



## *Exploring Digital Society*

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# *Digital society: risks and challenges*

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Innovations in digital technology have advanced more quickly than in any other field in human history. Society and the economy have been revolutionised by the advent of digital technologies, and virtually all industries and everyday life activities are experiencing daily disruption as a result of the digital revolution. The extent and breadth of these changes are uncommon in the history of humankind, and it had only been previously held by the revolution brought in by the advent of the steam engine, the electrical generator, and the printing press. Those revolutions have changed the way we work, think and live, having a tremendous long-term impact at both local and global levels. Likewise, the digital revolution has shown an extraordinary disruptive force able to introduce new methods of working, communicating, and connecting across disciplines, communities, and boundaries. Professional vocations, economic and social institutions, financial and banking reforms, popular culture, as well as communication and consumption, to name a few, are all impacted by this revolution. The line separating the physical and digital worlds continues to be muddled by the rate of development. To match the ever-rising expectations of their customers, business and media companies are modifying their business models. Similarly, public services are reinventing themselves to improve their delivery in the digital society.

During the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the digitalisation and the development of technology like fibre optics, computation, and satellites spread around the world, making the World Wide Web and the Internet widely used and adopted. Today, as the digital revolution advances, we are witnessing an increase in data usage and artificial intelligence applications powered by machine learning and algorithms (Ragnedda 2020). We are also seeing the emergence of robotics in manufacturing and home applications, the Internet of Things (IoT), blockchain technologies (Ragnedda & De Stefanis 2019), neural networks, and quantum computing, among other technology in use. These technological innovations work together to create new worlds of professional practice, knowledge-driven processes, business and management paradigms, and worldwide social networking. As new ecosystems emerge, digital technologies are radically altering business models, and private and public institutions, posing serious challenges for the whole society. Significant political issues are looming, and policymakers need to adopt new paradigms to tackle these problems. First, the political pressure will increase when significant portions of the middle class will face an impending unemployment crisis. Many “middle-class” occupations will be at risk due to the techno-acceleration or as a result of the delocalization of labour in other areas of the world. Within the next few years, a substantial component of white-collar occupations will be inevitably automated. Secondly, the challenges of the digital revolution are clear also in terms of new oligopolies and concentration of power. The major web companies and big tech giants are mainly based in two nations, namely China and US. 90 per cent of the market capitalization of the 70 biggest internet platforms is shared between China

and the US. Together, Africa and Latin America only account for 1%. It is therefore important to consider the implications of such a shift in digital geopolitics, not just for the regulation of technology but also for issues such as human rights, digital content and ubiquitous and transnational surveillance. Further challenges are related to how businesses have taken advantage of the absence of regulations controlling data privacy. The Cambridge Analytical scandal of 2018 brought to the surface the implications that AI and algorithmic decision-making may have both on society and on how our personal data are (ab)used. New policies are needed to address what Couldry and Mejjas (2019) define as “data colonialism”, namely the method by which companies, non-governmental organisations, and governments seek to commercialise and claim ownership of the data that users produce. The exploitation of personal data frequently occurs without users’ knowledge and usually against their will. Furthermore, the digital revolution needs to be seen also in relation to climate change and how it may contribute to either shrinking or exacerbating it. In fact, on the one hand, the rise of digital technologies has exploited the environment (by withdrawing resources), accelerated the misuse of resources, and increased pollution. On the other hand, the embeddedness of digital technologies into everyday life could represent an opportunity for a shift toward sustainability. There are knowledge gaps regarding whether and how individuals’ pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours interact with digital forms of consumption, working, learning, and social networking, which may also indicate a potential interaction between digital and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, giving the rise to what Ruiu, Ruiu and Ragnedda (2021) define the “Techno-environmental habitus”. A 2017 study on the digital economy revealed that having digital abilities enables people to make environmentally friendly decisions (Gazzolla *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is not the simple adoption of technology that might help the environment, but the digital skills and the savvy use of technologies that can promote pro-environmental engagement. As digital technologies advance and permeate every aspect of life, understanding and using technology for societal good is becoming crucial.

Tackling social and digital inequalities is another key challenge that still struggles to be at the centre of local and global policies. The rise of the information society was initially viewed as a chance to mitigate inequality, improve access to information and promote political and civic engagement (Negroponte, 1995). Initially, an over-optimistic approach that interpreted the Internet as impossible to be controlled and neutral by default, prevailed. The same approach described, by contrast, the old media as centralised, run by wealthy proprietors and with passive consumers. The rate of global digital transformation and the network’s phenomenal expansion was unprecedented in media history. In 1994, only 1% of the world’s population had access to the Internet, compared to more than 60% in 2022. In other words, in less than 30 years the number of citizens using and relying on the Internet for everyday tasks and activities moved from a few thousand to more than five billion people globally. The worldwide adoption of technologies and the embeddedness of the Internet into everyday life introduced new challenges given that the benefits that citizens and societies were receiving from the digital revolution were not the same for everyone. Beyond the hype and the techno-evangelist approach, it quickly became apparent that access to new digital technologies was not distributed equally across populations (Resnick, 1998). Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that one of the main causes of differences in the early years of ICTs adoption was the economic development, both within and across nations (domestic digital gap)

and globally (global digital divide) (Chinn & Fairlie, 2010; Crenshaw & Robison, 2006; DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004; Fairlie, 2004; Norris, 2001; Pohjola, 2003; Rogers, 2003). This is still evident in the contemporary digital experience. While the effects of the digital revolution on the economies and social lives of individuals are evident in the so-called Global North, it is less noticeable in other regions (Ragnedda & Gladkova, 2020). This does not mean that even in these less technologically advanced regions, ways of life are not evolving, governmental structures are not undergoing changes, and the delivery of health and education services is not being reviewed to adapt to a new normal, particularly in this age of the Covid 19 pandemic. It means that some areas of the world are slower in adopting technologies and they have limited advantages and benefits compared to the Global North (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). However, even at the country level, the benefits introduced by the digital revolution are not shared equally by citizens from various socioeconomic and socio-demographic backgrounds (Ragnedda, 2020). Differences in the adoption of ICTs are evident in terms of motivation, skill, and lifestyle as well as dynamics in the socio-economic and socio-demographic spheres. Those who are already advantaged in the social sphere, also tend to benefit the most from the adoption and use of digital technologies (Ragnedda, Ruiu & Addeo, 2020). Therefore, cultural, social, economic, and political context cannot be ignored when analysing digital exclusion and digital inequalities, and when trying to understand the social implications of the digital revolution. The social structure's disparities and the digital world's inequalities are interconnected. As Blagoev (2015, p. 2793) states, "the Internet as a social institution generates new possibilities that may, with a much greater probability than in the pre-digital age, precondition the creation of life chances, because it fosters and intensifies the interplay between globally dispersed individual potentials, whatever their origins and qualities may be, and market potentials dispersed across different societies, whatever their stage of development may be". Intra-generational mobility and inter-generational mobility are characteristics of democratic societies and citizens can use digital technologies to move up the social scale on their own, greatly increasing their chances of success.

However, the fundamental socio-economic inequities will not change as a result of this. The social structure might occasionally allow those with exceptional digital talents to ascend in society, but successful structural social mobility is less likely to occur than individual success stories of social mobility. The offline social networks, which are based on factors including family, occupation, political affiliation, income, and level of education, catalyse digital technologies' potential. Society constitutes of layers that are organised hierarchically, with the rich and poor in a top-down interaction that results in various social inequities (Giddens, 2006). The social hierarchy is a reflection of these disparities, which result in an uneven distribution of resources and rewards and are influenced by factors such as economic resources, gender, age, status, and political power (Ragnedda, Ruiu & Addeo, 2022a). At the same time, the socio-cultural-economic background is crucial in determining the adoption and uses of digital technologies, as also the advantages and benefits that users can receive (Ragnedda 2018). Digital inequalities are strongly intertwined with social classes and status, influencing the process of social inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, the technological determinist perspective, which believes that having access to technology can solve societal issues including social injustice, democracy, freedom, interpersonal relationships, and a feeling of community, is deceiving (Van Dijk, 2005). We should keep in mind the takeaways from the knowledge gap hypothesis concerning the socio-economic advantages that result from the targeted usage of ICTs (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970). The central tenet of this theory

is that the information gap would persist even in a society with equal access to technologies. This is still applicable to the digital age. Early adopters of technologies, who frequently belong to higher-status groups, tend to employ them more effectively, resulting in wider disparities. Social inequality manifests in a wide range of increasingly complex ways, many of which involve the aspects of digital inequality. Between social and digital inequality, there is something resembling a cyclical pattern. Early on in the study of the digital divide, policymakers and academics emphasised the importance of accessing the Internet and owning digital devices (Warschauer, 2003). Their programmes and research were centred on access to the Internet and technology ownership, emphasising the disparity between those who had access to digital technologies and those who did not (Selwyn, 2003).

Their policies and reports underlined how socio-economic divides between people and nations would have widened if these “digital gaps” had not narrowed. As a consequence, many policymakers, both at national and international levels, have increased investment in telecommunications infrastructure to close the digital divide, but they have neglected other important variables including digital skills, assistance, and the range of uses (useful to reduce digital inequalities). For instance, the FCC in the US advocated for extending a phone-funding programme in 2015 to include socially disadvantaged classes in the digital sphere, hence reducing the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2017). This strategy appears to be centred solely on the first level of the digital divide (inequalities in accessing ICTs), omitting to address and consider the other factors that make up the second level of the digital divide (inequalities in using ICTs), including skill, support, scopes of usage, autonomy, and equipment. Researchers soon realized that describing digital inequalities in binary terms (have vs have no access to technologies) only partially helps in tackling the issue. The digital divide, seen as “a moving target” that requires an ongoing conceptualisation (Gunkel, 2003: 505), needs to be conceived in terms of diverse levels of e-inclusion rather than as a binary concept. Citizens must have both access to and the ability to use digital infrastructure to fully engage in a digital society and benefit from the use of technologies. Digital inequalities, therefore, are multifaceted and the Internet offers a wide range of opportunities and societal rewards, but they may also exacerbate already existing social inequalities. By providing less expensive and physical access, the divide between those who connect and those who do not can be narrowed, but this does not necessarily mean that digital inequities will also be reduced. The potential adoption and use of ICT “depend on and embodies to some extent the society’s differences” and it “is strongly related with users’ attributes” (Stiakakis *et al.*, 2010, p. 43). Inequalities between users can widen as a result of additional dimensions and patterns that create and reinforce inequality. Digital technologies continue to be characterised by inequalities, that could further solidify and widen previously existing social inequalities if they are not addressed.

To conclude, we need to reiterate how the technologically-induced digital changes come at the expense of dislodging and disrupting conventional work systems, household routines, media access, languages, customs, and communication techniques. Everything has been affected by the digital revolution including the economy, innovation, research, education, health, sustainability, government, and lifestyles. Along with this revolution, inequalities in the ways citizens adopt, use and benefit from technologies have grown wider. Reynolds and Stryszowski (2014) and Van Dijk (2005:15) emphasised that, in a society that is becoming increasingly reliant on digital technologies for daily tasks, digital inequality has grown to be a significant form of contemporary inequality. Adopting a technology point of view



does not allow for the analysis and comprehensive understanding of such imbalances. The rise in inequality is not just a result of technological advancement, but it is embedded in the social structure. Addressing digital inequalities is not a technological issue, but a political choice. Failures of policy have played a significant role in the narrative, given their lack of responsiveness to the new power dynamics of the digital society and to the new challenges brought by the digital revolution. Long-term policy thinking should not be abandoned in a time when politics is becoming increasingly focused on the immediate future. Social and digital marginalisation are on the rise as the advent of digital technologies plays an increasingly significant role in our daily lives. Digital technologies might be a tool for social inclusivity and level-up inequalities if the process of digital inclusion is led by specific policies, otherwise, they exacerbate already existing social inequalities (Ragnedda, Ruiu & Addeo, 2022b).

## Synopsis

Encouraged by the techno-acceleration due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this issue of *Culture e Studi del Sociale* brings together international scholars to examine the impact of digital technologies in our everyday life. It focuses on daily routines and behaviours to give a fundamental and in-depth exploration of how the digital transition is changing everyday life. This issue helps us understand how digital technologies are affecting and will affect our future and daily lives. It also aims to improve our comprehension of the concepts and theories that underlie these developments and their consequences for those living in the developing civilisations of the twenty-first century.

Exploring today's youth's preparedness for the new challenges of the digital age is essential given how drastically ICTs have changed our daily lives, jobs, and social connections. To shed light on this timely topic, in the first article "*Computer and Information Literacy at the eighth-grade differences between boys and girls*" Elisa Caponera, Francesco Annunziata and Laura Palmerio examined the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) 2018 data for gender variations in computer and information literacy at the eighth-grade level. ICILS 2018 participants from Italy (N = 2810; mean age: 13,3) were taken into account. Students completed the CIL (Computer and Information Literacy) test and the international questionnaire, which asked them about their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, their expectations for the use of ICT in the future for work and study, how they have used ICT to complete a variety of tasks in the classroom and outside of it, and how confident they feel in their ability to use it. A path analysis was conducted using a structural equation model (SEM) to investigate whether or not there is a connection between student socio-demographic and socio-economic variables and CIL performance. The findings showed that there are differences between boys and girls in the correlations between the CIL test, on the one hand, and self-confidence and expectations for using ICT for job and study, on the other hand. Finally, some potential ramifications for the Italian educational system are examined.

The next article, titled "*De-Sanitising the 'New Normal': The Lived Experiences of 'Digital Research' in context of the COVID-19 India*" by Ahana Choudhury, explores the lived experiences, complexities, and use of digital research among social researchers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in India and its North-East Indian state of Assam. While the pandemic sparked a global crisis, India faced its bitter consequences due to a lack of strong infrastructure to combat it.

Furthermore, while the quick adoption of digital research by educational institutions emerged as a viable option for some researchers, it had more serious repercussions for those who belonged to marginalised groups. In the context of the actuality of digital research, the article illustrated the complexity of research practises, the critical reflexive spaces of research actors, and their social categorisation, such as gender and class.

Suania Acampa, Noemi Crescentini and Giuseppe Michele Padricelli in “*Is it still disintermediated? The role of the influencer news-maker in the social platform era*” focused on how the Internet revolution over the past 20 years has shifted the traditional news models used by journals’ gatekeeping toward a fresh disintermediated logic created by prosumers. This phenomenon has fundamentally altered how news is disseminated, pushing journalists to reconsider their position. The purpose of this article is to discover the characteristics of the modern journalists’ reinvention that the authors designated as influencer news-makers through a research design based on a Facebook Content Analysis. The article identified five of the most influential Italian journalists on social media, and the editors they work with. The main findings of this study, which involved the analysis of 20,000 social media posts, related to the emergence of two distinct journalistic profiles: the journalist who reinvents conventional news production methods by utilising the logic of social media, and the journalist who incorporates the promotion methods of his own content into the gatekeeping process.

Finally, “*The Italian perspective on the use of Big Data in Sociological Field Implications, Empirical Findings and an Impact Analysis on the Discipline*” by Michela Cavagnuolo investigates the impact of the digital revolution in Social Sciences and more particular in Sociology. Cavagnuolo points out how the advent of digital technologies modifies and innovates the typical toolkit of social sciences. It is therefore vital to analyse how digital technologies, and specifically the use of big data, has changed social sciences and how that has affected social scientists’ work.

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# *Is it still disintermediated? The role of the influencer news-maker in the social platform era*

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## **Abstract**

In the last 20 years, the Internet revolution has driven the traditional news-models featured by the journals' gatekeeping towards a brand-new disintermediated logic made by prosumers. This phenomenon has drastically reshaped the logics of the news dissemination, forcing a rethink of journalists' role. Through a research design based on a content analysis conducted on Facebook, the aim of this paper is to identify the features of the journalists' reinvention today we can define as influencer news-makers. To achieve our research goal, we identified five of the most influential Italian journalists on social media, and the respective publishers they work with. Analyzing about 20,000 social media posts, the main results from this study concern the emergence of two different profiles: the journalist who reinvents traditional news making practices by exploiting the logics of social media and the journalist who integrates the promotion practices of his own content in the gatekeeping process.

**Keywords:** Journalism studies; social media analysis; content analysis.

## **Introduction**

The transition to the late modern society drives us to rethink the role of the digital scenario and its influence on every aspect of daily life. The digital issue has been addressed by many scholars (Fuchs, 2021; Lupton, 2015; Marres, 2017; Rheingold, 2000; Rogers, 2013, Salganik, 2020; Vittadini, 2018) as a making-value repertory made by practices, techniques and representation. Digital is no longer understood in this way as a simple set of tools but rather as whole environment, mainly expressed in the web/online logic where specific rules and logics of the social norms are imposed and by which relational and sense sharing processes are reshaped among users and groups (Arvidsoon & Delfanti, 2013). As underlined by Comunello (2013, p.144), internet studies drove towards a comprehension of digital scenario not anymore as a parallel world «far from the social life, but rather remarking continuation elements among online and offline experiences» and so overcoming the concept of cyberspace, where all the cultural online elements are stored (Woolgar, 1996, p.89). In light of this background the relations between journalism and digital scenario have become more complex for the actors at all levels - from the subjects of coverage to journalists, to those consuming news - engage within these spaces (Broersma, 2019).

The technology has facilitated new ways of interacting with content and with the public, and one of the most-used instruments to this end are social media (Mourao & Chen, 2020; Hedman, 2020)

Facebook, the most popular social network, has also attracted interest in academic research, both because it is used as a professional medium by journalists (Jordaan, 2013) and it also alters the way users consume news (Carlson, 2018). Despite the persistent concern over the impact the haste and the real time logic of social media platforms might have on the quality of journalistic coverage (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019) for journalists, the use of social media has been integrated into their professional practices (Beckers & Harder, 2016; Bossio, 2017).

Furthermore, the relationship between practices and technologies changes due to the progress of innovation, on one hand from the point of view of the technological repertoire and on the other hand for what concerns the needs of use and consumption of information. Considering these assumptions, the following contribution aims to understand the main current characteristic relationships between journalism and the digital scenario. Journalism changes in terms of social image and in terms of the identity of those who practice it (Bechelloni, 2008). Therefore, it will be useful to reflect on how journalists reinvent their work, as well as how information specialists are influenced by the current way. The new ways of renegotiation of normative boundaries in visual journalism to «to support both the informational and the emotional content» (Aitamurto, 2019, p.4) as well as by the current way to make headlines in the online environment and how their performance style is determined by their being in a sense an influencer.

## **1. The Evolution and the role of the public in the news creation process.**

Web 2.0, with its time pressure, relational dynamics and its specific narrative grammars, has represented an explosive element for journalism. Today the news doesn't end with the latest TG news of the night or with the printing of newspapers in the printers; today it is possible to consume information anytime and anywhere. With the web, the practices settled in the work of journalists have been renegotiated by two factors: technological development and the breakthrough of the public in the process of creating the news. On one hand the new technologies in a "always on" logic (Boccia Artieri, 2012) cause a drastic reduction in the production times of news. This reduction affects the sources which suffer a greater level of flattening while the content undergoes an increasing level of homogenization and imitation between the different editorial offices. On the other hand, when the immobility of the medium has disappeared, the network offers newspapers the possibility of communicating with their readers in real time, while social networks amplify the spread of the message. The compound effect of these two factors has upset the communication paradigm of journalists and editorial groups and triggered unprecedented news production and consumption practices (Bruns, 2005) such as to redesign the entire information ecosystem, gatekeeping and journalist roles (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). The top-down model, which saw news acquisition moving from top to bottom, has given way to a horizontal model in which social actors are transformed into hybrid subjects; they stop being simply news consumers and become prosumers (Ritzer & Jurgerson, 2010), resulting in what Castells (2017) defines mass self-communication. While newspapers are losing their traditional

function of filtering access to information in support of social media, journalists are no longer the only ones able to activate the news machine.

While the intent to inform, interpret, update has remained the same, the production of news and the relationship with readers has profoundly changed. Journalism remains alive as a symbolic elaboration of reality but changes the mechanism of this production (Pratellesi, 2013). The editorial offices are considered the first source of formation of images and icons on the main public events (Lippmann, 1942) and the priority of journalists was select the facts and deepen the news by with a high degree of autonomy from their audience. In this way, the journalists can best exercise their role as a filter of access to information for the simplification of the reality that surrounds us. These roles, however, seem to fail with the centered consideration of readers who find themselves using any tools and languages in their daily life that until recently were the exclusive competence of journalism.

The origin of the gradual imposition of the reader in journalistic work is to be found in the practices of *Citizen Journalism*. Although the discussion already began in 1937, when Walter Benjamin - observing the effects of the column "*letters to the editor*" of French and English newspapers - highlighted the gradual loss of the traditional distinction between author and reader and the transformation of the latter into a writer. The practice of *Citizen Journalism* refers to the information sharing activities of individual citizens and is the daughter of the network and technological progress that today allows everyone to have tools at hand to record and share information at low cost. Citizen input allowed a fluid and horizontal news creation process: blogs exploded quickly, and citizen journalists played the key role of witnesses in capturing and sharing tragic events such as natural disasters in real time (2004 tsunami in the south-East Asia) and terrorist attacks (the London bombings of 2005, the Boston bombing of 2013) before reporters could reach the places concerned, thus becoming key actors in the dissemination of contents.

The columns of which Benjamin spoke in 1937 represent today social media with their millions of users, where many of the traditional activities of *Citizen Journalism* have migrated.

From an editorial point of view, social media represents the possibility of reaching and retaining different groups of readers without large investment costs, but they inevitably force the editorial offices to new information practices that are consumed in a continuous monitoring of the consumer. The social analytics tools are used to monitor the traffic of the website or the social pages of newspapers and become the compass of the editorial offices to orient their business based on the behavior of the consumer-reader, what they read and what they don't, what generates satisfaction and what doesn't. As in any major transformation, also in this case, the criticism is divided between those who praise the potential for democratization of user involvement in the processes of creating and disseminating news, and those who question the quality of the information produced and the implications on the role of the professional journalist.

Exposure to the public and its various forms of feedback forces news producers to give more and more weight to what Hermida & Thurman (2008) define "*clash of cultures*", that is, that confrontation, clash, negotiation between those who cover a professional role in the production of information and who instead is the user, imposing significant transformations in the logic, in the practices and in the very concept of the news. A higher level of interaction with the consumer determines greater difficulty in ignoring the requests that come from him. The massive use in

editorial offices of audience monitoring tools has led, in recent years, to a fervent discussion on the so-called *Data Journalism* (Gray *et al.*, 2012; Anderson, 2012). The data that the website or the social profile of the newspaper generates are considered influential on the way of producing the news, on the determination of the daily agenda setting, on the persistence of a news in the foreground or on the suggestion of an in-depth analysis of some events. The public has therefore become an important influencer in the personalization of information content and in defining the media agenda.

Even though a traditional model of journalism still prevails in the historic Italian newsrooms that uses social media only as a showcase of what is published on the site or in the print edition, we are recently witnessing the construction of a personal, direct, and lasting relationship between the journalist and their followers. In this case, reference is not made to the presence on social media of the newspaper, but to that of individual journalists who use their profiles to interact directly with their readers on the information landscape and on the news he produces. The journalist, detaching himself from the publishing group, thus builds his own fan base, relaunching a complementary and personalized narration of the news that ceases to be "information" and becomes "opinion". A tenet of journalism is that reporters, working for the news sections of newspapers, remain entirely independent to their personal opinion. The reflection on this issue in the world of Italian journalism is rather scarce and what we intend to do in this study is to analyse the resonance of journalists precisely through the quantitative logics promoted by the platforms based on engagement metrics. Starting from a question that emerges by observing the activity they carry out on social media, we tried to detect the existence of a new figure of journalist detached from the editorial group of reference and we tried to understand how this new figure moves in the informational ecosystem of social media.

## 2. Methodology

To address the research questions, a content analysis is proposed. In order to shed light about the current online news-making patterns and the any changes of the journalist role, we availed of text analysis techniques to approach the social media posts uploaded by 5 Italian journalists, and the respective newspapers to which they belong. The latter has been duly selected consulting the rankings of the most influential journalists characterized by over a million social interactions.

### 2.1 The observed subjects

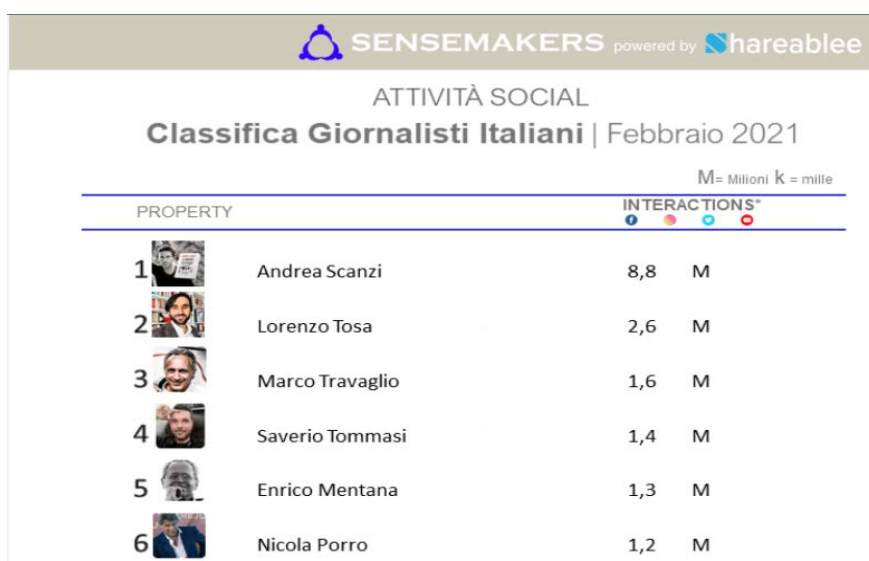
The ranking considered was elaborated by *Sensemakers* through the platform *Shareablee* which monitors the most active journalist on social media every month. The ranking logic is shaped on an interaction index made by the actual «form of cultural currency» (Hermida, 2012, p.317) that is the total of interactions carried out by the posts uploaded on the journalists' official accounts in the 7 days later the post creation date. The interaction value reply to the sum of the *likes*, *comments*, *shares* and *video visualization* raised on the most attended social media in Italy (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube). Following this ranking, that corresponds with beginning of the time span observed in this research, we involve the top 5 journalists and related newspaper they work for: *Andrea Scanzi (Il Fatto Quotidiano)*, *Lorenzo Tosa (The Post Internazionale)*, *Save rio Tommasi (Fanpage)*, *Enrico Mentana*

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(Open), Nicola Porro (*Il Giornale*). Given that *Andrea Scanzi* is already related to *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, we excluded *Marco Travaglio*, who belongs to the same newspaper.

Even though the ranking considers the main social media platforms more used in Italy, our observation focused only on Facebook representation since this platform turned out to be the first social platform consulted as news sources in Italy according to the *Reuters Institute* and to 2020 reports edited by *Blogmeter* and *We are social*<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1 – Sensemakers Ranking “Most influence journalists on social media” (February 2020)



Source: <https://www.sensemakers.it/>

## 2.2 Profiles Selection

The first selected journalist is *Andrea Scanzi*. He embarks on a journalistic career working for the music magazine *Mucchio Selvaggio*. Later, he wrote for *Il Manifesto*, *il Riformista*, *L'Espresso* and *Micromega*, dealing with culture and politics, but also with customs, music, food and wine. From 2005 to 2011 he signed on *La Stampa* and then in September 2011 on the newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (founded in 2009 by *Antonio Padellaro* as an independent newspaper, it has often held positions of objective closeness to the *Movimento 5 Stelle*). In addition to his journalistic career, *Andrea Scanzi* has also worked as a writer and presenter. Among his latest books are “*I cazzari del virus. Diario della pandemia tra eroi e chiacchieroni*” (In english: “*I cazzari del virus. Pandemic diary between heroes and talkers*”) and “*La congiura dei peggiori. Da Salvini a Bolsonaro, tutti i figuri che mandano in vacca il pianeta*”

<sup>1</sup> Digital News report 2020; in Digital 2020: July Global Statshot datareportal.com. Blogmeter, Italiani e social media, ed. 2020. Available at : <https://www.blogmeter.it/reports/italiani-e-social-media-2020>. We are social. Special report digital 2020 Italia. Available at : <https://wearesocial.com/it/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-italia/>



(In english: "*The conspiracy of the worst. From Salvini to Bolsonaro, all the figures who ruin the world*"). From 2012 to 2016 he conducted on *La3* the *Reputescion program*, in which he analysed the online reputation of his guests. Since 2013 he is often a guest in the program *Otto e mezzo*, conducted by *Lilli Gruber* on *LA7* while, since 2016, he is a regular guest in *Cartabianca*, conducted by *Bianca Berlinguer* on *Rai 3*.

*Lorenzo Tosa*, born in 1983, is a professional journalist since 2010. He worked for *Corriere Mercantile*, *Il Secolo XIX*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and *Primocanale*. In 2015 he was appointed head of the press office of the regional council group of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Liguria but after the establishment of the first Government *Conte*, *Tosa* was resigned from the position leaving the party. The official statement of his resignation has been published on his Facebook profile, causing a big stir in the online representation of Italian public opinion. In fact, during the following months the followers of his page grew rapidly, exceeding 400 thousand users. In 2019 he ran for European elections approaching the list *+Europe* but did not reach the 4% threshold needed to be elected.

Since November 2018 he has been collaborating with the online newspaper *The Post Internazionale* (TPI), which publishes news from international sources and produces articles written by reporters on the field.

Another selected journalist for this work is the Florentine *Saverio Tommasi*, writer and blogger who after his graduation at the *Accademia di Arte Drammatica dell'Antoniano* in Bologna, worked in the dramaturgical field for almost ten years. His video-inquiries, which featured journalistic language and codes, were branched through social media and then noticed by the online newspaper *Fanpage*, emerged in 2010 and which later created "*Youmedia*", an entirely dedicated section to information videos and complaint. *Tommasi* then began his career as a journalist and video reporter. In his videos he tackles topical, sensitive, and social issues such as immigration, the defense of civil rights, the defense of the LGBT community.

Another selected journalist is *Enrico Mentana*, a news specialist who boasts a long journalistic career started in 1980. He started working for the foreign editorial staff of *RAI*, at *Tg1*, and continued in 1992 with *Mediaset* where he helped create the first news station. When he was 37, *Mentana* was elected *Tg5* director. In recent years he stands out for his competencies, but also for his neutrality, especially in the management of political debates. On June the 30th 2010, he officially moved to *La7* broadcasting network. During this time as director of *Tg La7*, audience levels reached results never achieved before, even outpouring 10% of total share in some editions. In December 2018, he founded *Open*, an online newspaper that aims to bring young readers closer to information. *Open* is a non-profit newspaper, free and supported by *Mentana* first investment and by the proceeds of advertising ads. Being a social enterprise without purpose of gain, *Open* accepts voluntary contributions for social purpose.

Lastly, we selected *Nicola Porro*, a journalist, blogger, author, TV radio host and deputy editor of the newspaper *Il Giornale*. *Il Giornale* is owned by the Berlusconi family since 1977. Due to its liberal-conservative orientation, it is considered among the major Italian newspapers of centre-right. After a degree in Economics, he began a collaboration with *Il Foglio* and named editor for the section *Il Foglio Finanziario*. He collaborated with *Corriere Economia*, where he kept a column called *Visi Pallidi*. At the beginning of his career, he worked for *Mediaset*, the *Midas King* and *Economic Quadrant*. *Zuppa di Porro* is the name of the economic column that he signs every Saturday in the newspaper *Il Giornale* since 2015, of which he is deputy

editor. In addition to managing the *Nicolaporro.it* site and a YouTube page, he appears on *Canale 5* with *Matrix* and on *Rete4* with *Quarta Repubblica* in prime time.

### 2.3 The empirical base

The observed contents posted by journalists and newspapers have been collected on Facebook via *Crowdtangle*<sup>2</sup> in the time span that goes from February 2020 to June 2021. The initial population was composed by 20000 posts, duly sampled according to a systematic approach that extracted 2000 records.

The data have been collected following the structure of a proper standard gather grid (Losito, 2003; Amaturò and Punziano, 2013) divided in 2 main domains (*General information and Context information*) and then organized in a Cases per Variable Matrix composed by 2000 observations per 9 variables defined as follows:

- *General information*: Author (Title of Journalist/Newspaper Facebook page); Category (Journalist/Newspaper); Date of post (duly aggregated in trimesters);
- *Context information*: Type of post (Link, Photo; Live Video; Video; Status); Engagement (intended as the sum of likes, comments, shares and other reactions, duly classified in quartiles); Likes, Comments and shares (duly classified in quartiles – Low; Medium Low; Medium High; High); Message (to which we collected the entire corpus of posts).

All the information contained in the dataset has been processed following a multi-stage analytical procedure consisting of the application of the topic modelling aimed to point the features of the subject observed in terms of discourse and agenda setting. Then the application of the Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) makes possible to detect the latent dimensions by which the correspondence between topics and the other context variables is marked (type of post, engagement and posting time). Then, the Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA)<sup>3</sup> points out to be the best way to a right synthesis of the collected data: from a compact graphical representation of data relationships projected on factors we could indicate previously unobservable concepts. In this way it is possible to find the right key interpretations based on the correspondence between the selected variables and the most characteristic words of the post texts. Finally, we set a Cluster Analysis (CA) in order to go more in depth with the analytical process and turn back a further synthesis of the information contained in our dataset.

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<sup>2</sup> *Crowdtangle* is an insight tool reserved to the academic hub that only tracks public available posts on Facebook

<sup>3</sup> The LCA is a factorial technique concerning textual data and useful to synthesize information contained in texts; make graphic displays of association networks among words and between words and texts; show the connections between text and context data. (L. Lebart, A. Salem, L. Berry, Correspondence Analysis of Lexical Tables, in *Exploring Textual Data*, in L. Lebart, A. Salem, L. Berry (eds.), Springer Sciences & Business Media, Dordrecht 1998, pp. 45-79.

## 2.4 The Topic Modelling

The post texts present a considerable amount of information not traceable in a semantic structure. For this reason, we offered the empirical base to a simple but statistically robust solution: the topic modelling.

As first step we imported the database in *T-Lab*, a specific software environment for the content analysis able to process proper patterns based on textual context. We submitted the text variable, consisting in the corpus extracted by Facebook to *T-Lab* thematic analysis procedure that is preceded first of all by the following automatic processes: Lemmatization, consisting of 1) the standardization of all the verb forms in the same mode 2) the transformation of nouns and adjectives posed in singular number 3) the removing of definite-indefinite articles; Frequency threshold put on 5 occurrences that led us to exclude in the analysis all the words below this frequency value and reducing finally the vocabulary from 3597 to 1248 total words<sup>4</sup>; finally we proceeded with the exclusion of empty segments that were not significant and relevant for our analysis. Then, we set the topic extraction procedure based on the Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) that is a «generative probabilistic model for text document collections based on a three-level hierarchical Bayesian model, in which each item of a collection is modeled as a finite mixture over an underlying set of topics. Each topic is, in turn, modeled as an infinite mixture over an underlying set of topic probabilities. In the context of text modeling, the topic probabilities provide an explicit representation of a document» (Blei, Ng & Jordan, 2003, p.993). Following this procedure, we extract 9 topics renamed respecting statistical criteria, such as the consideration of specific words occurrences featuring the topic as well the low-high shared words occurrences among all topics, and by the semantic tagging on selected context in order to «detect the right document meaning solving disambiguation and identifying concepts by a set of words» (Bolasco, 2013, p.126).

Finally, we classified the 9 topics taking account of the related 608 emerging elementary contexts intended as the document analyzed fragments in which the topic itself comes more relevant.

Following Habert (2005), in fact, the more significant parts of documents are supposed by the information weight of its fragments featured by its discursive formulas, their position in the document, the specific weight of each word related its scatter in the document etc. In our case, the resume of elementary contexts, T-lab returned us a hierarchical order based on the informative score of single fragments which text reduction has been synthesized by 95 % threshold.

The emerged topics are:

- *Pandemic Storytelling*: which includes all the argumentation of the observed subject concerning the daily story of normal people during the pandemic period which reflects struggles and health-social needs. Furthermore, in this topic, are included the typical posts oriented to social media marketing strategies. By these posts the authors benefit of other popular accounts audiences, posting celebration contents for birthdays or other anniversaries.

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<sup>4</sup> All the posts were composed in the Italian native language.

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- *Pandemic emergency response*: this topic focuses all the argumentation concerning the safety devices to prevent the infection, as the use of masks and the social distancing, and the related policies discussions concerning their use.
- *Prime Minister Conte*: centered on the governmental issues facing the political decisions concerning the pandemic situation and the following government crisis which drove to the charge change in favor of Mario Draghi.
- *Death Bulletin*: mainly focused on the covid-19 tragic consequences widespread via official data sources.
- *Sensitivity to the women role*: mainly based on gender rights oriented to the women's role and featured by contents referring on abuse and social gender divide.
- *Restriction and mobility*: a topic interested on the mobility issue, quarantine obligation for people who came back from other Countries and new borders policies in time of the pandemic
- *Self-branding*: this topic reflects the current ways to approach audiences on social media outside the editorial lines of the newspapers journalists work for. The journalists use to adopt exhortative language to invite users, with a kind of influencer vocation, in following the activities of page admins.
- *Critical awareness*: considers the first pandemic round in 2020 spring, this topic centers around the argumentation related to the approaches and behaviors that the collectivity and political decision-makers should adopt in eventual next contagious rounds to avoid the struggling consequences already experienced.
- *Product placement*: the contents posted in this topic are focused on commercial vocation shaped on the authors product promotion related, mainly, on the books they wrote.

In order to assist the emerged topic description, a synoptic table which includes examples of elementary contexts, and the most shared words is proposed:

Table 1 – Topic, most frequent words, and elementary context examples.

Topic name	Most frequent Words (Specific, Shared with high probability)	Elementary context examples
Pandemic Storytelling	Years, me, life, see, day, story, become, world, listen, today, friend, pain, forget, moth, stop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aggiornamento bimba 11 anni ricoverata per Covid Le sue condizioni sono sempre più gravi. Forza piccola Bimba di 11 anni intubata per Covid a Bologna: "Caso unico, era sana e ora rischia la vita"</li> </ul> <p>(ENG: Update: the 11 y.o. child hospitalized in Bologna because of Covid. Her conditions are bad: She suffer a rare situation. She was good and now she risks her life).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Ho scoperto a 43 anni di avere difficoltà a concepire un figlio. Poi ho impiegato quasi</li> </ul>

		<p>dieci anni per restare incinta. Mio marito ed io abbiamo tanta energia proprio grazie_a nostra figlia. Mia figlia sta sempre con me, la seguo 24 ore su 24. Forse, se fossi stata più giovane, non sarebbe andata così. Prima lavoravo di più, ero spesso fuori casa.</p> <p><i>(ENG: I realized at 43 y.o. to have complications in get pregnant. I passed 10 years improving to have a child. My husband and I have lot o f energy thanks to our daughter. She is always with me. I support her 20h per day. If I had be younger it wouldn't end in this way. Before I worked more and I was more out of home).</i></p>
Pandemic Emergency Response	Home, last, doctor, child, son, resolve, job, achieve, family, work, wife, mother, images, good, wait, create, cure	<p>- Solo che non sono semplici fresconi da tastiera o @Fragoline74 ma medici, laureati, uomini e donne di scienza. E i danni prodotti dalle loro parole devastanti. In fondo, è semplice. Se decidi di mettere in discussione le basi della scienza medica e il progresso scientifico degli ultimi due secoli,</p> <p><i>(ENG: They're no trolls or @Fragoline74 but doctors, graduated, men and women of science. The d amages made by their words, devastating. Is easy. If you decide to discuss the science basis and the scientific progress of last two centuries).</i></p> <p>- ” Risposta della Santelli: “Non ho messo l'obbligo perché, se lo faccio, devo essere in grado di dare le mascherine ai cittadini” Risposta di De Luca: “In Campania è obbligatorio indossare le mascherine quando si esce di casa.</p> <p><i>(ENG: Reply of Santelli: I not allowed the obligation. If I do I can be able to distribute masks to citizens. In Campania works the mask wearing obliga tion when people comes out of home).</i></p> <p>- Misura drastica da domani: in quella regione si esce di casa solo con bocca e naso coperti. Coronavirus, in Lombardia scatta da domani l'obbligo di mascherine e protezione del volto per tutti Open.</p> <p><i>(ENG: Drasting measure stars tomorrow. In that Region is permitted go out from home only w earing masks. Coronavirus, in Lombradia the obligation for all starts tomorrow).</i></p>
Prime Minister Conte	Government, open, video, people, leave, Milan, look, emergency, Guseppe, Prime Minister, Conte, Draghi, page, keep, Christmas, overcome	<p>- Il Premieri contestato dalla giornalista, Conte risponde così "Se avrà responsabilità di governo, scriverà lei i decreti".</p> <p><i>(ENG: The Pri me minister contested by the journalist, President Conte replies: If you will have governmental responsibilities you wi ll write the governmental statements).</i></p>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'CHI ATTACCA CONTE ATTACCA TUTTI NOI "Il governo fa quadrato attorno al premier, da Franceschini a Catalfo: "Sta servendo con passione e dedizione il Paese nel momento più_difficile della nostra storia.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Who Attacks Con te Attacks a ll of us . "The Government support the Prime minister, from Franceschini to Catalfo. "He serves our country with passion and dedication in the worst moment of our recent history").</i></p> <p>Giuseppe Conte, le prime dichiarazioni alla stampa "Serve governo politico solido, non tecnico. Io ci sono e ci sarò "</p> <p><i>(ENG: First Press declaration of Prime Minister Conte "We need a political stable Government, not a technical one. There I am and there I will be).</i></p>
<p>Death Bulletin</p>	<p>Die, Coronavirus, covid, death, hospital, vaccine, tv, Rome, Positive, Fanpage, news, contagious, patient, live</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ULTIM'ORA CORONAVIRUS Oggi 5372 nuovi casi. Tutti i numeri aggiornati: bollettino coronavirus oggi 5 372 contagi e 28 morti per covid i dati di venerdì 9 ottobre?</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Coronavirus last news. Today 5372 new cases. All the data: 5372 infections and 28 covid deaths. Th e bulletin of Fri Oct 9<sup>th</sup>).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CORONAVIRUS, oltre 9mila morti in Italia. Mai registrato un così alto numero di decessi in un solo giorno: 27 marzo 86 498 contagiati di cui 10 950 guariti e 9 134 morti.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Over than nine thousand deaths in Italy. This high rate of daily death was never seen before: March 27<sup>th</sup> 86 498 infections, 10 950 healed and 9 134 deaths).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- È morta a soli 33 anni La donna lascia altre due figlie, una coppia di gemelle di 5 anni: incinta a 33 anni muore per coronavirus il giorno dopo aver dato allaluce il suo bambino.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: She died only at 33 years old. The woman leaves two twin daughters of 5years old: pregnant she died after she gave birth to her last son).</i></p>
<p>Sensitivity to the Women Role</p>	<p>Woman, us, ask, president, answer, narrate, time, journalist, speak, put, thanks, big, born, right, freedom, respect, resistance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- E poi ci sono quelle violenze sulle donne invisibili a cui non sarà dedicato nessun monologo. Ce le racconta Lorenza Formicola. Le ver e donne violate di cui Rula non parlerà mai Lorenza Formicola.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: And the n there's that silent women violence to who nobody will dedicate words. Lorenza Formicola will narrate their stories for us).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ecco quello che è stata costretta a subire Monica Patiño Gomez, 43 anni, avvocatita colombiana esperta in Diritto internazionale, dell'immigrazione e della famiglia che ha trascorso quasi metà della sua vita a Firenze,</li> </ul>

		<p>che con la sua associazione sostiene attivamente le donne immigrate in Italia.</p> <p><i>(ENG: This is what Patino Gomez, an Ita lo Colombian lawyer of 43 years old, has suffered. As international law and immigrant rights expert she lived almost half of her life in Florence, where she support the immigrant women in her association).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chi ha avuto la forza di arrivare fino all'una e venti passate ha potuto sentire questa giovane donna di 30 anni raccontare, con le lacrime agli occhi, la lunga strada per il successo, dall'infanzia senza acqua corrente né soldi per le bollette nella borgata di Quartaccio al sogno di diventare cantante.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Who was connected still 1:20 am could listen this young woman of 30 years old who crying narrated her long journey towards the success. Starting from the childhood without water or money for bills in Quartaccio neighborhood still her dream to become a singer).</i></p>
<p>Restrictions and Mobility</p>	<p>Our, country, days, arrive, think, leave, end, young, sons, come back, attack, murder, virus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- E proprio per questo motivo, il ministro della Salute Roberto Speranza ha firmato una nuova ordinanza che impone la quarantena obbligatoria di cinque giorni e il tampone alla fine dell'isolamento per tutti coloro che rientreranno in Italia da un paese dell'Unione Europea. La quarantena è comunque già prevista per tutti i Paesi che non fanno parte dell'Unione europea.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: This is the reason why the Italian health minister Roberto Speranza has signed a new decree that imposes the obligated 5 days' quarantine and the covid text at the end of the social isolation for all who come back from an European Union Country. The quarantine was already obligated for all who come back from not EU country members).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A Malpensa code di viaggiatori per vacanze alle Canarie: a Bergamo 35mila passeggeri in 7 giorni. Nei giorni di Pasqua e Pasquetta gli italiani potranno andare in vacanza all'estero, ma non potranno spostarsi tra Regioni. La notizia ha scatenato diverse polemiche, ma anche molti "vacanzieri" che hanno deciso di prenotare e partire verso i Paesi europei.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: At Malpensa airport lots of qu eue of tourists leaving for Canary Islands. From Bergamo 35 thousand travelers in 7 days. Italians can leave abroad for Easter holidays, but they can't move among Italian Regions. This pattern has caused lots of controversies and lots of Italians who preferred to fly in o ther European Countries).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In questi giorni la distanza tra individui è fondamentale per la nostra sicurezza: la</li> </ul>

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		<p>distanza tra nazioni europee, al contrario, mette tutti in pericolo "Ursula Von der Leyen, presidente della Commissione Europea</p> <p><i>(ENG: In these days the social distance is fundamental for our safety: the distance between European Countries, on the contrary, endangers all of us "Ursula Von der Leyen, President of the European Commission").</i></p>
Self Branding	Porro, close, zuppa, explain, school, hope, red, lockdown, new, Fatto, today, Italy, read, word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- La zuppa di Porro di oggi. A Natale dovevano liberarci, invece chiudono di nuovo Nicola Porro.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Today at "La zuppa di Porro". They could us make free for Christmas, but they're force us at home again).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oggi alle 16, solo su Instagram e dal profilo di Nove, farò una diretta particolare: racconterò tre oggetti per me molto importanti e, poi, se ci sarà occasione farò entrare nella diretta alcuni di voi. Il format si chiama "Caccia al ricordo". Lo hanno già fatto anche Sommi e Gomez. Vi aspetto.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Today at 4pm, only on Instagram and from "Nove" profile I will conduct a particular live stream: I will narrate 3 object very important for me and then if I can I will give space for some of you. This format is entitled: "Caccia al ricordo" as Somuni and Gomez already did. I wait for you).</i></p>
Critical Awareness	Italians, uomo, chiamare, scrivere, tempo, parole, her, exclusive, millions, before, good, italian, Italy, remember, defend, people, together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Noi dobbiamo tornare a comportamenti rigorosi come a febbraio, marzo e aprile, altrimenti ci facciamo male".</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: We must recover the rigorous behaviors of last February, March and April, otherwise we will get hurt).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- di sputare sul suo sacrificio, di offendere la memoria di questa grande donna e gli sforzi e i rischi immani di decine di migliaia di colleghi e colleghe in tutta Italia, spesso per stipendi da sopravvivenza. Non ci sono parole abbastanza esplicite nel vocabolario italiano per rendere tutta questa miseria.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: There's no word in the vocabulary to describe the misery of who despises the sacrifices, offending the memory of a great woman and the efforts of thousand Italian colleagues who worked for little rewards).</i></p>
Product Placement	Salvini, found, Andrea, politic, book, bit, amazon, scanzi, peggiori, lega, meloni, politician, right-wing, you, Renzi, PD, first, virus, Cazzari	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- La situazione politica, in breve. Renzi è davvero il peggio del peggio, politicamente parlando. Sempre lo è stato, sempre lo sarà. Il libro "La congiura dei peggiori" lo trovi qui.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: The political situation in brief: Renzi is the worst of worst, in political terms. He always has been and always will be the worst. You can find here the book "La congiura dei peggiori").</i></p>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Come minimo, Salvini, Demolition Man e tutta la stampa a loro vicina lo avrebbe fucilato. In pubblica piazza. Con diretta televisiva e dibattiti annessi. il mio ultimo libro, Demolition Man, lo puoi trovare anche qui.</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Basically Salvini “Demolition man” should be publicly executed in a square and all the press he support as well. You can find here my last book “Demolition man”).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- La politica al suo peggio. Il libro La congiura dei peggiori lo trovi anche qui</li> </ul> <p><i>(ENG: Politics and its worst. You can find here my book “La congiura dei peggiori”).</i></p>
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### 3. The Analysis

Later the topic modeling, we set in active mode all the variables even that the Engagement and the Category, set in illustrative mode<sup>5</sup>.

First of all, topics that are strictly connected to the pandemic issues, as Pandemic emergency response, Death bulleting and Restriction and mobility, feature both the two factors as well as the post-type status and native-video. Finally, also *Saverio Tommasi* (Journalist), and *Open* (Newspaper) feature both the two factors. The first factor, the X axis, is instead characterized by Product placement and Pandemic storytelling topics, as by link and photo post type. This factor is featured by all the journalist and newspaper observed, even that of *Nicola Porro* (Journalist) and *Fanpage* (Newspaper). Lastly, we can see how the time span looks perfectly progressive on this factor how the engagement grades of likes, comments and shares increase proportionally to the time span line sliding. The lower grade of engagement is in fact evidenced at the beginning of our time dimension of observation (2020 1st trimester), while the high grades at the end (2021 2nd trimester).

Looking at the graph and considering the variables' modalities interested in this factor, in terms of position, reciprocal distance and frequency, we can observe the reflection of the news-making current pattern. On the right side the factor is characterized by a commercial orientation featured by marketing strategies. Here stands only one journalist, *Andrea Scanzi*, particularly focused on the product placement initiatives related to the use of pictures and with a leverage pointed on different actors' daily life stories occurred in the emergency period. The left side, instead, reflects a news-making conduct not oriented on personal views of the authors. This side is featured by an information orientation where take position all the newspapers and the other journalists (even that *Porro*). This side is characterized not only by a stronger use of status and link posts but also by the related discussion mainly focused on the pandemic issues during the first phase between the beginning and the end of the first emergency phase. In fact, among the topics we can find here

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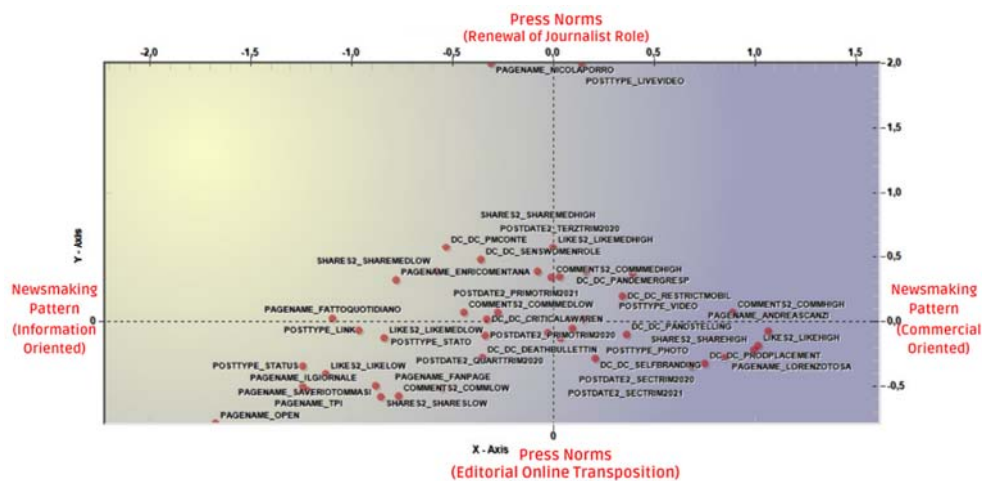
<sup>5</sup> «In the correspondence analysis is possible to discern two kinds of variables: the active variables directly contribute for the *factor building process*, while the illustrative variables do not. The position on the plan of the illustrative variables is moreover useful to understand the factors emerged» (Di Franco, 2017: 150).

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the critical awareness, the emergency response and the tragic consequences due to the Covid-19.

As far as the second factor is concerned, the Y axis is featured by topics related to the Sensitivity on women role, the Prime Minister Conte (centered on what concerned the Government crisis) and the typical ways to reach and involve the social media audiences, adopted through a personal approach. Hence we can in fact see, among the journalist observed, the only presence of *Porro* and a posting strategy held mainly by live video streaming. This evidence marked out on the upper side of the axis and in line with a renewal of journalist role, is directly opposite to the lower one that follows the traditional editorial customs transposed online and where all the other journalist and newspaper stand. Considered the composition of the graph the second factor has been in this way renamed “Press norms”.

Figure 2 – Multi Correspondence Analysis (MCA). X=Fact 1 (8,65%); Y=Fact 2 (4,89%)



### 3.1 The Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA) and Cluster Analysis

After this first analysis procedure we further synthesized the information contained in our data providing the next step of Lexical correspondence analysis (LCA) and showing the multiple correspondences between words and context elements (i.e. who spread the message).

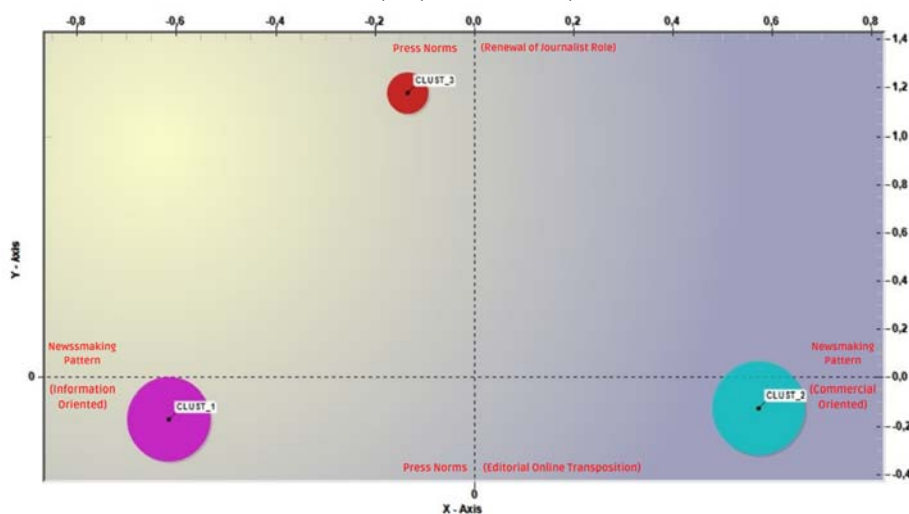
Looking at the graph, three word-groups emerged, which strengthen the factor building. The words pointed in the 3rd quad remark in fact the informational orientation of the first factor as well the traditional press norms transposed online. In this group, in fact, we can notice words such as: Covid, Positive, Die, Coronavirus, Lockdown, Live, as well as the self-citation of the newspapers and journalist that we saw, in the MCA, be present in this part of the graph, as *Open*, *Fanpage* and *Saverio Tommasi*.

The other word group pointed across the first and the fourth quads accurate feature the commercial orientation of the news-making pattern in light of lemmas such as: Amazon, book, Buy it, and the book title “*La congiura dei peggiori*” written by *Andrea Scanzi*, self-cited and also positioned in this side as evidenced in Fig. 1.

The last word group positioned across the 1st and 2nd squads which well reinforced the approach to the press norms in a personal-addicted way held by those



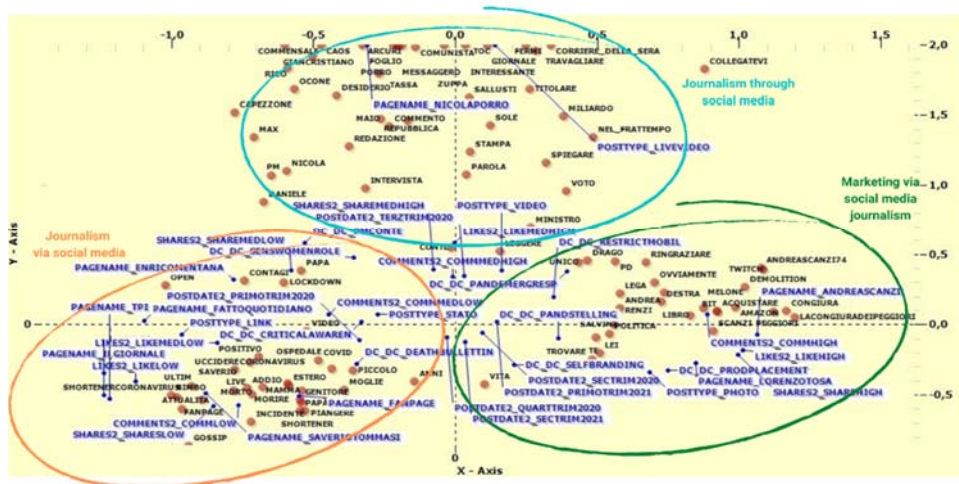
Figure 4 – Emerged clusters and concerning position on the factor graph. Cluster 1= 41,6%; Cluster 2= 47,3%; Cluster 3= 11,1%



The second class, which contained the 47,3% of the information contained in the entire dataset concentrates all the elements which suggest a renewed pattern in doing journalism, close to the promotion and commercial purposes. The words relating to the e-commerce platforms, the use of iconic and visual elements in the posting activities and the exhortative invite to buy a specific product (in our case the book written by *Andrea Scanzi*) led us to rename this class: “marketing via social media journalism”.

The last one, positioned in the upper side of the graph, that concentrates the rest of the information equal to the 11,1% of the entire dataset, connotes an approach in journalism well separated from the classical editorial attitudes migrated, or not, towards the digital scenario. The words and the post type here contained in fact suggest the journalists (in our case only *Porro*) who adopt a communicational attitude well adapted on the online logics, rules and languages, based on a direct interaction live transmitted with an involvement of the author who communicate in this way via, but rather, through a specific medium, being medium. Here is marked a “becoming medium” process featured by the cultural medium codes learned through the media fruition practices (Luhmann, 2000). Following Boccia Artieri (2012) these cases connote a «specific selection criteria useful to distinguish what is newsworthy or not, or better what is informative or not» (p.73) thanks to the interiorization of those specific languages, expressions and esthetic forms of a medium, in this case played online. For this reason, the last class has been renamed “journalism through social media”.

Figure 5 – Factorial graph on LCA with the over imposition of a three-class CA (respectively concentrating: Journalism via social media 41,6%; Marketing via social media journalism, 47,3% and Journalism through social media, 11,1% of the information contained in the dataset)



#### 4. Results and main conclusions

In the analysis conducted, two particularly relevant dimensions of meaning emerge in the debate concerning the impact of social media in the practice of creating and disseminating information contents.

While on the one hand a reworking of the traditional journalistic routines transposed on the web emerges, which uses social media as a communication tool useful for increasing the dissemination of information content, on the other it emerges how much the use of social media in journalistic work transgresses certain routines and established rules of the profession. From the analysis, in fact, a new and interesting profile of a journalist emerges, featured by who uses social media to break down the wall that separates him from his reader, adopting promotion strategies such as to establish a direct and lasting relationship with him that is different from what the reader adopts with the publisher to which the journalist refers.

Challenging the conceptualizations of the detached and objective role in the elaboration of the facts, the figure of journalist who emerged from the analysis organizes and spreads the news with particular attention to monitoring the user-reader feedback that bursts forcefully as a relevant actor in the process web information.

Monitoring, interaction, and promotion remain the three keys to understanding a new way of being a journalist that is best suited to the disintermediate environment of social platforms. The figure that emerged from the study differs in two profiles:

1. The journalist who reinvents traditional news making practices by exploiting the logics, rules and languages of social media but preserving practices already used in traditional journalism. This profile focuses on the user to whom it is addressed with an informative practice aimed at discussion and

exchange of opinion. The promotion is aimed at creating loyalty towards the proposed brand.

2. The journalist who reinvents himself and integrates the promotion practices of his own content in the gatekeeping process.

This profile is completely detached from the publisher to which it refers and puts himself on focus: promotion on social media is considered as an extension of one's work and is aimed at converting traffic into revenues. A continuous and lasting relationship is established with the public, evidenced by the high level of engagement produced, but with exclusively commercial purposes. The journalist thus enters a market practice based on the commercialization of information that was previously exclusive to the publisher.

In conclusion, the study conducted allows us to relate these results with a process, still little debated in the literature, of the online mediatization of journalism. This phenomenon, which has affected political communication before and scientific communication today, is understood as the submission to the rules of communication, standards and needs of the audience populate the medium of interest, in this case social media. The level of engagement - which informs us which type of information content the consumer-reader prefers to interact with and which one feels involved - increases the more one deviates from a type of information presented in a thematic way, with a focus on the impact of 'happened and reported in an impersonal way, choosing on the contrary an informative content presented through a personal, emotional or ironic approach.

The online mediatization in journalism is therefore a horizontal process in which all the actors involved are placed on the same level, in which the space of interaction is wide and direct participation, but at the same time does not exhaust the communicative profile: there are those who , "become a medium" using a style of confidential communication, a first-person exposure and an exhortative and engaging character and there are those who still remain anchored to the top-bottom levels and refer to formal journalistic practices, both in exposure and in content, these are the newspapers that build narratives through official and traditional sources.

In the light of what has emerged, looking at the future of the relationship between the world of information and social media, it would be desirable a convergence between traditional and innovative logics of news making that is able to adapt to the entertainment nature of social media and that knows how to involve and inform the reader at the same time. Further empirical investigations will be necessary, perhaps involving a greater number of subjects of investigation to understand the phenomenon in its entirety.

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# *Computer and Information Literacy at the eighth grade: differences between boys and girls*

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## **Abstract**

In recent decades, ICT has radically transformed our daily lives, work and social relationships, trying to understand how young people are prepared for this new challenge is crucial.

This study investigated the gender differences in International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) results. Italian students participating in ICILS 2018 (n=2810; mean age:13,3) were considered. The sample was representative of Italian students at the beginning of the eighth grade. Students answered the CIL (Computer and Information Literacy) international questionnaire including questions about students' socio-economic and cultural background, future expectations about ICT usage for work and study, ICT skills to complete a range of different tasks, self-efficacy towards ICT.

A structural equation model (SEM) was adopted to perform a path analysis to test a relationship between student characteristics and CIL performance.

The results evidenced that the relationships between CIL, on one hand, and self-confidence and expectations for the use of ICT for work and study, on the other hand, differ between boys and girls. Moreover, self-efficacy mediates the variables' effects for the girls: a higher level of self-efficacy reinforces the relationship between ICT Learning and CIL.

On the basis of the results, some possible implications for the Italian school system are discussed.

**Keywords:** ICILS, gender differences, computer literacy

## **Introduction**

In recent years, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have radically transformed our daily lives, our work, and our social relations. Digital skills have increasingly acquired a key role in the active exercise of citizenship and have become a crucial point in the agendas of every government in all developed countries, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and an important part of the contemporary debate addresses the current and future role of ICT in the school curriculum.

For the education field, the need for highly skilled workers required by the economic field requires the development of a high-quality workforce that not only

possesses a strong foundation in traditional literacy skills (reading, writing and mathematics) but is also competent in the digital field. In this general context, schools should play a fundamental role in promoting the development of these skills, ensuring that future citizens can participate actively and proactively in the development and economic and social growth of the country. Hence, trying to understand how today's young people are prepared for this new challenge has become crucial. The e-inclusion was already a priority issue for the European Union (EU) in the development of i2010<sup>1</sup> (European Commission, 2005). The e-inclusion policy aims to reduce the gaps in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and promotes the use of ICT.

Already since the mid-1990s, there has been talk of a digital divide, to indicate the different opportunities for "physical" access to technology (e.g., availability of a computer, an internet connection, a smartphone).

Today most people in Western countries, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic status, have access to these devices and the digital divide goes beyond the issue of access to technology, and the debate focuses now on digital skills (e.g., Hargittai, 2001; Gorski, 2005): not always having access to these devices corresponds to skills in the use of e-services, effectively hindering the learning of new digital skills using technology. Expanding the concept of digital divide beyond physical access digital skills are recognized as a crucial tool for the social inclusion and professional development of people. In a recent study, for example, Murry and Perez (2014) administered a digital literacy assessment to graduate senior, on the assumption that the university graduate is digitally literate, and they found that most students (about 70%) did not pass the tests, demonstrating that the exposure to the digital technologies differs from understanding and use them competently.

The relevance of this topic is also recognized from the European Commission, in different initiatives, for example The Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE), where lifelong acquisition of e-skills and competences is recognised as a key component in the 21st century (European Commission, 2010; European Commission, 2013), and the digital compass for 2030, based on four cardinal points: skills, government, infrastructures and business (European Commission, 2021). More in general, national efforts to address digital literacy are underway in various countries, nonetheless many educational institutions lag in their efforts to define, measure and amplify the complex construct.

### **Gender differences**

A vast amount of research, since the last century, has focused on the study of gender digital divide, even though few studies investigated the difference in actual ICT literacy (e.g. Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Bunz, Curry, & Voon, 2007; Aesaert *et al.*, 2015; Gnams, 2021).

Generally, in the last century, the research evidenced differences in favour of males in ICT competence (Reinen & Plomp, 1997). For example, Sutton (1991), in her review, found that boys outperformed girls both on computer literacy and on coding; while, more recently, different research that compares males and females in

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<sup>1</sup> i2010 is a comprehensive strategy to guide information society and media policies. The main aims are: a single European information space, innovation and investment in research, better public services, and quality of life.

their ability on ICT demonstrated no or little disparity in favour of boys (Hargittai, 2001; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Bunz *et al.* 2007; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2009; Hohlfeld, Ritzhaupt & Barron, 2013; Gnambs, 2021), and in some cases in favour of girls (ACARA 2015; Aesaert & Van Braak, 2015; Aesaert *et al.*, 2015; Fraillon *et al.*, 2019).

Gui and Argentin (2011) administered a test to eight grade students from Northern Italy and found that boys have also higher theoretical skills than girls, while there is no statistically significant differences on operational and evaluation skills.

Recently, in their literature review, Siddiq and Scherer (2019) highlighted inconsistent findings regarding gender differences in ICT literacy.

Regarding the gender differences on ICT attitudes, previous studies seem to clearly show that males have a higher level of self-efficacy than females (Volman & van Eck, 2001; Liff & Shepherd, 2004; Sáinz & Eccles, 2012; Acara, 2015; Cai, Fan, & Du, 2017) even though this difference is getting reduced over time (Cai, Fan & Du 2017). Males are also more likely to continue ICT school and job career (Volman & van Eck, 2001; Clayton, Von Hellens & Nielsen, 2009). Likewise, the differences between boys and girls in term of ICT use are decreasing over time, even though seems that some difference in using is based on the type of ICT use (Colley, & Comber, 2003; Jackson *et al.*, 2008; Karatsoli, & Nathanail, 2020).

In addition, the results of the NCGM (Net Children Go Mobile) study (Ferreira, 2017), conducted in six European countries, showed that boys have greater digital skills and seem to be more confident in using computers and the Internet than girls (Mascheroni, G., & Ólafsson, K., 2014).

This could be because adherence to gender roles is socially emphasized during adolescence and the ICT competence model is often linked to male characteristics (e.g., Cheryan *et al.* 2013; Sáinz, Meneses, López & Fàbregues, 2016), and since gendered identities of young individuals affect future educational and career choices, particularly concerning science and technology (e.g. Dicke, Safavian, & Eccles, 2019; Eccles, 2007), it would become crucial understanding of the co-production of gender and technologies to promote gender equity (e.g., Bray, 2007; Landström, 2007). For example, Tam, Chan & Lai (2020) evidenced that students' ICT self-efficacy can reduce their gender stereotyping in ICT. The author evidenced that ICT-related gender stereotyping was associated with both ICT self-efficacy and perceived difficulties in using ICT, indicating that gender stereotyping in ICT can be reduced by granting more ICT learning opportunities to female students.

While the debate on gender differences in attitudes, usage, and performance in ICT is still lively (e.g. Qazi, *et al.*, 2021), the study of relationships between use, self-efficacy and performance in ICT is barely undertaken, especially using data from large scale assessment. For example, Rohatgi, Scherer & Hatlevik, (2016) found a positive relationship between ICT self-efficacy and ICT achievement; they also found that ICT self-efficacy was a mediator between ICT use and ICT performance both for male and female students. Moreover, ICT self-efficacy is also positively related to the use of ICT, for example in a study of Tømte, & Hatlevik, (2011): the authors found a positive relationship between ICT self-efficacy and ICT use for both males and females.

## ICILS's study

The IEA's (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) ICILS (International Computer and Information Literacy Study) survey aims to collect data to provide educational systems with a better understanding of the phenomenon and thus enable them to develop programmes in line with the changes taking place. ICILS (International Computer and Information Literacy Study) evaluates the digital skills of grade 8 students in order to understand how students are prepared for study, work and life in a digital world. The 2018 cycle has seen the participation of over 46,000 students and 26,000 teachers from twelve countries and two educational systems related to individual provinces or regions (benchmark countries). For the first time Italy also participated.

The first cycle of ICILS 2013 demonstrated the fallacy of the assumption that just because young people grew up surrounded by digital technology, they have excellent ICT skills. Digital natives are not digital experts, "digital native" young people do not develop sophisticated digital skills just by growing up and using digital devices.

Based on the previous evidence, the present study aims at investigating:

- 1) Whether the relationship between computer and information literacy (CIL) test and different student characteristics varies in function of student gender.
- 2) Whether the ICT self-efficacy contribute to mediate the relationships between student characteristics and CIL achievement.

## Methods

### *Participants*

In the present study, analyses were conducted on the Italian ICILS 2018 data. In Italy, 2,810 students, grouped in 150 schools, participated in ICILS 2018. Cases with missing values in one or more explanatory variables were excluded from the analyses. The final sample consisted of 2,511 (52% girls), clustered in 150 schools, representative of Italian eighth grade students. The exclusion rate did not affect the sample composition.

### *Measures*

Computer and Information Literacy scale. The scale was developed by the ICILS working group. Computer and information literacy "refers to an individual's ability to use computers to investigate, create, and communicate in order to participate effectively at home, at school, in the workplace and in society" (Fraillon *et al.*, 2019 p. 16). The overall CIL test consists of a sequence of tasks contextualized by a real-world theme. CIL encompasses four strands: understanding computer use, gathering information, producing information, and digital communication (Fraillon *et al.*, 2019).

The whole CIL test consists of five modules lasting 30 minutes each, but each student has completed only two of the five modules, through a balanced randomized design. Each module is characterized by 5-8 smaller tasks, each of which usually took about one minute to complete, and a single large task that typically took 15 to 20 minutes to complete and required the development of an information product. Using IRT estimates, a score of mathematics achievement was calculated for each

student, drawn from five plausible values: this overall proficiency score was used in the analyses (for a detailed description see Fraillon *et al.*, 2020).

ICILS 2018 also collected information on student engagement with ICT through a 30-minute questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of questions related to students' background characteristics, their experience and use of ICT to solve different tasks in and out of school, and their attitudes towards ICT use. For the sake of brevity, only the measures that are directly relevant to this study will be described (for a detailed description see Fraillon *et al.*, 2020).

Socio-economic and cultural status (SES). Based on the answers in the ICILS Student Questionnaire a general index of each student's socio-economic and cultural status was created by the IEA: (1) student home environments, including the parents' educational level (2) the number of resources for study available at home, and (3) the number of books in the home.

Learning about ICT at school. The scale was created based on students' answers to what extent they had learned how to do eight ICT tasks, such as "Provide references to internet sources" and "Present information for a given audience or purpose using ICT". A four-point Likert type-scale (ranging from "to a large extent," to "not at all") was used.

Students' ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications. Students were asked to answer eight questions related to their skill perceived regarding the use of general applications, such as "Create a multimedia presentation (with sound, pictures, or video)". An index of Students' ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications was created based on the answers given by the students. Students had to respond on a 3-point scale ranging from "I do not think I could do this" to "I know how to do this".

Students' use of general applications for activities. Students answered three questions related the frequency use of general applications for activities, such as "Write or edit documents". A five-point Likert-type scale (ranging from "never," to "every day") was used. Expectations of future ICT use for work and study. Students were asked to answer three questions, such as "Learning how to use ICT applications will help me to do the work I am interested in". The response options were on a three-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree". Based on the students' answers, an index of *Expectations of future ICT use for work and study* was constructed.

In addition, students answered one single item:

Computer experience in years. Students answered one question regarding the use of computer in years. The categories of answer are two: 1) five or more years of experience (experienced users) and 2) less than five years of experience (inexperienced users).

## Data analysis

The descriptive and correlational analyses by gender were conducted using the software IEA IDB Analyzer. A mediation analysis with structural equation modeling assessed the mediation role of "self-efficacy in ICT", by means of MPLUS.

A structural equation model (SEM) was utilized to perform a path analysis to test a relationship between student characteristics, SES and CIL performance (see Figure 1). The following conditions applied to the model:

- The SES have been used as an independent variable.

- Computer experience in years, expectation of future ICT use for work and study, learning of ICT tasks at school, use of general application for activities were used as independent variables of self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications and CIL performance.
- Self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications were considered as mediation variable.
- The score on the CIL test was considered as the dependent variable.

Both observed variables, represented in the graph by rectangles, and latent variables, represented by ovals, were considered, according to the standard conventions in this field. For the construction of the latent variables, the parceling method was used on the basis of item-total correlations (Little, 2002). To estimate the model, two different indices were used: the CFI (comparative fit index; Bentler, 1990), where a value greater than 0.90 is considered a good adaptation of the data to the model (Byrne, 2001), and the RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation; Steiger, 1990), where index values lower than 0.08 represent an acceptable adaptation of the data (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

Considering the difference in CIL between males and females, we verified whether the gender effectively moderate the relationship between socioeconomic and cultural index, student characteristics and CIL achievement in each European country.

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics divided by gender.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics by gender*

	Boys		girls	
	mean	s.e.	mean	s.e.
Computer experience in years	2.0	(0.0)	2.0	(0.0)
ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of specialist applications	<b>50.6</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>	<b>47.6</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>
ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications	49.7	(0.3)	50.3	(0.3)
Use of specialist applications in class	50.5	(0.3)	49.8	(0.3)
Use of general applications in class	46.1	(0.3)	46.8	(0.4)
Use of ICT for accessing content from the internet	51.4	(0.3)	51.0	(0.3)
Use of ICT for exchanging information	49.4	(0.3)	50.1	(0.3)
Use of ICT for social communication	<b>49.5</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>	<b>52.3</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>
Learning of ICT tasks at school	<b>47.5</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>	<b>49.05</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>
Use of ICT for study purposes	48.1	(0.3)	48.1	(0.3)
Expectations of future ICT use for work and study	<b>54.2</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>(0.3)</b>
Socio-economic index	-0.01	(0.0)	0.02	(0.0)
CIL achievement	<b>453,5</b>	<b>(3.1)</b>	<b>469,3</b>	<b>(3.6)</b>

In **bold** gender differences statistically significant.

Concerning CIL achievement, females outperform males. The variation between the two groups is approximately 16 points. Female stated to use ICT for social communication more frequently than males. Males perceived themselves more confident than females in using ICT for specialist applications and reported higher level of expectations of future ICT use for work and study and frequency of use of general applications for activities. Females reported higher levels on Learning of ICT tasks at school index. In the table 2 the correlation analyses between student characteristics and CIL achievement were reported.

*Table 2. Correlation analyses by gender*

	EXCOMP	SPECEFF	GENEFF	SPECLASS	GENCLASS	ACCONT	USEINF	USECOM	USESTD	ICTFUT	LRNSC	SES	CIL
<b>Computer experience in years (EXCOMP)</b>		0.11	0.20	0.02	0.09	0.15	0.06	0.11	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.11	0.19
<b>ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of specialist applications (SPECEFF)</b>	0.18		0.40	0.19	0.15	0.25	0.25	0.24	0.31	0.23	0.14	-0.04	-0.02
<b>ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications (GENEFF)</b>	0.24	0.47		0.05	0.15	0.21	0.07	0.22	0.21	0.13	0.3	0.11	0.35
<b>Use of specialist applications in class (SPECLASS)</b>	0.06	0.26	0.06		0.58	0.18	0.20	0.13	0.40	0.13	0.23	0.00	-0.07
<b>Use of general applications in class (GENCLASS)</b>	0.12	0.18	0.10	0.69		0.16	0.10	0.10	0.33	0.07	0.31	0.04	0.12
<b>Use of ICT for accessing content from the internet (ACCONT)</b>	0.17	0.25	0.23	0.21	0.19		0.35	0.44	0.39	0.16	0.12	-0.01	0.00
<b>Use of ICT for exchanging information (USEINF)</b>	0.11	0.28	0.03	0.30	0.20	0.42		0.55	0.34	0.18	0.08	-0.03	-0.13
<b>Use of ICT for social communication (USECOM)</b>	0.18	0.24	0.22	0.19	0.16	0.52	0.48		0.33	0.16	0.18	0.01	-0.01
<b>Use of ICT for study purposes (USESTD)</b>	0.14	0.27	0.21	0.44	0.36	0.43	0.38	0.36		0.18	0.23	0.01	-0.05



Computer and Information Literacy at the eighth grade: differences between boys and girls

<b>Expectations of future ICT use for work and study (ICTFUT)</b>	0.17	0.25	0.28	0.08	0.11	0.17	0.08	0.16	0.18		0.11	-	-
<b>Learning about ICT at school (LRNSC)</b>	0.07	0.15	0.24	0.21	0.22	0.14	0.04	0.11	0.25	0.14		0.06	0.19
<b>Socio-economic index (SES)</b>	0.09	-0.01	0.14	-0.04	0.05	0.03	-0.04	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.05		0.26
<b>CIL</b>	0.20	0.03	0.36	-0.14	0.08	0.00	-0.18	0.00	-0.06	0.16	0.10	0.33	

At the top right of the diagonal are the coefficients of females, at the bottom left those of males

ICT self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications had the strongest correlation with CIL, both for males and females. In addition, the socio-economic index was correlated positively and strongly with CIL, stronger for males. Students with more years of experience in using the computer obtained better results in CIL.

Use of general application for activities was positively associated with CIL, both for males and females.

Expectations of future ICT use for work and study was positively related with CIL for males, and negligibly (and negatively) for females.

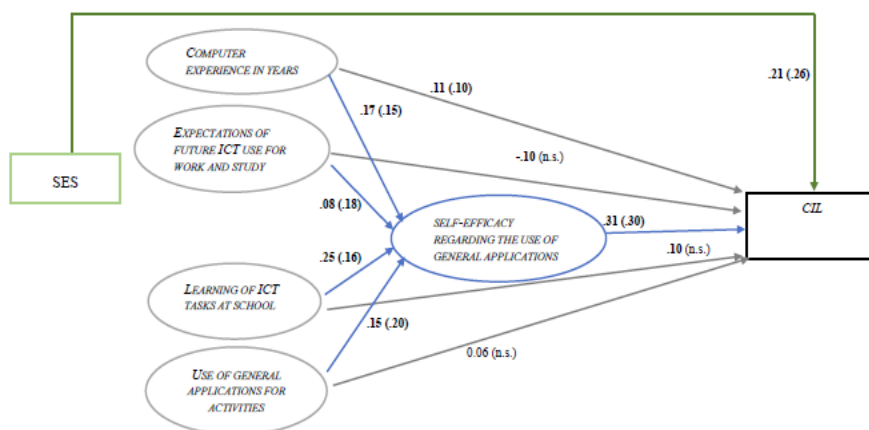
Learning about ICT at school was positively associated with CIL, more for female than males.

Despite the correlation coefficients were significant, it was decided not to consider for the path model coefficients with CIL lower than  $|0.1|$ , which can be considered negligible (Cohen, 2013).

The SEM path analysis tested to measure the relationships between student characteristics, SES and CIL performance is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The relationships between student characteristics, SES and CIL

$R^2$  CIL = 0.22 (0,22),  $p < 0.01$ ;  
RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.95



[Outside of the parentheses, the coefficients of girls; in parentheses, the coefficients of boys.]

This model had good fit indices according to recommended cut-off values (Byrne, 2001): RMSEA=0.08 and CFI=0.98, and explained 22% of the variance in CIL, both for males and females.

SES is associated with CIL. Self-efficacy is strongly associated with CIL both for males and females; the more students perceived themselves able to use general applications, the better they performed in CIL. Learning of ICT tasks at school and use of general applications for activities are positively associated with CIL for females, while they are not significantly associated with CIL for males. Expectation of future ICT use for work and study is not associated with CIL for boys and negatively associated with CIL for females.

All independent variables considered are positively associated with self-efficacy. The relationship between self-efficacy and Expectation of future ICT use for work and study is stronger for boys than for girls, while the relationship between Learning of ICT tasks at school and self-efficacy is stronger for girls than boys.

With regard to mediation, the estimation of the indirect effects in the model allowed to clarify how much experience on use of computer, learning of ICT tasks at school, expectations of future ICT use for work and study, and use of general applications for activities were related to CIL achievement through their effect on the mediating variable considered, i.e., self-efficacy regarding the use of general applications. The crucial parameter considered was the significance of indirect effect estimates (Zhao *et al.*, 2010; Iacobucci *et al.*, 2007). Table 3 illustrates the mediating effect.

Table 3. Direct, indirect, and total effects with self-efficacy as mediator variable

	Females			Males		
	DIRECT	INDIRECT	TOTAL	DIRECT	INDIRECT	TOTAL
	Self-efficacy			Self-efficacy		
Computer experience in years	.11 (.03)	.05 (.01)	.16 (.03)	.10 (.03)	.05 (.01)	.15 (.03)
Expectations of future ICT use for work and study	-.10 (.03)	.02 (.01)	-.07 (.03)	-n.s.	.06 (.01)	.10 (.03)
Learning of ICT tasks at school	.10 (.03)	.08 (.01)	.17 (.03)	n.s.	.05 (.01)	.06 (.03)
Use of general applications for activities	.06 (.03)	.05 (.01)	.10 (.03)	.05 (.03)	.06 (.01)	.11 (.03)

Self-efficacy mediated the effect of the four variables considered for the girls. A higher level of self-efficacy reinforces, in particular, the relationship between Learning of ICT tasks at school and CIL. The role of mediation between CIL and Expectations of future ICT use for work and study is less relevant.

Regarding the males, Expectations of future ICT use for work and study and Learning of ICT tasks at school seems to not have significant direct effects on CIL.

## Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between student characteristics and ICT competence in function of gender in the pre-pandemic period from COVID 19. The model tested proved to be successful in explaining the CIL performance: the predicted model showed a good fit to the data with 22% of the variance explained. According to a part of the literature, the results of this study seem to demonstrate that Italian female students perform better on CIL test than their male counterparts (ACARA 2015; Aesaert & Van Braak, 2015; Aesaert *et al.*, 2015; Fraillon *et al.*, 2019).

Context factors, reflecting the availability or unavailability of economic and cultural resources within the family, play a relevant role in predicting the performance of students in different subjects (e.g., Sirin, 2005; Chiu & Xihua, 2008; Levpušček *et al.*, 2013). This aspect is confirmed by the present study, in which the socioeconomic index was found to be linked to CIL achievement (Aesaert *et al.*, 2015; Hatlevik, Throndsen, Loi & Gudmundsdottir, 2018).

Student's high expectations that they will pursue scientific studies seems to be positively associated with achievement only for girls (Singh *et al.*, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001; Shute *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, according with the literature, there is evidence of a positive relationship between self-efficacy in ICT use and performance in CIL (Aesaert *et*

*al.*, 2015). Moreover, as found in prior studies (Rohatgi, Scherer & Hatlevik, 2016), the mediating effect was statistically significant and suggested that self-efficacy in ICT use plays a mediating role on the effects of several variables on CIL achievement, especially for the females, as evidenced by the significant indirect effects observed in the SEM analysis: the self-efficacy mediates and reinforces the effects of the Expectations of future ICT use for work and study and of Learning of ICT tasks at school.

We are aware of the limitations of this study. A first limitation is the cross-sectional research design and, hence, the correlational nature of the study, which prevents the evaluation of the causal links underlying the observed associations. Longitudinal studies would instead allow us to monitor the same group of subjects over the years and would be valuable in clarifying the role that self-efficacy plays in ICT student performance in function of the gender. Furthermore, this study used only Italian student data in only one school grade, thus generalizations should be made with caution.

Notwithstanding these limitations, few studies adopted objective, performance-based measures to investigate gender differences, and this study seems to suggest that the relationships between CIL achievement and student characteristics varies in function of gender. Learning of ICT tasks at school is related to better performance only for girls, suggesting that it is especially important for girls to work with computers at school.

Concerning the use of computers, it has been shown repeatedly that higher levels of computer self-efficacy are correlated with higher levels of computer use, more efficient user strategies, more positive affect when using computers (Dickhäuser & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2002, 2003; Shapka & Ferrari, 2003). This study seems to indicate that self-efficacy plays a mediation role between ICT achievement and student characteristics, such as learning of ICT tasks at school, for female students (Tam, Chan & Lai, 2020). It is crucial to identify the key factors that could explain variations in students' use of digital technologies in learning, such as students' confidence in using technology, experiences of technology use and learning, especially for female students, and the study of the relationship between gender and ICT perceptions and abilities. In fact, women continue – both nationally and internationally – to pursue careers in ICT-related fields to a much lesser extent than men (Anderson *et al.* 2008; Vitores & Gil-Juárez, 2016). The relationship between gender and ICT skills is also important for educational policies because the school could help reduce social inequities (Attewell 2001; Harper 2003; Warschauer *et al.* 2004): gender stereotypes can influence and determine the future educational and professional choices of young people, contributing to the maintenance of stereotypes in a cyclical process. Schools have an important role in disrupting this process, supporting the diversity of students' interests and encouraging both girls and boys to develop their technological competencies further. The relationship between gender and technology is not unchanging and the understanding of the co-production of gender and technologies would become crucial to promote gender equity (e.g. Bray, 2007; Landström, 2007). Thus, measuring variables that may impact gender differences in ICT learning and future career choice is necessary to implement *ad hoc* interventions for achieving gender equity (Qazi, *et al.*, 2021). Thus, although today's girls use computers as often as boys, it seems that their use is more instrumental and without going into exploration and technical details (Liff & Shepherd, 2004; Gui & Argentin, 2011). This finding could explain why girls are able to benefit more than boys from learning ICT at school and should contribute to push policy makers at the national level to include ICT competence in the curriculum, from primary to upper secondary school, as happens in other European countries (e.g., Innovative Technologies for Engaging Classrooms- ITEC, <http://itec.eun.org/>).

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# *The Italian perspective on the use of Big Data in Sociological Field: Implications, Empirical Findings and an Impact Analysis on the Discipline*

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## **Abstract**

Digital development has invested predominantly in all fields of society: the field of sociology and in general the field of social sciences are not exempt. Starting from these considerations, the social scientist is called to integrate everything within his studies with technological innovations and new tools that modifies and innovates the typical toolbox of the study. This change creates a strong interdisciplinary context. An analysis of the changes and impact of the use of Big Data within the social sciences and how they modify the work of the social scientist therefore becomes necessary.

**Keywords:** Big Data, Symphonic Social Science, Digital Sociology.

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an exponential growth in data production, accompanied by a significant reduction in costs for their management and storage. Due to the perennial collection of data, modern technologies have become an integrated part of all aspects of our daily lives, creating our digital double; which is not an avatar that resembles us in physical appearance, but a dataset with our tastes, preferences, and actions that we do. All this is made possible thanks to computer-mediated communication (Addeo, 2016): «people use blogs, social networks, chats and other online channels on a regular basis in order to express identity, share information, ideas, values, knowledge, and build relationships». Our social life seems to be literally invaded by the Internet, making it difficult to distinguish between «online life» and «offline life» (Pink, 2008).

Owing to these changes, social scientists have to include this new type of knowledge generated online within their studies. In this context, the Internet is not only considered as an «object», but also as a «tool», which sociologists must exploit in order to study these new sources of information available on the Web. Therefore, a context of strong interdiscipline made of sociology, computer science, statistics, but also economics, demography and communication is created; in short, nowadays all those disciplines that somehow wonder about the human behavior have something in common: the digital world (Rogers, 2013; 2019). The main innovation for all social sciences is digitization; the chance to extract and analyze an increasing amount

of data, whether these are *Open or Big Data*<sup>1</sup>, allows the scholar to interact with the entire world through a screen.

Since 2004, the widespread of social media has made more evident the inadequacy of an obsolete conception of the Web, considered as a mere theatre of fake identities and deviant behavior, but for the first time we find ourselves having as many available data as are the actions that users can do online (Jurgenson, 2012; Fuchs, 2021). Digital Life, Algorithmic Identity, Digital Footprint, Digital Shadow are just some of the definitions that describes the human activity of the 21st century (McQuade, 2021). Sonia Stefanizzi (2016, basing on a work by Kitchin (2014), underlines a new scientific paradigm and well describes the power of algorithms and computers, defining the Web as the context of the new paradigm of social research.

In the last few years (2014-2020), publications in the field of Big Social Data increased by about 40% (Scopus, 2019) and the interest in this new interdisciplinary field has led to the birth of new Degree Courses, Master's Degrees and Phd Programs.

For many social scientists, the introduction of the analysis of Big Data, changes the way of understanding and «doing» sociology. Due to this fact, it is important to understand what are the motivations that push the different authors to modify or implement the classic strategies of analysis. In the light of these changes, the essay has the following goals: 1. reconstruct the development of the Big Data phenomenon within the Social Sciences – especially Sociology; 2. understand how the introduction of Big Data analysis, impacts, modifies and redefines the boundaries of the scientific community; 3. reconstruct a mapping under a point of view of authors, publications, research centres, networks of relations and conferences.

In order to reconstruct the mapping, this study makes use of the metadata analysis of the main scientific publications in terms of Big Data and, more specifically, the analysis of keywords that through the use of a statistical approach allow extrapolating different application areas, relevant issues and strategies adopted by comparing the use of sociology and other disciplines of social sciences.

## **2. The Big Data phenomenon in the field of Social Sciences**

### **3.**

«Big Data» - also known as BD – is the expression used to describe a data collection so extensive in terms of volume, speed and variety that specific technologies and analytical methods for value extraction are required. The progressive increase in the size of datasets is linked to the need for analysis on a single set of data, with the aim of extracting additional information to those that could be obtained by analyzing small series, with the same total amount of data (Mayer-Schongerger & Cukier, 2017, p. 15-24). 90% of the existing data have been generated in the last 2 years. The rate this information is produced is so high that every two, a volume of data equal to the amount of information generated by the entire humanity until 2003 is created. The birth of the acronym BD is justified by the presence of a new type of data; that is unstructured data requiring a different treatment and name than the previous ones. Since it is difficult to give an intelligible definition, they are often explained using “7 V’s”<sup>2</sup>, which correspond to seven

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<sup>1</sup> Set of data in digital format that are collected, stored and managed through large datasets, not treatable through software and hardware systems traditionally used in the field of social research (Lombi 2015, p. 215).

<sup>2</sup>At the beginning there were just 3 V's: volume, velocity, variety. Then, over time, they have been integrated with four more V's: veracity, variability, visualization, and value (Haslinda Mohd Din, 2017).

questions we can ask about them, with particular reference to the most important first “three V’s” (Haslinda Mohd Din, 2017). Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier (2013) have clarified that the acronym BD refers to two main interpretations: the first one (used by the media) simply refers to the crossing of large amounts of data; whereas the second one is that used by computer scientists, mathematicians, sociologists, and researchers who can use them either as a support or as a new tool to explain social phenomena. The latter talk about mega dataset rather than BD.

As it has been explained above, the need to introduce the analysis of BD within social research arises because our actions are mediated by the digital and these are transformed into assemblies of metrical data without users of technologies even realizing it (Burrows, 2012). These digital assemblies generate a kind of Digital Doppelgänger<sup>3</sup>.

Our Digital Doppelgänger are born from the intersection of four types of digital archives: data of our economic transactions, our use of social media, our specific online conversations, and the use we make of crowdsourcing platforms such as Wikipedia or Kickstarter. We can talk about digital doppelgänger as informational entities that transcend us and end up overpowering us (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000) or complex algorithmic identities (Cheney & Lippold, 2011; Coulthard, Mallett & Taylor, 2020) that show how machines, in their different components are part of our incarnate processes and our way of being in the world (Haraway, 2015). Today, algorithms work in networks of associations that modulate part of the society; numerical values, subjective ratings, ranking and ratings that are transformed into what has been defined «self-quantification» (Aragona, 2015).

All data which have been produced by third parties should not be underestimated in social research; for example, those created by institutions and that are available to the population: the Open Data. They are a subset of BD but the most important differentiation lies in the purposes and utilization that characterize these two large categorizations of data:

- BD are also collected in order to profile the tastes and trends of citizens without letting the interested party know and are often used for private purposes and market analysis;
- Open Data are public data collected as part of the action of Public Administrations; they must be available, reusable, and are available to the community to encourage participation in the management of public affairs (ADI<sup>4</sup>).

Starting from these assumptions, to understand the importance of these data, it is noteworthy the statement made by Bossewitch and Sinnreich (2016, p. 226): «Nowadays digital technologies act as cognitive prosthesis, because their traces extend, increase and even replace memories». Therefore, sociologists cannot escape this new challenge to introduce the use of BD in social research with all its criticisms and limitations, which have been widely debated in recent year.

### 3.1 *The birth of Big Social Data Analysis*

Within the sociological field – basing on Putnam (2000), Wilkinson, Pickett (2009) and Piketty (2014) argumentative modes - Halford and Savage (2017) labelled the integration of the use of BD as “symphonic social science”. Symphonic

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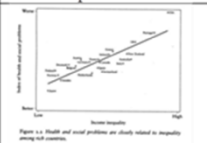

<sup>3</sup> Digital Double.

<sup>4</sup> (<https://www.agendadigitale.eu/dati/open-data-e-big-data/>) Website visited on 28/05/19  
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social science classifies the «BD phenomenon» both as an empirical phenomenon and an emerging field of practice where affirmations of knowledge of the social world are made (Halford *et al.*, 2014; Tinati *et al.*, 2014; Halford 2015; Savage & Burrows 2007; 2009; Savage 2013; 2014). BD provide information about the daily life of millions of people and in real-time. Interest in these new data can be found in studies such as *Bowling Alone* (2000) by Robert Putnam, *The Spirit Level* (2009) by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *Capital* (2014) by Thomas Piketty. Although none of these authors uses BD terminology, their innovative approach is a form of data collection and analysis. Halford and Savage, 2017 suggest that the books mentioned above “establish a new mode of reasoning that reconfigures the relationship between data, method and theory so that it brings both surprising similarities and key differences compared to BD analysis groups”. These important pioneering studies contain different topics and have different disciplinary backgrounds: none of them come from sociology but each one shaped many sociological debates. However, our interest focuses on the fact that they embrace different arguments, different analytical strategies, and different style of argumentation so that they could be a way of thinking to put at the base of the use of BD in social research strategies.

Figure 1. (Halford & Savage, 2017) shows the significant points of the books taken into consideration focusing on datasets used, different techniques, and models of visualization. This work is an empirical evidence that actually sociologists have been using BD for a long time before realizing it; the only things that have changed today are the awareness and the speed with which they are used.

FIGURE 1. *Symphonic social science and the future for Big Data research*

	Putnam (2000) <i>Bowling Alone</i>	Wilkinson & Pickett (2009) <i>The Spirit Level</i>	Piketty (2014) <i>Capital</i>
<b>Data</b>	US Census, surveys of social and political trends, membership data, Gallup polls, etc.	National survey data, registration data, ethnographic data.	Multiple and diverse taxation records from 1700-2010, registration data.
<b>Methods</b>	Descriptive statistics, bivariate frequencies	Descriptive statistics, linear regression, macro level comparisons	Descriptive statistics, frequencies over time.
<b>Visualisation</b>			

Source: Halford e Savage, 2017

Each databook mentioned above distributes heterogeneous numerical assemblages on a large scale reintroducing the results of numerous sources, rather than dedicated sources such as a national representative sample or a case study. Among different sources, *Bowling Alone* uses the US census, surveys on social and political trends, data relating to the membership of 40 organizations, Social Survey and Gallup<sup>5</sup> surveys. Similarly, Wilkinson and Pickett in *The Spirit Level* compare

<sup>5</sup> US Public Opinion Poll Agency (American Institute of Public Opinion, also known as Gallup Poll), based in Princeton, New Jersey, founded in 1935 by George H. Gallup (Jefferson 1901-Tschingel, Switzerland, 1984), statistician and professor of journalism. Mostly known for its surveys of presidential campaigns, it also conducts numerous economic, sociological and psychological investigations. Then provides information throughout various publications (books, reports) ([www.sapere.it/enciclopedia/Gallup](http://www.sapere.it/enciclopedia/Gallup)).

different types of national data sources, including not only surveys, but also ethnographic data and patent registrations. On the other hand, in *Capital* Piketty criticizes sample surveys and instead uses extensive data from the *World Incomes Database*<sup>6</sup>, which meticulously collects tax data from numerous nations to show long-term trends in income inequality and wealth emphasizing in particular that the last decades have seen a shift towards a concentration of income and wealth. In addition to this study, Halford and Savage (2017) claim that “social scientists have been the first people who started to show how new data assemblies can be deployed to formulate powerful arguments on social life and social changes that shape academic and public debates”.

Savage (2017) points out that each book taken into consideration is based on “repeated refrains”, just like classical music symphonies introduce and return to recurring themes with slight modifications. Hence, while conventional social sciences focus on formal models, often trying to predict the results of specific dependent variables, *symphonic social science* draws on a more aesthetic repertoire. In this case what truly matters is “prolixity” with intelligent and subtle repetition of examples belonging to the same kind of relationship, rather than “thrift” promoted by traditional social sciences.

Symphonic social science is based on three assumptions:

- re-proposition of multiple and various data sources;
- emphasis on correlation;
- use of visualization.

These assumptions not only break with conventional social science approaches but also are the hallmarks of BD analysis (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013; Kitchin, 2014; O'Neill & Schutt, 2014). Symphonic social science could be what the social sciences were waiting for to make the best use of BD analysis. *Symphonic authors* (Savage, 2014) took years to analyze all projects. This type of approach involves the pursuit of more complex research questions and an analysis of more data flows, easier longitudinal researches to implement and the use of large and different datasets. Using a symphonic approach means having a new view of data, method and theory. Now more than ever, we must not forget that data need to be observed critically, that combinations of different strategies involves the use of a pluralist methodology (Savage, 2017), and that a symphonic approach to BD requires abdicative reasoning which focuses on the interaction of co-producing data, method, and theory (Fotopoulou, 2021).

The next paragraph will be about the birth of BD and their worldwide interest, focusing on the existing nomenclatures that seem to be connected to them.

### 3.2 *A Scraping on the development of international interest*

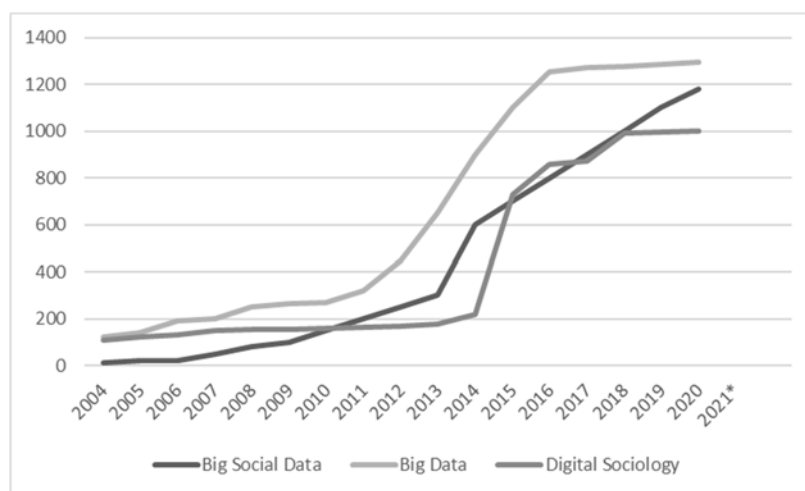
Having outlined how BD are used within the discipline, the next step is to understand how and when the interest in Big Data, Big Social Data and Digital Sociology develops from an international point of view. Graph 1. is the result of a

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<sup>6</sup> Open and accessible database on the historical evolution of the world distribution of income and wealth (<https://wid.world/>)  
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revision of re-elaborated raw data extracted thanks to Google Trends<sup>7</sup>. The data on the Big Data trends, Social BD and Digital Sociology have been extrapolated and reworked separately and then a comparison was made. Observing the curves, it is clear that the interest in Big Data increases between 2011 and 2012; whereas the interest in Big Social Data (term chosen to differentiate and specify the use of the latter within the social research) and Digital Sociology increases between 2013 and 2014. The comparison of the curves made possible the space-time identification of the following analysis: (2014-2020).

GRAPH 1. Interest in Big Data, Big Social Data and Digital Sociology



Source: Google Trends 18/05/2021

### 3.3 Methodological note

After having reconstructed through the reference literature the creation and development of the use of Big Data in the field of social sciences and having observed through Google Trends how the “world’s interest” has shifted through the years, the next objective is to reconstruct a mapping under the point of view of authors, publications, research centers, networks of relations and conferences through an analysis of the metadata in the most relevant scientific publications.

For the analysis of metadata, which follows a standard/quantitative approach, it has been decided to work on an integrated database built with the papers extracted from the databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Journals that mostly dealt with the “Big Data” phenomenon: Journal of Sociology (AIS), Journal of Big Data, Rassegna Italiana di Valutazione (RIV), Journal “Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale”. The decisions of adding some journals to the database extracted from Scopus and Web of Science derives from personal experience and from the main readings that have compelled the writers to create such mapping. The database has been constructed in various steps: I: The first step included the observation of all the filters that the platforms Scopus and Web of Science use to reduce the number of articles useful in achieving the objective of the researcher. II: After having identified all the filters useful to the current work, it was decided to use the Scopus platform to extract all articles that met the following criteria: the term “Big Data” in the keywords; networks “Italian”

<sup>7</sup> Google Trends is a search trends feature that shows how frequently a given search term is entered into Google’s search engine. This tool is for web scraping and enables the collection of data available online about the words in analysis.

(which enabled the extraction of not only Italian authors but also articles in which at least there is an Italian co-author; field “Social Science”; language “English and Italian”; Range “2014 -2020”. III: scraping of articles taking into account the same filters on Web of Science database (use of the same filters plus filter “sociology”, see § 3.5), n.70 extracted articles. IV: addition of extrapolated articles from the identified Journals. VI: final database construction (n. 260 of which 70 linked to the field of sociology).

As will be shown in the coming paragraphs, all the analyses that follow are the result of personal processing on the database.

#### 4. A mapping of empirical evidence: from the social science scenario to the focus on sociological discipline

##### 4.1 Publications

Looking at publication dates of all the articles, on the database it appears that 65,8 % of them were published in the range indicated by Google Trends analysis (2014-2020). From an international point of view, Computer Science and Engineering are the fields where BD are mostly used; the field of study of social sciences is placed in the third place for use with a total of 54.594 articles out of 321.905. Then, the fields of medicine, mathematics, agriculture, psychology and chemistry.

On the other hand, the analyses that follow are the result of integrated databases built on the extraction criterion mentioned that takes into consideration mainly Italy and collaborations between italian authors and international authors<sup>8</sup> (n. 190 for the field of social sciences and n.70 for the specific field of sociology).

FIGURE 2. Keywords Theme Cloud of the analysed in the field of social sciences



Source: Our database elaboration; Excel

TABLE 1. Frequency of keywords articles

Social Science Keywords	Freq.	%
Complexity	142	0,15
Algorithms	124	0,13
Machine Learning	114	0,12
AI	105	0,11
Hybridization	95	0,10
Human-machine Interaction	76	0,08
Facebook	47	0,05
Twitter	38	0,04
New Data Culture	29	0,03
Social Science	28	0,03
Social Researcher	19	0,02
Other	133	0,14
Total	950	1

Before introducing the authors, it was decided to do an analysis of the keywords that the authors themselves have inserted to describe their work when the contributions were published. Following a lexical approach, it is possible to understand what the topics are. Figure 2. shows that, in addition to BD keywords, the field of social sciences mainly refers to the concept of complexity, algorithms, the world of digital with social media, human-machine interaction (Roth & Luczak-Roesch, 2020) but also to more specific concepts such as “hybrid”, a new culture and artificial intelligence theme that is increasingly linked to the use of BD in different disciplines. Therefore, in the field of social sciences, the main reference is to the sociotechnical apparatus and the technical analysis of the use of BD rather than empirical fields of use and social repercussions.

### 3.2 Authors

The analysis shows that there are 563 authors of which 62% are only italians, while the remaining 38% have worked with international scholars.

Among the most significant italian authors stand out Davide Bennato, Gabriella Punziano, Paolo Parra Saiani, Biagio Aragona, Felice Addeo, and Fabrizio Martire. In particular, Davide Bennato (2016) studied BD in relation to the birth and development of computational science, up to the interest in Digital Sociology. Gabriella Punziano not only focused on the analysis of online texts (2017) but also on the birth and development of Data Science as a new branch of sociology. Over the years, Paolo Parra Saiani has worked in order to understand the advantages and disadvantages of using BD in social sciences (2016). Felice Addeo (2019) focused on Bds, but also on Digital Sociology with reference to *Online Social Research*. On the other hand, Biagio Aragona (2018) studied the integration of institutional databases with online ones, describing this union as BD. He also dealt with new strategies to insert BD into the evaluation research. Finally, Fabrizio Martire (2018) focused on *Food Print* analyses, emphasizing that BD analysis is not intrusive. He later pointed out the possibility – thanks to BD - of integrating social sciences and biological sciences into *biosocial surveys*.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most important international collaborations, some working groups can be seen: the group formed by Antoniou C., Barceló J., Breen M., Bullejos M., Casas J., Cipriani E., Ciuffo B., Djukic T., Hoogendoorn S., Marzano V., Montero L., Nigro M., Perarnau J., Punzo V., Toledo T., van Lint H, which in a volume entitled “*A Utility-based Dynamic Estimation Model that Explicitly Accounts for Activity Scheduling and Duration*” published in 2017, studied the behavior of users through an estimation model based on the actions of users themselves, all based on a simulation model; the group formed by Caputo F., Walletzky L., Štěpánek P, which dealt with the concepts of *smart community* (2016) and sociology of health (2015); and the group formed by Ayma V.A., Ferreira R.S., Happ P., Oliveira D., Feitosa R.,

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9: For further details, see the full contributions of authors: (Addeo, F., (2019), Doing Social Research on Online Communities: The Benefits of Netnography, in Athens journal of social sciences. vol. 7. p. 9-38; Aragona, B, (2017), Types of Big Data and designs of evaluation research, in Rassegna italiana di valutazione, 68(2):48-62.; -(2016), Big Data or data that are getting bigger?, in Sociologia e ricerca sociale, 109(3): 42-53; Bennato, D. (2008), Le metafore del computer. La costruzione sociale dell'informatica, Roma, Mantelmi; -, (2015), Il computer come macroscopio, Big Data e approccio computazionale per comprendere i cambiamenti sociali, Roma, Franco Angeli; Martire, F & Pitrone, M.C., (2016), Lo studio dell'opinione pubblica al tempo dei big data. Una sfida per la ricerca sociale, in Sociologia e ricerca sociale, 109(3). 102-115; Mazzaro, F & Punziano, G., Online Textual Data and Political communication analysis, in AIS, Journal of Sociology: Aprile 2017 (11): 143-158; Parra Sainai, P. (2016), Le risorse e il controllo. I big data oltre il mito, in Sociologia e ricerca sociale, 109(3): 28- 41).



Costa G., Plaza A., Gamba P, which analysed both Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Data Science trying to create an interdisciplinary mash-up between computer science, social sciences and mathematical methods.

The authors mentioned above make a step forward from a methodological point of view: due to their studies there is a shift of interest from mixed methods approaches to multidimensional studies, where each discipline can help to the knowledge formation of the phenomenon taken in analysis. All this is possible thanks to the collaboration between authors, universities, and institutes (see also §3.3, 3.4) we are perhaps witnessing the era of a second “new data culture” Aragona (2008). The author, reworking on the thought of Sgritta (1988) describes the social, technological, and institutional<sup>10</sup> path that statistical system has crossed until its current institutionalization. Today, it looks like that the same path is being crossed by new types of data available. As for the national statistical system - wanted and organized by various disciplines such as economy, jurisprudence, and administrative sector - the meeting between different disciplines and the application of BD analysis to the study of various sectors of society can be a strong incentive to create what we could call as the *second new data culture* ; justified both by interdisciplinary collaborations of the authors mentioned above, and specifically by the networks of relations that have been established thanks to this phenomenon. The collaboration between disciplines, institutions and authors -both nationally and internationally- can only strengthen the already predominant BD phenomenon.

Parra Saiani (2016) point of view is also interesting: he focused on how cuts to research funding (specifically on cuts to social sciences fundings in favor of hard sciences), can see in BD a new opportunity for social research, which goes beyond the use of them to study the new social complexity in the era of Internet and social networks, but as a mean of responding to the shortfall in financial resources that cuts produce. Again, collaboration seems to be the answer: an extracted database through an online scraping technique can not only be used -as the traditional statistical databases- by several scholars but can also contribute to the integrated study of a hypothetical analysed phenomenon. It is the case of Fabrizio Martire (2016) study, which focuses on public opinion: the same database could be used to make specific lifestyle analyses or could be analyzed to design a new campaign from a political marketing point of view, but also for an initial market analysis.

Although it is difficult to separate authors, networks, and research centres for more detailed information, the main research centres and groups working on BD are as follows.

### 3.3 Research centres

In order to create a mapping of the research centres, it has been necessary to start from the universities that are working to integrate the study and use of BD into their curricula. Figure 3. shows that the Italian regions that host universities dealing with BD are mainly Lombardy and Lazio. In fact, these regions are also connected to each

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<sup>10</sup> See: Legislative Decree no. 322 of 6 September 1989, enacted in implementation of the directive contained in Article 24, Law 400/88, with which Sistema statistico nazionale (Sistan) – National Statistical System was established; reform introduced by Law 81/93, on the company’s administrative management and the formal recognition of some profiles belonging to the Third Sector (Pavolini, 2003); Decree no. 322/89 which, together with welfare state reform, strengthened the link between production of statistical data and their practical use in the definition of policies and the study of social phenomena in the territories (Aragona, 2008, p. 161).

other thanks to conferences and publications. Regarding Lombardy, Bicocca and Cattolica universities are the most involved ones: in recent years, they have been working with the Department of Communication and Social Research of Sapienza University of Rome. Regarding Lazio, beside Sapienza, recently Rome Tre University has carried out an election campaign monitoring for the European elections of 26 May 2019, building an integrated online database thanks to the project “European election campaign 2019” where it was possible to monitor and archive the election campaigns of the leaders of all 27 countries; this is an example that the use of these large databases is applied in a wide range of fields research. However, it must be taken into account the statistical over-representation of Lombardy and Lazio, as they host a larger number of universities. In fact, while observing in detail Figure 3. it can be seen that almost all Italian universities are actually involved in these types of studies. Considering other regions, the University of Catania with a research group, led by Professor Davide Bennato, is one of the excellences in this field because for years it has been working with computational social sciences, web analysis and BD.

On the other hand, regarding the international scene, American universities turn out to be the most involved and for a longer period of time. This study starts from a theoretical consideration on symphonic sociology by Halford and Savage (Stanford). Nevertheless, also other universities stand out on this topic lately, such as King’s College London that is dealing with BD on several fronts: from Marketing to privacy.

Concerning research centres, one of the most interesting is Foundation Bruno Kessler (based in Trento) that in 2016 started to collaborate on BD studies with MIT (*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*). The Foundation is also popular for its involvement in healthcare and for the formation of the *Data Scientist*, a new professional. In recent years, also Gran Sasso Institute played its part in the field of social sciences.

Relationship networks established during the range of the analysis (2014-2020) will be shown below.

### 3.4 Research Groups and Relationship Networks established

It was decided to start from the Miur<sup>11</sup> mapping study published in June 2016 so as to analyze the research groups and relationship networks that have established over time.

Then, Miur identified three worldwide research groups that also constitute an important network (one is Italian): *EuroTech Universities*: Technical University of Denmark (DTU), École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), École Polytechnique (L’X), Il Technion, Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e), Technical University of Munich (TUM).

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<sup>11</sup><http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2016/bigdata.pdf>. Aim of the study: mapping reconstruction of the universities and institutes that deal with Big Data to analyze the progress of the phenomenon.

The Italian perspective on the use of Big Data in Sociological Field: Implications, Empirical Findings and an Impact Analysis on the Discipline

TABLE 2. Mapping of Italian Universities dealing with Big Data

FIGURE 3. Map of universities by region

Italian Universities using Big Data* Region	
Universities of Milan; Pavia, Bergamo; Brescia and Bicocca University	Lombardy
Sapienza, Roma Tre, LUISS, LUMSA and LINK Universities	Lazio
Federico II and Salerno Universities.	Campania
Universities of Florence and Pisa; Normale University	Tuscany
Alma Mater Studiorum University and Modena e Reggio Emilia Universities.	Emilia-Romagna
Padova and Verona Universities	Veneto
Turin University.	Piedmont
Salento University.	Puglia
University of Catania and Enna Kore University	Sicily
University of Calabria	Calabria
Basilicata University	Basilicata
Genoa University	Liguria
Gabriele d'Annunzio University	Abruzzo
Carlo Bo University	Marche
Perugia University	Umbria
Sassari University	Sardinia
Total: 29 Universities	



Source: Our database elaboration; Excel

This network currently involves several universities that aim to implement their analysis on BD and face the challenges of the digitalization of society. The network mainly deals with information technology techniques and engineering, but also healthcare, smart city, innovation, and artificial intelligence.

*European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT)*: Polytechnic University of Milan, Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, Universidad Politecnica de Madrid, Université Nice Sophia Antipolis, Technische Universität Berlin e KTH Royal Institute of Technology.

The EIT is an EU body created by the European Union in 2008 to strengthen Europe's ability to innovate. It is an integral part of Horizon 2020, the EU's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and uses BD-based research techniques in many of his studies.

*Michigan Data Science* : Institute which mainly deals with man-machine relationship. It includes several universities of the United States. According to the MIUR report (2016), the United States ranks first in the world for interdisciplinary investments.

The relations emerged from metadata analysis are as follows.

### 3.4.1 *Networks emerged from the database*

The analyses revealed 37 relationship networks based on 56 universities and 24 research institutes involved: 17 networks among universities alone, 18 networks between universities and institutes, and just 2 networks among institutes alone.

One of the most important networks is formed by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento and Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa (Mattoni & Pavan, 2018). They are dealing with political activism through BD and creating a clear net between political studies and social media. On the other hand, the network formed by the University of Cassino and the Link Campus University of Rome is studying digitalization of society so much that new single courses in digital sociology have been added to study programs. For the academic year 2019/2020, the Department of Social Sciences of University of Naples Federico II finally introduced a Master's Degree called Digital Sociology and Web Analysis. The most interesting indicator in this scenario is represented by the evolving interest towards higher education courses. In fact, among the networks which emerged in the analysis it is interesting to note that, out of four PhDs<sup>12</sup> in the field of BD, in addition to the Gran Sasso Science Institute<sup>13</sup> course, a new PhD course was inaugurated in 2016 thanks to the collaboration between the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, the Scuola Normale Superiore, the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, the University of Pisa, and the National Research Council- CNR.

Finally, regarding the relationship between universities and research institutes, it is very interesting to note how contributions from European centres can be the source of research funding. The universities that focused on the use of BD in social research are mainly Federico II of Naples, Sapienza University, and the Universities of Florence and Catania, which cooperate with several research centres such as ISTAT, CNR, ANVUR, CENSIS.

Also in this case, as for the authors, the collaboration between universities and institutes is a warning from the points of view of interdisciplinary, finance, and methodology. For example, consider bio-surveys and new ideas that might arise thanks to interdisciplinary. Starting from these considerations, it was decided to focus on sociology in order to analyse the impact of these new data on discipline.

### 3.5 *Specifications on the sociological discipline*

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, it was decided to focus on the sociological discipline. After having analysed 70 articles, comparing their topics, research questions and conclusions, it can be said that real conclusions do not exist neither at a national nor international level. Despite working on the "BD phenomenon" for a decade, in Italy there are still some scholars who do not agree on their use within the sociological field, whereas abroad, other scholars are open minded on their use. However, it is interesting to note that in conferences reports there is a high number of studies that have used BD, making redundant the discussion about their use. They have been used for a wide range of studies: from politics to the quality of life, but also social nets, emergency communications<sup>14</sup>, specific social

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<sup>12</sup> The other PhD interdisciplinary courses that are not focused on social research are those of the Department of Mathematics in the Universities of Ferrara and Insubria, and the Department of ICT in the University of Milan.

<sup>13</sup> An international PhD school and a center for advanced studies in physics, mathematics, computer science and social sciences.

<sup>14</sup> The emergency communication system and the analysis of interdisciplinary phenomena made with Big Data - is a very important contribution in the period in which work takes shape. In fact, a group of

networks. Moreover, on interdisciplinary studies, a widely discussed topic both in the last international conference of 2019 “Data Science and Social Research”, and in the XII National Congress AIS “*Sociologia in Dialogo: algoritmo, cervello, valutazione*” (Sociology in Dialogue: algorithm, brain, evaluation) held last January in Naples attended by scholars from different disciplines.

The theme cloud n.2 (Figure 4) shows the most relevant topics discussed in conferences held in Italy regarding the general field of social sciences. As it can be seen, the areas of application are very different: it is interesting to note how BD combine to public administration, healthcare, tourism and Smart Cities. The greatest innovation is to see words such as responsibilities, electoral forecasts, dialogue between university and industry because it suggests a departure from the statistical determinism with which BD are used in favour of sociological analysis. The authors reasoned on the advantages and disadvantages of using these data within the sociological discipline by testing them, using BD and evaluating their performance. All the extracted articles, especially review conference ones, are full of empirical evidence about their use.

Then, going into detail of the Cloud, it has been decided to collect the main aspects of the analyzed articles and review conferences, which, once again allowed to focus on the study and the use of BD in terms of interdiscipline and multi-method. Making a quick comparison between Key Words used in social science authors’ contributions and those of the specific field of sociology, it is interesting to note that in the sociological field the areas of application and the future of BD are in detail. Some examples also present in international studies: Big Data (Sandvik, 2020); Responsibility (Lane, 2020; Liu & Chen, 2021) Public Administration; Smart City (Meerstra-de Haan, Haartsen, Meier & Strijker, 2020; Willig, 2022); Tourism; Health; Facebook (Fussey & Roth, 2020); Twitter; Open Data (Westermeyer, 2020); Electoral Predictions (Chen, Wu, Hu, He & Ju, 2021).

One immediately realizes that in the field of social sciences there is more reference to the sociotechnical apparatus of the BD use rather than to its empirical repercussions. One immediately realizes that in the field of social sciences there is a reference to the sociotechnical apparatus of BD use rather than its empirical repercussions. Hence, under this point of view, sociology is – as symphonic authors say – one step beyond compared to other disciplines and context of studies in which the phenomenon in analysis has been studied in several ways.

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researchers at Johns Hopkins University created a georeferenced map of the spread of the Chinese virus COVID-19 also called Coronavirus, which shows the confirmed cases in real time and country by country, extracted from reliable sources such as WHO. In addition, some researchers at the Johns Hopkins Whiting School of Engineering have created an online dashboard that shows the daily progress of coronavirus infections globally. Website visited on 23/02/2020) <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.h>. A careful monitoring together with good communications can somehow help to keep under control the spread of the virus and keep citizens around the world constantly updated. Then, these data could be cross-referenced with other data of different studies. For example, they could be cross-referenced with social network data to study the spread of the virus and the reactions of users or with data that allow to study how media have addressed the problem to understand the level of alarmism transmitted by the extent of the phenomenon.

FIGURE 4. *Keywords Theme Cloud of sociological field*



Source: Our database elaboration; Excel

TABLE 3. Frequency of keywords *the articles in*

Sociology Keywords	Freq	%
Big Data	42	0,12
Responsibility	35	0,10
Public administration	29	0,08
Smart City	28	0,08
Tourism	29	0,08
Health	15	0,04
Facebook	18	0,05
Twitter	17	0,05
Open Data	14	0,04
Electoral Predictions	11	0,03
University & I D	7	0,02
Missing	105	0,30
Total	350	1

For these reasons, conclusions are considered as such just on formal grounds: actually, they represent the current level of existing art and scientific literature and an attempt to highlight the most interesting changes identified in the analysis of the works.

## 5. Conclusions

At the end of this study it is not difficult to recognize that the rapid growth and availability of digital data have led to a new development of social sciences and, more specifically, Sociology. The phenomenon of dating or quantification (Espeland & Stevens, 2008) allows to use data directly produced by social actors - like those extrapolated from social media – with a timing that never before would have been imagined. In this context, we are assisting to a new era of sociology (Brensinger & Eyal, 2021).

After analyzing the genesis of the phenomenon, the pioneering studies, the international interest and reconstructing a mapping of the use of BD in social sciences and sociology, the final aim of this study is to understand how the BD phenomenon had an impact on the scientific community. In order to do that, some key points taken from the contributions that constitute the impact of the utilization of BD in the sociological field will be used:

### *Birth of new branches of sociology*

*Digital Sociology.* *Digital Sociology* is a “sub-discipline of sociology that focuses on understanding the use of digital media as part of everyday life, and how these various technologies contribute to patterns of human behavior, social relationships, and concepts of the self”. The first scholarly article is “Digital Sociology” by Jonathan R. Wynn (2009). The author reflects on the ways in which digital technologies may influence not only daily lives but also sociological research, teaching, and sociologists. In 2012, the British Sociological Association approved a new study group in digital sociology; Goldsmiths, University of London, offers the first master’s degree in digital sociology; in 2013, following the conference of

the Australian Sociological Association the first book about Digital Sociology was published (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013); in 2015, there has been the first academic conference dedicated to this area of studies at New York University. Over time - underlines Deborah Lupton (2015, p. 43), sociologists have labelled media study in different ways: from *Cybersociology* to *Internet Sociology*, *Sociology of New Media*, or *Sociology*, *Sociology of digital media*. The peculiarity of Digital Sociology can be found in the greatest range of interests: it deals with cyberculture, the role of the media, the use of digital devices and the techno-social world. Therefore, it is a way of re-practising sociology; it is a kind of sociology that studies the challenge of digitalization, which recognizes the epochal turning point of the way sociology can be done. One of the easiest ways to explain what this is about is to think about the fact that it is no longer a study of *the* digital but a study *through* the digital itself, in all its forms. In short, putting in place the famous sociological imagination at the dawn of the third millennium (Santoro, 2018).

#### *Toolbox Implementations [some examples]*

*Data mining.* The term *data mining* refers to the procedure of extracting a part of the data (that have been chosen to analyze) from large datasets. In this case, it is important to emphasize that this procedure is useful within social research to build, for example, classification trees, study neural networks, use a cluster analysis technique on large datasets, for different types of regression, for association techniques, but also analyses in main components, factorial analyses, within SPSS, a software used in our field, or in the emerging field of social simulation. The innovation lies in the fact that this procedure manages to make researchers work on much larger numbers of cases even keeping on using classic techniques of social research (Zani & Cerioli, 2015; Kotras, 2020).

*GeoMapping.* One of the most interesting contributions on this technique is by Elena Battaglini (2015), who, in the fields of evaluation research and territorial development, focuses on the use of this technique for the analysis of the territorial system, the descriptive techniques of organization of the territory, but also for the analysis of territorial assets and ecological data. In this context, the maps show different types of information; but according to the author, the power of images is very important because it can help researchers to associate map's evidence and other types of information.

*Scraping.* Web Scraping is used for extracting data and information from websites thanks to automated processes. Unlike data mining, the main goal of this technique is to extract all available information, both textual and numerical. It is possible to use this technique within social research in different ways; for example, for studying all the online contents of an unknown topic when the research style is still uncertain, or for using other techniques in sequence, such as online *Sentiment Analysis* on the phenomenon (Marres, 2013).

*Hashtags Analysis.* Hashtags analysis on social media may have different functions. First and foremost, this kind of analysis can be both quantitative and qualitative. Statistic for recurring words can be analyzed quantitatively as well as some interpretations can be extracted from these words to understand the contexts meant by users who published the hashtag.

*Netnography/cyber-ethnography.* In recent years, thanks to netnography, anthropology has experienced a kind of internal revolution; in fact, it is defined as the discipline that studies relational dynamics, opinions, habits, digital communities. The term was coined by sociologist Robert Kozinets in 2010 to denote the use of naturalistic observation techniques on the web. This word is a neologism born by combining the words ethnography and internet and has different fields of application: from Tribal Marketing to digital ethnography studies, as in this case (Addeo, 2019).

*Web Content Analysis.* Web Content Analysis, as an analytical perspective, showed the potential for developing a new type of content analysis. From the development of the Internet, statistical techniques and other types of quantitative analyses, have dominated research for years. Thanks to the development of this new type of content analysis, qualitative techniques are regaining power. The subject to analysis are both different socio-cultural contents and simple online texts.

### *New professionals*

*Data Scientist.* The Data Scientist is a new professional role. An expert in statistics, computer science and mathematics, who thanks to its technical skills helps to solve problems that underlie disciplines such as sociology, marketing, biology. Also, in this case, it is important the interdisciplinarity concept, which is about the transversal skills that anyone should have once joined such a complex team. The feature of this professional is to have a strong technical knowledge and adequate theoretical formation regarding to the field in which he/she operates. The research groups must produce a continuous dialogue between technical and sociological theory in order to avoid a statistical/computerised micro-reductionism.

### *A new kind of relationship with theory*

One of the first topics to consider when discussing the theory/method debate is the fact that, with BD, this becomes a hybrid relationship. The datasets used in the research, are not free from theoretical references because they are the result of a construction process; most of all, we must keep in mind that use and production are co-produced. On the one hand, the production process affects utilization but on the other hand, the need for utilization affects production mode. Moreover, researchers seek ways to use them in social research to produce knowledge. This relies on the fact that someone produces them. According to Neresini (2017), data become the process themselves.

According to the scientific community and sociology, the most important change is to consider “data” as the tools that allow us to get different points of view, and not to be the points of view that allow us to choose how to generate data. Once again, it should be emphasized that -as it is typical of postmodern society- also in this field is a beta phase. Scholars should keep on learning from the interdisciplinary method and work with different scholars who can help to maximize the benefits of these studies.



Only by mixing social theory, calculation, data and models in an innovative way, researchers can give a social processes clearer view, integrating new and traditional approaches into social research (Amaturo *et al.*, 2017; Cavagnuolo, Capozza & Matrella, 2021).

Another important topic to consider is the method of social research as social object. The idea is to theorize methods, aiming for a perspective in which society is produced by research methods and at the same time produces them. The methods in this co-production relationship are both material and social (Law & Ruppert, 2013), the so-called *methodological devices*. [...] Methodological devices, like any other device, “do things”. The methods of social research have a double social life: they are shaped by the social and at the same time, as social vehicles, make the social (Law & Ruppert 2013, p. 233). Savage (2017) states that, in this perspective, a methodological device is an assembly of artefacts, users, practices and ideas in constant change. For this reason, they themselves are subjects of analysis and have their own social life. Consequently, this last statement makes us think that method and theory can coexist; according to this point of view, theory is closely linked to method. Theory and method are in continuous co-production.

In conclusion, authors agree on the fact that sociologists, when doing research, become part of an assembly made of human components, data and methodological devices, which modifies as the research progresses. These different assemblies co-produce in turn creating a hybrid system of knowledge, interdiscipline and devices in constant change. In this perspective, the assembly become one of the first aims of the sociological analysis, creating as previously stated, a deadline of the socio-epistemological theory/method debate (Mauceri, 2016). Dissociating from the idea that BD would sanction the “end of theory” by Anderson (2008), sociology is, perhaps, one of the main disciplines that is able to provide a theoretical-interpretative contribution to data. In this context, sociology represents a strong interdisciplinary link that too often prefers statistical significance rather than interpretation; by working in this direction, hopefully in a few years, BD will simply be absorbed within the discipline and used -as we know- like other tools of social research that each time are chosen according to the object of investigation: Big Data should not simply “work” (Sabetta, 2017; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021), but they must generate value, a value considered in all its possible forms.

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# *De-Sanitising the 'New Normal': The Lived Experiences of 'Digital Research' in context of the COVID-19 India*

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the lived experiences and intricacies of the 'new normal' and digital research among social researchers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic India and its North-East Indian state of Assam. While the pandemic erupted a crisis around the globe, the developing nation of India encountered its bitter effects in the form of the lack of potent infrastructures to contain it. Besides, swift propagation of digital research by educational institutions emerged as a workable alternative for some scholars but posed graver consequences for others belonging to marginalised groups. Reflecting upon this, three themes emerged; the digital monolith, voices and its checkpoints, spacing and (de)spacing. The themes portrayed the complexities in the practises of research, the critical reflexive spaces of research actors and their social categorisation such as gender and class within the reality of digital research. Lastly, the themes paved the concept of 'academic non-membership' as a situation where researchers are often excluded from the nexus of academic communities on one hand and are powerless in conforming to digital research standards and technical institutional orders on the other hand.

**Keywords:** new normal, digital research, pandemic

## **Introduction**

As a massive force revolutionising space and time, digitalisation today offers major contributions to the contingencies of living life as well as revisioning conventional practises of knowledge, social realities and material consciousness. The genesis of this argument reaches deep with scholarships on digital technology-enabled socio-economic developments, artificial intelligence set-ups and one of the most complex issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-material structure of the 'new normal' – 'digital research'.

With a threat to human existentialism, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 surpassed and barrelled approximately 114 countries across the globe. Its contagious origin, the Novel Coronavirus, propelled the weakening of social institutional functions and threatened human sustainability (Abidoye *et al.*, 2021; Blanco *et al.*, 2022); besides de-stabilising comprehensions of conventional social research<sup>1</sup>. Across such ruptures, debates on digital ethnography triggered implications for reorganising disarrayed academic frontiers. Digital ethnography is defined as a methodology for exploring societies and cultures through digital spaces, online flows

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<sup>1</sup> While the pandemic generated grave threats to research across all disciplines, social research was the worst-hit relative to its nature and principles of exploring human behaviour.

and digital fields such as texts, videos, images and coded networks (Burrell, 2009). This has been envisaged as distancing away from armchair anthropology and challenging the social role of anthropologists as mere descriptive translators of cultures (Underberg & Zorn, 2013). The gradual adaptation of digital techniques by anthropologists, specifically those belonging to linguistic and cultural camps, sought digital ethnography as an effective medium to process off experiences and story-telling by inspecting texts and graphics informally anytime (Boellstorff, *et al.*, 2013). But, several others also criticised the idea of ‘field’ and its incoherence in digital research. Rather than weaving ‘field’ as a network of putting several actors and their versions together, digital research has been deemed as losing enough socialisation, shutting off significant details under the mechanization of technology and fostering ethical dilemmas with hazy research strategies (Airoldi, 2018). But, with a significant historical context of digital research, academicians nodded to it as the alternative amidst the pandemic. Works within the pandemic panorama dictated digital ethnography as sustaining conversations with the interlocutors through virtual chats, tools and video-calling platforms (Ghosh, 2020; Góralaska, 2020). Besides, as social research perspectives changes or adapts over time, field engagement also encounters transitions in relation to usage of technologies for inter-communication (Howlett, 2021). This school of thought has been conveyed and reproduced in developed countries such as the U.S and the U.K., as consubstantiation of the ‘new normal’ structure. However, in unveiling the universalised logic of ‘new normal’ as normalising the disorder of research practises, the intricate challenges of developing economies like India have been largely neglected. While grappling with challenges of digitalization during the pandemic, scarce scholarships explored digital research in the context of Indian academia. Instead, abrupt transition from physical to online systems in schools and institutes turned into cutting-edge debates for scholarships (Iivari *et al.*, 2020; Suneja & Bagai, 2021), if not digital research.

The intensity of the way in which the pandemic hit ‘research’ is different from the online education of school students. While teaching and learning partly worked with digital devices such as mobile phones and television set installations (especially in the rural areas) in India, social research with researchers’ multi-spaced respondents/ participants shrank. So, the ‘new normal’ remained a fragmentary development. It emerged within an existing crisis of ‘digital divide’ in India and its coping struggles, such as the ‘Digital India’<sup>2</sup> programme by the Government of India (Government of India, 2021). But, the political economy of digital access through public-internet, e-commerce and e-governance remained largely constricted within urban spaces and metropolis. Comprehending it as techno-politics, Anubha Singh (2021) deconstructs ‘Digital India’ as reshaping ideas of empowerment as individual responsibility while valorising the status quo of dominant caste, class and gender. The intersections were also overlooked throughout the dissemination of ‘new normal’ and digital research in India. On the other hand, development theorists referred to ‘new normal’ as a way of resilience, recovery and re-structuration after a state of social precariousness (Corpuz, 2021). Across such an expansion, several digital and social media platforms facilitated group-oriented interactions, work from home culture and knowledge of containing the Novel Coronavirus. This indicated structural commonalities across developed and developing countries where a

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<sup>2</sup> A flagship programme for transforming India into a digitally empowered economy and society.

combination of the 'new normal' and 'digitalization' was validated for promoting health security and sustainability. But, parameters of such commonalities portray some differences with regard to India and its long historical account of digital discrimination against lower-income sections. This has raised concerns like that of 'digital divide' since the 2000s, where millions of people with regard to their marginalisation, caste/class, gender, education and intergenerational poverty are still considered to have no access to the Internet, mobile phones, etc. (Joshi *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, as per TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) in 2020, it has been estimated that over 70 percent of rural India has no access to Internet or Broadband facilities. Indian states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, projected the least number of Internet subscribers per 100 persons (Sharma, 2020). In addition, Assam, lying in North-East India, always underwent burdens of regional exclusion and digital divide as compared to other centralised Indian states (Singh, 2012). Such forms of spatial and regionalised inequalities have been further exacerbated by the gravest COVID-19 pandemic. Studies analysed how educators faced several challenges with the structured rules of digital world navigation, such as irregular schedules and eye-straining lecture modes. Inaccessibility to online classes due to lack of 4G smartphones, desktops or laptops among the students belonging to the lower-income families, disrupted their learning experiences, routines and motivations (Varma & Jafri, 2020; Chakraborty *et al.*, 2020). Also, the lack of training across specialised technical interfaces constrained opportunities for researchers and teachers during their coursework. This turned 'new normal' education culture as highly graded and contradictory.

Another pandemic facet draws upon the permanent closure of some schools in India that could not survive its repeated jolts, school drop-outs and lack of fees payment. Drawing across, if 'digital education' triggered scuffle over dismal infrastructures, digital research is a distant dream in a developing country like India and its peripheral North-East region. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 infer that across North-Eastern states like Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya, 48 percent of the students had no access to digital devices for continuing classes at home during the pandemic (Begum, 2022). While basic applications like WhatsApp and Telegram were used by the teachers to share notes, advanced video-platforms like Webex and Zoom were a complete miss. So, academic interactions were restricted to basic applications in some cases. But, no such scholarships exist on the status of digital research in Assam.

It is important to understand how lockdown and social distancing protocols snatched the aspirations of researchers for accomplishing their fieldwork and invited precarity on the completion of their doctoral and post-doctoral works. The researchers were repatriated back from their places of work to their homes with little or bare minimum access to library resources. Moreover, the researchers from poor backgrounds faced double burdens of relocating back to villages with inconsistent electricity and a lack of work environment. This dragged both primary and secondary data collection for social research to a dead end. While public and private funded institutions in India allowed researchers from material, physical and chemical sciences to be occupying institutional/hostel accommodations after the first wave of the pandemic, researchers from social science backgrounds were pushed to conduct their research within their homes. If 'field' for social researchers is largely assembled through sharing multiple experiences with their informants or shifting across intricate materialities, the social and institutional discourses of the COVID-19

pandemic pushed the horizon of the ‘fields’ out of the complex academic debates. Instead, swift legitimization of digital research in academic institutions without proper guidelines or handbooks, halted the careers of researchers. This also subtly de-legitimised social sciences as compared to material sciences and reproduced the methodological, theoretical or conceptual valorisation of raw scientific principles and development. Accordingly, though countries like the U.K. and the U.S. synchronised digital technologies such as Cloud, Internet-of-Things, Artificial Intelligence (AI) for research activities (De *et al.*, 2020), the ‘new normal’ in India is still begetting ambivalences, inequalities and distress among the research practitioners.

Through these assertions, digital research can be situated as a context rather than merely a methodology. This context not only influenced research activities but also reproduced ‘technological order’ and flows of power (Pathak, 2021); where control of information served as repositories of class-oriented consumption. The information transferred into the hands of the few possessing digital resources and networks for digital education (Rashid & Yadav, 2020), also overturned digital research into a passive bureaucratic hegemonisation. Besides, ‘new normal’ aided raw scientism, without comprehending ‘research’ as an identity beyond professional credit. ‘Researching’ needs to be framed as an embodied site of being and becoming while operating within a complex social, economic and political system.

A question now emerges is do digital research frameworks rightfully cater to the relationalities and communion of researchers with their participants? Even so, the post-modern anthropologists emphasised digital research’s flexibility in preserving relationships and interactions across distances and multiple spaces (Miller, 2018); this remains a distant passage for India, given its social complexities. Foregrounding this, the article puts forth empirical cases for exploring the limits of digital research in the North-East Indian state of Assam and gauges out voices and social meanings of such research amidst the ‘new normal’. It also analyses digital research as a stratifying order, entailing ‘academic non-membership’ for researchers lying on the other side of the ‘digital divide’.

### **Framework of the Study**

The study critically locates digital research and its complex institutional disbursement among the social science researchers in Assam. Drawing across this, the ‘academic non-membership’, has been proposed as a concept. But it has been achieved without a hypothesis. The concept primarily emerged through a grounded theory approach, where it has the ‘trait of being particularly suited for the exploration of not of static phenomena, but of the processes underlying those phenomena and their dynamics, understood in context’ (Tarozzi, 2020, p. 8).

The context here is the ‘new normal’ in India and specifically Assam, the North-Eastern state of India. In relation to this, the concept of ‘academic non-membership’ has been arrived at through vast set of data, collected through interviews, observations and field notes taken during multiple field visits. This attempt, however, aimed towards the integration of the perspectives of the author (researcher of the study) and the participants of the study while evoking varied meanings of the data and knowledge that emerged subsequently.

## **The Study Context: Assam**

Assam, one of the eight North-Eastern states of India<sup>3</sup>, perennially survived within a zone of peripherality and underdevelopment. Several ethnic revolts and anomalies in the mainstream media attention constructed the state as always lying in the lowest stratum of social, political and economic achievements, without much debate on the underlying issues of governance. Its boundaries are also defined as 'disturbed' areas (Government of Assam, 1955). Within this, while digital research tested time across the centric states of India, its roots in Assam remain in limbo. So, the case of Assam and researchers pursuing their research in few academic institutions here would serve as anti-thesis to the formulaic implementation of digital research.

The present study has been conducted in the Tezpur and Guwahati cities of Assam. Tezpur is a small city in the Sonitpur district and Guwahati stands as a metropolis in the Kamrup (Metropolitan) district of Assam. The latter, Guwahati, is also known as the largest circuit city that houses the capital of Assam known as Dispur, and serves as the seat of the State Legislative Assembly of the Government of Assam. But, the socio-topographical environment of Tezpur and Guwahati stand in contrast to each other in terms of digital distribution, transport, networking, finances and population. The Master Plan for Greater Guwahati 2025, prepared by the Government of Assam, includes developing digital infrastructures as a sub-goal within the larger framework of improving physical and social infrastructures (Government of Assam, 2022). In comparison, digital infrastructures in Tezpur did not rapidly evolve out from a state of underdevelopment. Lack of state attention and no corporate investments pushed this zone to obscurity. However, Tezpur and Guwahati also consist of reputed public-funded universities that admit researchers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in social science disciplines. But, the pandemic waves hurled massive challenges for research activities through irregular fellowships and abrupt (temporary) shutdown of university hostels.

Digital research invited new and unparallel challenges for researchers in Tezpur and Guwahati. The effects of the pandemic shook digital research projects in Guwahati, bringing it on a similar plane as Tezpur. With the implementation of lockdown, many researchers were forced back to their homes where survival turned into a primary challenge, lest 'research'. While 'digital support' was promised to researchers across several platforms, it did not work as expected. Later, in cases, institutional responses too ceased with no emails or information to support researchers in their academic activities, like participating in seminars/conferences or webinars. On the other hand, the researchers could not manage Broadband costs with the bare minimum stipend they received. So, digital research protocols halted their data collection, literature review process and submission of dissertations. It is against this backdrop that the enigmas related to the membership of researchers in academic communities would be explored.

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<sup>3</sup> The North-Eastern region of India comprises the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim.



## **Methodology**

### *Study Design*

This study was conducted in January 2021 and again resumed back in May 2021 due to curfew restrictions and social distancing protocols issued by the Government of India. The last phase of the study was conducted in January 2022. Before conducting the primary fieldwork, a pilot survey was conducted from November to December 2020 to assess the response rate for digital research. Later, primary responses were collected from those participants who participated in the pilot survey and some of the others they suggested. The succeeding interactions with the participants during the fieldwork further enabled the excavation of in-depth testimonies. Although the timing for the pilot survey and primary fieldwork was not a planned move, increasing Novel Coronavirus transmission and strict surveillance of police authorities outside residential complexes, influenced the decisions.

Relative to the research objectives of exploring the ways in which early-career social researchers perceive and negotiate with the institutional protocol of digital research in their mundane lives and uncovering the multiple ways in which digital research produced implications on their social identity as ‘researchers’ during the pandemic; a qualitative approach was followed. This approach proved relevant as it facilitated detailed interventions into the subjective narrations of the participants and their lived experiences (Patton, 2002), within the social formations of the ‘new normal’. The study as set in the context of a ruptured time strived more to represent an ‘event’ than merely politicising the cause and effect of actions. So, a cross-sectional design was implemented to place the study as a specific event and explore the interactive and psycho-social experiences of digital research among the researchers.

### *Data Collection*

Given the qualitative nature of the study, 50 one-to-one interviews were conducted with early-career<sup>4</sup> social researchers or research scholars belonging to the discipline of sociology, social work, anthropology, political science and cultural studies. The interviews took place in settings such as their homes, their rented rooms or their relatives’ homes during the first pandemic wave, through a semi-structured interview schedule. As accommodations within university campuses closed, a large chunk of researchers shifted back to their homes. This shift threatened their space of ‘research’ and turned homes into spaces of ambivalences and contested identities. To enable the participants to communicate perspectives without losing essences of rich details, both open and close-ended questions were used. The open-ended questions invoked responses on the everyday world of digital research and ‘new normal’, the mundane experiences of sustaining research at home, transitions in the course of their research, possibilities/constraints in academia and adaptation or crisis of academic existence during the pandemic. On the other hand, close-ended questions focussed on gender, age, years of research experience, stage of research careers, class and ethnicity, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> Full-time doctoral students with no central government administered scholarships.

With this, the inclusion criteria of the study involved researchers from social science departments of various public (state/central government-aided) universities. Public-aided universities in India stand a better chance of involving research scholars from various socio-economic backgrounds due to reasonable admission fees for Doctoral courses, provisions for free transportation services within campuses, free books in some cases and minimal accommodation charges. Also, the availability of financial schemes for researchers belonging to socio-economically marginalised communities while fulfilling the best possible criteria of pursuing their research from public-aided universities reflects a political economy of 'researching', different from the private universities. Even if private universities possess high-quality digital interfaces to support researchers, the admission fees for Doctoral courses are often set at an exorbitant rate to be afforded by researchers with no potent scholarships or stable familial incomes. This determines the way in which the social composition of the private universities might largely include upper-class researchers. With these considerations, out of the total 50 in-depth interviews, 30 interviews were taken from researchers belonging to lower-income backgrounds and 20 interviews were taken from researchers belonging to upper-income backgrounds (both from public universities<sup>5</sup>). Out of them, 20 were female and 30 were male researchers who belonged to the age group of 26 to 30 years. The participants who were from lower-income backgrounds also belonged to lower-caste groups and tribes such as Jaliya, Mahara, Garos, Rabhas and Adivasis, respectively. They hailed from villages and towns located mostly in the upper Assam region such as Kalbari Gaon, Chayani, Kohar Gaon, Udalguri, etc; while staying in university hostels and rented rooms in Tezpur and Guwahati. Since the pandemic made them shift or go back to their villages, the author interviewed the researchers when they booked rented rooms near their institutions or visited their relatives in Guwahati and Tezpur for work.

Furthermore, in assuring reliability and validity of the study, data were collected through a co-mixture of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The tracing of researchers was challenging during the pandemic, but snowball sampling technique sufficed. Since the author is herself a research scholar, she was acquainted with some researchers pursuing research from public-aided institutes at Tezpur and Guwahati, and asked them to refer to other researchers struggling with similar circumstances. She knew people and even professors from rural backgrounds with years of being in a research institute and forming social networks for academic exchanges. So, five known people of the author were asked to suggest research scholars from different socio-economic backgrounds, who were also later incorporated in the study. Besides, the purposive sampling technique enabled the author (researcher) to focus precisely on early-career social researchers affected by the phenomenon. Lastly, observation was also complemented through field notes taken during field visits such as reactions of participants to several other things and their work or living environment.

### *Data Analysis*

The data were collected in English and Assamese. The pilot survey illuminated that most of the participants were comfortable speaking English and Assamese. Besides English, Assamese is the official language of the state. It also functions as a

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<sup>5</sup> From the pilot survey findings, it has been inferred that researchers belonging to upper-income backgrounds might also join public-aided universities for its social recognition in the Indian context.

regional identity in itself (Sengupta, 2006). So, the author is well-versed in both English and Assamese, which worked as a viable communication link with the participants. With reference to the qualitative approach of the study, the narratives were collected in detail through intensive conversations on the paradigm of the problem. Accordingly, a thematic analysis was conducted for organising patterns across datasets and ‘make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences’ (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 2); of the research participants. The responses from the interviews were placed and documented in an MS-Word file (MS-Office 2019 version) for coding and thematic retrieval. The narratives were read and re-read for the generation of primary codes, secondary codes, refined codes and categories. Refined codes were placed in boxes adjacent to the narratives and later themes emerged with groupings of refined codes, relative to resemblances in statements and assertive opinions with reference to the context. In addition, it can be deemed as familiarising oneself with the collected data, generating initial codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing or presenting the outcomes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Furthermore, the author resorted to note-taking in the field. The validity of notes has been preserved while reading out emerging narratives to the participants and cross-checking critical points of concentration with them. So, instead of exploring digital research from a policy-based perspective, the study focussed on the ambiguities and negotiations of the researchers with the ideologies and actions of the ‘new normal’, culminating in processes of digital authority and forces.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher was well aware of uncovering the complex pain and trauma of the participants involved in the study. In most cases, the researcher faced significant dilemmas of hearing and writing emotions of the participants who were struck within a liminal status. This also posed challenges of being ‘reflexive’ and engulfed with personal dispositions as a researcher working amidst the pandemic. To address this, the research participants were informed about the aims of the study in great detail. Both verbal and written consent was taken from them to protect their data against manipulation and pseudonyms were used in place of their real names on request. Since the research was carried out during the pandemic spike in India, SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under the aegis of the Government of India, have been followed. While the interviews were conducted in spaces such as the rented homes of the participants or their relatives’ homes, N95 masks were used along with washing off hands upon the completion of the interview sessions and using disinfectants in sitting places. The participants responded and offered cooperation to the author, amidst the pandemic crisis. The health conditions of the author and the participants were well enough and no such virus transmission cases have been detected post the interviews.

### **Findings**

While society serves as the primary laboratory for researchers belonging to social sciences, the pandemic and post-pandemic period disclosed digital paradigms where essences of touch, feel and talk are mediated by technical impulses. In relation to

this, the findings of the study revealed the agential dynamics of such performances in the world of digital research.

*The Digital Monolith*

Digital research emerged as a social consensus for researchers during the pandemic period. But, this consensus transfers compliance for researchers while reinstating the politics of disbursing knowledge across academia. Academia, as known, serves as a structural edifice of equality, social justice and human rights deliberations. Students and researchers from diverse classes have been integrated into the disciplines and routines of academic institutions. As many participants claimed, academic spaces serve as repositories for researchers to establish contact with the wider academic community, beyond national boundaries. But, the pandemic ruptured the essence of such assimilatory spaces, that even virtual interactions could not fruitfully suffice. A researcher hailing from one of the remotest villages of Assam, grimly uttered:

*I and my colleagues used to participate in group discussions at our institutional library. That was very productive. We used to have tea! Tea somehow provokes more discussions to happen! (laughing!). But, with the pandemic, I lost my scholarship. Even if I possess a second-hand laptop, I lost most of the stuffs that are only possible on campus such as on-point discussions with my supervisor or accessing more projects. (S. Deori, 30 years)*

The pandemic and the repatriation of researchers back to their homes affected access to physical libraries, invested with acclaimed and expensive academic resources (books, journals or software). This generated more visible social asymmetry through the ownership and non-ownership of production in academic industries. Early-career researchers who began reviewing literature for their works and research proposals, stopped at a dead end. While researchers from upper-income families or doing part-time jobs could afford limited editions, others from lower-income families or availing minimal scholarships failed to accomplish this task. Mou, a researcher from Social Work programme of a public-aided university, remorsefully expressed:

*Institutional affiliation determines access to resources. Being a researcher located in Assam, we already have limited access to databases. I could not access a book by the Duke University Press due to my financial constraints. But, a colleague of mine, belonging to an affluent family, has her father to back her during this tumultuous time. She could secure lot of best-selling books. So, my research is halted! (Mou, 30 years)*

The pandemic and normalisation of digital research (as prescribed by institutions) generated grave threats to the crafts of the researchers. Apart from the transgressions of social systems, the anxieties and precarity comprehended through self-evaluation or by taking into account evaluation of others (local/global academic community); generated ambivalences in social status, irregular research routines and cognitive disarray among researchers within their institutions. Darshana, a researcher, stated:

*My credibility as a researcher was questioned in my institution. I could not execute digital research methods such as Google Forms usage for data collection or other means for my thesis. Nowadays, I also fail to process information! Lost! As you*

*already know, qualitative research requires immersive engagement with the participants while replenishing it over time. Digital surveys are absolutely ineffective as I don't possess a smartphone. Worst, I borrowed my neighbour's phone (chuckling)! (Darshana, 28 years)*

Technology influences the functions of social institutions and adaptations of people in a long run. While the pandemic carved a habitat for 'new normal', its implications for material and metaphysical consciousness of people's lives secreted fracture of mutual negotiations. Such form of digitalisation of social networks in turn generated starkly (in)equalising pedagogic relations.

Dekha, an early-career researcher dwells deep into the problem of digitalization:

*At my home, I tried my best to contact my supervisor through video-conferencing tools. But it was a failure. The interaction was a loss! Neither I could communicate to him properly what I was saying, nor he could. And my home is in a sub-urban area, which makes things worst. So, my relations with my supervisor strained. I could not help in his works too. (Dekha, 25 years)*

So, the 'new normal' cannot be iterated as a neutral alternative of sustenance. It is also an order determining social participation and depicting a stratifying force of disbursing 'means of knowing'. It (de)stabilises academic essences and multiple voices within it. In the context of Assam, digital research has not merely produced cross-cutting implications on the reflexive identity of the researchers but has de-territorialised processes of pedagogic interlocks.

#### *Voices and its checkpoints*

The structuration of the 'new normal' secreted antiphonies of language and silence. This antiphony bestowed unparallel effects on the voices of researchers and their complex interactions with that of the 'researched'. In a way, digital research subjects the 'researched' in a perennial zone of inaudibility. Many researchers specialising in qualitative research spoke about the interpretation and persuasion of speeches or indicators and intensities in the languages of the 'researched'. Moreover, questions on who, where and how can be investigated with sufficient intent of researchers' reflexive interpretation of his/her social location.

Devi, a researcher speaks:

*I am applying ethnography in my research and institutional fellowships have been very irregular and meagre since the pandemic. In this context, digital ethnography is something beyond my imagination. I don't have access to steady electricity here. Moreover, ethnography is not about collecting narratives, it is also about observing shifts in language, intonation and a deeper understanding of participants, which digital research cannot fulfil. (Devi, 27 years)*

While digital research worked as the only available mechanism during the pandemic phases, it can be rendered comprehensive as a substitutive method in combination with physical field-work design. Placing it as an independent intervention would be a challenge, which might rip off the essence of doing qualitative research. Acting on one's research objectives and the multiple ways of applying methodology (especially in the case of ethnography) involves bundling up

the social, political, economic and cultural valences, which establishes the consistency/validity of qualitative research. Bani, a researcher, describes her position:

*In digital research, your field, your research participants and your channel of accessing them would be heavily queued. You will only find typical groups of elite participants for your research. If your research is focussing on digital aspects such as exploring the usage of social media, then it is likely to be fine. But, otherwise no! Sitting at home during the pandemic and struggling to find participants possessing smart mobile phones, has certainly placed my identity as a researcher in jeopardy! Moi saage nijok sinibo nuaru<sup>6</sup> (I think I cannot identify myself!). Also, due to technical glitches, one of my conferences went horrendous! (Bani, 26 years)*

Digital research disposed the status and role of researchers into a zone of liminality. The 'liminal' re-construction of their identity has shaped the performance of their roles as non-academics (struggling for digital connectivity at home) yet within the virtual space and power relations of the bourgeoisie university administration. Their liminal voices encumbered emotive aspects of their identity, which suffered enough with the 'complex trauma' of the pandemic. The final blow emerged with the rapid shifting of jobs for resisting hunger. Durga, a researcher, stated:

*In the first wave, I was ruined! I had to rush to my village with no other means of furthering my career. A sense of connection was lost between me and my research participants. Every time I had to report my progress to the Research Committee, I had answers like 'Due to the pandemic ... my field-work halted!'. I tried contacting participants by phone, but they were themselves vulnerable. I remained a researcher for administration, but not for myself. Even administration people were asking me to pay fees through online mode. My family was going through a financial crisis and I set up a tea shop for survival. Couldn't find the 'new normal'! (Durga, 30 years)*

As a comparative assertion, researchers from affluent backgrounds could not only access laptops, fax machines and smartphones but could also partly continue their research by travelling in their personal cars and arranging suitable accommodations near the field whenever necessary. This ensured an attempt toward digital research while being hierarchically placed at the upper stratum of academic organisations. Digital research secured a mode of belongingness and achievement for them, within the 'new normal'. The 'new normal' refurbished the recognition of the researchers who could monopolise their social capital to work. Shanti, a researcher from affluent background stated:

*In a developing country like India, more than half of the people are living below poverty line. Although I faced the problem of non-physical field participation, I would still consider myself in a much better position. I not only possess digital gadgets but also good connectivity with top-notch officials. This facilitated contact with my research participants. I can buy Internet packs regularly and can at least have a spacious room to work. How many people can afford that? (Shanti, 28 years)*

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<sup>6</sup> A phrase in Assamese has been used to express complex emotions of self-alienation.

So, digital research lies within the domain of ambivalence and exploration. While it can be fixed as an alternative methodology for social research, it affects the long-term legitimacy of ‘research actors’, mostly from marginalised backgrounds. Within the technocratic stimulation of information control and exchanges, digital research also reproduces class barriers and (de)neutralises the spatial paradigm of academic practises. So, the assimilation of digital research and the ‘new normal’ is no less than a hegemonic construction that dissects the voices of ‘research’ among a spectrum of researchers, and negates role-relationship of others within the dominant pejorative.

### *Spacing and (de)spacing*

As an evolving law-like formulation of social association, the ‘new normal’ outlined subtle prescriptions of spatial coordinates and who can be legitimately placed within that ‘space’. These spaces functioned as a cross-section of power and monopolisation that produced certain implications for ‘research’ activities and ways of ‘doing’ it. While digital research emerged as the way out, the academia favouring it could not dwell deep into the purview of gender stratification, division of labour in domestic spaces and baggage of caring or nurturing as a feminine responsibility. Mansi, a researcher, uttered:

*Since the pandemic shut my university down, I failed to carve a workspace for myself at home. I had to help my mother-in-law in household chores and faced immense difficulty everyday in negotiating my work. It even affected my motivation. Being a woman also places me as a caretaker of the household. Similar things are not expected from my husband. Even if I sit with my work, all look upon me as a person who is not willing to help in running the household! (Manshi, 30 years)*

Researching and performing research within one’s own zone of passion requires a space. This space is not merely about material manifestation of organising a process, but also a metaphysical consciousness of finding one’s own being within one’s work. Several participants uttered about the constraints of ‘reflexive’ workspace amidst the pandemic. They referred to institutional libraries or reading rooms as workspaces where social interactions with colleagues enabled them to access their subjective and objective dialecticism. Haba, a researcher and a member of an ethnic community named Adivasi, spoke:

*I still remember my physical interactions with other colleagues. I miss it so much. We used to discuss a wide range of topics and they used to help me with a range of ethical issues pertaining to research. One day, while I was thinking about ‘how do I take notes when participants are remorseful about something’, one of my friends told, ‘See, this is an art. You have to see yourself from your social location’. See, these discussions can never happen on video-conferencing platforms. Moreover, I am an Adivasi. I received this opportunity with my hard work. But expectations for digital research are certainly drifting me apart. (Haba, 28 years)*

In a way, intellectual risk-taking formed the part and parcel of social research during the pandemic. This has been encountered with regard to participants’ voices, their complicit spaces and capacities of transferring narratives through digital mediums. In relation to the observations, it can be inferred that digital mediums can be operated or rearranged according to the wishes, crisis, gendered roles and socio-cultural injunctions. Even, the inability to utilise digital mediums for research turned

into a sanction for non-inclusion in academia, such as cracking jokes on digitally 'naïve' researchers. Sulekha, a researcher in her 30s added:

*Digital mediums are shaped through gendered binaries. It is useful at times. But, it is also difficult for a woman respondent from a remote area to reach the hillock for accessing networks and contact me for providing a long interview. She might have thousands of household chores and her kins would maintain constant surveillance over her phone and perhaps be sceptical about 'who is calling' her. Besides, I am not much experienced when it comes to digital devices. So, I feel left out! (Sulekha, 29 years).*

'Digital divide' and its dissemination between researchers and their participants problematises integration between them. Many participants stated that their space with their participants has been threatened by the starkness of pre-indicative social inequalities. Their use of digital gadgets invited non-responsiveness from their participants. The obscurantism, uncertainty, and cognizance of the digital research paradigm made it difficult for research actors to make a sense of their assertion or what Stanley Cavell (1995) states as conversations of justice. Himen, a researcher, states:

*I know the relational space with my participants have collapsed. When they saw me with my gadget, they scorned me saying, 'we don't know all these!'. It is really difficult to communicate. I don't know how to make it right! Everything seems bleak. Earlier when I physically went to the field, they were so happy upon seeing me. Now, they feel disturbed by my virtual face! (Himen, 28 years)*

So, digital research in social sciences is more complex than physical-field research. While physical-field research involves varying ontological turns in defining and redefining costs and exchanges for research actors, it also oscillates across dynamic realisations. It too secretes gendered asymmetries. But digital research constrains engagement with a 'vocational' form of research while physical research offers more agentive understanding and reflexive turns of relationality.

### **Discussion: Towards 'Academic Non-membership'**

A more telling analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic depicted abrupt transcendence of social systems and rupture of prior known modes of social interactions, group-oriented associations and physical connectedness. Against this, the dramatic effect of 'new normal' flourished throughout the globe with the rhetoric of re-development initiatives and positive well-being. As been disbursed, the 'new normal' erupted as a ground-breaking framework for not only rearranging social, economic and political systems but also lived digital realities. It has also been argued that digitalisation blur the frames between the formal and informal learning and offers leisure tools for academic purposes, such as chat rooms, blogs etc. (Nilsberth *et al.*, 2021). While this promised an emergency education, digital research has been certainly different. The structural anomalies of penury and excess in a country like India affected millions of researchers at the junctures of their social, academic and personal lives. This has been explored from the themes deciphered in the study.

Digital research appeared as a transitional force for conventional pedagogy. The face-to-face interactions and negotiations between the supervisors and researchers



function as an act of communion and exchange of embodiments. These evocations through body language and gestures offered several spaces for producing ‘research’ as an academic activity and an aspiration. But digital research worked more as a ‘digital monolith’ (first theme). This de-linked the communion between researchers, their supervisors and the products of their research. As a deemed necessity, although digital research or ‘stay at home’ research sustained day-to-day management of research activities (Kokkinakos *et al.*, 2016); it also remained distanced. The shared epistemic relevance within such remote modes suffered from several problematic orientations, ambivalences and controlled voices. As narrated by many participants, the lack of stable electricity and broadband connections in their home-villages, their repatriation back from the institutes, the lack of access to digital libraries and their stalled relationships with their supervisors, all resulted in the dissemination of digital research as an authoritative model. Deeper into it, it can also be analysed that the ‘new normal’ project of digital research is far from the normative and pedagogically rich opportunities for researchers belonging to the socio-economically marginalised groups in the social complex of India. It can be depicted as a politico-economic project of reproducing power relations or class-based stratification and scripts Global North-Global South divide in academia. More stable facilitation of digital research in the Global North or developed nations has subtly led to the blurring of socio-economic and historical specificities of countries in the Global South, specifically India. This can also be argued as how culture, powerlessness and consumption of information are intricately linked to each other (Alexander & Smith, 2020). Some participants stated that their remote existences, their habitat close to nature and their agricultural ways of life kept them priorly away from the practises of technology.

In exploring the reach of digital research in the context of the ‘new normal’, an imperative move would be to decipher its residues in shaping the world-view of the researchers. Digital research throws into disposal a reality that exists not merely in the immediate but across the interlocking layers of social formations. The second theme of ‘voices and its checkpoints’ highlights this through the testimonies of social researchers living in Assam. Deconstructing the linear view of research as a rigorous methodological and theoretical endeavour, some participants claimed research as their habitual behaviour. They indicated it as a tool of replenishing their reflexivity as actors of research – going to the field, talking with people, forging ties, photographing them and unravelling the ‘unknown’. This has been an empowering and liberating process for them in terms of immersing in an area where their social locations would be affirmed and contested over time. Such constructions of social meanings have been heavily constricted throughout digital research applications in universities. Although digital research has been an alternative amidst the pandemic, university administrators ‘announced the “switch-to-online” mode, with the foggiest ideas about curriculum, ways of transactions and pedagogy’ (Pathak, 2021, p. 3).

However, the pandemic phases brought a dramatic rhetoric of resilient adaptability and threw into disposal a conflict between one’s embodied and extrinsic identity of fieldwork. Where life seemed to be threatened, researching required a manifesto of continuum and digital research came as an appeal or configuration for post-pandemic research in social sciences. While the argument seemed reasonable to an extent, the context-dependency of such an approach has been largely ignored. Institutes and universities in India started off-shooting online transaction systems with abrupt decisions and holding virtual sessions with high-tech devices. In a way, ‘new normal’ and digital research emerged as something beyond the ‘normal’ or a

channel of facilitating the stark logic of capitalistic accumulation. Several big-data applications were relaunched in India during the pandemic with state interests. It is also where Telecom and IT (Information Technology) policies made strides after the ventures of neo-liberalism in India around the late 1990s. But such services are still lagging behind in its equalisation. In a recent enumeration by the 5<sup>th</sup> National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2020, a significant share of the 'digital divide' has been traced; while percentages in urban areas are slightly higher at 56% of women and 73% of men using the Internet, rural scenario has shown worst records at 34% of women and 55% of men (Asia, 2020). So, it can be analysed that digital research within the 'new normal' evoke an expression of social inequality reproduced through the institutional monoliths of academic administration and control of knowledge.

The participants, from sociological backgrounds, rummaged that digital research constricted the choices of their research area. With limited access to 'smart' digital technologies by the researchers belonging to lower economic status, their roles as 'participants' in their research amidst the pandemic, got scrapped. So, research as an act of synergy and passion for the researchers received massive blows with digital research. The lack of control over the products of research led to an alienation from their identity as researchers. This also constricts 'personhood', which works through research and recognition of one's work across national and international borders. Personhood, Miles Little (2011) suggests, 'have physical, cognitive, emotional and moral dimensions ... is thus also the sense of agency, the sense of what it is to be this willing, choosing and acting entity, as experienced by the person and by the people with whom she interacts' (p. 38). In a way, digital research reduced this. It reproduced the idiosyncrasy of research as a structured administrative work with strict norms and protocols. For researchers, the dialectical interaction between their creative pedagogies, passions and promises of social mobility for rewards remained short-sighted. In many instances, participants found it enormously difficult to share their research findings through AI (Artificial Intelligence) enabled platforms such as Webex.

Many participants were of the view that digital research can work as a secondary or substitutive methodology, rather than a primary one. Furthermore, the state policy in Assam and its negligible intervention in digital infrastructures elevates such crisis. Until now, no strong plans, data, or reports exist on the status of digital education in Assam, if not digital research. Many participants belonging to the remote villages of Assam stated that the 'new normal' for them had always been physical mobilisation rather than a digital one. Leaving their research work behind, many went to their agricultural fields to collect fruits and vegetables for selling in the nearby 'haat' (market held regularly or weekly in rural India). On the other hand, many participants from upper-income backgrounds had better access to certain accommodations near their field or the target population. In that case, even if digital research was not directly applied, technology helped them in gathering high-quality secondary data and they in turn helped their participants with some Broadband facilities. So, this perpetuated 'an established system of classifying groups; a complex of social [*state and economic*] institutions that generate observed inequalities which unequally distribute societal resources (such as income and power)' (Oyekola & Eyitayo, 2020, p. 126).

Furthermore, encounters with the participants also illustrated the 'gendered' script of technological practises and the intersectional complexities of gender, class, and ethnicity in accessing digital devices. This has certainly been an overlooked

point of focus in the realm of digital research. While exploring the third theme on 'spacing and (de)spacing', several participants stated that a man sitting with a laptop might connote contrasting meanings in relation to division of labour within the households than a woman who performs this similar act. This can be placed within the gendered social system, which marks inequalities in realising agencies for men and women. Using laptops and smartphones can be socially decoded as leisure time for women who intend to refrain from care work and domestic chores, which is more culturally valorising. These social expectations or organisation of biological and sexual norms often (de)legitimise and ambivalently regularise the role, identity, positions of work, and prestige of women researchers compared to their male counterparts. In a way, while on one hand, digital research invokes the broadening of lenses to a vast set of national and transnational contexts, it delimits the envisioning of this tangent where gender structures technological use and its essence in the mundane world of one. In relation, a majority of the women participants iterated phrases like performed a lot of unnecessary household work, disruption of workspace, no similar expectations of home chores from husband, etc. This can further extend debates in terms of whether technological intervention is liberating in an absolute fashion or falls within what Judith Butler would analyse as the 'gendered' script of doing digital research, that is the repeated stylised acts within a socially regulated structure (Butler, 1990).

A question pops up on whether digital research can uncover the narratives of the research participants in a sensorial manner. In several instances, women researchers from remote areas found it hard and extremely difficult to communicate with their participants during the pandemic. They often complained about the broken cellular-network towers in their areas, resulting in ruptured or unclear communication. In a way, while social research needs to be conducted with a 'reflective, experiential and critical' lens (Rabinow, 1977, p.5); such lenses have been constrained across digital mediums which (de)stabilised researchers' own location and knowledge.

So, the above three themes suggest the concept of 'academic non-membership' that emerges to the brim. In stretching towards 'academic non-membership'<sup>7</sup>, it can be connoted as the manifestation of the macro-authoritarian digitalised processes or fetishisation of the 'digital', 'virtual', or the 'abstract' corporeal world. In other words, 'academic non-membership' can be referred to the material (overt) and non-material (covert) exclusion of pedagogic members<sup>8</sup> from the social, digital and academic structure of activities, conventions, rituals and celebrations. It is a situation where one gets distanced from the larger nexus of the academic community while being powerless to conform to digital research standards and the technical order of institutions. For instance, a researcher might not possess institutionalised access to important academic events due to his or her repeated failures in participating in digital platforms. This might condense to liminal existences, graded assimilation and

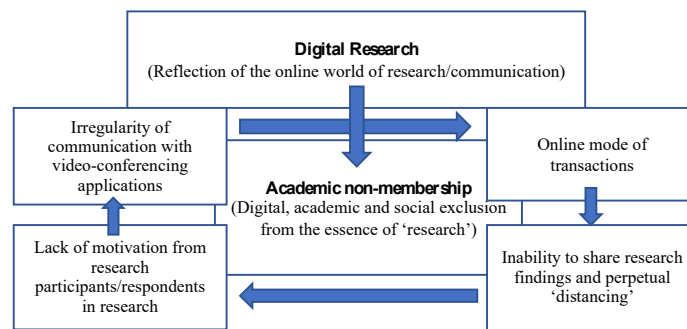
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<sup>7</sup> The narratives of the participants (specifically from socio-economic marginalised sections) indicated the situation of the concept. But this can be applied across several other developing or under-developed nations. In 'academic non-membership', research experience emerges more from the validations of academic administrations and technocratic orders than that of the researchers themselves. The members are gradually distanced from their membership and agencies.

uncertain participation of researchers and research participants within the standards of digital research. So, the process of becoming an 'academic non-member' can be traced through four dynamic or inter-linking stages – first, irregularity of interaction on digital platforms such as audio/video media due to technical glitches, lack of clear communication and less expertise, second, assertion of online mode of transactions such as payment of fees or submission of documents within a deadline with less or no flexibility, third, low motivation from the research participants of the researchers due to lack of access to smart technologies, broadband or loss of communion through virtual facial interaction and fourth, the inability to share research findings through absolute precision such as the use of pauses, silences, hand movements, etc. while presenting in academic committees (Figure 1).

However, while the online world brought faces seeing each other for serving webs of claims and information, the self-reflections of researchers in digital research work its way towards redefinition – the redefinition of the excluded or those present in constriction. This might be an anti-thesis to 'academic membership', suitably for the ones who have access to resources, space, time and skill to curate digital research or pathways. This garners far greater sanctions from the academic technocrats who 'curate the manifold polar-perspectives on, for example, insider-outsider, we-they, boss-employee, oppressor-oppressed, conservation-progressive, and name it' (Pathak, 2021, p. 5).

Therefore, researches on online platforms expand beyond the platforms. While it is coping in terms of a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, the structures of power imbedded within it obscure the agential, economic and psycho-social dynamics of doing social research. So, 'academic non-membership' in a web-based horizon remains trapped within the contestation of choice and necessity, rational and experiential appropriations, identities and prescriptions.



*Figure 1: Loop of 'Academic Non-Membership' (Source: Author's own)*

## Conclusion

The propositions and recommendations of digital research within the structure of the 'new normal' lifted its credibility among the larger academic community of social sciences in India. It stretched an intellectually stimulating venture of redesigning research strategies, teaching-learning practises and distanced sociability during the COVID-19 pandemic. But this social reality also sparked off certain contradictions and debates that have been poorly explored in the context of India and its relatively underdeveloped North-Eastern state of Assam. In view of this, this

paper explores the experiences of digital research among the research community (specifically from marginalised sections) in Assam. It also takes into account the pathos, identity and catharses of researchers working across the proposals of digital research, that made its way into the post-pandemic academic discourses.

Digital research worked as the only viable alternative to restore communion between researchers and participants across varying spaces, places or geospatial locations. But it destabilised the inhibitions of researchers from diverse backgrounds. The reproduction of class asymmetries within the socio-digital purviews of the Indian context and the 'not-so-normal' complexities of the 'new normal' for researchers belonging to the marginalised groups, could never remain a hidden script. The politico-economy of digitalisation made its way into the visual culture of social media, where political figures often marked their existences. But, prospects of digital research, researching phenomena or accessing the participants from varied locations with stable connections remained certainly bleak. Taking into account the approach of ethnography often used in social science disciplines such as sociology and anthropology; it requires a deep intervention into the physical field with attention to specific locales of reflexivity, meanings of speech, attempts of knowledge sharing, and encountering multiple subjectivities. These nuances can be followed through specific research themes or can be halfway followed on the digital platforms. For these elements to work in a holistic manner, not only for the researchers but also for other actors of research such as the research participants, sufficient investments from the state and stable policy frameworks needs to be put into place. The policy frameworks might involve guidelines for digital research approaches, disbursing sufficient funds to the public institutes for making digital research transparent and accountable as well as ensuring stable electricity generation plants or Broadband networks in remote villages. These can be proposed as recuperative approaches in the post-pandemic phase.

Locating across these vantage points, this paper explores digital research not merely as a methodological approach to observe inter or intra-cultural world through digital spaces, but also as a context influenced by the residues of the digital divide. This processes a stream of 'academic non-membership' and situates the dislocation of conventional research practises across researchers' everyday world. Digital devices are not merely automated pieces of machinery, it carnage in multiple manifestations of bodily experiences, anguish, aspirations, power and identities. It also safeguards capitalistic accumulation in processing ease of use but with a subtle standpoint of uneasy or distanced inspiration for many. Therefore, while digital research and the 'new normal' filled the void of non-mobility during the pandemic, it certainly requires an in-depth comparative analysis in terms of socio-economic trends across developed and developing countries. Moreover, futuristic research potentials need to be directed not only on understanding research as a syntax. But a focus should be placed on the agential dissensions of researchers, their locations (class and ethnic orientations) and their membership in an academic community.

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# *Intersezioni di sguardi. La rappresentazione intersezionale in alcune serie Netflix di successo*

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## **Abstract**

Digitalization has been changing the methods of production, distribution, and use of audiovisual products, according to a process of *platformization* (Van Dijck, Poell, de Waal, 2018). Platforms have introduced a new user-based model that feeds different forms of participation and spreadability through intermediality and storytelling (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013; Salmon, 2007).

This produces a different audience that is not national, but global, used to see films or series in their original language at once (binge-watching) and to comment in a continuous stream on social media (Corvi, 2020), according to the prosumer culture (Collins, 2010), characterized by users' ability in terms of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). This user-based model seems to encourage new ways of representation characterized by many gazes, points of view and identities. Specifically, Netflix's audiovisual contents, according to an intersectional framework (Weber, 2001), show a strong interest about diversity and inclusion.

This is the case of some Netflix's Original TVSeries such as *Orange is the new Black*, *Sense 8*, *Hollywo od* and *Bridgerton*, which are characterized by an intersectional perspective in terms of representation. Moving from this framework, the aim of the analysis will be to make a preliminary investigation about these TVSeries, according to an intersectional perspective.

**Keywords:** platforms; representation; intersectionality.

## **1. Introduzione**

L'avvento del digitale sta progressivamente modificando le modalità di produzione, distribuzione e fruizione dei prodotti audiovisivi, secondo un processo di sempre maggiore *platformizzazione* (Van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018) del mercato. Nello specifico, negli ultimi anni la grande maggioranza dei prodotti audiovisivi risulta disponibile via Internet, tramite piattaforme di streaming, all'interno di un percorso caratterizzato da una sempre maggiore convergenza tra i media, in grado di potenziare un processo di convergenza culturale in corso da diverso tempo (Jenkins, 2007). L'avanzamento tecnologico, quindi, si innesta all'interno di un lungo percorso di incontro tra i media incentivato dall'innovazione digitale, all'interno del quale il settore audiovisivo non fa eccezione e, anzi, sembra essere tra i più interessati da quella che è stata definita proficuamente una *streaming revolution* (Corvi, 2020), che sta investendo il settore da molteplici punti di vista.

L'impatto del modello a piattaforma, caratterizzato da una strutturata fortemente user-based e da una forte fidelizzazione dell'utente, infatti, sembra avere delle ricadute non solo di ambito economico ma anche culturale, traducendosi in una

guerra di contenuti con i modelli produttivi di matrice novecentesca. In questo terreno di battaglia, l'ottica intersezionale (Collins & Bilge, 2016) sembra trovare spazio, in quanto veicolo di voci storicamente poco rappresentate all'interno dei più classici processi di rappresentazione audiovisiva. Nello specifico, la piattaforma Netflix sembra aver fatto della logica intersezionale, e dell'attenzione all'inclusione di voci tradizionalmente poco rappresentate all'interno del circuito di rappresentazione audiovisiva, un suo intento programmatico, a partire dalla progettazione dei contenuti fino ad arrivare alla rappresentanza di minoranze all'interno dell'organigramma aziendale.

In questo senso, specchio dell'ampliamento dello spettro del punto di vista risultano essere le serie *Orange is the new Black*, *Sense 8*, *Hollywood* e *Bridgerton*, prodotti di punta del palinsesto Netflix, caratterizzati dalla forte logica intersezionale, risultando così significativi casi di studio, anche in ragione della loro popolarità. In questo senso, dopo aver inquadrato da un punto di vista socio-economico i principali cambiamenti produttivi e distributivi veicolati dai modelli a piattaforma all'interno dell'industria audiovisiva, obiettivo del contributo sarà effettuare una prima analisi esplorativa e di carattere descrittivo delle serie individuate, con riferimento alla narrazione in ottica intersezionale e in aperta antilogia con le tendenze narrative tipiche della rappresentazione audiovisiva novecentesca.

## 2. Platform Society

Se nell'industria audiovisiva novecentesca il modello dominante era stato quello hollywoodiano a base pipe line, e di matrice fordista secondo alcune letture (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Manovich, 2001), un vento di cambiamento ha smosso le dinamiche produttive e distributive degli ultimi decenni, introducendo nuove modalità grazie ai modelli di piattaforma. Sin dagli anni '20 del '900 la produzione audiovisiva si è concentrata per lo più a Hollywood, dove otto società<sup>1</sup> controllavano gran parte della filiera. Quello hollywoodiano risultava essere un modello a base pipe proprio in virtù del fatto che esisteva una ristretta cerchia di produttori che, in ottica verticale, riversava a cascata i suoi prodotti su un ampio numero di consumatori (Choudary *et al.*, 2017). Come in altri settori culturali e creativi (Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2021), da questo punto di vista il modello a piattaforma, al contrario, ha introdotto un nuovo mindset che ragiona in orizzontale, mettendo in comunicazione all'interno di un ambiente digitale produttori e consumatori, secondo un circolo globale e continuo, in grado di abbattere le barriere spazio-temporali.

In questo senso, a livello cinematografico, si osserva un passaggio "da industria monomediale a industria multimediale" (Preta, 2007, p. 25), rendendo la fruizione non più unicamente legata alla sala ma a diversi supporti medial, generando una competizione con i modelli di produzione tradizionali e una conseguente guerra dei contenuti tra vecchi e nuovi operatori, andando a configurare un nuovo ecosistema basato su contenuti, convenienza e controllo dei dati (Corvi, 2020). Obiettivo centrale diventa la soddisfazione del consumatore nel tempo e la conseguente fidelizzazione dell'utente, che ha modo di erogare continui feedback grazie ai social media (Brunetta *et al.*, 2017); anche in ambito audiovisivo, dunque, "si assiste a un passaggio delle imprese dal ruolo di distributore di prodotti al ruolo di service provider" (Nasta e Pirolo, 2017, p. 117), spostando il focus di interesse sull'utente della piattaforma, motivo per cui la principale preoccupazione delle piattaforme

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<sup>1</sup> Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Brothers, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Radio-Keith-Orpheum, Universal, Columbia, United Artis

riguarda la user-experience. Le piattaforme di streaming, infatti, sono caratterizzate da una raffinata profilazione degli utenti proprio per soddisfarne le alte aspettative (Corvi, 2020). L'elevata qualità dell'esperienza degli utenti è strettamente connessa alla capacità della piattaforma di profilare i gusti e gli interessi. Ciò rende cruciale la dimensione dei dati. Gli utenti, infatti, da un lato forniscono una grande mole di dati sui propri profili e sulle proprie scelte di consumo, utilizzati dalle piattaforme di streaming per tracciarne l'esperienza di utilizzo e per finalità di marketing. Le piattaforme, invece, utilizzano moltissimi metadati proprio per organizzare i contenuti audiovisivi, che vengono classificati secondo diversi criteri specifici per ogni piattaforma, che stabilisce una propria tassonomia, utile al proprio modello di business (Avezzù, 2017). “Le tecnologie digitali hanno traghettato l'io-utente al centro del sistema, portandolo a un livello di soddisfazione superiore grazie a una offerta sempre più completa e personalizzata” (Brunetta *et al.*, 2017, p. 31). Se questo è vero in generale, lo è particolarmente per il modello di business a base delle piattaforme di streaming, che “non devono creare contenuti che piacciono agli inserzionisti ma al loro pubblico potenziale” (Corvi, 2020, p.15), dotato di capacità distintive intuite da Bourdieu (1984) in tempi non sospetti.

In effetti già Abercrombie e Longhurst (1998) avevano rilevato il cambiamento di ruolo del pubblico, coniando la definizione di *audience skilled*, perché dotato di una strumentazione cognitiva particolarmente critica. Questa definizione parte dal presupposto che nella società contemporanea l'esperienza di fruizione di un evento mediatico diventa elemento costitutivo della vita quotidiana, motivo per cui i due autori utilizzano anche la definizione di *audience diffusa*, poiché l'esperienza di fruizione risulta essere continua. Un fatto estremamente potenziato dal modello a piattaforma, in grado di abbattere le barriere spazio-temporali, erogando contenuti fruibili in qualsiasi tempo e in qualsiasi spazio. Si configura, dunque, un pubblico differente, “un'audience che non è nazionale, ma globale, ben predisposta a vedere i film o le serie in lingua originale, propensa a consumare più puntate di una serie in una volta (*binge watching*) e a commentare in un flusso continuo sui social media” (Corvi, p. 15), che generano un inevitabile marketing “spontaneo” intorno ai contenuti audiovisivi. In questo senso, La differenza fondamentale tra gli operatori storici dei media e le nuove società (Apple, Amazon, Google, Facebook, Netflix) è che queste ultime sono attività internet pure-play con una vasta popolazione di clienti o utenti online che generano un'enorme quantità di dati sulle abitudini di ricerca e sugli acquisti; esse inoltre condividono un focus primario sull'innovazione tecnologica e vantano anni di esperienza nel marketing diretto al loro bacino di utenti, rivolgendosi specificamente a coloro che hanno maggiori probabilità di essere interessati a un particolare genere o programma sulla base del loro comportamento passato. (Cunningham e Craig, 2021, p. 52)

Il consumo di contenuti, dunque, non si argina nei confini della piattaforma di streaming, ma trova spazio, come un fiume in piena, negli altri rigagnoli mediatici di cui si compone il web, in una dialettica social continua basata su intermedialità e *storytelling* (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013; Salmon, 2007) opportunamente valorizzata dalle piattaforme di streaming, con implicazioni evidenti dal punto di vista del marketing che si produce intorno al prodotto audiovisivo all'interno dei mercati a coda lunga (Anderson, 2006) e allo stesso tempo con ricadute profonde anche sull'identità stessa del consumatore.

Proponendo una lettura delle dinamiche sociali contemporanee come frutto di una *società performativa*, infatti, secondo Abercrombie e Longhurst (1998), la costruzione stessa dell'identità individuale risulta così strettamente connessa con l'esperienza spettatoriale, dal momento che la vita viene a configurarsi come una

performance costante in cui, grazie ai social media, si è pubblico e performer allo stesso tempo. Nel momento in cui i protagonisti delle storie costruite in film o serie tv varcano i confini mediali e approdano sulle piattaforme social (anche) grazie al pubblico, l'esperienza spettatoriale diventa spettacolare, secondo una lettura che intesse un filo doppio tra la nozione di spettacolo e il concetto di narcisismo sociale. Immagini tratte dalla serialità audiovisiva o dal cinema popolano i canali social, diventano foto del profilo nelle community, avatar dei personaggi interpretati nel gioco di identità forgiato dal virtuale e che diventa appendice, e non antagonista, di quella costruita nella vita reale (Floridi, 2014).

### 3. Nuovo Cinema (e nuova Televisione) Digitale: il caso Netflix

L'insorgenza del modello a piattaforma ha avuto, dunque, l'effetto di un tornado sulla catena del valore a base pipe precedentemente consolidata all'interno dell'industria audiovisiva, riuscendo a mettere sotto pressione l'intero ecosistema, arrivando a coinvolgere perfino gli studi di Hollywood (Corvi, 2020). Il guanto di sfida a Hollywood da parte delle piattaforme era stato lanciato anche prima della pandemia, così come risultava evidente la presa d'atto del cambiamento in corso da parte degli Studios che, nello specifico, nel 2019 premiano con un Oscar un film esclusivamente distribuito su Netflix (*Storia di un matrimonio*, di Noah Baumbach) e che lasciano in mano a Netflix la produzione di *The Irishman* di Martin Scorsese.

In effetti quando Anderson parlava di mercato a coda lunga nel 2006, e della capacità delle piattaforme digitali di intercettare nicchie di mercato e profilare precisamente i gusti dei propri utenti, come supporto alla propria argomentazione utilizzava proprio una serie di interviste a Reed Hastings, amministratore delegato di Netflix, sottolineando l'ormai inevitabile sinergia e tensione tra Silicon Valley e Hollywood. Nella analisi relativa all'impatto di Netflix sull'ecosistema audiovisivo, nello specifico, McDonald e Smith-Rowsey (2018) sottolineano quanto sin da subito Netflix si sia posta in aperta concorrenza con i modelli produttivi di matrice hollywoodiana e televisiva: "Netflix is primarily devoted to high-quality media content, the type of entertainment that has been traditionally produced by the Hollywood studios and major television networks" (p.87).

La sfida lanciata da Netflix ai più tradizionali modelli produttivi, distributivi e di fruizione, dunque, naturalmente non riguarda solamente il segmento hollywoodiano dell'industria audiovisiva novecentesca, ma anche e soprattutto l'ambito televisivo. Nata nel 1997 come società di distribuzione online di video a noleggio, nel giro di due decenni la società si è guadagnata un posto tra gli OTT di settore, grazie a una serie di investimenti strategici quali il potenziamento del servizio di streaming nel 2007, la sottoscrizione di un accordo con la casa di produzione Open Road Films che nel 2011 la pose in diretta competizione con la pay TV window e l'avvio di produzioni originali (Brembilla, 2018). Pur mantenendo in realtà player da tempo operanti nel settore, grazie a un'attenta campagna promozionale (Barra, 2017), la piattaforma ha fatto di produzioni originali, interfaccia, prezzo, user-experience e recommendation i punti di forza della sua rivoluzione digitale (Barra, 2022), in aperta concorrenza soprattutto con le più tradizionali forme di palinsesto televisivo (Lotz, 2018), presentandosi "allo stesso tempo come espansione alla televisione ordinaria e come alternativa (per certi versi migliore) a essa" (Brembilla, 2018, p. 85). Stando a Jenner (2018), "*binge-watching* and 'quality' TV" (p. 139), risultano essere gli elementi cardine della strategia promozionale di Netflix sin da quando la piattaforma ha iniziato a produrre opere originali. In termini comunicativi, dunque, la strategia di Netflix si fonda sull'idea di (op)porsi come alternativa

qualitativamente superiore soprattutto al sistema televisivo tradizionale, diffondendo “un’immagine della compagnia come terreno fertile sia per una libertà creativa che sfida quella della premium cable [...] sia come canale distributivo ‘di salvataggio’ di serie che non funzionano nel sistema televisivo tradizionale” (Brembilla, 2018, p. 85). A livello italiano, l’impatto di questa strategia di comunicazione è testimoniato dall’iconica foto pubblicata su Wired Italia che accoglieva l’arrivo di Netflix in Italia nel 2015 raffigurando Reed Hastings intento a spegnere un televisore in bianco e nero. Sin dal suo esordio, l’arrivo di Netflix in Italia nell’ottobre del 2015 è stato accolto come rivoluzionario dalla stampa italiana (Spalletta, 2017), che ha puntato l’accento sulla capacità della piattaforma di superare i vincoli di palinsesto e accedere liberamente ai contenuti. In effetti, è possibile rilevare questa tensione di ambito televisivo anche nel contesto italiano, poiché nel pieno della pandemia la docu-serie SanPa è stata prodotta e distribuita da Netflix Italia, pur essendo stata realizzata a partire da materiali custoditi nelle Teche Rai<sup>2</sup>. Il cuore della produzione audiovisiva più tradizionale cede il posto, simbolicamente e non, a una produzione che non passa dalle reti generaliste e risulta essere distribuita unicamente dalla piattaforma, presentata come spazio di innovazione e di qualità.

L’enfasi sulla qualità di fruizione, inoltre, non è posta dalla piattaforma solo in relazione ai programmi, ma viene applicata anche alla user-experience. «In questo senso, Netflix fa leva sulle possibilità di personalizzazione del consumo, enfatizzando la sua attenzione alle reali esigenze degli utenti» (Brembilla, 2018, p. 85), facendo dell’orizzontalità di consumo il perno attorno a cui si costruisce la campagna di promozione della piattaforma.

### *3.1 Orizzontalità, partecipazione e autonomia: tra mito e storytelling*

Naturalmente non mancano letture critiche rispetto a quanto questa forma di fruizione all’apparenza più democraticizzata e orizzontale di fatto risulti guidata dagli algoritmi della piattaforma, che nel profilare gusti e interessi influenzerebbero molto le scelte di consumo tramite criteri di somiglianza rispetto ai contenuti fruiti in precedenza, non favorendo particolarmente l’eterogeneità del catalogo (Avezzù, 2017) e generando bolle di gusto e/o partecipazione, secondo una tendenza rilevabile anche in altri ambiti della comunicazione (Boccia Artieri e Marinelli, 2018). «In fact, its algorithm even serves to limit choice by highlighting programmes it determines relevant to the viewer. In some ways, this tailored experience suggests less control and choice than offered through the RCD and the VCR» (Jenner, 2018, p. 110). Allo stesso modo, di fatto, media digitali come Netflix, Hulu e Amazon consistono in piattaforme chiuse che distribuiscono contenuti multimediali tradizionali originali e in licenza. [...] Sebbene questi contenuti siano distribuiti e trattati in modo diverso alla televisione tradizionale, le piattaforme ripropongono la stessa divisione in generi e le caratteristiche testuali dei contenuti creati a livello professionale tradizionali collocandoli alla voce serie tv o documentari, animazioni o live action, comedy o drama (Cunningham & Craig, 2021, p. 70).

Per queste ragioni, a proposito delle piattaforme di streaming Lotz (2017) propone l’utilizzo della definizione di “portali”, in grado di sottolineare il ruolo sostanziale di intermediari che, al di là delle proprie produzioni originali, di fatto raccolgono, curano e distribuiscono la programmazione televisiva tramite la

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<sup>2</sup> Balestreri G. (2021), SanPa, il docufilm prodotto da Netflix con le immagini Rai è uno schiaffo a Viale Mazzini, “Business Insider”, 6 gennaio, <https://it.businessinsider.com/sanpa-muccioli-netflix-rai-tv/>

distribuzione su internet. In contrasto rispetto al mito dell'autonomia di fruizione paventato dalla piattaforma, inoltre, il ruolo di intermediazione svolto da Netflix risulta essere tutt'altro che neutrale: "As much as binge-watching, as company language suggests, offers unprecedented control to viewers, Netflix also clearly guides, or nudges, choices" (Jenner, 2018, p. 110). Il catalogo, dunque, risulta presentato secondo una serie di filtri e categorie impostati dalla piattaforma, sulla base di criteri molto spesso legati alle precedenti esperienze di fruizione dell'utente, alla somiglianza tra i contenuti visionati in precedenza e quelli proposti e, naturalmente, al modello di business della piattaforma, il cui ruolo risulta particolarmente preponderante all'interno dell'esperienza di fruizione.

D'altra parte, però, una recente ricerca di ambito italiano, condotta durante il lockdown primaverile del 2020, fornisce elementi di interesse da questo punto di vista. L'ottavo rapporto di Osservazione Generazione Proteo, osservatorio permanente sui giovani dell'Università degli studi "Link Campus University", ha condotto un'indagine relativa alle esperienze di consumo su un campione di 3000 studenti di scuola secondaria<sup>3</sup>. Tra questi, il 27,6% dichiara di aver optato per la fruizione di contenuti audiovisivi nel tempo libero durante il lockdown, preferendo Netflix per ragioni di convenienza economica (31,7%) e perché la piattaforma contiene film e serie di cui si parla molto, dal vivo o, soprattutto, in rete (57,4%).

Rispetto all'autonomia di scelta dei contenuti, la ricerca condotta da Proteo racconta come, almeno tra i fruitori di giovane età interrogati, persista la percezione di una notevole possibilità di scelta dei contenuti. Il 27,9% degli intervistati, infatti, dichiara di non essere affatto influenzato dai consigli di fruizione proposti dalle piattaforme e il 43,3% dichiara di esserne influenzato minimamente. Emerge la diffusa percezione di non essere influenzati dai consigli di fruizione, ma piuttosto di essere piacevolmente guidati da una piattaforma in aperto dialogo con il suo pubblico, in grado di coglierne gusti e interessi, secondo un giusto bilanciamento tra raccomandazione e autonomia di scelta. La piattaforma, dunque, pur essendo di fatto un circuito chiuso, sembra aver costruito una narrazione vincente che fa della (presunta) orizzontalità di consumo, dell'autonomia di scelta e del dialogo con il proprio pubblico i propri elementi preponderanti, in aperto contrasto con i più tradizionali modelli di produzione, distribuzione e fruizione di ambito cinematografico e, soprattutto, televisivo.

### *3.2 Quando la vocazione alla diversity diventa un brand*

Naturalmente questa guerra di contenuti (Corvi, 2020) ha delle ricadute non solo da un punto di vista economico, ma si traduce anche in una guerra di sguardi e punti di vista, all'interno di un contesto, quello digitale, che ha reso sempre più visibili istanze e voci storicamente poco rappresentate, soprattutto per quel che riguarda la comunità LGBTQ+. Il tweet pubblicato da Netflix Italia<sup>4</sup> in data 22/06/2020, per esempio, sembra confermare questa volontà di dialogo aperto con il proprio pubblico, nell'ottica di un ampliamento del punto di vista di tipo programmatico.

Il motivo alla base dell'interesse di Netflix rispetto all'inclusione di più punti di

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<sup>3</sup> Tutti i risultati dell'indagine riportati nell'articolo sono stati riferiti da Valentina Re, docente in "Cinema, fotografia e televisione" presso la Link Campus University di Roma e parte del comitato scientifico dell'Osservatorio Generazione Proteo, durante un seminario dal titolo "Audiovisivo – Nuove forme di fruizione e modelli di sostenibilità", tenutosi online in data 18/12/2020.

<sup>4</sup> Spesso ci dicono che i nostri titoli sono pieni di personaggi LGBTQ+. Sapete cosa? Ne vogliamo mettere ancora di più. Direttamente nei titoli.

vista naturalmente non prescinde da esigenze di natura economica e, anzi, sembra strettamente connesso alla struttura fortemente user-based delle piattaforme e al relativo modello di business basato sulla soddisfazione dell'utente sul lungo periodo (Jenner, 2018). Se il pubblico, globale e diffuso, è al centro, centrale risulta anche la pluralità dei punti di vista da intercettare e soddisfare. Stando a Jenkins, Nonostante la retorica sulla “democraticizzazione della televisione”, tale passaggio è guidato da interessi economici e non dalla missione sociale di conferire più potere al pubblico. Le aziende dei media vedono con favore la convergenza per vari motivi: perché le strategie basate sulla convergenza sfruttano i vantaggi della conglomerazione mediatica, perché rafforza la fedeltà dei consumatori in un'epoca in cui la frammentazione del mercato e lo sviluppo del *file sharing* minacciano i vecchi modi di fare business (2007, p. 266).

Come precedentemente illustrato, la piattaforma si propone, e propone una narrazione di sé, come *disruptive* dal punto di vista della progettazione dei contenuti e del palinsesto, in grado di ribaltare le tradizionali logiche produttive e distributive di ambito audiovisivo, per quanto stando alla lettura di Brembilla (2018) più che di rivoluzione si tratti di una naturale evoluzione delle precedenti modalità di produzione, distribuzione e fruizione.

Rispetto a questa analisi, però, ciò che risulta interessante osservare è che Netflix sembra proporre anche una *disruption* del punto di vista nei processi di rappresentazione, proponendosi come contenitore di prospettive storicamente poco rappresentate all'interno del circuito di rappresentazione audiovisiva. È possibile osservare, infatti, come di recente Netflix sembra aver ricalibrato la propria strategia di marketing, ponendo un'attenzione particolare alle tematiche legate alla *diversity*:

*More recently, and at least partially owing to the successful linkage of terms like 'quality' television, binge-watching and Netflix, the company has recalibrated its brand. Its emphasis now lies on the concept of diversity, aiming for a broad spectrum of experiences to be represented via Netflix texts (Jenner, 2018, p. 23).*

In questo senso, “La TV diviene infatti più inclusiva con il passaggio dalla preponderanza di show conservatori alla multi-etnicità, alla rappresentazione della comunità LGBTQ, alle famiglie ‘atipiche’” (Brembilla, 2018, p. 86), corroborando una “retorica auto-promozionale” (ibidem) che, insieme agli elementi sopracitati, a livello comunicativo pone Netflix come innovativa rispetto alle tradizionali forme di produzione, distribuzione e fruizione di contenuti audiovisivi, di ambito cinematografico ma anche e soprattutto di ambito televisivo, in cui quei punti di vista storicamente poco rappresentati hanno trovato minore spazio. Il nuovo paradigma valoriale più inclusivo, a cui la piattaforma (e il suo potenziale pubblico) tende, dunque, sembra costituire parte del brand della piattaforma stessa (Jenner, 2018), con potenziali ricadute culturali concrete, in un circuito, come quello della rappresentazione, in cui causa ed effetto si rincorrono.

L'attenzione di Netflix al tema della rappresentanza in ottica intersezionale, inoltre, risulta rilevabile anche rispetto alla propria struttura aziendale. Dal 2013 la piattaforma redige un report, pubblicato su Netflixjobs, contenente dati relativi alla rappresentanza di minoranze all'interno dell'azienda. L'ultimo report, aggiornato a ottobre 2020, rileva la presenza di donne per il 47,1% della forza lavoro, inclusi ruoli di director (47,8%), vice president (43,7%) e ruoli di senior leadership (47,6%). Inoltre il 46,4% della forza lavoro e il 42% della leadership è costituita da persone che provengono da una o più minoranze etniche.

Questa attenzione risulta osservabile anche nella progettazione dei contenuti da parte della piattaforma che sembra aver abbracciato la logica intersezionale da tempi non sospetti e all'interno di alcune produzioni originali di grande successo: partendo da *Orange is the New Black*, seconda serie originale di successo della piattaforma (Brembilla, 2018), passando per *Sense 8*, la cui produzione dell'ultimo episodio è stata fortemente influenzata dal pubblico a dimostrazione della forte attenzione da parte della piattaforma alle richieste degli utenti<sup>5</sup>, fino ad arrivare alla più recente *Bridgerton*, ucronia intersezionale prodotta da Shondaland, universo narrativo creato da Shonda Rhimes. Un'attenzione che, seppur guidata da ragioni di carattere economico e pur arrivando a esiti di rappresentazione naturalmente differenti in termini qualitativi, sembra concorrere a un cambiamento culturale che viene alimentato da un processo di immaginazione socializzata, il cui principale alimento sono appunto le immagini, le storie – in una parola – le risorse tratte dall'immenso serbatoio dei mezzi di comunicazione di massa. Sono i media, coi loro modelli di stile, coi loro racconti, con le icone e i suoni che attraversano e impregnano il mondo sociale, a fornire il carburante immaginativo essenziale per la vita quotidiana tardo moderna (Scaglioni, 2006, pp. 82-83).

#### 4. Intersezioni di genere, etnia e orientamento sessuale

Come anticipato in precedenza, l'attenzione di Netflix a uno sguardo intersezionale nella rappresentazione è testimoniato dall'aver affidato proprio a quello sguardo la narrazione di uno dei primi (e tra i più popolari) prodotti originali della piattaforma: *Orange is the new Black*. Prodotto da Netflix nel 2013, la serie è andata in onda fino al 2019 per un totale di sette stagioni, che hanno sviluppato la trama originaria da cui muove il racconto: l'inserimento di una facoltosa donna bianca newyorkese, Piper Chapman, all'interno del braccio femminile di una prigione federale. Muovendo da questo nucleo tematico, la serie si dipana lungo le (dis)avventure che la giovane Piper vive all'interno della prigione, che all'inizio appare ai suoi occhi come un microcosmo incomprensibile e pericoloso, ma che lentamente comincia a diventare il suo ecosistema di riferimento, al pari di quello che accade alle altre detenute.

Le altre detenute, nello specifico, risultano essere a tutti gli effetti il cuore pulsante della narrazione: nel corso delle sette stagioni, la serie sviluppa e approfondisce le storie dei diversi personaggi femminili che popolano il carcere, caratterizzati da etnie, identità di genere e orientamenti sessuali estremamente diversificati.

In questo senso, a livello visivo, la sigla costituisce l'indicazione intersezionale da cui muoverà tutta la narrazione: sulle note di "You've got time" cantata da Regina Spektor, vediamo susseguirsi immagini che raffigurano sezioni di volti femminili estremamente diversificati, a sottolineare quanto la serie si predisporrà a raccontare. E in effetti, nel corso delle sette stagioni, la serie offre uno spaccato di un contesto raramente raccontato in termini visuali: quello della detenzione femminile. Sin dalla prima stagione, in ottica intersezionale, vengono raccontati abusi di potere, violenze sessuali, discriminazioni subite in virtù della propria etnia, del proprio orientamento sessuale e della propria identità di genere, fino ad arrivare a uno specifico riferimento al "MeToo" e al "Gender PayGap" nell'ultima stagione.

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<sup>5</sup> Echites, G. (2018), 'Sense8', il (lungo) finale che sconvolge i fan: l'hashtag #BringBackSense8 invade il web, in "Repubblica.it", 8 giugno, [https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/tv-radio/2018/06/08/news/\\_sense8\\_-198460465/](https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/tv-radio/2018/06/08/news/_sense8_-198460465/)



La rappresentazione vivida dell'ecosistema carcerario muove dal romanzo che ha ispirato la serie: il memoir di Piper Kerman<sup>6</sup>, facoltosa newyorkese, che proprio come il suo alter ego narrativo, Piper Chapman, ha trascorso un anno di detenzione a seguito di un periodo di riciclaggio di denaro sporco insieme alla sua fidanzata, a cui è analogamente ispirato il personaggio di Alex Vause, amante di Piper nella serie e responsabile della sua detenzione. Per quanto la serie in alcuni casi indugi nel ricco "white gaze" di matrice "wasp" riconducibile a estrazione e provenienza della sua autrice, di fatto costituisce un'apripista rispetto a rappresentazioni che fanno dello sguardo intersezionale il nucleo attorno a cui muove la narrazione, dando spazio a voci e sguardi storicamente poco rappresentati all'interno dei più tradizionali circuiti di rappresentazione mainstream. È il caso, per esempio, del personaggio di Sophia Burset, detenuta transgender, interpretata dall'attrice transgender Laverne Cox. Oltre a raccontare quanto la detenzione possa risultare particolarmente difficoltosa per portare avanti il percorso di transizione, a causa della scarsa disponibilità di farmaci, nella scelta di affidare il ruolo a un'attrice transgender la serie offre un'indicazione precisa di tipo metanarrativo: quella del dare voce a sguardi e punti di vista poco rappresentati nella finzione come nella realtà. Quella che oggi appare una scelta sempre più comune, nel 2013 non era così tanto mainstream: basti pensare alle polemiche suscitate dalla scelta di affidare a Eddie Redmayne il ruolo da protagonista in *The Danish Girl*<sup>7</sup>, biopic su Lili Elbe (pittrice danese transessuale) prodotto nel 2015, due anni dopo l'uscita della prima stagione *Orange is The New Black*.

Sulla stessa linea narrativa si pone un altro originale Netflix di grande successo: la serie *Sense 8*. Prodotta nel 2015 dalla piattaforma, ideata e diretta da Lana e Lily Wachowski insieme a J. Michael Straczynski, la serie abbraccia lo sguardo intersezionale raccontando la paranormale connessione tra otto personaggi, distanti dal punto di vista della provenienza, dell'etnia, dell'identità di genere e dell'orientamento sessuale, ma accomunati dalla strana capacità di sentire le emozioni degli altri. Metafora dell'empatia, che riesce a creare connessioni invisibili, la serie porta lo spettatore nelle esistenze dei diversi personaggi, che risultano essere distinte e (anche fisicamente) distanti, poiché collocate in diverse località del globo, sedi di ambientazione delle diverse puntate.

Proprio la volontà di dare verità alla narrazione girando le diverse puntate nei reali luoghi d'ambientazione costituisce una delle cause alla base della brusca cancellazione della serie, troppo costosa in termini produttivi<sup>8</sup>: una cancellazione non gradita dal pubblico, che a seguire di proteste in rete, è riuscito a far girare l'ultimo episodio, a dimostrazione della forte attenzione da parte della piattaforma alle richieste degli utenti<sup>9</sup>. La volontà di riempire la narrazione di verità non è testimoniata solo dalla scelta di girare le puntate nelle reali sedi di ambientazione degli episodi, ma anche dalla costruzione dei personaggi, che riflettono l'ampio spettro dell'identità di genere, dell'orientamento sessuale e della provenienza. Come nel caso di *Orange is the New Black*, per esempio, il personaggio di Nomi Marks,

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<sup>6</sup> *Orange is the new Black*. Da Manhattan al carcere: il mio anno dietro le sbarre.

<sup>7</sup> Maiucato, R. (2016), "The Danish Girl: perchè Eddie Redmayne e non un attore transgender?", 17 febbraio, <https://www.wired.it/play/cinema/2016/02/17/the-danish-girl-perche-eddie-redmayne-non-attore-transgender/>,

<sup>8</sup> Nicoli G. (2018), *Sense 8: Netflix chiarisce perché è stata cancellata*, 22 aprile, <https://www.fuoriseries.com/curiosita/sense8-netflix-motivi-cancellazione/>

<sup>9</sup> Echites, G. (2018), *'Sense8', il (lungo) finale che sconvolge i fan: l'hashtag #BringBackSense8 invade il web*, in "Repubblica.it", 8 giugno, [https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/tv-radio/2018/06/08/news/\\_sense8\\_-198460465/](https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/tv-radio/2018/06/08/news/_sense8_-198460465/)

blogger e hacker transgender, è stato interpretato da Jamie Clayton, attivista transgender, che nel 2018 ha dato eco alle polemiche contro la scelta di affidare a Scarlett Johansson il ruolo di un personaggio transgender, sottolineando quanto al contrario non si consideri mai la possibilità di affidare ruoli di personaggi cisgender a donne e uomini transgender<sup>10</sup>. La volontà delle sorelle Wachowski di riflettere anche su una certa ipocrisia dellostar system (probabilmente anche per ragioni biografiche) è testimoniata da un altro personaggio centrale della narrazione: Lito Rodriguez, celebre attore, costretto a nascondere il proprio orientamento omosessuale al fine di mantenere uno spazio all'interno del circuito di rappresentazione audiovisiva.

### 5. *What If?*

E se invece attori come Lito Rodriguez avessero più spazio nel circuito della rappresentazione audiovisiva, senza necessità di occultare il proprio orientamento sessuale, la propria etnia o la propria identità di genere? È questo il presupposto da cui muove un più recente originale Netflix: la miniserie *Hollywood*, ideata e diretta da Ryan Murphy e Ian Brennan, che tramite l'artificio narrativo del "What If" si chiede come sarebbero state le produzioni audiovisive degli anni '40, e conseguentemente la società di quel periodo, se nelle grandi case di produzione hollywoodiane ci fosse stato accesso per chi in quel periodo era considerato invisibile e non aveva voce. Il punto di vista delle minoranze e degli esclusi - per motivi legati al genere, all'orientamento sessuale o all'etnia - risulta centrale nella narrazione, il cui obiettivo sembra essere proporre un noto racconto della realtà affidato a voci che storicamente non hanno avuto spazio nel circuito della rappresentazione audiovisiva. Alla luce di quanto precedentemente illustrato, non sembra casuale che nel 2020 la miniserie abbia trovato collocazione proprio all'interno del palinsesto di Netflix, corroborando la narrazione auto-promozionale che presenta la piattaforma come contenitore di contenuti innovativi e inclusivi. Se le immagini "rappresentano uno dei terreni fondamentali su cui competere per costruire socialmente le identità di genere, di etnia, di generazione, di classe sociale" (Tota, 2008, p. 21), la serie tv distribuita da Netflix costituisce un manifesto di intenti rispetto a una nuova forma di rappresentazione audiovisiva dei personaggi fondata su una vocazione inclusiva, intersezionale e con un'attenzione particolare alla dimensione di genere, con potenziali ricadute rispetto alla fruizione da parte degli spettatori in termini di costruzione dell'identità (Abercrombie e Longhurst, 1998).

Se è vero, infatti, che la costruzione del genere è allo stesso tempo il prodotto e il processo delle sue rappresentazioni (de Lauretis, 1989), si può dire che la percezione delle differenze di genere non solo è riflessa all'interno delle rappresentazioni, ma ne risulta allo stesso tempo forgiata. In questo senso, la narrazione di Ryan Murphy e Ian Brennan sembra voler riequilibrare una costruzione dei personaggi monocorde, imputata nello specifico alla Hollywood bianca, maschile, cisgender ed eterosessuale rappresentata nei sette episodi.

Che la serie si inquadri nell'ottica della battaglia intersezionale è visivamente evidente ancora una volta a partire dalla sigla, che rappresenta significativamente i protagonisti delle diverse puntate intenti a scalare faticosamente l'iconica scritta "Hollywood" e parallelamente i vertici della rappresentazione audiovisiva. Il faticoso accesso alle produzioni hollywoodiane fa da filo conduttore ai diversi

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<sup>10</sup> Volontè, M. (2018), "Rub & Tug: due attrici trans sulle polemiche contro Scarlett Johansson, 4 luglio, <https://www.cinematographe.it/news/rub-tug-attrici-trans-contro-johansson/>

personaggi, che riflettono il punto di vista di minoranze storicamente poco rappresentate all'interno delle produzioni audiovisive di matrice novecentesca.

Aggrappati alle lettere dell'iconica scritta e insieme ai loro sogni, vediamo sfilare sin dai primi minuti i personaggi principali della serie. Nella sigla è contenuta l'indicazione programmatica di quello che avverrà nel corso delle diverse puntate: grazie all'aiuto reciproco, simbolo della lotta intersezionale, i personaggi appartenenti a diverse minoranze avranno il loro lieto fine, almeno nella finzione proiettata sullo schermo di Netflix. Altri personaggi costellano il cast corale della serie pur non figurando nella sigla: si tratta di personaggi completamente immaginari, come nel caso di Dick Samuels e Avis Amberg, ma anche di rappresentazioni narrative di persone realmente esistite, come Anna May Wong, a cui la serie regala un lieto fine mai vissuto nella realtà<sup>11</sup>, Rock Hudson, noto attore costretto a nascondere per molto tempo il suo orientamento sessuale<sup>12</sup>, e Henry Wilson, predatore seriale di Hollywood, che nascose il suo orientamento sessuale fino alla fine dei suoi giorni<sup>13</sup>. La serie ruota attorno alla produzione di un film scritto dallo sceneggiatore (afroamericano e omosessuale) Archie (sceneggiatore afroamericano e omosessuale), diretto da Raymond (regista di origine asiatiche) e avente come protagonista Camille (attrice afroamericana). La produzione del film avviene grazie al temporaneo allontanamento di Ace Amberg dai corridoi della sua casa di produzione (Ace Studios) a causa di un malore: un fatto che porta a una temporanea nuova gestione da parte della moglie Avis e di Dick Samuels, suo fidato collaboratore, costretto a nascondere il suo orientamento omosessuale.

Lo snodo narrativo è fortemente simbolico per la critica alla Hollywood bianca, etero e cisgender rappresentata dalla serie. Ace, uomo di potere bianco eterosessuale e cisgender, è il simbolo di quella Hollywood, motivo per cui il cambiamento nel circuito della rappresentazione audiovisiva viene presentato come possibile solo se viene allontanato dai vertici del potere e sostituito da personaggi che appartengono a delle minoranze - una donna e un uomo omosessuale. In questo snodo narrativo è contenuta l'indicazione intersezionale della serie: il cambiamento è possibile solo se le voci di diverse minoranze lottano in modo compatto, permettendo ai diversi livelli di disuguaglianza di emergere dal silenzio generato dalle voci dominanti all'interno della rappresentazione audiovisiva (Dill e Zambrana, 2009). In questo senso, la serie sembra mostrare una forte consapevolezza rispetto al potere performativo delle immagini, in grado di incidere sulla realtà agendo sull'immaginario. (Tota, 2008).

Dallo stesso presupposto sembra muovere un altro recente originale Netflix di grande successo, *Bridgerton* (2020), ucronia intersezionale prodotta da Shonda Rhimes e diretta da Chris Van Dusen, che muove a sua volta da un "What If" in chiave storica. La serie, infatti, si chiede come sarebbe stata la società britannica di inizio Ottocento se uno dei re della casata reale avesse deciso di sposare una donna afrodiscendente, rendendola regina.

La serie si dipana lungo le conseguenze di questo "What If", offrendo la rappresentazione di una corte sfaccettata a livello etnico, in cui personaggi appartenenti a etnie differenti convivono all'interno della privilegiata corte inglese.

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<sup>11</sup> Armelli P. (2020), *Chi era Anna May Wong, la prima diva di Hollywood di origini cinesi*, in "wired.com", 22 gennaio, <https://www.wired.it/play/cinema/2020/01/22/anna-may-wong-diva-hollywood-origini-cinesi/>

<sup>12</sup> Sofri L. (2015), *La storia di Rock Hudson*, in "ilpost.com", 17 novembre, <https://www.ilpost.it/2015/11/17/la-storia-di-rock-hudson/>

<sup>13</sup> Uzzo C. (2020), *Hollywood, la serie tv. Da Rock Hudson a Henry Willson, I personaggi e la loro storia vera*, in "gqitalia.it", 5 maggio, <https://www.gqitalia.it/show/article/hollywood-serie-tv-rock-hudson-henry-willson-personaggi-storia-vera>

Se le polemiche rispetto alla veridicità storica non sono mancate da parte di chi nell'ucronia di Shondaland ha visto un affresco poco realistico dell'Inghilterra vittoriana<sup>14</sup>, d'altra parte la serie ha raggiunto vette di popolarità notevoli, collocandosi tra i recenti successi del palinsesto Netflix e confermando la volontà della piattaforma di fare della *diversity* il proprio brand. A livello narrativo, infatti, la serie tratta dai romanzi di Julia Quinn, attinge a piene mani dal serbatoio narrativo dei romanzi ottocenteschi e delle successive trasposizioni audiovisive, giocando con la familiarità di certe atmosfere e riempiendole allo stesso tempo di nuove storie maggiormente inclusive. Tra storie d'amore tormentate e intrighi di corte, trovano spazio personaggi principali afrodiscendenti (il duca di Hastings, protagonista della prima stagione) e di origini indiane (Kate Sharma, protagonista della seconda stagione). Per quanto la serie, in aderenza al genere narrativo a cui afferisce, non problematizzi il tema della rappresentazione intersezionale in profondità, di fatto sembra essere la realizzazione di quanto ipotizzato da Ryan Murphy e Ian Brennan nella loro Hollywood: personaggi e attori, appartenenti a etnie diverse, non vengono marginalizzati ma, al contrario di quanto accadeva nella Hollywood degli anni '40, trovano spazio e voce sullo schermo di Netflix, confermandone la linea intersezionale in senso programmatico rispetto alla progettazione dei contenuti.

## 6. Conclusioni

Dall'analisi effettuata, risulta evidente come l'intento programmatico della piattaforma Netflix sia sviluppare una linea di rappresentazione intersezionale tramite produzioni originali di successo, dando spazio a voci, sguardi e punti di vista storicamente meno rappresentati all'interno del circuito di rappresentazione audiovisiva mainstream. Da questa prima indagine esplorativa, e di carattere prevalentemente descrittivo rispetto all'analisi delle serie individuate, si può osservare come la linea di rappresentazione risponda a una più ampia progettazione dei contenuti da parte della piattaforma in aperta concorrenza con le più tradizionali dinamiche di produzione e distribuzione di contenuti audiovisivi. La volontà di dare spazio allo sguardo intersezionale all'interno di produzioni di successo sembra inquadarsi all'interno della campagna di autopromozione incentrata sull'innovatività di contenuti adottata da Netflix sin dagli esordi (Brembilla, 2018), ma anche e soprattutto all'interno di una più recente strategia di promozione della piattaforma, che fa di *diversity* e inclusione elementi preponderanti (Jenner, 2018). In questo senso, la narrazione delle serie individuate, pur riflettendo sguardi autoriali differenti, risulta essere costruita in ottica inclusiva, secondo una direzione di rappresentazione e di rappresentanza adottata dalla piattaforma da un punto di vista comunicativo. L'inclusione di punti di vista storicamente poco presenti nel circuito della rappresentazione audiovisiva novecentesca, dunque, appare collegabile alla strategia comunicativa che, sin dalle prime produzioni originali, la piattaforma ha adottato in termini autopromozionali, proponendosi come spazio di maggiore libertà creativa e come alternativa qualitativamente superiore ai tradizionali modelli produttivi di ambito cinematografico e televisivo (Brembilla, 2018), anche e soprattutto rispetto alle prospettive di rappresentazione. In questo senso, possibile e ulteriore orizzonte di ricerca potrebbe essere relativo all'analisi in profondità di ciascuna delle serie tv individuate, con particolare riferimento alle specifiche e

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<sup>14</sup> Ugolini C. (2020), "*Bridgerton*": sesso, femminismo, fake news e razzismo. *Quanto è moderna l'Ottocento di Shonda Rhimes*, 25 dicembre, <https://www.repubblica.it/serietv/netflix/2020/12/25/news/bridgerton-278965221/>

peculiari scelte di rappresentazione adottate dagli autori per dare spazio alla linea intersezionale abbracciata dalla piattaforma.

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# *Expert construction during the Italian vaccination campaign against COVID-19: positional, reputational, and communicational spheres in comparison<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to understand what mechanism leads specific actors of the scientific community to assume the central role of experts during the COVID-19 pandemic vaccination campaign. Thanks to the understanding of the world of narratives and self-constructed representations we will try to understand if the figure of the expert is influenced by the institutional role they play, the network of collaborations and the academic network as a proxy of their reputation and, finally, what figure emerges instead from the mainstream media such as the press and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

**Keywords:** visible expert, media representation, COVID-19 vaccination campaign

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been elevated to the top of the agenda setting since the first contagions in January 2020 and from early on identified itself as a challenge even for information systems called to respond with speed to the new needs the crisis had imposed (Thomas and Senkpeni, 2020).

The involvement of scientific experts in media coverage and public exposure during the Covid-19 pandemic recalls Goodell's (1977) concept of "visible experts". Their presence in public communication leads to new changes in the dynamics between science and society (Maasen & Weingart, 2005; Cheng *et al.*, 2008; Bucchi & Trench, 2014). In times of the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of expertise and the scientists becomes more and more crucial in the academic debate (Algan *et al.*, 2021), so with the symbolic launch of VaccineDay in Italy, we formulated a research question that became the main topic of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the paper should be considered the result of the collective work of the authors, Rosanna Cataldo was responsible for the coordination of the research analysis and the statistical structure; Gabriella Punziano was responsible for the coordination of the research work and for the methodological design, reflection and assessment; Barbara Saracino was responsible for the concept idea and the theoretical framework; Ferdinando Iazzetta was responsible for the data collection and organization and for the preliminary drafting of the reached reflections.

The goal is to understand the mechanism that leads specific actors in the scientific community to take on the role of experts and become central to the health policy agenda to effectively promote, through the mass media, interventions both in support of vaccine decisions and in response to instances of misinformation ready to raise social alarm of vaccine hesitation (Coleman *et al.*, 2002). In this study we intend to explore the centrality of the Italian public sphere of experts, assuming that it is constructed in the interaction among positional, reputational, and communicative spheres, and therefore it does not depend exclusively on communicative and media processes, but it is, in any case, stimulated by them. From the beginning of the pandemic emergency, in fact, communication played a fundamental role in providing citizens with information and indications on how to minimize the risks of contagion. Information was available through a variety of sources and media experts and, unlike other countries (Metcalf *et al.*, 2020), a plurality of perspectives with different expert emerged in Italy to the point of opening and shaping a new crisis in the emergency on the public and institutional communication point of view. Media exposure to the pandemic crisis is now forcing public communication, and thus various experts, to face new challenges.

Despite Italians' good level of trust in science and scientists, a 2020 survey conducted by the Observa Science in Society Observatory in April 2020 shows that one in two respondents is confused by the different opinions of experts (Saracino, 2020).

The Italian case, therefore, is interesting to analyze the role of experts during the pandemic for two main reasons: first of all, Italy was the first patient-nation of the Western world (Sfardini, 2020) as well as the first country in the world after China to have developed quarantine measures following the increase in contagions, attracting the attention of the world. Similarly, expert statements in 2020 and 2021 report information overload and different (from pandemic severity to judgments about containment measures) with no small amount of inconsistency among them. The suggestion of discordant diagnostic and prevention methods, instances in which the danger was underestimated or ultimately the discovery of multiple vaccines, lead to the opening of a new emergency, often causing delays in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, communication, understood not only as the transfer of information but as that symbolic process through which reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed (Carey, 1992) emphasizes the analogy between the evolution of the species and the evolution of scientific knowledge. Today, compared to the past and thanks to the introduction of web 2.0 along with the instantaneousness of digital media, communication has as its reference the vast popular audience and, therefore, it becomes necessary for the community to trust its country. It highlights both how the various medical subjects are all focused on the epidemic and the lack of criteria used by the media to select "scientific experts" to comment on issues that do not belong to their scientific community. The problem of talking people about scientific complexity without adopting a complex approach has highlighted the central role of data analysis by communicating accurately through a massive use of data and statistical decisions to support public policy activities, a theme addressed and emphasized by Parrott (2009, p. 21) in *Talking About Health* where she states that our perception of health occurs through numbers or through stories of various kinds. In this context, the relationship between science and communication once again becomes a strong point and, especially when science is used for political decisions, the role of transparency in communicating information about the vaccination campaign to citizens should not be underestimated. One of the key issues to reflect



on becomes the role of persuasion and trust in scientific discourse and communication between the expert community and society (Larson *et al.*, 2018). As regards the mechanisms of how one is led to believe or distrust science is an essential discourse to avoid further problems. The reputation of science and expertise has never been more important like today and, where the rapid timing of the epidemic and the crowding of disciplines and experts go hand in hand with their communication in this contribution to highlight the delicate relationship among science, media and public in the light of the online presence of experts.

Moreover, the scientific literature belonging to the line of public opinion studies describes a contemporary society whose knowledge is strongly influenced by the media and the representations derived from them (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lippmann, 1922; Noelle-Neumann, 1984). The way an event is reported in the media, if highly dramatic and unpredictable like the case of Covid-19, can profoundly influence the public debate, helping to influence perceptions of risks and the ongoing crisis (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013), and thus inducing the population to follow certain behaviors and comply with imposed rules. The problem with explaining the complexity of science to an audience without taking a complex approach, without becoming a science communicator, is that even when all experts agree on the nature of the issue, each one could possibly tell a different nuance, creating misunderstandings or worse, giving a personal interpretation of the facts (or an opinion) in conflict with the others. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to the contribution of the social sciences to understand the problem of telling the public the scientific complexity related to the construction of the Covid-19 pandemic, on the contrary, the figure of the expert as an experience of joint and media self-representation.

### **Research Methodology and Objective**

Since the symbolic launch of VaccineDay set on 27th December 2020 across Europe, the role of scientific communication experts has become increasingly central to effectively promote, through the mass media, interventions both in support of vaccine decisions (Casiday, 2007) and in response to cases of misinformation ready to raise social alarm (Diekema, 2012). Our research draws inspiration from the report *A year of Pandemic, 1st report of the project TIPS - Technoscientific Issue in the Public Sphere* that investigates the pandemic through media coverage in newspapers to monitor the quantitative presence and qualitative evolution of technoscience in the public speech, in this specific case with the aim of exploring the centrality on the public sphere of issues, experts and institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The main interesting result in relation to the objectives of our work was the rank sharing of the thirty-three experts in the newspapers that somehow implies a media construction of the figure of the expert during this period. Starting with this explanation, the central research question that led our project aimed at understanding the world of narratives and self-constructed or inferred representations regarding the figure of the expert. However, as the Covid period was filled with crucial and decisive moments in the national health agenda and pandemic governance, we decided to focus our work on the emergence of the expert figure in connection with one of the most specific themes, that is to say those of the vaccination campaign.

Fragmenting the main research question, this article focuses on three sub-questions:

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*Is the figure of the expert influenced by the institutional role they play such as their position?*

*Is their media relevance influenced by the academic collaboration and network as proxy of their reputation?*

*What is the social representation and which figure emerging instead from media mainstream like press and social like Facebook and Twitter?*

To answer these questions, it is necessary to divide the investigation plan into three areas that cover the cognitive aim of this work focusing on the figure of the thirty-three experts.

The first dimension turns around the positional area that is analyzed here from the side of personal and biographical information.

The second dimension concerns the area of reputation here operationalized as data regarding public positions, academic esteem, and online influence.

The last dimension focuses on the area of communication processed as self-presentation on social media and representation in traditional media.

The thirty-three experts<sup>2</sup> who emerged from the Tips Project were selected according to the principle of inclusion, i.e., every expert who is in at least one of the groups selected by TIPS (both on articles with scientific content and on articles without scientific content) was included in the list, except for Luca Parmitano, who was considered an expert of the medical field of interest. The reference list retains the scores measured by TIPS of the share of scientists, obtained accurately through the ratio of the number of articles where a particular expert appears over the total number of articles in which he was mentioned at least once. For the construction of the empirical record, the selected experts were entered into two case-by-case matrices by variable to collect all useful characteristics for research purposes.

The useful tools for collection, processing and analysis are: FanpageKarma for social media, Publish or Perish for publications, Google Search for curriculum vitae, Volocom for newspapers and social news while Ucinet, Excel, Gephi, SPSS and T\_LAB for analysis operations. The first one built to cover the first two areas that we will investigate with the following data: expert, age, sharing on all articles (scientific and non-scientific articles), disciplinary field, specialization, possible role of institutional leadership and political appointment in a technical-scientific committee (CTS); all functional data to apply network analysis paths. The second matrix built to cover the area of communication was constructed by extracting, thanks to keywords<sup>3</sup>, coming from the national newspapers *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa* (newspapers chosen considering their circulation rates and centrality in the information scene) and, from the social networks Facebook and Twitter on which a content analysis was conducted. Specifically, 7,728 cases were extracted among articles and posts/tweets from 1/11/2020 to 30/10/2021 and subsequently organized period of collection of posts, type of media and content,

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<sup>2</sup>Walter Ricciardi, Silvio Brusaferrò, Anthony Fauci, Andrea Crisanti, Massimo Galli, Roberto Burioni, Giovanni Rezza, Fabrizio Pregliasco, Franco Locatelli, Iliaria Capua, Alberto Zangrillo, Matteo Bassetti, Pierluigi Lopalco, Giuseppe Ippolito, Francesco Vaia, Mike Ryan, Massimo Andreoni, Nicola Magrini, Roberto Cauda, Giorgio Palù, Guido Silvestri, Antonella Viola, Maria, Rosaria Capobianchi, Alberto Mantovani, Giovanni Di Perri, Silvio Garattini, Giuseppe Remuzzi, Massimo Clementi, Paolo Ascierio, Maria, Van Kerkhove, Eugenio Gaudio, Luca Richeldi, Alberto Villani.

<sup>3</sup>The extraction used keywords such as *vaccin\** and *espert\** and *covid\**, *vaccin\** and *espert\** and *coronavirus*, *covid* and *scientiat\** and *vaccin\**, *coronavirus* and *scientiat\** and *vaccin\**, *vaccin\** and *espert\**, *vaccin\** and *scientiat\**.

presence, reaction, and followers on social networks. The selected period covers a year of debate around the vaccination campaign, from the time when the first news about the introduction of the vaccine in Italy was released, following all the discussion about the decisions on the allocation of vaccinations, the administration of the first, second and third dose, closing before the debate on the possibility of introducing a fourth dose. From the materials thus collected and organized, we will discuss below the main results that emerge for the three areas identified.

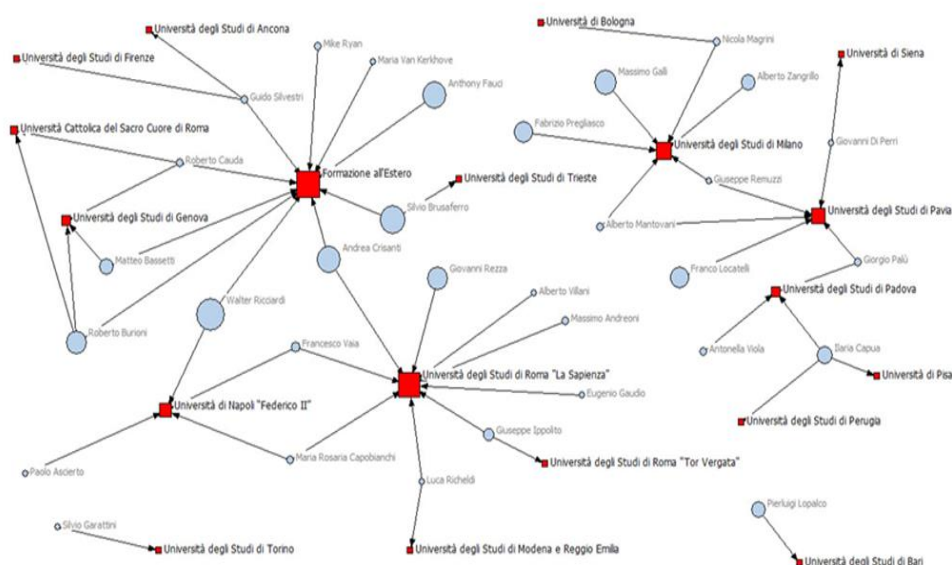
### **Positional area**

Socio-demographic characteristics show that our experts consist of 4 women, including only Maria Van Kerkhove under 50, and 29 men. Only for six experts was possible to find a useful link to their updated resume. Among our experts, the average age is 64, and 30% have senior roles in public agencies. So how is the expert position built and accredited? To answer this question, our proposal has been to reconstruct the pathways understood as relevant institutional steps in education and in the professional sphere, studying centralities and roles in these specific networks, but also changes and characteristics that make the profile of the expert identifiable.

Thanks to the curriculum and the generation of an affiliation matrix, we reconstructed the university educational network, considering both the undergraduate and the doctoral paths. Thanks to this expedient, we reconstructed an institutional affiliation network of our experts' training. From Graph 1, where the largest nodes are the institutions mostly attended by our experts, it is possible to trace three large clusters. The first one with a predominance of training abroad, the second one with the University of Rome "La Sapienza" as the central node closely linked to the Federico II in Naples and, the last one, with the centrality of the University of Milan. Moreover, the largest nodes have a sharing value on the largest TIPS items where, in fact, most of the experts with high share value have a university connection/affiliation abroad. The network analysis allows us to view the most influential universities for our research and, we can infer how the geographical proximity among them tends to strengthen collaborative relationships (as in the case of Milan-Pavia-Padova-Pisa). Moreover, it is also worth noting that 10 of the 33 experts had an educational path that involved the achievement of academic degrees outside the Italian borders; in this regard, it is interesting to note that, following the ranking of TIPS experts, those with the highest total share (Ricciardi, Brusafarro, Fauci, Crisanti, Burioni) all had educational experiences in foreign universities.

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Graph n.1 Training network and PHD study



Elaboration with Ucinet, source online CVs. Minimum linkage: 1 Size by: Degree Centrality (University Nodes), Share calculated by TIPS on all articles (scientists' nodes)

The main disciplinary areas are infectious diseases with Di Perri, Ippolito, Andreoni, Galli, Bassetti, Cauda and microbiology with Crisanti, Palù, Rezza, Capobianchi, Clementi and Burioni. This is followed by a variety of different disciplinary areas, but also by a group of experts trained abroad. Table 1 shows how the multidisciplinary approach has covered and has concerned the entire period of the pandemic and vaccination campaign.

Table. 1 Disciplinary area

Disciplinar scientific Sector	Experts
BIO/14	2=Magrini, Garattini
BIO/16	1=Gaudio
Estero	5= Fauci, Silvestri*, Capua, Van Kerkhove, Ryan
MED/04 ·	2=Mantovani, Viola
MED/06 ·	1=Ascierto
MED/07 ·	6=Crisanti, Palù*, Rezza*, Capobianchi, Clementi, Burioni
MED/10 ·	1=Richeldi
MED/14 ·	1=Remuzzi
MED/17 ·	6=Di Perri, Ippolito*, Andreoni, Falli, Bassetti, Cauda
MED/38 ·	2=Villani, Locatelli*
MED/41 ·	1=Zangrillo
MED/42 ·	4=Pregliasco, Lopalco, Brusaferrò, Ricciardi
SECS-P/07	1 = Vaia* <sup>4</sup>

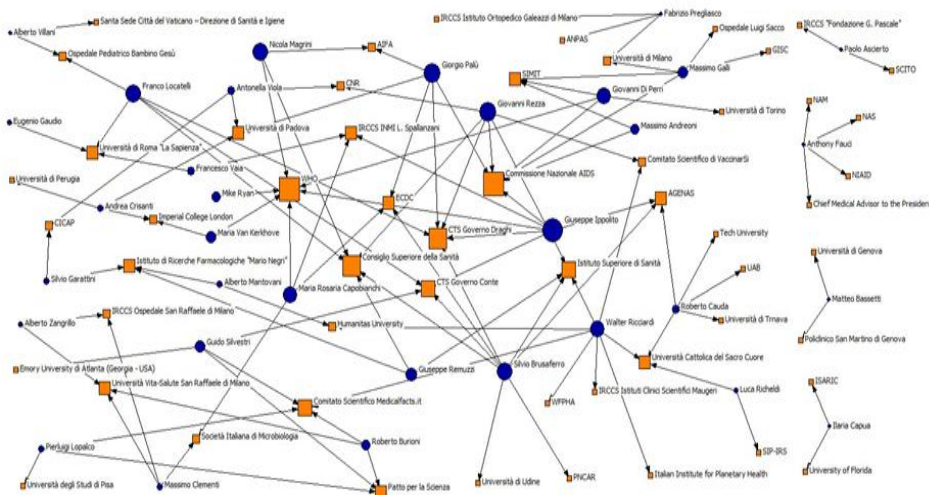
Looking at the side of the professional network conceived as roles in relevant institutions, all our experts have held top positions in Institutes and Agencies, except for Roberto Burioni. The visibility of a scientist becomes, especially in the period of

<sup>4</sup> \*Present in the scientific technical committee.

health crisis more than before, a credential that can be spent on the tables of policy research decision-making (Beltrame, 2007; Rubin, 2020) and likewise one can assume a dual role of policy advisor and public communicator (Roqueplo, 1997). One of the political responses of the Italian government to face the epidemic of Covid-19 was the creation of the Comitato Tecnico Scientifico (CTS) both during the Conte II government (until January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021) and the Draghi government - with new appointments and various confirmations - which have been instrumental in the process of implementing the general rules established by the law and not with various criticisms received. The CTS, composed of experts such as virologists and epidemiologists, in recommending containment measures between the present and the future by translating them into provisions and ordinances, faced the choice of priorities between economy and health with different and contrasting opinions. The importance of maintaining roles has often diminished, creating an additional problem in addition to the fueling confusion for the people. The real mix of roles of different scientists, for example, led to various doubts about the actual usefulness of the mask at the beginning of the pandemic. The data collection for the reference matrix - updated to September 2021 - considers the offices and institutional roles of the CTS to report the presence within the CTS of 4 experts during Conte's government: Silvio Brusaferrò, Franco Locatelli, Giuseppe Ippolito and Guido Silvestri - with the confirmation of the first 3 plus the appointment of Giovanni Rezza and Giorgio Palù in the CTS during Draghi's government.

In this network analysis process, several associations and organizations in which scientists worked were identified. In detail, as shown in Graph N.2, the association with the highest centrality value is the National AIDS Commission (NAC). In addition to it, some public state agencies also have a high level of centrality, such as the Superior Health Council (HSC), the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Graph n.2 Experts Institutions Network



Elaboration with Ucinet, source online CVs. Minimum linkage:1 Size by: Degree Centrality

Furthermore, it is important to note the fact that, in addition to the public and governmental issues, the Scientific Committee of Medicalfacts.it, an online magazine of scientific information and debunking of fake news directed by the virologist Burioni, also played a significant role. In this sense, the importance of this

association, created with the aim of correctly informing web users about science and health issues, may mean that even within the most traditional media, such as newspapers, there has been a selection of personalities who have a propensity for a type of communication and dissemination of information characteristic of digital platforms.

### **Reputational area**

For the reputational area, we will proceed with the exploration of the coverage at the academic level, and, therefore, with the different scientific production and the network of collaboration among the various experts, and with the presence and centrality on social networks. On this side, unlike the previous one centered on the educational and professional network, the focus goes in the direction of academic relevance and distinctiveness on social platforms.

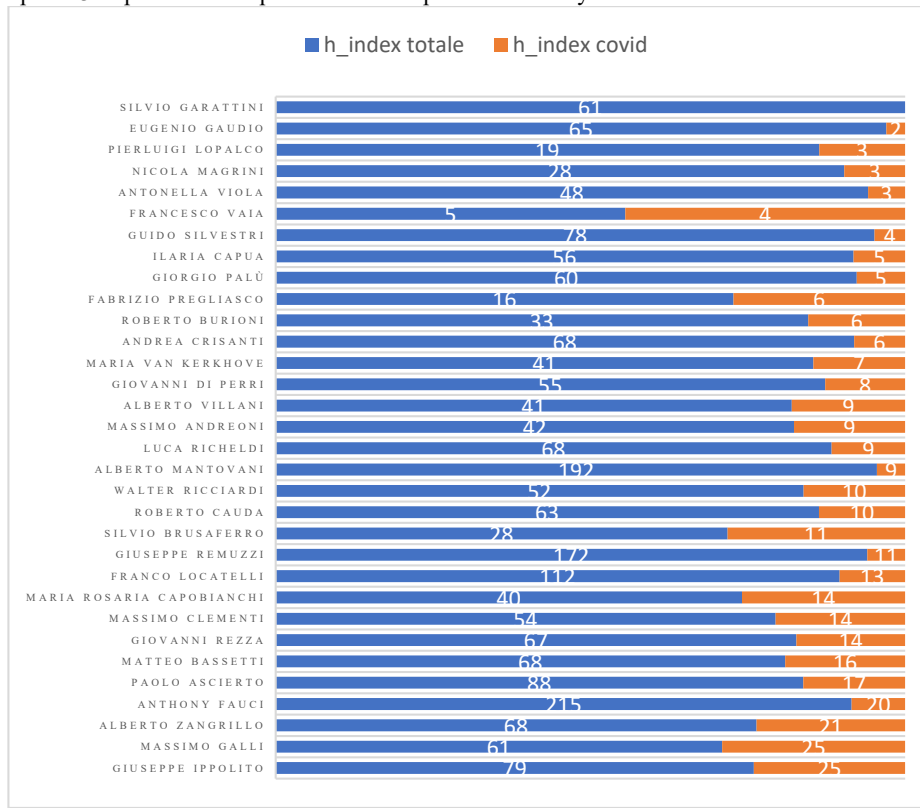
Taking into consideration the academic element, media coverage dominated by scientific actors and characterized by a diversity of experts took place focusing on those with high scientific expertise and often already recognized before the Covid-19 pandemic. This means reconstructing the academic relevance of the experts to be considered and comparing it to the media relevance in 2021. Therefore, two case-by-case matrices were created containing for each of our thirty-three experts the relationship between:

- Number of publications on covid/Total publications;
- Number of citations on covid/Number of total citations;
- H covid index/General H index.

The study was conducted through the automatic calculation of h-indexes based on the Publish or Perish database, a software that allows to browse the archives of other well-known search engines and scientific databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar. Internationally, the various bibliometric indicators are an important tool in scientific research. The new bibliographic databases show a significant increase in the number and variety of scientific productivity indices and, at the same time, the studies that evaluate their behavior and reliability have grown (Alonsoa, Cabrezizob, Herrera-Viedmac, Herrera, 2009).

In the reference matrix, thanks to the index of Hirsch (2005) we quantify the prolificacy and scientific impact of reference experts thanks to the number of publications (academic scientific) and citations on articles (received both from colleagues on the list and out). In this way, the academic relevance has been reconstructed considering both the entire span of their scientific career and during the pandemic period with Covid-19 theme. Among the authors with the highest total h-index we find Fauci, Mantovani, Remuzzi, Silvestri and Locatelli, while on topics centered on Covid-19 of the various experts that are also in the CTS we note the reconfirmation of Fauci among the best unlike, for example, Silvestri committed to follow and work more on pandemic governance. Following the h-index Covid-19, there are some experts such as Galli, Zangrillo, Bassetti and Pregliasco ready to exploit the topic scientifically but not only. Furthermore, thanks to Graph n.3 we can see how the figure of the expert visible in the pandemic era was built not only by the previous path of publications but also by the possibility of doing research using the central theme (Vaia).

Graph N. 3 Experts for total publications and publications only on covid

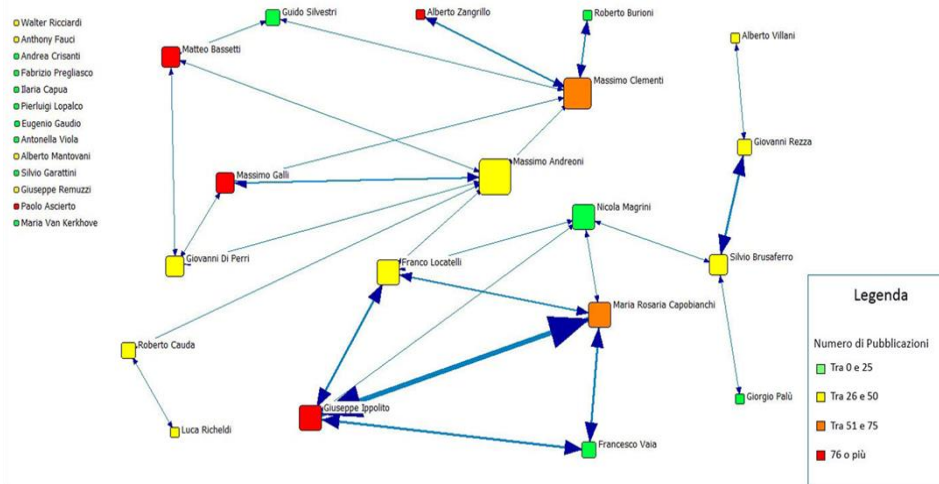


Bibliometrics, understood as that set of mathematical and statistical techniques to analyze the information distribution patterns of school publications and thus authors, articles, and journals, also provide a means to identify diverse relationships with respect to a research topic. Since the onset of the pandemic, the literature has advanced statistics on an exponential increase in the number of academic publications on Covid-19 and, often, an excellent set of interdisciplinary research. Scientific collaboration is a multidimensional concept, generally understood as a form of cognitive exchange, sharing of research procedures and ideas leading to the production of scientific knowledge. Goddixsen, (2014, p. 113) states that in science, co-authored publications of relevant scientific articles seem to be among the most important ways to recognize that a person has given a significant contribution to the development of a research field. Collins and Evans (2002) argue that the highest form of scientific competence is when the scientist can contribute to science in his or her field of research. In this direction, then, collaborative networks assume great importance, since, to borrow the words of Piselli (1995), the influence of a group or institution's relationships is evident on the opinions and actions of an individual. For this reason, the work and training networks explained above and the collaborative one is interesting to observe. And, as it can be seen in Graph N.4, there are relevant connections among scientists: the most obvious is the cluster of scientists working at Spallanzani Hospital, consisting of Ippolito, Capobianchi, and Vaia. Moreover, we can also observe a strong connection between Clementi and Burioni, both protagonists of the "Medical Facts" blog; and equally a remarkable connection between Rezza and Brusaferrò as collaborators both at ISS and at the CTS of Draghi's government.

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In our case, the list of reference experts allows us to place Zangrillo, Bassetti, Galli and Ippolito as nodes in the network with more collaborative publications, while Clementi and Andreoni as more prolific in a network of contacts. In fact, from Graph N.4 we can see that the last is a real link among the experts both in a multidisciplinary sense and for the centrality assumed.

Graph No.4 Network of expert collaborations - Covid-19 publications only.



Processed with Ucinet, online CV source. Minimum Link: 1 Size by: Degree Centrality. Color for: Number of publications

A second element must be taken into consideration, and it is the centrality of the social platform of our experts. The pandemic, in fact, has also shown the central role of communication within today's hyper-connected society, showing on the one hand a scientific debate shifted online, and on the other hand increasingly evident problems of misinformation and *infodemia*. Much of this misinformation spread primarily through social media leads to the question of whether it is a real duty for institutions and policymakers to be online. The question of whether social media fuels institutional distrust was at the heart of school concerns about fake news and misinformation years before the Covid-19 pandemic (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018, Lazer *et al.*, 2018). Exploring their presence on various social platforms, we found that most of the referenced experts are not online. The platform with the most members is Twitter, followed by Instagram and Facebook with only Burioni maintaining and updating his MedicalFacts blog, while the only CTS member active on at least two social networks is Brusaferrò. The idea of true public communication of science is based on the need for mediation between scientists and the public. The complexity of the scientific content moved to the platforms gave him the opportunity to communicate with short messages or photos, again taking up the importance of exposing the numbers of the pandemic. A language translation made necessary by the need to communicate risks by accurately identifying that "process of exchanging information among stakeholders about the nature, power, importance, or control of a risk" (Covello, 1992, p.359). Risk communication, in addition to monitoring an "ongoing risk" (Coombs, 2012), on the one hand has the task of performing preventive functions without leaving anything to chance, and on the other hand empowers scientists to proclaim themselves at the center of the communication process. As we know well from the literature (Colombo, 2015; Riva, 2016) each platform has its own target audience, and the fact of being followed on one of these



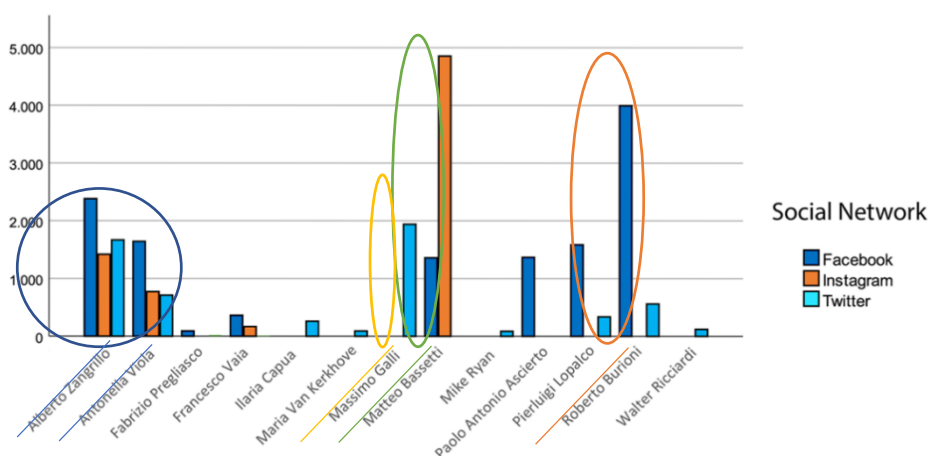
platforms clarifies the place of importance within which the individual expert fits. The data collected allow us to observe a different distribution of followers among the three reference platforms. Burioni, in fact, on Twitter and Facebook is the first to be followed with more than 100,000 followers, Bassetti (not present on Twitter) is the most followed on Instagram and, with only the virologist Ilaria Capua, achieves 100,000 followers. This highlights how, in the positional sphere, presence in mainstream media is reserved only for some of the experts considered and only for those who can create their own language, especially in a format characterized by a feature that sets them apart. At this juncture, it becomes legitimate to project these considerations also by virtue of their presence in television broadcasts (where each television channel with its own broadcast decided whom to address as experts). In fact, the most "followed" experts on social networks are precisely those characters that we have seen several times on TV.

If, from the point of view of content, a specific contribution is needed to enter the analysis and understand "who publishes what?" and with what style of communication they do it, we underline the lack of use of individual blogs by experts in spite of an increase in the number of Italians who obtain every day information about scientific content on blogs or websites (reported by *Annuario Scienza Tecnologia e Società*, 2021). The individual blog, which, from the point of view of content and communicative functions, is configured for scientists as an alternative channel for the publication of their research, has been replaced by the imposition and use of the most well-known and used platforms. Bucchi (1996) pointed out that in certain situations, often related to scientific controversies, experts prefer addressing the public directly, skipping the different stages of scientific communication. Looking at the Graphs 6, then, one can infer how the online mediation of science recalls the presence of few of the familiar faces. Marcinkowski (2014) argues that while the need for science to present itself to the public is evident, any kind of expressed communication must be understood as a real component of academic activity.

If we look, however, at how social platforms are used, as shown in Graph 6, we can see different types of use for different experts. There are those who use all platforms with the same intensity and tend to have a multi-platform profile of the content they produce, such as Zangrillo and Viola. There are some experts who use more visual and emotionally intense content, like Bassetti who dominates on Instagram. There are some experts who focus on the rational component and on public and political debate, like Galli, who makes Twitter his favorite platform. There are other experts who choose Facebook as their digital forum, also because it reaches a more generalist and varied audience, and among these Burioni stands out, followed by Lopalco and Ascierto.

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Graph N.6 Use of social networks by experts.



Burioni is the most followed on Twitter along with Capua, who however does not post much on it; Bassetti is consistently the most followed on Instagram as well as Burioni on Facebook. This means that the relational component, the public and political debate that passes through Twitter are connected to other dimensions of reputation and importance, probably dictated by the content conveyed and not by the way it is conveyed and not dominated by the amount of activity of the participants on the platform.

### Communication area

To analyze the characteristics of the communication area of reference experts all contents extracted with Keywords are considered (espert\*, Scienziat\*, Vaccin\*, COVID, coronavirus) from daily articles of national newspapers such as La Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Giornale and from social networks Facebook and Twitter. In this way, mass media are used as a proxy for representation in mainstream media and social networks as a proxy for representation via social. All texts were collected between the months of November 2020 and October 2021 for a total of 7,728 cases organized in a case matrix for variables such as: media type, date, the complete corpus (title plus article) and, the presence or absence of the reference experts in the corpus with 32 dichotomous variables (YES/NO).

The exception is that the only expert ever named within the dataset is Ascierio and, as a constant not included. Ascierio is among the first for h-index both general and on Covid-19 topics but at the same time it is possible to notice his non-presence in the collaboration network. We therefore hypothesize a construction and a figure of the expert here not centered at the national level but more at the local level.

The date was appropriately classified in three phases considering the debate around the vaccination campaign.

The first phase from 1st November to 30th March anticipates and describes both the entire phase of the vaccination campaign in advance with the vaccination day set for 27th December and where, therefore, there is a phase of information, discussion on decisions for vaccination and administration of the first doses.

The second from 1st April to 30th June, which is in the intermediate phase between the two doses of vaccinations, and the third from 1st July to 30th October with the third dose and the possibility of achieving herd immunity. From the Table

2 we can see that social networks cover more than 61% of cases compared to 38% of newspapers and, in all cases, differ in several factors and nuances.

Table 2. Type of media and Phase

Type of media	First phase (Nov–Dec–Gen– Feb–Mar)	Second phase (Apr–May – Jun)	Third phase (Jul–Aug–Sept– Oct)	Total
Newspaper	21,30%	17,85%	22,64%	61,79%
Social network	12,88%	16,63%	8,70%	38,21%
Total	34,18%	34,48%	31,34%	100,00%

In the construction and representation of experts on the two media types we find both similarities and contrasts from the most used keywords. Indeed, the main queries for both media types are *vaccin* and *expert* but, nevertheless, there is a tendency to create a space for representation that moves away from the specialist domain.

With Table 3 it is possible to notice how the construction of the figure of the expert using keywords is central to daily articles in the first phase and with a further increase in the second and then decline in the third. While for social networks, if Twitter follows the same line, Facebook with 18.52% concentrates expertise in the last phase.

From this we can deduce how the centrality of the expert for the area of communication has been dominated by the plurality of content produced on Web 2.0, often recalling interviews and products of other media.

Table 3. Distribution media o phase

Type of media	First phase (Nov–Dec–Gen– Feb–Mar)	Second phase (Apr–May–Jun)	Third phase (Jul–Aug–Sept– Oct)	Total
Corriere	4,97%	7,02%	3,70%	15,69%
Repubblica	4,37%	5,09%	2,43%	11,89%
Stampa	3,53%	4,53%	2,56%	10,63%
Facebook	13,23%	11,34%	18,52%	43,09%
Twitter	8,08%	6,51%	4,12%	18,70%
Total	34,18%	34,48%	31,34%	100,00%

Consequently, thanks to content analysis techniques and in particular co-occurrence analysis, it was possible to study the different associations among words by identifying those that appear closest to each other. Using T-Lab it was possible to study and explore the semantic relationships among words within the whole corpus and the network of experts.

From the outputs we can see a different centrality of the figures of the expert and the scientist differentiating the representation by type of media and elaborating

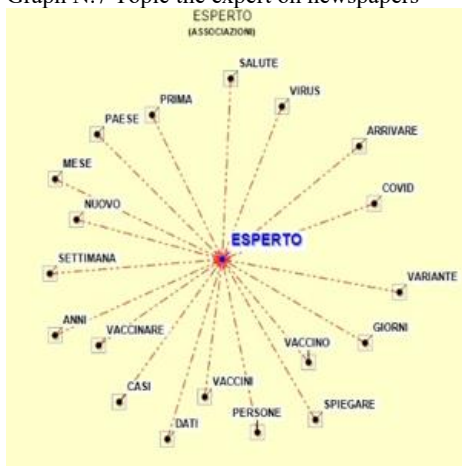
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through sequences of KeyWords, whose elements are lexical units in the corpus or in a subset of it.

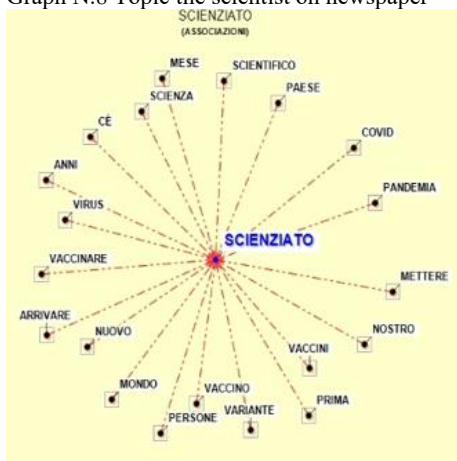
From Graph n.7 depicting the construction of the expert we note associations ranging from considering the period and, therefore, between the temporal distance of the administration of doses (words such as week, month, years), to explain in terms of efficient health the usefulness of the vaccine even during the arrival of new variants from Covid-19 (arrival, variant, explain, people).

In addition, for newspapers, in Graph n.8 we can clearly see how the construction of the "Scienziato" placed on the network returns an interconnection directed both to science (scientific, pandemic, vaccinated) and to people. Just the high frequency of the plural possessive form "our" is not a coincidence, in fact, along with the world and people puts at the center of the debate during the vaccination campaign a figure of the scientist inclusive and at the service of the public.

Graph N.7 Topic the expert on newspapers



Graph N.8 Topic the scientist on newspaper



*Processing with T\_lab, own extraction source*

From Graph 9 we see how on social networks, the figure of the expert stands out with a different narrative and construction. We find words like Anti, doubts, Astrazeneca that we can explain by assuming that the topic and generic posts on social networks are more varied with a wide spectrum of topics and a lexicon often oriented to a specific type of target. Changing the communicative register also

automatically emerges a question/answer to uncertainties and the new (with the third word placed at the centre).

The lexical patterns in which words like use, anticovid participate, together with the previous ones show how the participation of the expert in the construction of knowledge for the audience has changed. Even for the figure of the scientist on social networks (Graph 10), the words identified are hardly surprising as they are the ones most echoed and known during the pandemic period.

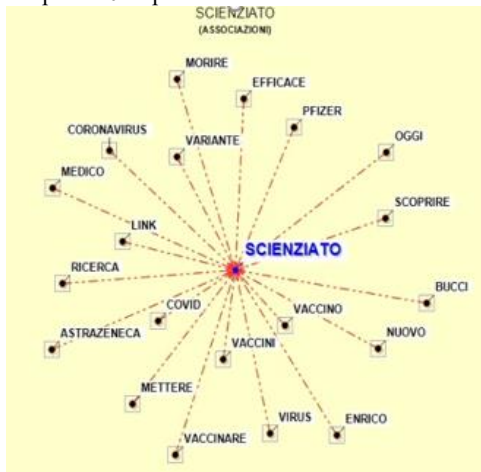
However, interesting for interpretation purposes are the distributions of the keyword's death next to effective ready to recall the usefulness of the vaccine and, the figure of the expert Bucci the only one not present in the reference list and that the research on the corpus reported among the most frequent.

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Graph N.9 Topic of the expert on social network



Graph N.10 Topic of the scientist on social network



*Processing with T\_lab, own extraction source*

## Conclusion

In this study, the three positional, reputational, and communicative areas show how the construction of the expert figure depends on several factors, often interconnected and in interaction. In fact, it can be said that the relevance and emergence of the expert in relation to the theme of the vaccine campaign is accelerated both by his scientific activity (consisting of both a dense network of interdisciplinary relationships and with different research institutions) and by the intersection between mainstream and social media. In fact, even within the most traditional media, such as newspapers, there has been a selection of personalities and a construction of the figure of the scientist who has a propensity for a type of communication and dissemination of information characteristics of digital platforms. However, from the elaboration specific frames of representation of the figure of the visible expert emerge as opposed to the ones not visible or at least not visible to the media. In fact, it becomes necessary to distinguish the role of scientists as "public experts" (Peters, 2008) from other possible roles that scientists may assume in public. This viewpoint reflects both how scientists' entry into media programming is not always linked to their academic activity and, how the priorities of experts in an

institutionally relevant position is not conveyed communicate. At the same time, the "celebrity" status assumed by several scientists may allow them to comment on areas outside their framework of expertise. So, what makes a scientist the expert of the moment? This increasingly contentious question may be resolved through future analyses of television presence and contents collected.

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# *Female caregivers for elderly relatives in Russia: social barriers and stereotypes*

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## **Abstract**

The article presents the results of a study in which gender issues are shown using the example of variations in home and institutional care for elderly relatives. The objects of the study were women - close relatives of elderly people living in private boarding houses. The authors conclude that social factors such as gender stereotypes, stigmatization, and negative stereotyping of any form of care, except for home care, are the main barriers to turning to institutional forms of care and alleviating the plight of caring women. It is these factors that mainly hinder the development of alternative forms of care for an elderly person, which could provide professional care at a modern level, as well as contribute to an improvement in the quality of life of caring women. Conducting a study during a pandemic with limited opportunities for a personal meeting of an informant and an interviewer became the basis for using, along with traditional, a series of digital interviews, which allowed the authors to draw a number of conclusions about the application of new methods to sensitive gender issues.

**Keywords:** elderly people; board and care home; female caregiver.

## **Introduction**

For several decades, the demographic situation in Russia has been developing in such a way that the aging of the population can be considered its most characteristic feature. The increase in the relative share and the total number of elderly and very old people sets new special goals and objectives for society. Nowadays, the focus of the desired future in old age is shifting from simple longevity to active longevity. More attention both in socio-economic and scientific discourse is now rightfully paid to representatives of the third age, namely elderly people, who having crossed the calendar retirement threshold, continue to be active actors in various areas of life.

However, the reality is that the third age is almost inevitably followed by the fourth one when health and strength fail and the elderly need more or less care and help from others. Under current conditions, this becomes a real challenge: If in 2006 there were 29.4 million people older than working age for 90.1 million people of working age, then in 2021 this ratio is 38.0 million for 81.4 million<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, an increase in life expectancy leads not only to prolongation of the active period of old age but also to an increase in several chronic age-related diseases in the later period of life, limiting self-care or making it impossible, among which it is necessary to

highlight psychiatric problems, for example, Alzheimer's disease. These factors keep the following questions current: by whom and how the help and support to elderly people in need of care will be provided regularly under modern requirements for ensuring the quality of life. The goal of the research is basing on example of women, which turned to such form of care as a board and care home, to identify and analyze contemporary problems, which they faced while and after the home care, as well as stigmatization and stereotypization of women in the period of care for elderly relatives

### **Theoretical basis**

Historically, there have been several approaches to the implementation of care for the elderly in European countries. In some countries of Southern Europe (Greece, Spain, Italy), elderly people traditionally live together with relatives. The main burden, including the expenses, in this case, are borne by the family. In Germany, Austria, and France, social insurance plays an important role, and care is provided by special services (nurses, assistants, short-term and long-term accommodation in specialized inpatient facilities). In Sweden, Norway, and Finland, the main burden of care for the older generation, both financial and organizational, is put on the state through budget funding (Gilyadova, 2015; Anttonen, 2003).

At the same time, researchers identify such general trends that have formed as a response to the changing socio-economic and demographic conditions of recent decades as professionalization, commercialization, as well as broadening of the window of opportunities and implementation of care associated with them. The *professionalization* trend is due to the increased requirements for ensuring the quality of life of a person at any age, with the advent of new sophisticated medical technologies and means of care for people in need of care. The *commercialization* trend reflects the increased needs of consumers of such services, usually relatives of an elderly person, and is aimed at solving the issue of disburdening home caregivers. Both of these trends form the third one, *the expansion of the repertoire of care practices*, which allows for an elder-centered approach for an elderly person in need of care. It should be noted that under the pressure of the above objective factors, these trends are now observed in the countries of Southern Europe (Da Roit, 2007).

As for Russia, care for close relatives is traditionally entrusted to members of the family, as a rule, the female part of it (Zdravomyslova, 2014). The demographic and socio-economic transformations discussed above have not become a generator of changes in this area either at the institutional level or at the level of everyday representations. For example, the number of beds in inpatient social service facilities for elderly citizens and people with disabilities from 2008 to 2018 slightly increased from 251 to 263 thousand. At the same time, the number of such facilities during this time decreased from 1530 to 1280<sup>2</sup>. A review of domestic scientific sources also indicates insufficient attention of researchers to the problem, although interesting and significant writings of E. Zdravomyslova, O. Krasnova, E. Temkina and O. Tkach allow seeing the depth of the problem. The results of the studies presented in them capture a deep gender asymmetry, as well as a number of acute and insoluble issues faced by women who have assumed the responsibility of caring for an elderly family member (Krasnova, 2000; Tkach, 2015). The general conclusion of the researchers is unanimous: Home care for an elderly relative can be described as a stressful and destructive period in the life of a caring woman, since it negatively affects and is interconnected with many areas of the female caregiver's life.

This destructive effect, which has been emphasized by both Russian and foreign researchers, especially in prolonged care, has the following *targets*:

1. *Helper (caregiver) health.* The issue of preservation of health is developing in connection with both the objectively greatly increased costs for the home care, which is reflected by the society in Russia first of all as a female duty, and with the subjective perceptions of the burden as unsustainable. Female caregivers experience strong emotional stress associated with constant tiredness and emotional burnout. This is especially true for people caring for relatives with dementia. Current studies confirm the findings of L. Pearlin (Aneshensel, Pearlin & Schuler, 1993) about the multi-factor nature of stress in care for elderly people with dementia. According to these findings, the primary stressors include the time spent by the female caregiver, pressure and physical work; the secondary stressors include those that are caused by nervous exhaustion and a lack of resources, namely conflicts, problems in the family and at work. Further, the “secondary intra-physical stress” is added, leading to a loss of self-respect and loss of self, and thereby physical health deterioration: The emergence of new and exacerbation of chronic diseases. Thus, according to studies by M. Alshanskaya, A. Makushina, N. Aleksandrova, conducted among female helpers caring for elderly relatives, 15% of respondents experience fear and anxiety about the preservation of their health, 18% of respondents state that they look worse, 21% of respondents state constant tiredness and a decrease in overall vitality, 34% of respondents report a deterioration of sleep, appetite and mood, (Alshanskaya, Makushina, Aleksandrova & Lemish, 2019). Conspicuous is the fact that in our opinion, deterioration of sleep and appetite of caregivers are more objective markers, while the rather low percentage of people who are concerned about their health can be explained by social attitudes, according to which the fulfillment of family responsibilities in care cannot and should not be accompanied by negative emotions;

2. *Home environment and family atmosphere.* As a rule, the decision to live together and provide care for an elderly relative is made in families collectively and is usually supported by all family members (Krasnova, 2000). This is due, firstly, to the traditions of intergenerational relations: The prospect of living together with an elderly relative is discussed or, at least, spoken out long before the decision is made, therefore it is often perceived as unambiguous and inevitable. Secondly, such a living, to a variable degree, helps the family to solve or improve their living conditions: either to expand their own apartment or to provide separate housing for the younger generation. However, in general, *relatives are unprepared* for the difficulties and problems that inevitably accompany such a decision. 56% of respondents report a significant change in their lifestyle after they start living with an elderly relative, 40% report a significant decrease in quality of their life due to the need to care for an elderly relative (Alshanskaya *et al.*, 2019).

Studies by O. Tkach indicate that a “caring home”, on the one hand, sidelines an elderly person, on the other hand, the home environment is completely remade to suit his/her needs (Tkach, 2015). The daily routine of all family members changes, special pieces of furniture, helping devices, care products, and new smells appear. The house becomes a hospital with single patient and unqualified personnel. Inadequate housing, blurring of personal boundaries and a chronic shortage of free time often lead to a narrowing of social contacts of an elderly person’s relatives and further isolation. Therefore, the family atmosphere is often characterized by increased conflict (Stuart-Hamilton, 2002). High physical and psychological stress lead to a lack of attention and support that family members providing constant care for an elderly person give to each other. This is confirmed by the findings of gender-

studies, according to which all female respondents (family caregivers) state that they pay much less attention both to themselves and to other family members (Alshanskaya *et al.*, 2019). The important fact should be mentioned that care for an elderly ill relative is far from being universal. By presenting an elderly person as an impersonal object of care, we miss a whole layer of problems, and therefore, opportunities for constructive analysis. In fact, the history of the caregiver's relationship with the elderly relative is imposed on the initially difficult life situation of constant, often long-term care, intensifying the pre-existing conflicts between them. Moreover, it is extremely important how successfully the elderly person has overcome his/her, perhaps, last age crisis. D. Levinson states that the positive option in this case is associated with the giving in of the leadership and playing "supporting roles" (Levinson, 1980). According to R. Peck, the successful aging of a person and its final part are associated with "loss of self-concern" and a shift in attention to the well-being of close ones who are left without him/her. If this final crisis is not overcome by an elderly person due to different life circumstances, then another direction of attack on the home environment and family atmosphere of relatives is formed (Peck, 1968);

3. *Career*. Overload of female caregiver, fatigue, negative emotions, lack of free time and stress affect her professional life. Thus, 15% of women caring for ill elderly relatives leave their jobs due to the inability to combine care and career (Alshanskaya *et al.*, 2019). A decrease in performance efficiency during this period of life may be evidenced by the fact that almost a one fourth of female caregivers report that they have financial difficulties (Alshanskaya *et al.*, 2019). K. Aneshensel and L. Pearlin, based on their studies, found that the consequences of care, which are not directly related to the care settings, have the most direct impact on the career of a family caregiver. The authors describe such secondary stressors as a long-term stable feeling of a state of captivity or imprisonment, critically reducing a person's potential, which harms her career efficiency.

It is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of female caregivers in Russia are 45-60-year-old women, daughters (or wives of sons) of elderly ill relatives who need constant care. Turning to the well-known periodization of the labor subjects' development by E. Klimov, we can see that at this age a specialist is either at the stage of his/her excellence or, with favorable development of events, enters the next stage - the stage of authority (Klimov, 1996). In any way, his/her working activity is stable and maximally effective, has an individual, unique style, which is confirmed by such formal signs as high skill category, academic degree, rank. Consequently, the traditional shifting of the burden of constant care for elderly ill relatives onto family caregivers (or, more precisely, female caregivers) reduces the contribution to the country's economy of the most resourceful part of the population in terms of professional competence. Intensive home care lasts from several months to several years. At the current rate of development, it is very hard for a family caregiver to return to previous positions after such a long break.

### **Private board and care home as an alternative form of care for the elderly**

The traditional model of family care in modern demographic and socio-economic conditions comes into conflict with reality. A total underestimation of the burden of female caregivers, while discussion of the problem at all levels in the categories of responsibilities and customs have not only sad but fatal results for many people:

1) problems of one social group are solved mainly at the expense and by means of another, the damage of which we have just considered;

2) excessive burden of female caregivers, leading to emotional burnout, cannot but reduce the quality of care;

3) obsolete rules impede the development of social institutions and market mechanisms that could relieve female family members of an elderly relative in whole or in part, and give them a choice that they currently do not have (or have a little alternative as an exception).

We are faced with logical questions: are changes possible, and is society ready for them? Researchers note an increased conservatism and traditionalism that are characteristic of the economically poor, which, together with limited affordability, practically close the possibility of initiating changes from there. Therefore, the “first echelon” in the transition to new (or combined) forms of care for ill elderly people are better-off groups (Da Roit, 2007). Thus, in response to the changed conditions and the social demands that have just begun their formation, private board and care homes for the elderly began to be made in large cities.

Analysis of the market for the services provided and living conditions allows getting a fairly clear idea, since, although the offers vary significantly in terms and prices, it is possible to highlight the features and characteristics inherent in most objects. A modern private board and care home for the elderly is usually a two-story house with a well-equipped backyard area intended mainly for walking. The price includes five or six meals a day, medical care and leisure activities. Twenty-four-hour medical supervision in private board and care homes is achieved in a very simple way: A specialist with secondary medical education and experience of working as a nurse is appointed as the head (senior caregiver). Such work presupposes accommodation and meals in the board home itself, which are attractive working conditions for many people who come to Moscow for work. Private board and care homes accept elderly people, both for permanent residence and for limited periods, for example, during the vacation period of relatives who provide primary care. The residents of such facilities are people not only with serious diseases (dementia, blindness, diabetes) but also relatively independent elderly people, for whom it has become uncomfortable to live separately.

## **Method and methodology**

### *The goal of the study and research questions.*

Our study aimed to identify the grounds, causes, and social barriers that arise and are formed among women caring for elderly sick relatives while turning to such a form of institutional care as private boarding houses for the elderly. Research questions are:

- Why do female caregivers turn to the institutional form of care of elderly relatives?
- What kind of barriers and stereotypes have been they faced while seeking of assistance from private board and care homes for the elderly?
- How can female caregivers evaluate the results of turning to the institutional form of care of the elderly relatives?

*Method.*

The study was planned by in-depth interviews in Moscow and the Moscow Region for the spring of 2020. The empirical base should have been 64 in-depth unstructured interviews with women in Moscow and the Moscow region aged 40 to 65 years. The informants were close female relatives of elderly people living in eleven private board and care homes (N=64). The board and care homes that are located in different districts of Moscow and the Moscow Region and offer care services in the price range from 750 to 2000 rubles per day were selected for the study, which was due to the need to minimize the possible economic determinism. The socio-demographic structure of the sample corresponds to the socio-demographic specificity of the group (repeatedly articulated by Russian and foreign researchers) that traditionally provides home-based care, and thus includes the majority of 45-60-year-old women with an average income<sup>3</sup> (from 40 to 70 thousand rubles).

The interview guide had three conceptual blocks. The first block dealt with the reasons why informants turned to the institutional form of care. Within the framework of the second block, the main attention was paid to the barriers faced by the informants in deciding whether to seek assistance from the private board and care homes for the elderly. The final part considered the informants' evaluation of the "final results" of this decision.

*Pandemic-related limitations and methodological solution.*

Began in spring 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic changed our habitual way of life. In the context of sociological research conducted by the qualitative interview method, this was expressed in the following methodological limitations:

- Low motivation of informants to take part in face-to-face interviews due to health risks;
  - Due to the anti-COVID measures, the possibilities of free movement around the city were limited, therefore it was difficult to hold a personal meeting between the researcher and the informant;
  - Due to the anti-COVID measures, almost all public spaces were closed, so finding a place to conduct interviews was a challenge.

These limitations put us before a choice: to stop the study; to limit the number of interviews with the number of already provided face-to-face interviews; or to adapt the qualitative research methodology to new conditions.

During the pandemic, the role of digital technologies has grown significantly: They turned from a highly specialized sphere into one of the most important means of labor and "means of production". This transformation has affected the methods of sociological research as well. Accordingly, it was decided to replace the face-to-face interview with an online/digital interview in the form of in-depth interviews in Skype or Zoom, when the informant was at home and at a convenient time. The guide of the interview remained the same. Since pandemic-related restrictions have become more stringent since fieldwork began, 25 interviews were traditional, and 39 were conducted using digital technologies.

As we decided to continue our study in new conditions and with an updated methodology, the methodological goal of the study was added to the sociological one: to analyze and compare the features, as well as the level of openness of

informants during traditional and digital interviews on a sensitive topic within the framework of gender research.

## Results

### *Decisions made and the reasons for their making.*

In the first part of the interview, most of our informants state that much work prevents them from providing quality home care as a reason for turning to private board and care homes for the elderly: *“I work a lot. My mother can no longer stay alone in the apartment. She needs constant supervision. Therefore, we made such a decision. The whole family, together. Here she is under medical supervision, and that gives us peace of mind”* (Valentina, 56 y.o.).

However, references on other grounds for such a decision were appearing during the interview. Thus, it turned out that in most cases, applying to a private board and care home was preceded by many months and years of family care. According to our informants, their own *health* was becoming materially worse during that time. Here are some excerpts from the interview: *“To be honest, I was physically unable to take care of my mother. My health simply deteriorated. When I started caring for her, I was a perfectly healthy woman. Over a year, I turned into a wreck. Before that, I was doing fitness, I could run several kilometers. And that all gone in a year. I am not talking about running, it became difficult for me to get to the metro station without stopping because of my heart condition”* (Zhanna, 49 y.o.); *“I am not in good health now. By the way, I even have records that evidence this. I undergo a preventive medical examination every year. So, after a year of such a life, my cholesterol is 9 (normal is 4), and my hemoglobin is greatly increased. Do you know who has such results? Soldiers during military operations. I read that the Americans conducted such studies. That is, my body decided that I am at war. My blood really got oily and thick. Probably so that I don't lose a lot of blood in case of injury. That's what I have”* (Oksana, 50 y.o.).

It is necessary to highlight the influence of the *experience* of friends who have been providing family care for many years on the decision to use the services of a private board and care home. Informants state that there are women in their environment lifestyle of which has become a warning for them: despite the social approval of home care, the female caregivers themselves are deprived of private life, their health is undermined, and communication with other family members is broken: *“My friend has been caring for her paralyzed mother for 7 years. During this time, she developed cancer. She turned into an old woman. The children were just at a transition age, it turned out that they grew up practically without their mother because she could not be everywhere at once, she started using drugs as a result. Such a tragedy ... My friend said that she would probably die before her mother. And I listened to her and thought to myself – so would I”* (Marina, 56 y.o.); *“There was also an example before my eyes: a neighbor was taking care of her mother. Her mother has been wrong in the head for along time, for many years. The neighbor has now health issues, she looks older than her mother, she quit her job. Honestly, when I look at her, I understand that my life will become like that very soon”* (Irina, 55 y.o.).

Many informants reported the deterioration in the psychological climate in the family, an increase in conflict during the period of home care, affirming the point of the crisis nature of long-term care for an elderly seriously ill patient for the whole family. Moreover, the frequency of conflicts increased between the female

caregivers themselves and both the elderly persons and other family members. Our informants attribute this mainly to two factors, namely physical and psychological overload and character traits of the elderly person: *“I was so tired that I began to take out on everyone, the family, of course, was the first one. But, at the same time, it was hard to provide care, I felt exhausted”* (Nadezhda, 60 y.o.). The results of the interviews confirm the findings of the researchers (Levinson, Peck), given above, and make it possible to separate the issue of caring for elderly parents who have stable personality traits throughout their life that make it difficult to communicate with them. Under home care, this circumstance greatly increased the crisis of the situation for the caring women: *“My dad has been hard to get on with all his life. We took him to live with us to take care of him, he became medically fragile. But it turned out that only physically. The character traits remained as in his youth. He was bringing me to white heat and I used to think: it would be better if he had dementia...”* (Elena, 52 y.o.).

A fundamentally different opinion about the reasons for using the services of a private board and care home was given in only one interview. The informant resides permanently in the United States, and for several years her elderly mother is a resident of a private board and care home in Moscow. She stated that the appropriate choice was made due to the impending departure, the transfer of such experience to her own approaching old age: *“This is a very good board and care home. Mom feels good here. I am constantly in touch with her and with the personnel ... When I retire, I will return to Moscow. I have a son with his family in Moscow. And I told him a long time ago that I wanted to live in the same board and care home. Many people in America do this, and I think it's right”* (Natalia, 55 y.o.).

However, in most cases, the decisions on the need for using the services of private board and care homes by our informants were made only after tangible damage to health and other personal losses against the background of the conviction that it was impossible to provide full care for an elderly person and their acute experience of this fact. Here is an interesting statement about the period of home care made by Anna, the daughter of an elderly woman suffering from dementia, who has been living in a board home for more than a year: *“While this does not affect you personally, you have no idea about this problem, about the fact that many families live like this for many years, just like in captivity. But when this affects you, it is as if you are in an extra dimension. Suddenly it opens up to you how many families and women live like this! And before that, I did not even notice them, as if they were invisible to me”* (Anna, 54 y.o.).

#### *Barriers or why is it so difficult to make a decision?*

One of the main questions of the study was the question of the factors that impeded the choice of a private board and care home as an alternative form of care. The analysis of the previous block (on situations and reasons for such a choice) made it even more current. Indeed, despite the heaviest, traumatic conditions for everyone that is involved in the home care, the unbearable burden on the caregivers when they realize that it is impossible to provide care that meets modern requirements for quality of life, nevertheless, the decision on an alternative form of care is postponed by our informants to the utmost. It seems clear that this is possible only in the presence of very specific, extremely high barriers, to overcome which extraordinary events or conditions are required. The results of the gender-study made it possible to reveal the social nature of the studied barriers and to highlight several specific features.



Most of our informants reported that they initially (in the first months of home care) did not get by with alternative care. As a justification for this position, first of all, we can identify the great influence of the cultural model of kindred care for the older generation. The informants sincerely wanted to provide home care, as was customary to their families and the families of their acquaintances: *“You see, at first this (private board and care home) did not even occur to me. I knew that it was my turn to wear ball and chain. And that was that. Every woman does it”* (Oksana, 50 y.o.).

An excerpt of an interview with Anna, in which she talks about the first consultation with a psychiatrist that came on a house call to her mother, who was then still suffering from the initial stage of dementia, also indicates the gradual nature of the problem awareness. In an interview, the informant fixates on the change in her views on the issue of care: *“My mom started to behave in a queer way. I was completely at a loss and didn't know what to do. An emergency doctor (psychiatric service) arrived. He was an elderly man. He talked to my mom. And then he came to me and said: “Do you know how many deaths I have seen?” I was so shocked and asked again: “...of such patients?” And he says: “No. Their relatives.” Can you imagine that? And then he said straight to my face: “She won't feel better. But you will lose your health. In a year or two, you will be fired, because you will not be able to work normally. Take your mom to a board and care home. There she will be provided with professional care, and you will save your life.” My indignation knew no bounds. What a board and care home?... Then I understood everything. You know, I thought back the words of this doctor every day afterwards. He was right about everything”* (Anna, 54 y.o.). The given excerpt of the interview records the change in the informant's attitude to the problem under the influence of expert knowledge.

An analysis of the interviews allows assuming that the traditions of self-sacrifice, family stories of female home care (often colored and reconstructed in the memory of descendants with the help of time and the older generation), which form the views of the caregivers themselves, act as the primary barrier, the basis of the lack of alternative to home care. Moreover, our study has shown that this state of things is maintained and controlled by the social environment of caring relatives, making barriers of the next (second) level. For five years, our informant Oksana was independently caring for her mother, who had several strokes: *“Then I came to realize that it couldn't go on this way; I felt absolutely done mentally and physically. And most importantly, I couldn't help her much. But there was also a fear of social judgment. And I knew such cases”* (Oksana, 47 y.o.).

The following fact gives the understanding of the “height” of this (“secondary”) barrier: almost all of our informants hide from others that they have moved away from the traditional model of care, entrusting the care of a relative to the personnel of a private board and care home. *“I don't tell anyone that my father lives in a board and care home, especially at work. Everyone will condemn me. All five years, while I was caring for my father myself, I was torn between two houses (my father live d separately, and I had a small apartment), all my colleagues were closely following the process. I was regularly asked with deprecatingly when would I take my father to my place? Moreover, none of those who controlled the execution of my mission as a daughter took care of their parents themselves”* (Polina, 49 y.o.). Our informant Zhanna told us about her condition and the first conversation with the senior from the board home, where her mother lives now: *“I often reminisce about Nadezhda. This is the main person in our board and care home. I remember how she calmed me down when we brought my mother there. She said that she saw how relatives are stressed, so many tears... After all, it is clear that it is no longer possible to live like*

*this, and there is a feeling of shame at the same time... Nadezhda helped me a lot to psych up” (Zhanna, 49 y.o.).*

Starting our study, we assumed that one of the main obstacles to turning to alternative forms of care, perhaps the main one, would be the financial issue. The most common cost of living in a private board and care home on the market is about 30-35 thousand rubles per month (medicines and hygiene products are not included in this amount). However, our study did not accept this hypothesis. *“As for the money ... Yes, it is probably expensive. Our family is limited. But how can all this be measured with money?” (Olga, 50 y.o.). “Of course, this is a serious part of the family budget ... Is this an obstacle? No. But now I know how much my life cost - 32 thousand rubles a month” (Evgenia, 53 y.o.).* The traditionally important money issue in line of our problem is clearly on the periphery. The fact that the financial component is almost lost among the influence of cultural practices, socio-psychological contradictions and dramas allows seeing the extraordinary power of this influence.

#### *How the life changed*

All our informants highly rated the living conditions in private board and care homes. The interviews stated the friendliness of the personnel, good food, high quality medical care: *“I can only say good things about our board and care home. It is so clean there. There is absolutely no bad smell, it’s so surprising. The food is good there, bathing is twice a week. And the important thing is that my mom can communicate with patients of the same age” (Anna, 54 y.o.); “The conditions are excellent, of course. The garden plot is large. There is a lawn, cedar trees, a summerhouse. Each room has a TV. The main thing is that the personnel is always in touch with us. We can call at any time, they will tell how are things going, what we need to bring there” (Alla, 59 y.o.).* Most of the informants stated that as a result of the move of an elderly relative to a board and care home, the quality of care for him/her did not deteriorate in comparison with home care, and in some cases, it improved, which informants associate with medical supervision and the constant presence of nurses.

Positive changes are recorded in the lives of our informants after turning to alternative forms of care. It took some time (from several months to a year) for many of them to recover the lost physical and psychological resources, especially in situations of previous long-term home care. *“How has my life changed? A lot. I was recovering for about six months or even more. But now, of course, my health is much better, and, most importantly, I can work normally now, I have the energy” (Nadezhda, 47 y.o.); “Honestly speaking, I still wonder how I was not fired then, and how I survived in general...” (Tamara, 55 y.o.); “The depression has passed, I pay attention to my grandchildren, this is what I live now” (Polina, 58 y.o.).* The results of the interviews reflect the improvement in the life of both an elderly relative (through the strengthening of the professional component of care, medical supervision, the emergence of new social contacts) and the informants themselves, who have received the right to privacy and free time.

#### *Is everyone happy now?*

A separate block of interview questions is about the study of the emotional component of the problem. Thus, the feelings and emotional sufferings of informants about the stay of a relative in a private board and care home at the time of the survey,

as well as how, in general, the informants express the situation of using this form of institutional care are of interest now.

Although the majority of our informants clearly recorded an improvement in the quality of their lives in almost all the aspects, as well as a high level of professional care for a relative provided in a board and care home, the study revealed *the overwhelmingly negative emotional coloring in the perception*. For example, some informants admitted that they felt like traitors and guilty all the time for not caring for a relative on their own. Almost all of our informants told us about oppressive feelings and emotions, to one degree or another accompanying them throughout the entire period of a relative's stay in a board and care home, so this can be identified as a tendency. *"It's hard for me to think that strangers are taking care of my mother... I seemed to have broken with something important, tradition or something else... Yes, I understand that this is better for everyone. But there is still a guilt feeling"* (Valentina, 56 y.o.); *"Deep down inside I consider myself a traitor. Is it irrational? Yes. But I feel it"* (Lyudmila, 60 y.o.); *"Is it bad when your parents are in a care home? Of course, it really depresses me. I constantly think if it is possible to somehow solve the issue differently, I go through some options. But I can't find a way out..."* (Oksana, 50 y.o.).

The pathologization by informants of the preference for institutional care for close relatives revealed in the course of the study, their acute experience of non-fulfillment of social practices by them, provoking guilt, are reflected in the frequency and emotional coloring of visiting of relatives in the board and care homes. Some informants state that they visit an elderly relative less often than they could due to feelings of guilt. Such visits are distressing for many informants. *"We visit dad regularly. Once or twice a month... But, of course, it's hard for us. I don't understand why. I try to transfer more money and the personnel can buy him more fruit and sweets. But still, after visiting him, I don't feel very well the next day. Although everything is fine, and heartfelt people work there"* (Polina, 58 y.o.). Interestingly, the informants themselves record the discrepancy between the objective conditions and the quality of life and their emotional perception.

### Methodological results

The second significant part of the study was a transformation of the chosen methodological approach, which was caused by new conditions and restrictions related to COVID-pandemic. The research method was the in-depth interview, but at the moment of the beginning of the empirical part, COVID measures became stronger, so we planned to provide interviews in proportion 1:1 – 1 "traditional" per 1 "digital"-interview. But the restrictions became even more harder and that became impossible to conduct face-to-face interviews, so we provided 25 traditional and 39 digital interviews. In interviews, several informants were allowed, as an exception, to turn off the camera while discussing the most sensitive topics and talking about the most emotionally difficult experience.

Discussing methodological results, traditional and digital interviews should be compared according to the following criteria: (1) duration; (2) emotionality of informants; (3) subjective comfort of informants; (4) willingness of informants to discuss sensitive topics.

*Duration.* The duration of the digital interview lasted 20% longer (ca. 60 min. for traditional interview and ca. 80 min. for digital interview) due to two main reasons: (1) the block with instruction was expanded; (2) being in a comfortable environment,

informants either mentioned more details or, conversely, digressed and changed the subject.

*Emotionality of informants.* Due to the high sensuality of the research topic, the level of emotionality of informants was very high during traditional as well as digital interview.

*Subjective comfort of informants.* The level of subjective comfort was higher when conducting digital interview since the informants were at their homes and at convenient time. During the COVID-pandemic that was a very important condition for the informants, that there was no need to leave their own houses (due to the health risk). At the same time, digital interviews were conjugated with the risk of technical malfunctions and defects 'caused by dependence from the Internet connection and the individual technical skill and experience of each informant.

*Willingness of informants to discuss sensitive topics and openness.*

We did not notice any significant differences between the levels of openness during traditional and digital interview, but during digital interviews, respondents were less likely to avoid the most acute and sensitive topics. That should be also emphasized, that respondents were very thankful as they were allowed "to hide a face" (turn off the camera) while talking out the most stressful themes and topics.

Generalized, several main advantages, as well as disadvantages of digital interview as a research method, could be named. The advantages are (1) digital interview became a full-fledged alternative for traditional face-to-face interview in conditions when personal meeting is impossible or related to personal risk for participants; (2) this makes it easier for informants to talk about the most sensitive topics. The disadvantages are (1) dependence from Internet connection and technical skill of each respondent; (2) since there is no direct face-to-face contact, the researcher should save attention, concentration and interest of the informants for the talking.

## Conclusions

Thus, the results of our study allow drawing the following conclusions.

1. Private boarding house and nursing home - the "last choice" option for relatives of elderly people who need constant care. It applies when all adaptation options have been exploited and one or more primary goals (health, home environment, caregiver career) have suffered significant damage;
2. Barriers preventing the use of this form of institutional care are social factors - social stereotypes and traditions of gender and intergenerational relations, normalization and the cult of self-sacrifice, fear of social stigma;
3. There are also feelings of guilt and betrayal that accompany relatives throughout the entire stay of an elderly person in a boarding house and nursing home, as well as public disapproval of this practice;
4. Informants recognize that feelings are ambiguous and rather negative, and their feelings are irrational, and their assessments are contradictory.

The analysis carried out does not contradict the data of other authors and confirms that constant home care for elderly sick relatives carries a pronounced strong gender component and is a critical life situation for caring women. The main barriers to the formation of new, multivariate forms of care are in the field of social, including gender stereotypes and ideas that reproduce outdated norms of intergenerational care that are often unsuitable for modern life. As the main constraint, these social perceptions limit the development of a whole range of modern forms of care (which has been shown in the example of private boarding houses), which provide the elderly with decent care, and their children the opportunity for private life and professional fulfillment.

Discusses results of the “methodological experiment” one can say for sure that the methodology of digital research showed its effectiveness: through digital methods under condition of contemporary “COVID-Society” sociological researches (even in such sensitive fields as gender-studies) staid possible and staid theoretical relevant. The study made showed there are some advantages of using of the method of digital in-depth interview: 1) there is no need for direct face-to-face interaction (it is especially relevant for today); 2) this makes it easier for informants to talk about the most sensitive topics. The most important disadvantage of this method is dependence from the software and speed of Internet-Connection: both researcher and informants should have necessary skills in personal “video-communication”. The second one is that because informants stay at home or in other “comfortable” places the researcher should save attention, concentration and interest of the informants for the talking.

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*Book Review. La violenza spiegata. Riflessioni ed esperienze di ricerca sulla violenza di genere di Felice Addeo, Grazia Moffa (a cura di). Franco Angeli, 2020.*

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Proporre uno sguardo complessivo sul tema della violenza di genere non è semplice, in quanto il tema per la sua complessità attraversa molteplici aspetti della vita sociale: i vissuti individuali, i ruoli sociali, il contesto culturale, i tratti psicologici, le rappresentazioni simboliche e di potere. Tale ampiezza del fenomeno rende il campo di studio e di analisi vasto, articolato e ricco di approcci plurimi.

È proprio da una prospettiva interdisciplinare che Felice Addeo e Grazia Moffa, curatori del volume, *“La violenza spiegata. Riflessioni ed esperienze di ricerca sulla violenza di genere”*, edito da Franco Angeli, hanno cercato di chiarire le dimensioni e i molteplici volti di una realtà, perlopiù nascosta, sfuggente, difficile da contrastare nonostante gli innumerevoli passi in avanti compiuti in materia legislativa.

La struttura del volume, nonostante la sua densità, appare snella e sembra rispondere a un’esigenza non solo accademica ma anche di tipo politico istituzionale, rivelandosi utile strumento di dibattito. L’idea editoriale, come spiegato nella presentazione, fa tesoro dell’esperienza raccolta durante i numerosi seminari interdisciplinari proposti dal Centro interdipartimentale per gli Studi di Genere e le Pari Opportunità dell’Università di Salerno (OGEPO) sul tema del contrasto alla violenza di genere e dalle esperienze professionali degli stessi curatori del volume come valutatori di progetti all’interno di linee di finanziamento Horizon2020 dedicate alle questioni di genere.

Attraverso il confronto tra studiosi e studiosi di varie discipline: dalla Filosofia al Diritto, dalla Storia alla Letteratura, dalla Sociologia alla Psicologia, gli autori offrono degli spazi di riflessione che consentono di leggere il fenomeno da differenti prospettive del sapere con un linguaggio relativamente semplice ma che non trascura il rigore dell’analisi scientifica. Pur nell’apparente eterogeneità dei differenti approcci e prospettive, il volume restituisce al lettore relazioni e punti di intersezione, tra i vari saggi in esso presenti, che permettono di dare risposte convincenti, dal punto di vista analitico e interpretativo, su un fenomeno strettamente connesso alle diseguaglianze e alle asimmetrie tra i sessi.

Riprendendo le parole di Maria Rosaria Pellizzari in prefazione, «il volume affronta il tema della ‘violenza di genere’ in un dialogo a più voci che ha portato alla luce, da contesti storici e culturali differenti, “indizi” e “spie” di una realtà sommersa e composita che sfugge a un’analisi superficiale, basata su quanto appare a prima vista. La “vera” natura della violenza si sottrae, infatti, a chi si ferma ai suoi aspetti esteriori e più evidenti».

Le diverse prospettive di analisi, che caratterizzano il volume, permettono di cogliere la violenza di genere in tutte le sue declinazioni: dalla soggezione economica alla violenza psicologica, dai comportamenti persecutori al ruolo dei social media, alla reticenza nel denunciare la violenza domestica, pur non tralasciando l’attenzione al divario di genere e alle ineguaglianze persistenti nel mondo della famiglia e del lavoro.

Il volume è diviso in cinque sezioni ognuna delle quali costituisce un tassello che contribuisce a mettere a fuoco un fenomeno ancora sfuggente e del quale, spesso, percepiamo solo un’immagine sfocata.

La prima sessione, *Il dibattito attuale*, raccoglie quattro contributi che focalizzano l'attenzione sull'attuale discussione pubblica, emersa con vigore durante il periodo della pandemia da *COVID-19*, che con il *lockdown* e la convivenza forzata ha esacerbato quelle situazioni in cui già vi erano difficili rapporti e difficoltà relazionali all'interno dei contesti familiari.

La sezione si apre con il saggio di Grazia Moffa che analizza proprio l'impatto che la pandemia ha avuto sulla violenza di genere, ripercorrendo le principali indagini condotte sul tema delle disuguaglianze di genere e facendo emergere in tutta la sua evidenza come la crisi pandemica ha intensificato e "messo a nudo" le molteplici vulnerabilità e ineguaglianze nel vissuto delle donne.

Rileggendo il ruolo e il significato della violenza di genere e la sua centralità nel capitalismo globale finanziario, attraverso il concetto di corpo-territorio e inquadrando la violenza di genere come elemento costitutivo del colonialismo, Giso Amendola e Gennaro Avallone, evidenziano «la rilevanza della relazione tra nuovi concetti teorici (e politici) e le lotte materiali che stanno cambiando i rapporti socio-ecologici e di potere in diversi contesti geografici».

La sezione prosegue con il contributo di Francesca D'Angelo che analizza il linguaggio dell'odio e della violenza, i fattori che causano e influenzano i discorsi dell'odio sessista e quali sono le cause che portano all'uso di un linguaggio violento e offensivo nei confronti di alcune categorie di donne. L'autrice descrive gli esiti del fenomeno in termini psicologici, fisici ed emotivi, sottolineando le conseguenze che esso comporta per la vita professionale e personale dei soggetti coinvolti.

Gli aspetti psicologici della violenza di genere, le differenti tipologie di abusi e di soggetti abusati nonché una serie di strategie psicologiche che le vittime possono adottare per difendersi, vengono illustrati da Mauro Cozzolino, Deborah Vivo e Giovanna Celia. Nel loro contributo gli autori evidenziano, inoltre, come il riconoscimento di comportamenti violenti possa essere un primo passo per uscire dal problema e come la consapevolezza di sé e del controllo sulle proprie scelte, decisioni e azioni, nelle relazioni personali (*empowerment*) possa contribuire in modo efficace ad affermare il diritto delle donne a vivere libere da abusi verbali, e aggressioni e bullismo.

Le modalità con cui la ricerca sociale affronta e studia il tema della violenza di genere sono illustrate nella seconda sezione del libro, *Metodi e Ricerche*, che mostra come si sono sviluppati, nel corso del tempo, gli strumenti metodologici per lo studio della violenza di genere. Agli approcci di tipo quantitativo, caratteristici dei primi studi del fenomeno, nel corso degli anni si sono affiancati strumenti sempre più raffinati, di tipo qualitativo, che hanno indagato l'esperienza più soggettiva della violenza di genere e i contesti e significati ad essa associati.

Una prospettiva metodologica che integra sia i metodi quantitativi che qualitativi viene proposta, nel saggio che apre la seconda sezione, da Felice Addeo come un efficace strumento metodologico per la comprensione di concetti complessi e multidimensionali come quello della violenza di genere.

L'autore dopo aver passato in rassegna i diversi approcci metodologici e la loro evoluzione negli anni, descrivendone le potenzialità e i limiti, indica nei *Mixed Methods* una possibile soluzione alle sfide metodologiche poste da questo filone di ricerca e un utile strumento per indagare fenomeni sociali complessi e a volte sfocati come quello della violenza di genere.

Luna Carpinelli e Giulia Savarese, invece, pongono l'attenzione sul superamento e la ristrutturazione del trauma subito dalle donne vittime di violenza. Nello specifico nella *Compassion Focused Therapy* (TFC), «un moderno approccio psicoterapeutico che fa parte delle moderne psicoterapie cognitive comportamentali, note come approcci "di terza onda" o "terza generazione», come uno strumento adatto al ripristino dell'equilibrio tra i sistemi di regolazione delle emozioni nelle donne vittime di violenza.

Mediante un approccio qualitativo Giuseppe Masullo e Francesco Iovine, nel loro contributo, indagano i temi antifemminili presenti in una certa letteratura pseudo-



scientifiche che, nonostante le dichiarate premesse di affrontare le questioni di genere con un approccio scientifico e razionale, «propinano false rappresentazioni dei generi». Dopo aver sottolineato la pericolosità dei messaggi ideologici veicolati attraverso approcci sessisti, gli autori, cercano di «restituire un quadro reale sulle relazioni tra maschilità e femminilità e individuare gli elementi che accomunano queste posizioni».

L'ultima parte della sezione è costituita dal contributo di Clotilde Cicatiello, che racconta l'esperienza di alcune associazioni femminili e dei centri antiviolenza più attivi sul territorio salernitano a valle di una riflessione sulla violenza di genere e sulla mancanza di un adeguato inquadramento del fenomeno in un'ottica di lungo periodo.

La terza sezione del volume, *Rappresentazioni nella storia*, ci aiuta a comprendere in una prospettiva storica come la violenza sulle donne abbia origini antiche, profonde e ancora oggi difficili da sradicare. Nonostante le differenze culturali delle società nelle varie epoche storiche, la violenza di genere si è adattata alle regole morali e sociali, resistendo alle trasformazioni e ai cambiamenti e conservando, quasi inalterate le relazioni di potere tra uomini e donne a discapito di queste ultime.

Claudio Azzara, ripercorrendo l'origine della violenza di genere, propone l'analisi di un'opera del III secolo, il *De cultu Feminarum* di Tertulliano che, in una prospettiva cristiana, valuta la bellezza femminile, come fonte di peccato e di corruzione morale. Come ci spiega l'autore del saggio «Modificare il proprio aspetto naturale tramite biacca, croco, rossetto, nerofumo per gli occhi, tintura per i capelli, significa disprezzare l'opera di Dio, il sembiante che Lui ci ha voluto dare. È Satana che istiga al cambiamento e produce l'artificio».

Stefano Amendola, invece, propone alcune riflessioni sulla presenza della violenza di genere nel mondo antico e più nello specifico nel genere letterario che attingono al teatro greco e ai miti che in esso venivano rappresentati, come quello di Io e Zeus, rappresentato in due tragedie: «Le supplici» e il Prometeo incatenato, che dimostrano come, la rappresentazione misogina degli uomini viene rappresentata anche nel comportamento degli dei.

Il contributo di Mariarosaria Pellizzari ripercorre la violenza di genere, tra il XIX e il XX secolo, a Napoli. Attraverso l'analisi di una ricca documentazione, costituita dai fascicoli di processi contro la «violenza carnale», «libido» e «pubblica decenza», l'autrice ci restituisce un pezzo della storia sociale e culturale della città, fotografato attraverso le lenti delle aule di tribunale e messa a fuoco e resa nitida dal linguaggio degli imputati, dei testimoni, delle espressioni burocratiche usate negli scritti, fino al linguaggio scientifico dei rapporti medico-legali.

Il contributo di Michele Bevilaqua e Massimiliano Agovino riflette sulle discriminazioni linguistiche verso l'omosessualità maschile attraverso un'analisi lessicografica degli epiteti omofobici. In particolare, essi indagano la violenza contro i gay nei paesi di lingua francese e italiana attraverso uno studio empirico comparato. Utilizzando gli strumenti della linguistica applicata e dell'econometria gli autori mostrano come «le pratiche discorsive hanno la potenzialità di riprodurre continuamente discriminazioni e violenze verbali, ponendo alcuni individui, come nel caso delle persone omosessuali, in posizioni sociali subalterne»

Nella quarta sezione di volume, dal titolo *Tra poesia, letteratura e cinema*, sono illustrate alcune forme di rappresentazione della violenza di genere nelle arti cinematografiche e letterarie e come queste ultime contribuiscono ad alimentare l'immaginario collettivo plasmando la realtà dei vissuti individuali.

Il saggio di Alfonso Amendola offre un contributo al cinema sociale di Maya Deren, esponente di spicco dell'avanguardia cinematografica americana), che grazie all'uso di espedienti stilistici e narrativi innovativi, inaugura una realtà artistica decisamente radicale rispetto ai canoni produttivi hollywoodiani degli anni Quaranta. In contrapposizione ai modelli dominanti del cinema classico americano.

Nelle opere della Deren si riscontra un modo di fare cinema, sovversivo, costantemente attento all'indagine introspettiva in cui confluiscono poesia, danza, antropologia, iniziazione, mito e che fanno della regista una pioniera dell'emancipazione femminile.

Ma non è solo nelle rappresentazioni cinematografiche che si trovano i segnali dei futuri cambiamenti sociali in relazione al genere. La poesia femminile, ripercorsa da Eleonora Rimolo nel suo saggio, ci mostra come i poeti, italiani ed europei, del Novecento hanno saputo denunciare le varie forme di violenza di genere attraverso lo strumento del testo poetico.

Debora Sarnelli, nel suo saggio, offre un tributo alla scrittrice canadese Margaret Atwood che, attraverso il romanzo *Alias Grace* liberamente ispirato a fatti realmente accaduti, racconta la storia di una donna, accusata di assassinio e costretta a subire angherie e violenze, nel Canada vittoriano dell'Ottocento. La regista Atwood con il suo romanzo cerca di dar voce ad una donna di bassa estrazione sociale, condannata ingiustamente e costretta a vivere tra il carcere e un istituto psichiatrico, denunciando come il rapporto tra potere e conoscenza è sempre una prerogativa maschile.

Chiude la quarta sezione il contributo di Mario Tirino che, attraverso un approccio sociologico allo studio dell'immaginario, prende in esame la serie televisiva *The Handmaid's Tale*, tratta dal libro culto di Margaret Atwood. Nel saggio si analizza il modo in cui «tale ecosistema narrativo elabora racconti connessi al pensiero femminista» e sottolinea il potere delle immagini nella rappresentazione di un mondo distopico dominato dall'oppressione femminile e dalla dittatura sul corpo delle donne.

L'ultima parte del volume, *Questioni aperte*, raccoglie contributi di particolare attualità che ampliano il ventaglio delle conoscenze dei temi affrontati e approfondiscono alcuni aspetti di carattere sociologico, politico e giuridico della problematica di genere.

Il saggio di Marianna Esposito, che apre la quinta sezione, offre alcuni spunti di riflessione circa le relazioni di potere indotte dallo sviluppo del capitalismo globale e dalle trasformazioni della vita contemporanea sui diversi tipi di violenza alle donne sottolineando come tutte le discriminazioni siano collegate. L'autrice, infatti, affronta la dimensione del femminicidio analizzando le cause intersezionali con gli squilibri di potere, su scala globale, secondo una prospettiva offerta dal femminismo de-coloniale.

Gli abusi all'interno del contesto domestico e più in generale in quello intrafamiliare, sono affrontati nel saggio di Gaspare Dalia che esamina, sotto il profilo giuridico, le recenti scelte legislative per la prevenzione e per la repressione di questa tipologia di reati che, se fino a non molti anni fa sembravano godere di una sorta di immunità, oggi, grazie ad una maggiore consapevolezza offerta anche dall'attuazione di modifiche normative ispirate da fonti sovranazionali, sono più facilmente arginabili.

Vitulia Ivone nel suo saggio analizza le misure di protezione contro la violenza nelle relazioni familiari con una disamina della giurisprudenza prodotta a cavallo tra il ventesimo e il ventunesimo secolo, sia sotto il profilo strutturale che sotto il profilo processuale. Pur evidenziando alcuni limiti, l'autrice rimarca l'importanza di alcuni provvedimenti quali strumenti di dissuasione per i reati di violenza domestica ed individua, inoltre, nell'educazione alle relazioni affettive, all'interno delle quali viene identificata la violenza, un efficace strumento di mitigazione di questa tipologia di reati.

Il volume si conclude con il contributo di Marianna Chirivì e Grazia Moffa che, ripercorrendo i temi affrontati nei diversi saggi presentati nel volume, ne affrontano le questioni centrali. Passando in rassegna le riflessioni prodotte nel dibattito più recente, specie in campo sociologico, le autrici sottolineano la necessità di contrastare il fenomeno della violenza di genere con scelte politiche e strumenti volti a favorire un cambiamento culturale che decostruisca gli stereotipi e contrastino quei

comportamenti che fanno da contesto alle giustificazioni delle differenze uomo-donna.

Affrontare un fenomeno come la violenza di genere, complesso e con molte sfaccettature, richiede necessariamente di superare le suddivisioni disciplinari e di aprire un confronto tra le diverse prospettive di analisi, il volume si presenta come un utile strumento in tale direzione. Accostare approcci, esperienze e prospettive diverse, a nostro avviso, ha permesso ai curatori del volume di costruire un testo flessibile e di facile lettura che, oltre a cogliere le diverse sembianze che assume la violenza di genere, restituisce al lettore molteplici spunti di riflessioni in merito.

*Book review. COVID-19 in Italy Social Behavior and Governmental Policies, by Lucia Velotti, Gabriella Punziano, Felice Addeo, Routledge, London 2022*

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The book, edited by Lucia Velotti, Gabriella Punziano and Felice Addeo illustrates and examines people's perception of risk, their willingness to trust the sources and channels of information available to them and their attitudes towards protective behaviors by analyzing different aspects of the Protective Action Decision Model (PADM) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

Among the main premises for reviewing this highly stimulating volume there are the location and timing issues. The centrality of Italy, the first patient-nation in the Western world to face the pandemic and its crisis with the delicate management between the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2.

From a sociological point of view, it poses the pandemic as a major epistemological challenge for the social sciences both for the so-called pandemic social practices (Werron & Ringel, 2020), i.e. social practices that emerged and continued during the pandemic, and for the possibility of a positive scenario envisaged by Amartya Sen in making opportunities emerge from the crisis.

In addition, this volume presents a really fitting research design with data collection through an online survey with a two-stage sampling, and a combination of analytical techniques aimed at creating effective typologies to interpret the behavior of the individuals surveyed.

The book consists of four main and interdependent sections:

1) The background of the administration of the COVID-19 in Italy is provided in Chapter 1. 2) The theoretical framework and methods of the study are provided in Chapters 2 and 3. 3) The results of the study are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. 4) Conclusions pointing the way to live in a post-pandemic world in Chapter 6.

The book has the merit of considering theoretical aspects that, since the first chapter, offer a wide and rich overview of the management of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy. In fact, in addition to a background on previous pandemics that have affected humans and the Earth, it discusses elements that in the Italian case have made the management of the crisis even more difficult. The authors narrate how aggravating the problem was a crisis of governance and leadership generated by the dual and conflicting involvement of both the central and regional levels of the Italian government.

Moreover, in the first chapter the authors create an outline in detail of a temporal sequence of events in Italy based on the phases of the management of the crisis, a reconnaissance work not yet present in the thematic literature and of certain relevance for the categorization of events related to the Pandemic:

1. Sense making and decision making of the COVID 19 crisis (January 2020 to February 2020);
2. Decision making and meaning making (March-April 2020): Phase 1 – From regional to national lockdown;
3. Terminating the crisis and learning from it (May-September 2020): Phase 2- Staged reopening;
4. Sense making and decision making (September-November 2020): The second pandemic wave and staged lockdowns;
5. Terminating the crisis and learning from it (December 2020-January 2021): Phase 3 – The vaccine campaign.

The second section, with Chapters 2 and 3, describes the pieces of that mosaic that discuss the study's theoretical background and research methodology. A sociological intrigue and difficult to summarize. The second chapter explains what motivates people's adoption or support of new behaviors and policies by introducing the following key elements for research purposes: the social construction of reality and behavioral change, risk communication, and protective action models in disaster science.

The authors' careful reconstruction addresses the concepts of socially constructed reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and ontological safety (Giddens, 1984) in an interesting way.

The study assumes «...different profiles/groups of people adhere to different constructions of social reality. Depending on how reality is socially constructed, people will experience intense feelings of imbalance regarding the previous way of living their lives and making sense of themselves and the social and physical reality surrounding them. People will try to restore the feeling of security by adopting or not adopting new behaviors and attitudes. » (pp.40). From here, the book lends itself to several possible reading levels with arguments that go through the major sociological theories. The authors also specify that beyond the epidemiological aspects of COVID-19, there is also a dimension of the social construction of the pandemic to be considered and, they introduce the concept of "(in)ontological security" to answer the basic question around which the discussion is structured. The main questions in this chapter are "how does behavioral change occur? What motivates change?».

The importance of understanding what motivates people's protective behaviors, and their support of government regulations becomes particularly important in a context such as that generated by COVID-19. The book chronicles and emphasizes how in a crisis the importance of the relationship between the micro (individual) level and the macro (societal) level influence each other in determining distinctive behavioral patterns (actions), as in the case of engaging in protective behavior.

In the conceptual baggage of this chapter, we find what I believe is the heart of the book, with the integration of a particular model of protective action communication, Lindell and Perry's (1997, 2012) Protective Action Decision Making (PADM) model<sup>1</sup>, with the concept of ontological insecurity.

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<sup>1</sup> The PADM model outlines the following five phases:

1. Processing of information derived from social and environmental signals with messages that social sources convey through communication channels to at-risk individuals;
2. Pre-decisional processes consisting of exposure, attention, and understanding of the warning;

I find encapsulated in this requirement the authors' true scientific innovation. The PADM model aims to describe how people process information (considering sources, channels, and reliability), take protective actions, and/or adopt protective behaviors and it is possible to understand and predict how behavioral responses are produced in risk situations. All of this is complemented by the concept of ontological (in)safety as an element that motivates people to protect themselves and others and is used as a starting point to understand people's motivation to change behavior or attitude and sustain it over time (not temporary but long term). The central concept of ontological (in)security, trust, has been operationalized by the authors in the three dimensions of the physical environment, the social environment, and the personal sphere by expanding them to concepts related to the PADM model. Having then outlined the current scenario, in the third chapter the volume presents the methodological organizational choice adopted to support the entire study with the main objective of understanding if and how ontological (in)security and cultural worldview can impact (1) risk perception, (2) adoption of protective measures and (3) support for government regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The method chosen by the authors was an online survey using CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) administered to individuals aged 18 and older in Italy during Phase 2<sup>2</sup>. The authors frame the major categories addressed in the questionnaire with concepts such as 1) Sociodemographic for characteristics of individual respondents 2) Information and media for consumption and evaluation of sources and information during the pandemic crisis 3) Values for respondents' cultural worldviews, political orientation, and religious beliefs 4) The Risk Profile (involving aspects such as (1) Experience of contagion (2) protective behaviors adopted by respondents or noted by them in their social contexts; and (3) the degree to which respondents agreed with the regulatory provisions that were examined at various stages of the crisis).

A thorough and detailed work of data analysis rich in intellectual references conducted by applying three types of multivariate statistical techniques (PCA, MCA, CIRCA) closes the second section. The interweaving of plans of analysis with a mix of methods of investigation has allowed an extensive collection of information and a cross-reading of valid data is reassembled to illustrate the third section. The authors, in the fourth and fifth chapters, address respectively the private sphere and the public sphere, successfully dialoguing in systematic terms with conceptual frameworks and empirical findings. The last two sections have a narrative structure that develops through a constant overlapping of the planes of research and theoretical reflection. It should be noted that Chapters 4 and 5 follow a similar structure, presenting a conceptual exposition organized in detail, both from a theoretical and empirical point of view. Around the theoretical framework of reference, the authors organize a lively, stimulating, and aggressive analysis without leaving anything to chance. Velotti, Punziano and Addeo cleverly use the dimensions of the PADM model (Lindell & Perry, 2012) to explore the factors that influence the private sphere, hence, the adoption of protective behavior by individuals, and, the public sphere

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3. Fundamental perceptions, such as threat perceptions, protective action perceptions, and stakeholder perceptions;

4. Protective action decision-making;

5. Behavioral response, which refers to three main behaviors: information seeking, protective response, and emotion-focused coping.

<sup>2</sup> Administered at various collection points on social media between May 11, 2020 and June 3, 2020

where information processes, risk communication, and responsible actors play a key role.

The authors use multidimensional and cluster analysis techniques to identify three macro-groups of ontological profiles for both the private and public spheres. It is worth mentioning the main characteristics of the two areas:

1. First group, average ontological (in)security. The personal sphere presents groups in which characteristics such as medium-high perception of experiential proximity of the virus, medium knowledge and awareness, high perception of fear and self-efficacy, and robust adoption of protective behaviors are associated. While for the public sphere, the sample is characterized by a high degree of recourse to authoritative sources of information, trust in science, and official information.

2. Second group: medium-high ontological (in)security is characterized in the private sphere by a high tolerance of risk. Here, the authors intuitively relate the propensity to accept an elevated level of risk to professional motivations that counterbalance the perception of risk. For the public sphere, they emphasize the lack of trust in official information, institutions, and science in favor of informal networks and information channels.

3. Third group: ontological security where, for the personal sphere, there is little knowledge and awareness and a more distant perception of risk (perhaps due to geographical distance from the spread of the virus). For the influence of the public sphere, they place themselves hybrid in the middle, placing media trust in science, official information, and informal networks, and relying on institutions (mostly local ones recognized at the regional and municipal government level).

The fourth section with chapter 6 is an “*Ode to Joy*” for Social Research. The authors discuss the vision of a future free from COVID-19 in Italy both at an individual and collective level.

It is a book that offers a relevant contribution to sociological but at the same time interdisciplinary reflections, representing an essential point of reference for those who want to develop a research program on relevant and innovative topics such as behavioral patterns, communication studies, and in particular risk communication or new sustainable lifestyles post-pandemic. And this could already be enough to signal the volume as a reading to be included among those planning for an advanced or non-advanced course in social research and health studies such as epidemiology of social phenomena. The book offers a fascinating opportunity to see how much more and how different they can understand phenomena that certainly in the pandemic era have created more problems. I emphasize how the authors deliver what they promise, all brilliantly and lucidly with a flowing writing style, arguing with bibliographical references and analysis to support all the theses supported chapter by chapter. Together with all the elements evoked in the last section, a picture is drawn of a society, of a population, that finds itself facing crucial challenges and, to face them, will inevitably have to change. And it is for this reason that I consider reading it to all those who wish to be better informed about the challenges that await our World.

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