Number of videos posted during the three months _____
•  Number of images/photos/memes posted during the three months _____
•  Number of personal statuses posted during the three months _____

•  Number of statuses of the reference public figures (politicians, journalists, authors…) posted
   during the three months_____
•  Who are the reference public figures (politicians, journalists, authors…)?
    1.        _____
    2.        …
•  Type of topic debated
    1.        _____debated No. of times _____ No. of comments
              _____
    2.        …
•  Initials of the commenting "friends" and number of comments by each of them
    1.        _____ No. of comments _____
    2.        …
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Table 1 - Evaluation form of online observation

The kind of topics treated have been grouped by specific themes; for each one of the 10 subjects both posts with political contents and posts with social contents have been recovered independently from the subject's main activity; peaks of posts on particular subjects such as Center-Left Primary Elections or Political Elections in 2013 have been analyzed.

In-depth interviews

Of the 10 subjects of the research, 5 have been picked out for an in-depth interview about their social or political activity and the use they make of communication media. The 5 subjects have been chosen among those who had an institutional mandate and a certain abundance (in quantitative terms) of material published on their Facebook page.

In this case I chose to work on an interview of a structured kind whose protocol implied 5 questions and a series of sub-questions. The interviews lasted about 1 hour for each one of the interviewees, were always made in the same setting, as agreed with the interviewees. The setting was made as welcoming and informal as possible in order to make the subjects feel comfortable. Each interview was made individually and recorded as agreed with the interviewee. At the end of the interview, the subjects were asked whether they thought it might be important to discuss further issues in order to explain their activity or position towards the media and, in the end, they were asked to make a comment on the interview itself.

The protocol implied the following questions:

1. How does your experience as a socio-political activist originate?

    - Where does your activity originate?

    - How did you politically/socially shape yourself?

    - What is your goal?

    - What does your activity mean to you?

    - What importance do you give to your activity?

2. In your opinion, what is a media activist?

    - Do you consider yourself a media activist?

    - What is the role of Facebook in your activity?

    - How useful is it to you?

    - Why did you actually choose Facebook?

    - What relationship do you have with your network of contacts, regarding political issues?

3. Have you had any education about the media?

    - Where?

    - By whom?

    - What was the weight of school/family/group of peers/other reference points?

    - Do you know what are the "profiling" and the "Internet Bubble"?

4. What was the role of school/family/group of peers/other reference points in your political/social development?

5. What is the relationship between your offline and online activity?

In detail: question 1 was intended to be of a biographical kind and to get to know the social or political experience of the subjects keeping out, at first, the media element. Question 2, "Do you consider yourself a media activist?" comes from the consciousness deriving from studying the available literature and the data from the in-depth interviews carried out with the key informants, of the fact that "to be a media activist" doesn't have the same meaning for all the categories of subjects, being them communicators, hackers, computer scientists, mere active citizens. The sub-questions have the purpose to investigate what use they do make of the Facebook media. Questions 3 and 4 investigate the received education regarding the media and the political and social awareness. The last question tries to investigate the relationship between offline activism/communication and online activism/communication as it is experienced by the subjects.

The analysis of the material was carried out choosing the method of thematic analysis[52].

Observation of the offline activity

A further step in this research was the observation of the offline activity of some of the subjects involved in the research. The activity was only followed upon invitation by the subjects themselves in order to avoid being considered indiscreet or intrusive. In some cases it's out-and-out activities carried out in public, such as speeches during demonstrations, flash mobs organized in the city, participation to the public assemblies of Parties, presentations of political motions.

In order to analyze the events ascribable to the first case, I used a diary while the analysis of the documents was of a thematic kind.

The diary was used to collect the data regarding

- Who?

- Where?

- When?

- Why?

- How?

- Who else is present?

- How was it communicated on the web?

and recorded both the offline activity and the communication of it on the Facebook profile.

Effectiveness of the tools used for a thick description

At the beginning of this article I made a reference to the use of Media Ethnography in a Study which has phenomenology as a theoretical framework, in the same way as it is articulated in a pedagogical key in Piero Bertolini's studies. I thought that these two approaches, the theoretical and the methodological one, would connect together in an optimal way for the kind of research that I was doing that, besides trying to identify objective educational experiences, also tries to discover the meaning and the importance that the socio-political activity has for the subjects of the research.

By paraphrasing Bertolini (1988), it is possible to state that each person perceives an object depending on his/her unique and exclusive past which was created in his/her historical, financial and social

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[52] Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. 4th Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

environment by some specific experiences that gave to the subject some particular glasses through which to look at "reality".

The construction of the research tools tried to understand those elements stated by Bertolini by trying to satisfy the criteria of that *thick description* that Geertz defined as a thick, substantial, complex and stratified description of the observed object.

The closed-question questionnaire given to the subjects included some of the items included in the National and International reports consulted in the *desk* phase of the study[53] (those more pertinent to the research). The purpose was to understand if and how much the ten subjects distanced themselves from the photograph that they took, but also to investigate the socio-cultural environment in which they grew up. For this purpose, we asked questions related to the educational qualification, the profession of the parents and to their possible activity in the political or social fields. Furthermore, we have considered the possession and the access, both in the family and with reference to the subjects of the research, to digital media. The educational qualification of the children was compared to that of the parents. These data showed an only partly predictable picture. If it is indeed true that the higher the educational qualification and job of the parents, the higher the educational qualification of the children, it is also true that some of the subjects have not had such a brilliant school career. Failures and retests are much more frequent than in a linear career. The parents' activism, on the other hand, has an influence in less than half of the cases (37%). A peculiarity is that all ten subjects come from the humanities and they carry on their university course of study in the same field. Therefore, a quite high level of parents' education and the studies in humanities characterized the growth of the subjects.

The in-depth interviews took the educational pasts to emerge, such as family, school, party, associations, voluntary work. The school has a particular weight for four subjects (out of five interviewed). Three of them come from the same Humanities High School where the teachers are clearly politically leaning and where Associations such as Libera or Amnesty International go to present their projects. It is in the schools that, during the occupations, the subjects organized meetings with journalists writing against Mafia, with the mayoral candidates for their city and with activists engaged on the territory.

In particular, Francesco states that:

[…] even school contributed to my political education because to study Latin and Greek doesn't mean to study "dead languages" but it means to study the culture and the civilization of these two worlds and realities of the past […] they are strongly, really strongly, politicized realities, they are the progenitors of modern democracy, of the later political culture, of the democratic history that was born as a consequence of those important centuries […].

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[53] A series of statistical national and international reports of the years immediately before the beginning of the study were consulted to have a picture of young people in the age category of interest with regard to their socio-cultural status and their relationship with the mass media. For references, see bibliography.

Francesco, again, increases his experience in the Party's education:

[…] a phase of internships, we travelled in Europe and Italy […] we went to Salzburg and to the Mauthausen concentration camp, then in Freiburg and Strasbourg for the European Union's environmental issues and in Rome […] at the National Parliament and in the PD headquarters, finally […] in Sicily for the commemoration of the massacre of Via D'Amelio that claimed Borsellino's life […]

Dimitri describes another humus:

[…] On the one hand there has been a family influence, not a pressure; because my grandfather worked in the National Leadership of the Communist Party and he was engaged in the relationships between Berlinguer and the Catholic world; he managed the religious page of the newspaper Liberazione. Since I was young I remember that in Rome, at his home, I had dinner with Bertinotti, Vendola, etc. However, since I was a kid, I got used to live in a certain dimension. My father has always been engaged in political activities, in Sicily at first with the Rifondazione Comunista Party, then with Sel Party, etc... But neither my grandfather nor my father made me any pressure.

The observation of the Facebook pages of the ten subjects showed another class of information, this time related to their current activity, which is characterized by the construction of an efficient network of contacts, by the use of communicative forms and by the recognition, by the contacts of friends, of the active role of the subjects. The peaks of posts and comments in some specific periods, connected with political campaigns, elections, student demonstrations, have shown and provided evidence of the socio-political engagement and turned the timelines of the subjects actual manifests of activism. The subjects took part in a dialogue and a spreading of information and reflections that made them part of a collective intelligence (Cavallo & Spadoni, 2010).

Furthermore, the observation of the offline activity gave me the possibility to get involved in the enthusiasm and engagement of the subjects in circumstances such as the presentation of a motion for their favorite candidate during the elections, the public debates on the stages of the main Italian trade union during the students' and workers' demonstrations, the flash mobs about temporary work and violence against women, the organization of stands for the collection of signatures in favor of the causes of Amnesty International.

All the data which emerged from all the investigation tools used in this study, of which we presented only few examples here, gave all the useful information for a Thick Description of activism and of the meaning it takes on for the subjects of the research.

Conclusions

As already mentioned above, this article has no pretension of exhaustiveness for such a complicated issue as the ethnographic research on the web, but it tries to be a methodological contribution, a work indication which we can be taken into account or to meditate on should one decide to undertake a work of this kind.

It is not a path without critical aspects; the first one has certainly been the research of the subjects to observe. To ask adolescents and young people the authorization to observe their web page required a lot of tact and the choice to operate according to the method of the avalanche sampling, therefore working on the relationships between the subjects. This, in order to avoid a "Big Brother" effect, perceived as a risk by the first young people contacted. A great attention must be used both during the first online approach and the first face-to-face appointment.

A second issue to be dealt with very tactfully is certainly the constant passing from one side to the other side of the screen. The attention to the language and the clarity of the roles are extremely important.

With regard to the strong points, the diary structure of Facebook allowed me to collect hundreds of pages of data, the in-depth interviews allowed me to enter in the core of the socio-political activity and this enriched the meaning of the more objective data collected on the web. On the ethical side and for the construction of the confidence, the behavior chosen for the research bore fruit. I am still in contact with the ten subjects and, in some cases, we developed a more personal relationship and they still invite me to some events and to some political, social and even leisure initiatives.

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