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Researching Social Media in Digital Age: Reflections on 'Observation' as a Data Collection Method

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ABSTRACT

The global spread of social media is unparalleled both in growth of take-up and content production. The amount of data created and deposited every minute is extraordinary. In short, social media usage has become a daily practice for many. Researchers have viewed this revolution in communication both as opportunity and challenge. The sheer amount of digitized user-generated content is a potentially rich source of information about interactions, attitudes, opinions and virtual reactions to real-world events. However, there are computational and analytical challenges too. Reflecting on varied nuances of social media and challenges about how to research it, this paper critically explores with the plurality of meanings given to the term social media. Offering a brief historical overview of how the term has evolved, it then details on how 'observation' as a methodology can be utilized while researching his vast data on social media.

Keywords: *Observation, Virtual, Qualitative Research, Social Media, Digital Age*

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, social media has become an integral part of everyday life having tremendous economic, political, and societal implications. As the influence of traditional media dwindles, social media platforms 'have been taken up around the globe at an unprecedented speed, revealing the extraordinary nature of the social media phenomenon. For this reason alone, it is imperative to analyze the phenomenon of social media' (boyd, 2015: 2). Research reveals that most of the social media scholarship is associated with big data due to the 3Vs – volume, velocity, and variety – which may be culled from sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Kitchin, 2014). Such data which is resulting from user-generated content, such as posts, 'likes', and connections, have become central to many areas of study, including politics as pointed out by Rainie et al., (2012) and (Reavley and Pilkington, 2014). So many researchers are exploring this vastly unexplored domain. However, as the analysis of such massive amounts of data is unprecedented, it is bringing with it many challenges, including ethical considerations, hardware constraints, and the development of software for data collection and analysis. Methodological constraints are also

tumbling blocks as researchers often get confused as to how to collect the vast data for any academic study in order to arrive at authentic results. Though various techniques have been used depending on the nature of the research, this paper delves into details about the 'observation' as a data collection tool in social media research.

2. Defining Social Media

As the term social media has multiple meanings, its definition has become highly contested and it is not always clear what tools, platforms, and social phenomena count as social media, though its integration into the daily lives of many is indisputable. Despite the proliferation of research on social media in recent years, there are relatively few formal definitions. This lack of definitions is potentially due to the difficulty in defining the term, as it is relatively emerging and still evolving (Ellison and boyd, 2013). Papacharissi argues that a definition of social media can only be dynamic and context specific. The term social media is also conceptually related to other terms including SNSs and online social networks (OSNs). Social media 'provides a mechanism for the audience to connect, communicate, and interact with each other and their mutual friends through instant messaging or social networking sites'

(Correa, Hinsley, and de Zúñiga, 2010: 247–248). Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010: 61) argue that 'Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content'. Whereas, according to McIntyre (2014: 6), 'Social media is a form of computer-mediated communication'. All these definitions specify what social media does; namely, it allows individuals, communities, and organizations to interact with one another by providing a service that allows them to connect and collaborate and to create, modify, and share content. To sum up, social media are web-based amenities that permit individuals, communities, and organizations to work together, connect, interact, and build community by allowing them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible. (Lori McCay –Peet & Anabel Quan -Haase, (2017).

3. Researching Social Media Data

According to Salmons (2017), social media sites offer users with opportunities to post content, common to each other, and share each other's ideas. Users can create groups and networks, united by common interests. These features offer qualitative researchers with opportunities to observe users' communications, or to connect directly with members. However, evolving methods designed to conduct such research must take into account the intrinsic complexities and ethical dilemmas associated with online interactions. To facilitate these, Salmons (2015, 2016) offers the *Qualitative E-Research Framework* which researchers can use to consider interrelated elements and develop coherent research designs. This *Framework* provides techniques to assess the suitable methods to use and a holistic approach for exploring the inter-related aspects of research design in studies that use data collected online (Salmons, 2015, 2016). He argues that different roles are needed by e-researchers who collect existing online materials or *extant* data, who *elicit* data by questioning or observing participants, or who generate data by creating arts-based experiences, games or other *enacted* research events. As selected exemplars from the literature show, researchers use a wide range of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) available in social media sites including text or video chat, discussion forums, archived written, visual

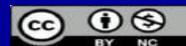
or multimedia materials to assemble rich collections of data.

3.1 Qualitative Research in the Digital Age

Salmons (2015, 2016) asserts that in present-day world, we demand the assumption that people must sit in the same room to have a meaningful dialogue, or that observers be in the same physical space as the activities that concern them. Many areas of life, including carrying out personal and social conversations, shopping, working, and other activities previously reliant on physical proximity, are now conducted via the Internet. Virtual researchers can use, adapt and re-invent qualitative approaches to explore patterns of activity shown in the virtual world, or they can utilize online communications to ask questions about any area of the lived experience. In other words, virtual researchers could observe how professional networking occurs in an online community, or communicate online with a participant located in another part of the world, to ask about how s/he networks professionally in her/his local community. Salmons (2016, p. 6) uses 'Qualitative e-research' as an umbrella term to describe methodological traditions for using Information and Communication Technologies [including social media] to study perceptions, experiences or behaviours through participants' verbal or visual expressions, actions or writings. As is evident, these online platforms permit one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many interactions between users who can create, archive and retrieve user-generated content (Salmons, 2014). Notable feature of social media is that here the user is producer; communication is interactive and networked with fluid roles between those who generate and receive content (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2013).

3.2 Rethinking Qualitative Research Design for the Digital Age

Traditional qualitative data collection methods are typically classified into three broad types: 1) Interviews, 2) Observations, and 3) Document or archival analysis. In 'Interviews', (one-to-one or group interviews) the researcher poses questions for conversation with research participants. Research participants respond to questions and any follow-up prompts. In 'Observations', researchers observe individuals, or group interactions, and make note of activities or behaviours that relate to the topic of the inquiry. This research observations can take place in a controlled or laboratory setting; alternatively



naturalistic observations can happen anywhere. Depending on the type of observation, the researchers may or may not engage with those being observed. In 'Document or archival analysis', historical or contemporary documents, media, and records of all kinds are analyzed. The term *documents* may also refer to diaries, narratives, journals and other written or visual materials. These types take new forms online to take advantage of the characteristics of the Internet generally and social media particularly.

As any of these data collection tools can be utilised, I'll basically focus on 'Observation' as it is most convenient for the social media research. Researchers may choose a social media site for the setting of the study for a variety of reasons, including the researcher's own preferences. Some researchers are looking for specific communications features to observe or to use in exchanges with participants. One can choose the types of communication social media sites facilitate including: text-based communication in writing, posts or exchanges of visual images or media, voting or signaling likes or dislikes, approval or disapproval of others' posts. Ne should also note that this communication can be 'asynchronous' which entails two types of displacement: time and space whereas 'synchronous' communication entails one type of displacement: space (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). Synchronous modes bring people one step closer together, but many people find that the reflective pause between message and response in asynchronous communications leads to deeper consideration of the matter at hand (LaBanca, 2011).

Synchronous and asynchronous modes are generally available on social media sites. The culture of the particular social media site may lean more towards synchronous chats or quick successions of posts presented in a chronological stream, or a slower, more asynchronous pace of posts and responses on a discussion board. In any of these sites registered members can go back and review materials posted in the past to read them – or to make comments and bring them back into the current conversation. Social media sites aim to keep their members in a regular visitation schedule by pushing messages through email or text alerts when something is posted in an area where the member is subscribed. Extant data collection can happen synchronously or asynchronously. The researcher could

observe a synchronous streamed online event. The live event could be recorded or and viewed in the social media archive. Posts and archives of discussions from any era can be downloaded for analysis.

3.3. *Participants and Ethical Issues*

Qualitative researchers use purposive or purposeful sampling when selecting participants, meaning the sample is intentionally selected according to the purpose of the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Established qualitative sampling procedures can be adapted to organize the process, however, new approaches are needed when researchers use social media sites to locate and recruit participants. The virtual researcher can modify purposive sampling depending on the nature of the study, the selected social media site, and the target study population. Trustworthy options for finding reliable research participants online include nomination and sample frames. The first relies on verification of identity by another person who knows the potential participant; the second relies on verification by membership in a group, organization, or reliable administrative list. Once the researcher has a list of prospective participants, online recruitment can be carried out.

Ethical issue considering the participants in social media research is the presence of 'human participants'. LeCompte (2008, p. 805) defines human participants as 'a living individual whom a researcher obtains data about through interaction with that individual or with private information that identifies that person'. The human participant is the person on the other side of the monitor, the 'user' with a mobile device who is typing on the keyboard, chatting on a video call or uploading images or files. The human may be represented or expressed online by diverse avatars, pseudonyms or screen names. While some kinds of research with extant data that contains no personally identifiable information can be conducted without informed consent, any study using elicitation or enacted methods requires that participants are informed and voluntarily consent to participate. Informed consent in online research should include as much attention to the *informed* aspect as the *consent* aspect of the agreement. This is one of the important ethical aspect that a virtual researcher should take into account while researching social media through 'observation' participants online.

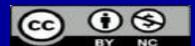
4. *Collecting the Data through Observation*

The process of collecting social media data though seems simple on the surface requires numerous technical and research design related competencies (Brooks, 2015; Driscoll & Walker, 2014; Felt, 2016). Generally, in the rush to collect data, the implications of observing dynamic content at a particular, arbitrary point in time and issues of preservation of social media posts and their accompanying linked metadata aren't considered and rarely discussed in research publications. One need to understand that social media data is ephemeral. The data is constantly changing, being updated, or deleted. That is why often observation as data collection tool seems more feasible and easier. An observational approach gives the possibility to gather more detailed information about the amount and the nature of the content found online. Studies available using observational approach have been built on a content analysis of observed profiles, mainly focused on particular information types such as profile pictures or publicly available profiles (e.g. Taraszow T, Aristodemou E, Shitta G, Laouris Y, Arsoy A (2010), Hinduja S, Patchin JW (2008), Morgan EM, Snelson C, Elison-Bowers P (2010)).

Observation implies a way of collecting data through observing. Marshall & Rossman, (1989, p. 79) defines observation as 'the systematic description of the events, behaviors, and artifacts of a social setting'. Observation as a data collection method can be structured or unstructured. In structured or systematic observation, data collection is conducted using specific variables and according to a pre-defined schedule. Unstructured observation, on the other hand, is conducted in an open and free manner in a sense that there would be no pre-determined variables or objectives. There are various advantages of observation data collection method such as direct access to research phenomena, high levels of flexibility in terms of application and generating a permanent record of phenomena to be referred to later. Observation also gives you the opportunity to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the social setting in your field notes and to view unscheduled events, improve interpretation, and develop new questions to be asked of informants (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998). That is why observation, particularly participant observation, has been the hallmark of much of the research conducted in anthropological and sociological studies and is a typical methodological approach of ethnography.

While conducting research on social media using observational approach, the researcher must actually be able to carry out the research, with all of the cluttered realities central to any communication. Communications technologies require more planning prior to an observation. The researcher may need to set up a private discussion chat, organize a game, or make sure the participants have accepted the invitation to connect in a meeting area. These are more suited to semi or structured approaches. In a structured observation the researcher may have a checklist to guide consistent observations across all participants in the study as elaborated by Salmons (2015). The researcher may look for and make note of the same features in the setting for each interview. The researcher may make note of same kinds of non-verbal cues or the same kinds of online posts, records or activities for each participant. Researcher will need to ponder upon issues such as whether the researcher would record the observations or take notes in real time during the observation, whether the same social media site be used for all observations, to what extent the observations will be consistent from one participant to the next, what kinds of posts, records or activities the researcher will observe to learn about each participant, whether the researcher will follow-up particular responses by looking for related posts and materials, whether the same social media site be used for all participants, whether the researcher will develop unique observation protocols for each participant and what will guide such observations.

We should note here that observation online can happen in two ways, unobtrusive or participant. Unobtrusive observation, sometimes called external observation, allows researchers to collect data without asking questions, making posts or otherwise involving themselves in interactions with the online community, group, social media or social networking site. The researcher does not announce his or her presence or role. A researcher might use unobtrusive observation to learn more about the population, phenomena or social media settings by observing ways of interacting or topics of discussion. Such observation can be done without collecting personally identifiable information. This type of observation may help in the selection of a site or group for further study-with extant, elicited or enacted methods. In a study using elicitation or enacted methods with



consenting participants the researcher may want to learn more about the individual by reading posts and/or interactions on social media. Permission to use data collected this way may be requested in the consent negotiations. On the other hand, Participant observation occurs when the researcher collects data that includes researchers' own involvement. The researcher might, for example, post comments, prompts or questions to forums, boards or walls in SNSs where they are observing one or more participants.

4.1 Some Examples

Certain questions arise while using observation as data collection tool such as how will these social media data be analyzed. We should know that generally qualitative data are analyzed using methods such as content analysis to assess a wide range of qualitative data or else constant comparison to identify themes (Snelson, 2016). AlQarni et al (2016) analyzed 1551 posts using predetermined themes, and further inductive codes were used to independently extract and analyze the Facebook posts to determine major content themes. Thematic analysis was performed using NVivo, a qualitative software used to code, store, and potentially exchange data with SPSS for further statistical analysis. Kramer et al (2014) on the other hand used LIWC (2007) software to analyze 689,003 posts to determine if the valence of the posts was positive or negative. Keller et al (2017) used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative software used to code data, to code 1614 comments for major and minor themes. In addition to these, observation in researching social media as data collection tool was also used by Alenezi, Kebble, Fluck, Yang, & Bown (2018) and Alenzi (2019) also. Alenzi (2019) researched social media by observing how Saudi youths constructed various identities and which linguistic and non-linguistic strategies they used. He also focused on politeness and impoliteness strategies used by the Saudi Arabian youths and tried to investigate if the gender had any role in this. His study successfully concluded that participants were observed constructing various identities using different strategies online. He also concluded that gender of the participant also determined the kind of content the user posted on the social media posted. In another study, Raby and Raddon (2015) observed and collected a total of 600 comments. They used qualitative content

analysis methods to code and interpret the data.

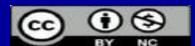
5. Conclusion

To sum up, observation as data collection tool helps to observe phenomena as they occur in their natural settings. Observation is neither as restrictive nor as artificial as either the survey or the experiment. Various studies have shown how social media can be researched effectively and very conveniently using observation as data collection tool. One should note that every choice the online researcher makes influences other aspects of the research design, as well as the findings. The 'observation' for researching social media can be used as a tool to analyze such choices at the design stages and make the most use of the opportunity to collect data from social networking sites. Lijadi & van Schalkwyk (2015); Alenezi, Kebble, Fluck, Yang, & Bown (2018) and Alenzi (2019) used online Facebook Group as well as similar social media website. They used discovery-oriented qualitative study with interpretative phenomenological content analysis. Considering the nature of vast data the social media has to offer for virtual researchers and observation as highly convenient tool to collect such data, it is suggested that virtual researchers interested in exploring varied nuances of social media should utilize observation for collecting their data from the required social media sites.

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