

The Core Tasks of Virtual Ethnography: Reflections on Observation and Sampling

El quehacer de la etnografía virtual: reflexiones en torno a la observación y muestra

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Abstract

Within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of social policies were implemented and managed through the web. The recipients of these interventions were found in Facebook Groups, sharing doubts and concerns about access to the programs. These environments have concentrated a massive number of participants and daily interactions, making their observation relevant. Starting from the implementation of a virtual ethnography in those virtual environments, the aim of this article is to reflect on the stages involved in virtual ethnography. It also examines the framework of theoretical and methodological decisions involved in the registration and sampling of the publications and all the content deployed in these virtual spaces, evidencing the preeminence and significance of the object of study, the theoretical perspective and the research objectives.

Keywords: Observation; Sampling; Internet; Social Media; Empirical Research.

Resumen

En el marco de la pandemia por COVID-19 se implementaron una serie de políticas sociales desde sus inicios gestionadas a través de la web. Las personas receptoras de estas intervenciones se han encontrado en Grupos de Facebook, compartiendo dudas e inquietudes sobre el acceso a los programas. Estos entornos han concentrado un número masivo de participantes e interacciones diarias volviendo relevante su observación. A partir de la implementación de una etnografía virtual en dicho entorno

virtual, el objetivo de este artículo es reflexionar sobre las etapas que implica la etnografía virtual y el entramado de decisiones teóricas y metodológicas involucradas en el registro y muestreo de las publicaciones y todo el contenido que se despliega en estos espacios virtuales, evidenciando la preeminencia y significatividad que poseen el objeto de estudio, la perspectiva teórica y los objetivos de investigación.

Palabras clave: Observación; Muestreo; Internet; Medios sociales; Investigación empírica.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic enabled the visibility of a series of phenomena already present in 21st century societies, such as the digitalization processes of state interventions. In the context of the health, economic, and social emergency generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, several social policies were managed and implemented through the web¹ since their inception.

The use of Information and Communication Technologies in intervention processes had already been documented under the concept of Extended State (Esteinou Madrid, 2001) and/or e-government, which is understood as a paradigm shift in governmental management (Naser & Concha, 2011). In turn, this phenomenon has been influenced by a context of mass participation (De Sena, 2011) of recipients in state interventions, which has activated different channels and access routes to resources, information and/or dissemination (Cena, 2014; Sordini, 2017; Weinmann & Dettano, 2020). Among these channels, Facebook Groups have become more prominent and popular among the recipients of social policies in Argentina, being useful spaces to clarify doubts, access information, solve administrative problems and/or share experiences in relation to their journey through state interventions. Facebook Groups of social policy recipients have multiplied massively in terms of number of participants and daily interaction flow.

In this scenario, it becomes central to explore the interactions that take place there in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This involves a considerable number of challenges in terms of social research, starting with the review of techniques and methodologies involved in the processes of knowledge and analysis of these "new" expressions of social phenomena. A few years ago, we became aware of how participation in these programs had created new social spaces in the digital/virtual world, which implied beginning to observe—through virtual ethnographies—these spaces of deployment: Facebook Groups.

The ethnographic strategy allowed us to combine two techniques: observation (with different degrees of participation) and virtual interviews. In turn, the ethnographic process involved three stages: (1) Delimitation of the characteristics of the environment, which led us to identify how and where these interactions are channeled. The second stage (2) involved observing and recording the interactions, which resulted in the methodological reflections outlined in this article; and lastly (3), virtual interviews were conducted with participants of these environments.

In light of the above, this article is the result of reflections on the practice of observing and recording posts in the "Groups" section of the social network Facebook. This process was fraught with questions about how to select a Group, how to capture interactions, how many to record, among other issues. Thus, the aim of this article is to reflect on the stages involved in virtual ethnography. It also examines the network of theoretical and methodological decisions involved in recording and sampling. This will show the preeminence and significance of the object of study, the theoretical perspective and the research objectives.

Fluctuating observation in virtual environments

The expanding and ever-changing virtual environments invite us to rethink the modes and strategies of observation and inquiry of the social world. In this way, the transformations of the world and, therefore, of the objects of knowledge imply constantly calibrating the "ways of seeing".

According to Di Próspero (2017) and Sarraayrrouse Oliveira (2009), in classic ethnography, the notion of space has been of great importance. To "be in the field" involved physical presence in the territory (of the other) to arrive at thick descriptions based on observation. Going out and mobilizing into the

¹ Such was the case of the Emergency Family Income [IFE] that was managed during 2020 in Argentina, concentrating almost 9 million recipients and 44 % of the Economically Active Population (ANSES 2020 [Spanish acronym for Argentina's National Social Security Administration]).

space which was observed, added validity to fieldwork and presupposed “[...] a spatial distinction between a known space and an external place of knowledge” (Clifford, 1999, as cited in Di Prospero, 2017:46).

Different transformations have invited to problematize the notion of “space” for fieldwork. Among these transformations, Information and Communication Technologies and all the spaces of interaction that they enable, describe areas with blurred boundaries that lead to concepts such as hybridity, emplacement and copresence. These concepts, which are closely related to each other, address three central elements that underpin the importance of ethnographies of the digital world: (1) the existence of hybrid worlds, that is, where the conceptual separations between virtual/real, online/offline lose significance given that the Internet and its multiple spaces are part of everyday life; (2) the notion of emplacement allows us to consider that concrete practices are the ones that delimit ethnographic regions and that these emplacements exist where (3) copresence becomes effective. The latter decentralizes the notion of space without excluding it, and is established through a variety of modes, such as physical colocation (Jordan, 2009; Beaulieu, 2010; Gómez Cruz & Ardevol, 2013).

In this context, while classic ethnography regarded the concept of space as a key element in defining the field, the rise and widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies has “blurred” its traditional boundaries, creating Onlife interaction spaces (Gómez Cruz & Ardevol, 2013). Therefore, virtual ethnography has emerged as a strategy aimed at capturing social network experiences.

Based on individual and group research, the aim of this section is to address the variations in the levels of structuring and participation implied in virtual ethnography. Particularly, this section problematizes how observation becomes a technique for collecting substantial amounts of different types of data, including text, images, audio, video, among others. This leads to the question, to be discussed in the next section, of how sampling decisions are organized in multimedia spaces such as social networks.

A key element that arises from the virtual ethnography conducted is the concept of “staged process”, which enables different methodologies for approaching the object of study. The fieldwork was conducted on a daily basis over a period of five months, including different activities ranging from observation and delimitation of the environment, recording daily interactions and conducting interviews. Although each of the researchers was familiar with the use and interactions of the social network under study, a specific period of time was assigned to identify the technical components of the environment (Dettano & Cena, 2020). At the time of the analysis, the environment included 200,000 members and showed a high flow of daily interactions², which enabled the observation of written posts and the comments on them, videos, images and invitations to other platforms such as WhatsApp groups or YouTube. The ongoing presence in the studied environment led to the creation of different records, where observation was of utmost importance and had to be reconsidered based on its use on Facebook.

From a general perspective, observation can be understood as the ability that individuals use in everyday life to account for the world around us. It becomes a research method when it fulfills an inquiry objective, follows a planned and systematic process, is related to more general propositions, and finally, is subject to validity and reliability criteria (Selltiz et al., 1965; Piovani, 2007).

One of the main advantages of observation—even when mediated by technology, such as social networks,—is that it captures behaviors within their own environment, while also facilitating data collection regardless of the individual's capacity to provide information about themselves.

Reflecting on what was mentioned earlier in this section, the strategies and tools used in social research become fundamental resources that can be redefined and adapted in ever-changing environments based on Information and Communication Technologies and the internet. Therefore, when considering the disadvantages of traditional observation, it is important to highlight how some of them become less relevant in virtual settings. For example, one disadvantage is that traditional observation requires events to occur in real-time. The difficulty lies in predicting when spontaneous actions will take place, often demanding the researcher to remain in the environment under study for an extended period of time. In virtual settings, interactions occur constantly (depending on the interaction flow in the environment) and are usually stored on the platforms (Ardevol et al., 2003). Consequently, observation and recording can be conducted without requiring the simultaneous presence of the observer and the object under observation.

² By March 2021, the group had already reached 398.8 thousand members.

Another disadvantage related to traditional observation is the existence of situations that are not available for observation, such as sexual practices or family life scenes, among others (Selltitz et al., 1965; Valles, 1997). In virtual environments, this can also present a challenge, given that not all environments are public, thus being necessary to first find a means of access before proceeding to negotiate the role. In the referenced research, the negotiation of the role involves two key moments; first, the request for access to the virtual environment if it is not open to the public, and second, the acceptance of the rules and norms of interaction in that environment.

There are various modes of observing and depending on the different levels of structuring and participation, these modes may vary. In terms of the level of participation, this refers to determining different levels: (a) complete participant, where the researcher's purpose and identity are concealed; (b) the possibility of participating while specifying the observer's role; (c) the role of participant-observer, in which participation occurs at a specific moment, such as when conducting an interview; and (d) complete observer, a role that involves observing while remaining unnoticed (Piovani, 2007).

Different authors argue that the most useful approach is to think of observation and participation as a continuum, ranging from active to passive strategies. On the one hand, passive strategies involve observing, reading and listening to describe places and interactions, while, on the other hand, active strategies involve initiating conversations, interacting (either as a researcher or by posing as a group member), and possibly engaging in activities, increasing familiarity and closeness (Osorio et al., 1999). Nadruz (2010) suggests that the level of participation may vary throughout the research.

The initial step involves conducting a floating observation, which consists in preliminarily exploring the environment without focusing on a particular object, until the modes of interaction and functioning in that environment are identified. According to the author, this method is used in virtual ethnography until the researcher assumes a specific role in the context, which would be a preliminary step to establishing contact and participation with the community under study. This floating observation may also end when the researcher introduces themselves through a post to the members of the community. In the referenced investigation, this first contact with the virtual environment consisted in identifying its constitutive components and analyzing the interactions either enabled or restricted by the platform. In the next step, the author also proposes the method of deferred observation as a possibility, which involves a higher level of participation through establishing contact with participants in the environment, initiating interviews in the same platform chats, arranging to move to other platforms or organizing in-person meetings.

In addition to these possible options, it is essential to mention how, in virtual environments, a structured observation with a low level of participation allows access to a significant number of conversation and comment records, making it possible to reconsider observation as something beyond a merely exploratory practice.

In terms of structuring levels, the modes of observation can vary from total flexibility, where only the problem and certain potentially relevant aspects are considered, to using pre-designed tools, where the observation focus is carefully outlined (Selltitz et al., 1965). The level of structuring will depend on the object of study.

In general terms, the researcher must attempt to answer, as suggested by Selltitz et al. (1965:233), four key questions: (1) What needs to be observed?; (2) How should these observations be summarized?; (3) What procedures should be applied to ensure observation accuracy?; and (4) What kind of relationship should exist between the observer and the observed, and how can that relationship be established?

In the case under study, in relation to what should be observed, we have mentioned different inquiries where the participation of the recipients in Facebook Groups emerges as a space for channeling doubts and questions related to some understandability issues of social programs. Design modifications, changes in the amounts paid and shifts in the implementation modes surfaced as challenges that recipients had to face and overcome. Later on, these exchange spaces began to be massively used by recipients of various social programs across Argentina (Cena, 2014; Weinmann & Dettano, 2020; De Sena, Dettano & Cena, 2022).

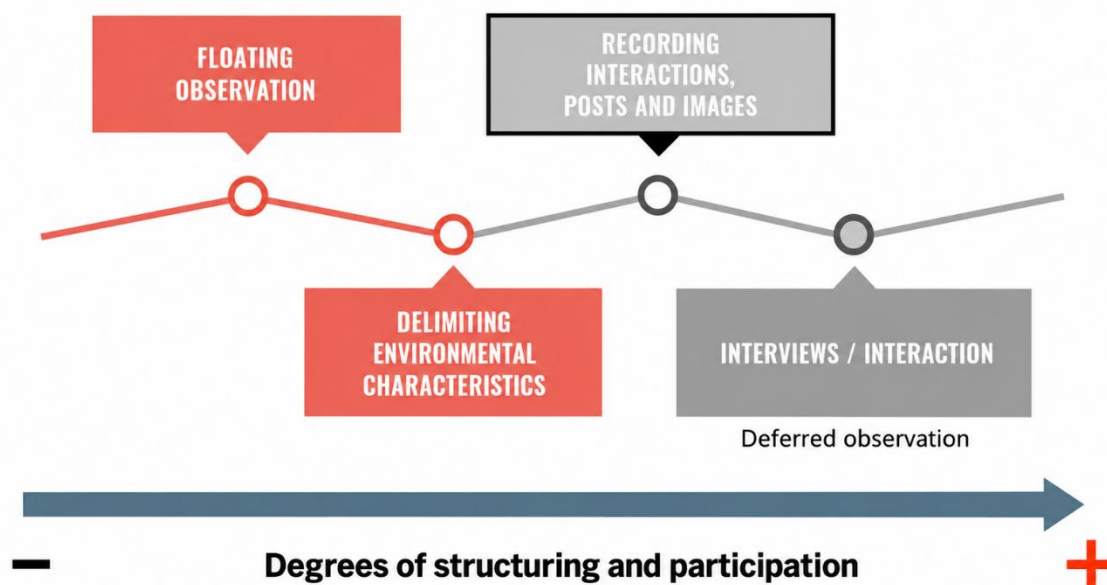
Virtual environments, specifically Facebook Groups in this case, were the empirical location of our research (Ardevol et al., 2003). These environments offer multiple spaces for socialization, including private chats, the Facebook wall, public comments, and live streams, which allowed for various ways of interaction and observation, with a high flow of continuous and overlapping exchanges among all its

members. Furthermore, the platform allows the review of posts based on selected dates, enabling users to review content across different points in time. The different posts, often containing images or videos, trigger hundreds of conversations and comments, which serve as analytical material that reveals traits, characteristics, ways of being and feeling of the population under study. Given the different ways of interaction among the participants, the focus of the observation is first placed on the objectives that guided the observation (analyzing the sensitivities and emotions of the recipients of social policies during the pandemic through Facebook Groups), and second, on its level of structuring. Given that the observation environment was a Facebook Group, the focus of observation would consist of a series of factors that can be delineated in the analyzed environment, such as: the name of the Group; its nature (which indicates its level of privacy; the description; the interaction rules, and the established filters and roles; the number of members and average activity; the types of participants; Group seniority and the images chosen for both the cover and profile.

With regard to the way these observations should be summarized and introduced and considering that the previously described research is part of Small Data studies (Meneses Rocha, 2018), we used analysis matrices to incorporate the contents of posts and the selection of comments for their subsequent analysis. This recording method gave rise to several concerns and questions related to sampling decisions. In turn, the observation conducted had a dual record: the matrix of posts and comments and the annotation logbook, which was implemented to support the observation process of the environment. The annotation logbook made it possible to include insights, perceptions and opinions, as well as interim analyses, which were progressively questioned and expanded from our conceptual framework (Mejía Navarrete, 2011). In connection with the procedures which should be implemented to ensure the accuracy of the observation, the annotation logbook also became an instrument which permitted cross-checking the researchers' notes in order to compare the distances and proximities of the observations, as well as the relevance in relation to the proposed objectives (see Piovani, 2007).

The last step in an observation, consists in defining the relationship that should exist between the observer and the observed, along with the methods to establish that relationship and the negotiation of its terms. This criterion refers to the level of participation discussed above, which is redefined in the virtual environments. The degree of participation can be conceived as a continuum that may suddenly vary from passive participation only involving observation (with no interaction or exchange with the members of the environment), to a more active participation (making comments, posting or initiating conversations in private chats).

Figure 1. *Non-linear stages of virtual ethnography*



Source: Own elaboration based on virtual ethnography conducted.

In this sense, aiming at analyzing the sensitivities and emotions of the individuals receiving social policies during the pandemic through Facebook Groups, virtual ethnography became a comprehensive and flexible strategy which made it possible to capture the experiences taking place in social networks. Once decided what the purpose of the observation was (the posts and comments) by delimiting its objectives

and questions, the next step was to determine the number of posts and/or comments, and the criteria to be implemented to select them. In view of the above, in the next section we will address matters related to sampling, considering the characteristics of the referenced environment and the possibilities for interaction offered by it.

The sampling problem in virtual ethnography

The ethnographic method is presented as multi-technical, reflective and interdisciplinary, which expands the spectrum of cognitive possibilities in the scientific work (Apud Pelaez, 2013). The ethnography of the digital world involves modifications and changes in the research process which leads to a review of and from methodological decisions, among them those related to sampling. These represent a fragment of a population or a group, which is subjected to systematic observation, with the aim of obtaining valid results (Sierra Bravo, 1995). With regard to the observation in Facebook Groups, once the purpose was delimited, the matters related to sampling led us to consider the following: how these observations should be registered; which of them would be registered and/or gathered for further analysis; and which criteria would be relevant for that delimitation.

First, we consider that the decision and selection of the sample in virtual ethnography is closely linked to other fundamental research elements such as the questions, objectives, units of analysis and observation, and, particularly, purposive and theoretical criteria (Apud Pelaez, 2013). As Table 1 shows, the research question serves as a guide in relation to the phenomenon observed. The objective identifies how (techniques) and which elements were considered (unit of analysis and unit of observation) to conduct the research. The delimitation of the unit of observation represents the population which is subject to analysis and the sample is selected from this population. The selection criteria, in turn, depend on the research design (Valles, 1997) and the available resources (either economic, technical, human, among others). Thus, it is observed that systematicity, as a fundamental characteristic of scientific knowledge, involves understanding every research phase which consists of interrelated logical structures, while articulating different parts into a unit of meaning (Yuni & Urbano, 2014).

Table 1. *Core elements of the research planning and design*

Research question	What are the interactions of the recipients of social policies in virtual environments? What emotions and sensitivities are expressed by the recipients of social policies in virtual environments during the pandemic?
Objectives	To analyze the sensitivities and emotions of the recipients of social policies in Facebook Groups during the pandemic.
Unit of analysis	Recipients of social policies who participated in Facebook Groups during the pandemic in Argentina.
Unit of observation	Each of the publications (posts, comments, photos, videos, links, etc.) made by individuals who participate in Facebook Groups related to the reception of social policies during the pandemic in Argentina.
Sample	Non-probability and/or purposive samples Diverse sample up to theoretical saturation (small data)

Source: Own elaboration.

In the ethnographic method, it is important to conduct inquiries that address the “characteristics, structure and functioning of a social system (such as a group, organization, community, subculture or culture), whether it is a family, brotherhood, fan group or a megacity” (Sampieri, Collado & Baptista Lucio, 2014: 471). In this study, the social system analyzed focused on those social interactions which take place on the internet through social networks, especially in the environment of Facebook Groups. This analysis has allowed the creation of information related to the central elements that constitute the virtual interaction environments, which enables or restricts certain behaviors, as well as the “interactions, language, rules, standards and behavior patterns” (Sampieri, Collado & Baptista Lucio, 2014:471) and also

ideas, beliefs, meanings, knowledges and practices that can be observed in recent advances where interactions related to uncertainty and waiting have been identified (Dettano & Cena, 2021; Cena & Dettano, 2022).

The possibility of taking the environment³ (Dettano & Cena, 2020) as a starting point made it possible to define an observation from there. This was a key element for a preliminary delimitation of the classic “spatial” notion which is usually required in ethnographic observation processes. At that point, the following was proposed as the research objective: *To analyze the sensitivities and emotions of the recipients of social policies in Facebook Groups during the pandemic*. The analysis and observation units derive from the proposed objective. It is not possible to conceive a territorially delimited unit of analysis in virtual ethnography as it is “‘non-located’, given that our object of study cannot be found in the text shown on the screen nor behind it” (Ardévol, Bertrán, Callén & Pérez, 2003: 3). Thus, we were able to gain precision in the prior delimitation of the environment because the units of analysis and observation acquire meaning in the space of interaction mediated by its technological characteristics. Hence, the unit of analysis has been the following: *Recipients of social policies who participate in Facebook Groups during the pandemic in Argentina*. The delimitation of the unit of analysis (Marradi, Archenti & Piovani, 2007) explains the type of object for which the information is searched in the research in question (recipients of social policies) and also, as has been previously established, a “temporal-spatial” precision which is set in a specific environment: Facebook Groups in Argentina during the pandemic. In relation to our unit of observation, that is to say, those empirical references that were used to generate the information needed and upon which we applied our data collection techniques (Yuni & Urbano, 2014; Azcona, Manzani & Dorati, 2013) were the following: *Each of the publications (posts, comments, photos, videos, links, etc.) made by recipients of social policies in Facebook Groups during the pandemic in Argentina*. In connection with the delimitation of the unit of analysis and the observational space-environment, we could identify one or more units of observation. Following the methodological recommendations provided by Flores Vivar (2018), we have placed special emphasis on the expressions and interactions of the users, given that “the writings of the users [...] become part of the documentary sources, which [...] determines their value and establishes a classification based on various criteria defined by the researcher themselves”. (Flores Vivar, 2018: 12).

The defined unit of observation has made it possible to identify the population to be selected for this study and which we intend to analyze. In the environments under study, this has forced us to rethink the sampling process, taking into account that the sample is just a portion of the units in the universe. The sample selection involves deciding which characteristics or matters will be highlighted. On the one hand, the quantitative sample is built on the principle of randomization, whereas on the other hand, in qualitative research, the sample selection implies that the relationships and characteristics that shape the object of study are represented, as well as the depth of knowledge of that object, rather than the size of units sampled (Mejía Navarrete, 2000).

The sampling process is open and is defined as the fieldwork progresses, based on intentional and theoretical criteria: “Qualitative samples are small, hard to decontextualize, deliberate, not totally pre-specified, theory-driven and evolve as the research unfolds” (Apud Pelaez, 2013: 230). According to Scribano (2008), what is important in qualitative sampling is what we want to know, not how many subjects or, in this case, comments there are. He also mentions how dynamic and constructive this process is. If we think of it in the light of the comments made in the posts, we can perceive that the selection of one of them “influences and affects the selection of others [...]” (35). He also argues that: “The qualitative sample is shaped as a spiral that contracts and returns upon itself as a virtuous circle of information. Thus, the selection of a subject is based on what we have found in the previous subject, rather than on a rigidly conceived plan” (36). Therefore, in the case of this research, the decision-making related to the recording process and the number of daily posts and comments were conditioned by previous records, intending to enter records using the criterion of maximum variation.

It is important to highlight how the process is influenced by constant decision-making, as a key element of the entire process of sampling, delimited by theoretical criteria and technical resources. If we agree with Scribano (2008), Apud Pelaez (2013) and Mejía Navarrete (2000) on the importance of

³ Namely: Name and identification of the environment, type (public or private), filters (interactions previously approved or not by the administrator), description of the environment (aims and purpose for its creation), interaction rules, number of members, activity and average activity, types and roles of participating individuals, group lifespan (for a detailed examination of every element). See (Dettano & Cena, 2020).

considering the knowledge we intend to build as a demarcating criterion of what and how much to record, we can note how the recording and selection of comments answered our questions. Particularly, this study sought to achieve the greatest variety: we refrained from adding to our grid those publications and comments that were repeated or dealt with similar topics. We also sought diversity in terms of gender and times of the day. In other words, given that the purpose was to show different perspectives related to the complexity of the phenomenon under study, we implemented what has been called “diverse or maximum variation sample”. In view of the above, the recording was performed on a daily basis and posts from the selected group were obtained during one of the payment periods of one of the most massive social policies during the pandemic. The sampling process was conducted during the morning, approximately at 10:00 am and another one in the evening, after 6:00 pm. In each shift, we selected two posts, and we recorded 10 % of the comments of each post, taking into account criteria related to their gender and roles in the environment (administrator, content distributor or regular member).

The recording made it possible to sample 84 posts and 454 comments. This exercise in variation sampling enabled us to record the diversity of interactions and to identify differences and similarities, patterns and specific details in them. Additionally, we delimited the sample by category saturation, given that the data became repetitive, redundant and/or the new data did not add anything to the analyses within the framework of the proposed objective.

In this digital ethnography, the samples involved a contextualized, deliberate and theory-driven selection method and evolved as the research process unfolded (Apud Pelaez, 2013). Consequently, this article has rediscussed and rethought the observation and sampling strategies which are now adapted to the digital/virtual world. Even though we have worked with a volume of empirical material that is consistent with the concept known as Small Data, this virtual ethnography includes a flow of interactions, comments, posts and reactions which require to determine the selection and sampling criteria, as well as inquiring about those elements—such as the observation logbook—which make it possible to compare the adequacy between what is observed and the proposed research objectives.

Conclusions

This article stems from an ethnographic study conducted in connection with the implementation of social policies during the pandemic in Argentina, in which Information and Communication Technologies were involved. These social policies were relevant due to their digitalization, the economic, social and health crisis context in which they were implemented, and because they engaged a number of groups of recipients on the Facebook social network, which were massive in the way they were structured and the flow of the interactions.

The characteristics of 4.0 societies (Scribano & Lisdero, 2019), the digital world and the expansion of the e- government have led to a series of increasing transformations related to social policies. It seems that these new spaces marked by the presence of social policies, such as the possibility of implementing state interventions totally mediated by the web, the creation of the previously mentioned massive groups and YouTube channels consisting of tutorials and information, as well as the profiles of government agents on the web, are here to stay. This involves a considerable number of challenges in terms of social research, starting with the review of techniques and methodologies involved in knowledge and analysis processes.

One of the first challenges that arises is the connection between the new/the old in relation to the knowledge processes. In agreement with Ardevol et al. (2003), we will argue that virtual ethnography is not an adaptation of an old method to new phenomena. The observation environments show a new way of organizing, structuring and understanding the sociability processes mediated by Information and Communication Technologies, which explains why the observation environments enable/restrict certain ways of being, existing and feeling in these contexts. In this sense, along with Latour (2001), we contend that technology is social and that interaction platforms are inherently social. The transformations undergone by the platform as a result of the interactions of users are worth mentioning. These include the possibility of expressing emotions, making group calls or video calls, accessing buy and sell websites, among others. Virtual ethnography thus encourages us to reflect on the distinctive characteristics of our object of study, which is social and technological, as well as on our theoretical assumptions and methodological decisions for addressing its problematization. Hence, it is neither a new nor an old method, but one that offers and invites us to explain once again the theoretical and methodological postulates

that sustain the processes of interpretation of the social. It is fundamental in this instance to recover the initial concern that gave rise to our investigation: the risk of fetishizing the technique without noticing the crucial intellectual, theoretical and interpretive content required. In virtual ethnography, the environment and the technology are a constitutive part of the observed interaction processes.

In light of the above, there are two additional challenges we would like to highlight. First, the need to explain the technique and the sample employed. Neither new nor old, as already mentioned, the classic observation technique is readapted and redefined. Elements that are considered disadvantages become advantages due to the characteristics and possibilities for interaction and storage provided by virtual environments. An observation with a low level of participation can generate, as in Facebook Groups, a thick description of the ways of being and existing in the state interventions while questioning the exploratory nature of the technique.

Second, in terms of the sample used, the massiveness of the referenced environments and the high flow of daily interactions have also led us to rethink the sample selection criterion, taking into account the key elements of the research plan in accordance with the available resources. Hence, every sampling decision made in the process has shown once again the deep connection with the design, the research questions, the objectives, and the units of analysis and observation.

Finally, consent should be mentioned. Meneses Rocha (2018) encourages to problematize the processes of building, accessing and treating data, with the aim of maintaining strict rigor when managing data, so as not to compromise individuals' privacy. Ardevol et al. (2003) complement this standpoint related to the characteristics of the environment in which the research process takes place. If the environment is public and the individuals there assume identities that may not be recognized by others, floating observation can guide the initial processes of contact with the environment and even the immersion. However, when the inquiry process requires conducting interviews and a more personalized level of interaction with the individuals in the environment, it is crucial to explain its purpose and to request consent for using the data.

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