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Ethnography and the digital fields of social media

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers struggle to study the transient fields of social network sites like Twitter through conventional ethnographic approaches. This paper suggests that, in order to step further, we should distinguish between the relatively stable “contextual” fields of bounded online communities and the fluid, “meta-fields” resulting from the aggregation of scattered communicative contents based on their metadata. Both these two intertwined layers of the digital environment interplay with users’ online social practices – which are embedded within offline everyday life and vice versa. While Internet ethnography largely dealt with contextual digital fields, recent developments in the realm of online research allow the ethnographic exploration of digital meta-fields and their publics. This shift recalls Marcus’ appeal for a multi-sited ethnography but, in fact, goes further beyond, towards a truly “un-sited” ethnography. I highlight and discuss the main methodological implications of meta- and contextual fieldworks by presenting an exploratory study of European exchange students’ Facebook identities.

Keywords

ethnography, social media, digital field, Internet, meta-field

1- Introduction

As Hallett and Barber have recently pointed out, “it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces” (Hallett and Barber 2014:307). Ethnography as a whole is experiencing a moment of methodological restructuring (Plowman, 2017; Reich 2015; Mannay and Morgan 2015), and web-based ethnography has become an increasingly popular research method in a wide range of disciplines. In general terms, online ethnography “transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of Internet” (Hine 2008:257). In the last decade, online ethnography has evolved in the direction of more reflexivity, orderliness and synergy between online and offline fieldworks (see Beneito-Montagut 2011). However, different views on the objects, the techniques and, in particular, the settings of online ethnography fostered the flourishing of numerous rival methodological perspectives (see Caliandro 2014). Moreover, the relative lack of online ethnographies conducted on social network sites witnesses the inadequacy of conventional ethnographic approaches in studying the transient digital fields of platforms like Twitter, Instagram or YouTube, which nonetheless now represent the main sites of Internet users’ digital lives (see Marwick 2013; Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

This article does not present a comprehensive literature review about Internet ethnography (see instead Caliandro 2014; Garcia et al. 2009). Rather, it deals with the digital contexts of online communication and, particularly, with their methodological implications for qualitative

researchers. To step further in the ethnographic analysis of interpersonal communication on social media, a clearer interpretation of what the digital field means for ethnographers and researchers approaching the Internet is needed. Since the term “field site” refers to the “stage on which the social processes under study take place” (Burrell 2009:182), the ongoing evolution of the “digital stages” of today’s social media undermines a mere transposition of offline methods and concepts to the online worlds (see Orton-Johnson and Prior 2013; Caliandro 2017).

My main argument is that the digital field can be heuristically considered a twofold one. While, on the one hand, a large amount of online social interactions still takes place in relatively stable and bounded socio-technical contexts conceivable as places, a major part of social media users’ digital experiences are enacted in volatile environments such as social networks’ feeds, social media aggregators and changeable collections of contents featuring a given keyword or tag. What all these dynamic digital environments have in common is that they aggregate previously dispersed communicative traces according to a variety of semantic or algorithmic logics. Scrolling photos about #cats on Instagram; having a look to Twitter’s trending topics; liking some of your Facebook friends’ posts – carefully selected by the news feed’s algorithm: these are all common digital practices for billions of Internet users, enabled by technicalities featured by most of contemporary social media. These practices take place in digital fields constituted by moving assemblages of contents provisionally displayed together in the same setting. While I could visit a discussion forum several times a day, finding again and again (more or less) the same posts and conversations, Instagram photos featuring the hashtag “#cat” change at tremendously fast rate. This latter case is an example of what here I call “meta-field” – that is, a digital setting temporarily aggregating scattered communicative contents sharing some features – such as the hashtag “#cat”. I decided to employ the term “meta”, though potentially misleading, for two main reasons. First, because it refers to metadata, the information about data archived by any digital platform, at the core of the organization, identification and search of any Internet resource. Second, since it points to the actual “meta” character of such a fluid digital field, being it a sort of “field made of fields”, transversal to digital spaces and constantly changing over time.

Far from being just the artificial representations of an otherwise abstract macro-level of communication, such transient digital environments are crossed by the everyday micro practices of individuals, who constantly scroll through social media feeds, query search engines, employ tags and interact in “placeless” communicative streams. Thus, meta-fields and their publics can and should be the research objects of online ethnography (Caliandro 2017). Nonetheless, we must not forget that social media are also constituted by myriad separated contexts (Hine 2000:108) whose “affordances” shape communication and social action (Papacharissi 2011; Baym and boyd 2012).

What are then the characteristics of meta- and contextual digital fields? What their epistemological and methodological implications? In order to answer these questions, I rely on a multidisciplinary literature as well as on my research experience during an exploratory investigation regarding the “Facebook lives” of European exchange students. This case study, dealing with both meta- and contextual fields, will serve to clarify the distinction between the two, as well as to highlight some of the methodological strategies needed in the study of large, fast-flowing meta-fields. A key premise is the following: both in the case of meta- and

contextual fieldworks, online ethnography does not only study a medium and its users, but also social and cultural phenomena which are not less “real” than those observable offline.

2- Trajectories in online ethnography

When the first strand of Internet ethnographies emerged during the 1990s, the online social environment was largely considered as detached from the “real world” (see Paccagnella 1997). Personal computers were heavy and connections were slow. The research objects of online ethnography were essentially “virtual communities”, defined by Rheingold (1994) as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. Newsgroups, bulletin board systems, internet relay chats, multi-user domains were the technological settings that hosted such communities. Internet users constituted a small, privileged fraction of the World population (less than 0.5% in 1995)¹. Apart for few exceptions (e.g. Hine 2000; Miller and Slater 2000), the mainstream conceptualization of the digital field was not far from the early 20th Century anthropologists’ one, that is “a seemingly deep-frozen cultural essence, residing in one temporal and spatial location” (Dicks et al. 2005:116-117; see also Burrell 2009).

In the last two decades the digital environment has dramatically mutated. In 2017, over a half of the World population was online. In Europe and North America, this share rises to more than 80 percent². The advent of social media platforms and the ubiquitous diffusion of smartphones have contributed to turn the relatively static user experience of Web 1.0 into a convergent, interactive and mobile one. Overall, the digital landscape has become increasingly “real”, as well as complex and internally differentiated (see Floridi 2014).

These transformations have affected ethnographic research too (see Caliandro 2014). For instance, several ethnographers have started to question the so-called “digital dualism” (Jurgenson 2012), conceptualizing fieldwork as a mixture of online and offline observations (e.g. Hallett and Barber 2014; Garcia et al. 2009; Murthy 2008). Others have stressed the necessarily multi-sited and mobile character of Internet ethnography (e.g. Hine 2007; 2011; Stirling, 2017). Nevertheless, advancements in the epistemology of the digital field have been rare. Most ethnographic approaches to the Internet have dealt exclusively with isolated or interconnected (web) sites and their communities of users (see Kozinets, 2010; Hine, 2015). As Caliandro (2017) recently remarked in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, such a localist and community-centered approach to the digital environment cannot be taken for granted anymore.

The need for a re-conceptualization of the digital field is driven by the aforementioned evolution of the medium. On social media platforms we are likely to ethnographically observe online publics – fluid associations among persons that largely do not know each other, mediated by the platform’s affordances (Baym and boyd 2012), characterized by emotional intensity (Papacharissi 2015) and channeled by a common focus, such as a political controversy (Barisione et al. 2017) or a brand (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016). These social aggregations

¹ <http://www.internetworldstats.com> (Accessed 09/01/2018)

² <http://www.internetworldstats.com> (Accessed 09/01/2018)

are especially common on Twitter, where large-scale communicative fluxes surround trending topics and hashtags (see Arvidsson et al. 2016). Can the volatile digital traces left by a multitude of social media users who barely perceive themselves as a collectivity be studied in an ethnographic way? Although some scholars are skeptical about this possibility (see Hoybye 2015:6; Gobo 2008:110), many others are working in this direction (e.g. Papacharissi 2015; Marwick 2013; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Still, social media platforms and their ephemeral publics pose major epistemological and methodological challenges to online ethnography. In comparing bounded online “places” such as discussion forums with the digital environment of Twitter, Alice Marwick acknowledges that the latter “is a large, public site, making it difficult to bound, or even determine, exactly who or what one is studying” (Marwick 2013:116). Similarly, Bonilla and Rosa point out that part of the problem of engaging in “hashtag ethnography” on Twitter is that “it is difficult to assess the context of social media utterances” (2015:6).

There is an urgent need to develop an “ethnography for the Internet” capable to deal with social formations others than bounded virtual communities (Hine 2015). Following the recent work of Caliandro (2017), who fruitfully proposes a set of analytical concepts for the ethnographic exploration of social media, the present paper tackles the same topic from a distinct epistemological and methodological angle. More precisely, it aims to reflect on the complex relationship between digital infrastructures and forms of social interaction, showing how the complicated boundary-issues resulting from a fragmented digital field resonate in the practice of ethnographic research, eventually changing it.

3- Anatomy of the digital field site

Social interaction is always enacted in the context of a social situation, defined by Goffman as “an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are present, and similarly find them accessible to him” (1964:134). According to Meyrowitz (1985), *vis-à-vis* and electronically-mediated social situations – e.g. a phone conversation – are both conceivable as “information systems” characterized by specific patterns of social information flowing among participants, as well as shaped by the structure of the settings where social interaction is enacted. If we apply this pre-Internet analytical perspective to the digital landscape (see boyd 2014:31), we can argue that the properties of physical spaces – such as “the thickness of doors and walls, the size and location of windows (as well as the presence or absence of window shades)” (Ibid.:36) – are digitally mirrored by platforms’ infrastructures and interfaces (see Baym and boyd 2012).

Although Meyrowitz’s outlook allow meaningful comparisons between electronically-mediated and “analog” social contexts, it is important here to underline a key ontological difference linked to the shift “from atoms to bits” (Negroponte 1995). That is, the fact that digital presence on social media platforms implies information storage in the form of metadata. As a result, the posts and pictures uploaded on our social media profiles are not simply “there”, permanently displayed in that very specific context, but they exist also in the form of de-contextualized search results aggregated on the basis of a shared keyword or a given timestamp (see boyd 2011).

The following conceptual distinction may help to clarify this ambivalence. Computer scientist Guha and colleagues identified two types of search queries: in the case of “navigational searches”, “the user provides the search engine a phrase or combination of words which s/he expects to find in the documents [...] using the search engine as a navigation tool to navigate to a particular intended document”. Conversely, in the case of “research searches”, “the user provides the search engine with a phrase which is intended to denote an object about which the user is trying to gather/research information. There is no particular document which the user knows about that s/he is trying to get to. Rather, the user is trying to locate a number of documents which together will give him/her the information s/he is trying to find” (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003).

On the one hand, through a “navigational search”, users travel from one digital setting to another, knowing their final destinations. On the other hand, through a “research search” users do not look for a specific digital place but, more broadly, for a set of contents sharing a common feature. In the first case, connections among digital locations resemble routes that link different districts of the same big city (Nunes 1997); in the second one, the original contexts collapse (boyd 2014:31), substituted by an ephemeral aggregation of scattered contents. From the user’s point of view, this fluid aggregation is itself a structured digital setting, characterized by a given graphic interface. However, unlike the stable context of a discussion forum, here there are neither “history” nor “community”; instead, there is just a moving informational stream, which gravitates around a specific keyword in a given time span.

Most online interactions currently “take place” in similarly placeless, “liquid” sites, such as Facebook’s News Feed, which presents a real-time customized selection of algorithmically-filtered content one can interact with (see Arvidsson 2016), or Twitter’s search, which allows to explore tweets featuring given hashtags or keywords (see Marwick 2013). Such volatile digital settings have become more and more common in the last decade, with the developments of standards in the recording of metadata (Steinacker, Ghavam and Steinmetz 2001), the diffuse use of tags – which “act as metadata operating behind web pages”, enabling users to “move in non-linear directions from one page onto pages that have something in common” (Beer and Burrows 2007:6-7) – as well as the massive adoption of online algorithms and data mining techniques in the organization of fluxes of information on digital media (McKelvey et al. 2015). From an ethnographic point of view, I define these peculiar stages of social interaction as “meta-fields”. That is, temporary assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) of dispersed communicative contents, aggregated on the basis of their metadata. They can emerge either as a consequence of individual agency, like in the case of users’ “research searches” (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003), or as the automated outcome of platforms’ algorithmic functioning, partly independent from the users’ will and awareness (Beer 2009).

To some extent, this notion of meta-field overlaps the aforementioned concept of “public” (see Arvidsson and Caliendo 2016; Papacharissi 2015). Similarities are evident especially considering boyd’s definition of “networked publics”, intended as both “the space constructed through networked technologies” and “the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (2011:39). Here, my intention is to keep separated the technological and social components of media contexts, defining meta-fields in purely infrastructural terms, independently from the social formations that they actually mediate and/or constitute. Of course, the technological properties of social networking sites are

at the root of the emergence of non-communitarian forms of digital sociality, as in the case of Twitter-enabled political movements (see Barisione et al., 2017) and affective publics (see Papacharissi 2015:118). Similarly, the diffusion of anonymous discussion forums in the 1990s contributed to the rise of virtual friendships and communities (see Baym 1995). However, digital behavior is far from being entirely determined by platforms’ technological affordances (see Baym and boyd 2012:326-27). As an example, the hashtag-based architecture of Twitter does not prevent some users to reply to tweets as in a sort of public chat room, thus building regular virtual relationships, which nevertheless coexist with the predominantly ephemeral forms of sociality conveyed by the platform (see Arvidsson et al. 2016).

Focusing exclusively on digital platforms’ ontology, I propose to distinguish “liquid” meta-fields from relatively “solid” digital sites conceivable as bounded “places” – what here I label “contextual fields”. According to Hine, “when ethnography first went digital, early internet researchers tended to focus on the place-driven metaphors that framed the internet. That was logical, considering the emphasis on ‘rooms’ invoked in early social software like chat rooms and MUDs/MOOs” (2008:27). Although the Internet has dramatically changed since then, this very same place-driven analogy applies also to digital contexts that are currently very popular, such as, for instance, group chats on messaging apps, Facebook pages, Google groups, social media profiles, blogs. Reprising the digital adaptation of Meyrowitz’s work (1985) introduced at the beginning of this section, we can argue that the “walls” and “window shades” of these locations are less fluid than those of meta-fields’ informational streams. In contextual field sites, the audience of mediated self-presentations – far from being “invisible”, as in the case of boyd’s networked publics (2011) – is imaginable, thanks to the availability of persistently shared information (for instance, in the form of user-generated descriptions). Also, the context – i.e. a perceived “sense of place” – far from “collapsing” (see boyd 2011) tends to be recognizable by the users, who have become increasingly familiar with a “multiplication of place” throughout their digitally-mediated impression-management practices (Papacharissi 2011:308).

In sum, these two overlapping layers of the digital – the contextual one, exemplified by Uniform Resource Locators (URL), and the informational one, based on back-end databases of metadata – can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Depending on the infrastructural properties of digital platforms, users will access either predominantly contextual sites – e.g. discussion forums, the classic *loci* of Internet research (Kozinets, 2010) – or “liquid” meta-sites – e.g. Instagram or Facebook’s social feeds. Section 3 reflects on the methodological implications of this conceptual distinction for qualitative researchers exploring the digital environment, building on Marcus’ multi-sited ethnography (1995) and Rogers’ digital methods (2013).

4- “Following” in meta- and contextual fieldworks

In her path-breaking book *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine argued that, online, “the concept of the field site is brought into question. If culture and community are not self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography” (2000:64). Such a “problematic relation to the local” does not characterize solely the restricted field of Internet ethnography; rather, it is one of the “grandest themes of late twentieth century and contemporary social science” (Falzon 2009:5). Marcus’ proposal of a multi-sited ethnography (1995) represents one of the most influential attempts to move “out of the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic

research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Ibid.:96). Methodologically speaking, Marcus proposed six different strategies for multi-sited fieldwork, all based on the same imperative, “follow”: the People; the Thing; the Metaphor; the Plot, Story, or Allegory; the Life or Biography; the Conflict.

While the applicability of these recipes in conventional ethnography has often been disputed (see Falzon 2009:2-3), the interconnected ontology of the Internet fostered from the very beginning the development of multi-sited ethnographic approaches (see Hine 2000; Burrell 2009). When exploring the digital environment, Marcus’ appeal to “follow” is unavoidable. One can legitimately decide to focus on a specific digital context, like a discussion forum (Hine 2015:27). However, in order to construct a “thick” account of the investigated social phenomenon (Geertz 1973), researchers need to follow the users behind the screen or, as Miller and Slater put it, “to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (2000:5). This is increasingly true also the other way around, since ethnographers can hardly ignore informants’ digital interactions (Hallett and Barber 2014).

Generally, digital ethnographers have constructed and explored multi-sited fields either by investigating both online and offline sites (e.g. Hallett and Barber 2014; Hine 2007) or by following hyperlink networks connecting web pages (e.g. Beaulieu 2005). Still, these approaches reveal a purely contextual understanding of the digital landscape and, ultimately, of the ethnographic site – intended as a network of bounded places (Burrell 2009) comparable to a city (Nunes 1997), which can be researched by “navigating” the Web (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003). This appears perfectly coherent with Marcus’ suggestion to follow the people – e.g. specific users, or communities of users, across digital and analog contexts³. However, in order to follow the metaphor, the story, or the conflict instead, a “research search” capable to reveal dispersed digital discourses rather than a multitude of contexts seems the most appropriate methodological strategy. This is the case, for instance, of “hashtag ethnographies” on Twitter (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Juris 2012) which, by acknowledging and exploiting platforms’ “native” technological features (Caliandro 2017), materialize in the practice of research truly “un-sited” fields – that is, social discourses detached from space and place (see Cook et al. 2009). The latter is an example of what here I called “meta-fieldwork”, which must be distinguished from the contextual multi-sited approach mentioned above.

In the case of meta-fieldwork, multi-sitedness is even more central. In fact, a meta-field site is essentially a temporary informational artifact resulting from the act of “following” a keyword, or an algorithm (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003; Airoidi et al. 2016). Differently from the fairly bounded context of a group chat, where the traces of social interactions are limited in number as well as persistently inscribed in a stable digital terrain, and ethnographers can produce field notes by using screenshots (e.g. Stirling 2017) or manual copy-and-paste techniques (see Caliandro 2014), meta-fields require a re-negotiation of ethnography’s epistemology and, especially, methodological toolkit.

³ To some extent, the same can be said about following the thing – e.g. a phone for sale on eBay – or the life/biography – e.g. as it is mediated and objectified by a Facebook profile. However, depending on the interpretations given to these concepts, the digital transposition of Marcus’ categories might differ (see for instance Caliandro 2017; Hine 2011).

The main methodological issues regarding meta-fields concern their width and fluctuations over time (see Marwick 2013:116). Meta-fields may comprise extremely large amounts of users and messages; for instance, a single hashtag on Twitter can catalyze hundreds of thousands of tweets per day (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). In addition, considering online communicative streams rapid rise and fall, exemplified again by the ephemerality of Twitter’s trending topics, we could realistically question the suitability of conventional ethnographic observation in the study of the resulting “social textures” (Hoybye 2015). Unless online ethnography renounces to investigate social media platforms’ “unsited” fields and their publics, new strategies for data collection and interpretation must be adopted (Hine 2015; Caliandro 2014; 2017). For this reason, in the case of meta-fieldworks, the verb “to follow” should assume also a second connotation, inspired by the literature on digital methods (see Rogers 2013; Marres 2012).

Digital methods propose to “follow the medium”, taking advantage of the ways digital platforms produce and organize data in order to map social and cultural phenomena (see Rogers 2013; Marres 2012). As Marres and Gerlitz point out, “the ‘ontology’ that emerges from the platform data, its specific format and associated use practices cannot just be ignored by our method” (2015:25-26). This implies that ethnographers should exploit the infrastructural properties of digital field sites in order to fruitfully “follow” the circulation of the investigated empirical objects (see Caliandro 2017:10). As a consequence, meta-fieldworks can be conducted with the help of online tools that permit the real-time tracking of hashtags and/or keywords – according to the metadata-based logic which is ontologically at the root of the digital environment. Several free social media data collection tools are available online⁴; they represent a key opportunity for speeding up ethnographers’ online fieldwork in large, public and ephemeral media contexts.

Not differently from photography, which has become a common practice in ethnography for documenting the social life of communities in addition to participant observation (see Schwartz 1989), data collection tools are likely to become soon an essential part of digital ethnographers’ toolkit (see Caliandro 2017). However, while in the case of meta-fields such an unusually “distant reading” (Moretti 2013) of social formations is justified by the peculiar organizational ontology of the field site, contextual fieldworks largely resemble conventional ethnographic experiences. As I will argue below, this is due to the digitally-shared sense of place and proximity fostered by contextual fields’ architectural properties – such as, for instance, the “blue ticks” indicating that a message has been read on WhatsApp.

In the next section, I discuss the distinct methodological issues raised by contextual and meta-fieldworks, using my exploratory investigation of European exchange students’ identities on Facebook as an empirical illustration.

5- Following “Erasmus identity” on Facebook

With about two billion active users, Facebook is currently the most popular social media platform in the world⁵. On Facebook, users can communicate through asynchronous posts, comments and “likes”, as well as via a synchronous messaging system. Social interactions take

⁴ For instance, see <https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolDatabase> (Accessed 28/12/2017).

⁵ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm> (Accessed 24/01/2018)

place in public (e.g. Facebook pages), semi-public (e.g. closed groups) as well as relatively private contexts (e.g. chat conversations). At the same time, these very same interactions are also algorithmically and semantically displayed in ephemeral meta-field sites, such as the News Feed – a stream of customized contents filtered according to undisclosed computational criteria (see Arvidsson, 2016) – and the internal search engine⁶ – where posts can be searched and aggregated on the basis of metadata and keywords, as in the case of Twitter.

Given its heterogeneous landscape (see Stirling 2017), Facebook represents an appropriate social media platform for illustrating contextual and meta-fieldworks in practice. I present here the methodological implications of a five-month ethnography based in a Scandinavian university campus, exploring the co-construction of a shared “Erasmus identity” by European exchange students.

Erasmus Programme is a European Union student exchange programme established in 1987, which has provided over three million European university students with the opportunity to go abroad and study at a higher education institution or train in a company⁷. At the time of my research, shared cultural meanings about a widely mythicized “Erasmus life” implied relatively stereotypical representations of the Erasmus experience. Mutual expectations about “being Erasmus” were constantly negotiated in the everyday social interactions among exchange students. Interestingly, a major part of these interactions were based on Facebook⁸.

On the one hand, through a meta-fieldwork, I aimed to reconstruct how students publicly narrated their exchange experience, following the “metaphor” as well as the medium (Marcus 1995; Rogers 2013). On the other hand, I followed “the people” (Marcus 1995) throughout a multi-sited and user-centered contextual fieldwork, which allowed me to observe the situated co-construction of “Erasmus identity” across different “information-systems” (Meyrowitz 1985), online as well as offline. These two approaches, rather than being in contradiction, proved to be fruitfully complementary.

Having briefly summarized the context and purposes of my Erasmus case study, I now focus on its methodological implications, aiming to shed light on the practical differences between meta- and contextual fieldworks.

5.1 Meta-fieldwork

To access my Facebook-based meta-field, I conducted a “research search” on the platform’s internal search engine, semantically aggregating public posts featuring the keyword “Erasmus” in the metadata (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003). Posts authored by exchange students, Erasmus-related pages and clubs promoting “Erasmus parties” appeared on the screen – a stream of de-contextualized communicative traces, organized and re-located on the basis of their metadata. This “unsited” site looked like an enormous square full of exchange students walking on their own, speaking loudly about their “Erasmus lives”. The “affective intensity of

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=v> (Accessed 24/01/2018)

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/statistics/erasmus-plus-facts-figures_en.pdf (Accessed 13/08/2017)

⁸ My Scandinavia-based participants normally spent more time chatting on Facebook than interacting offline, and those who had not a Facebook account at the beginning of the semester by one or two months ended up registering, not to be excluded from Erasmus Programme’s social life.

the platform” characterizing the networked Twitter publics studied by Papacharissi (2015:127) was diluted, dispersed in disconnected self-narrations about a common “focal object” (Caliandro, 2017) – that is, the shared experience of being “Erasmus”.

In such a digital square, it is not easy to hear thousands of voices clearly (see Marwick, 2013). For this reason, “following the medium” through a data collection tool was necessary (Rogers, 2013). Hence, using a proprietary software, I retrieved all the public posts and comments featuring the keyword “Erasmus” published in the two months before the search (around 1500 in total)⁹. This procedure was extremely useful for speeding up the data collection process. Also, it allowed to establish a clear temporal limit to the fieldwork and, eventually, to enhance data interpretation thanks to the application of further techniques, such as network and co-word analyses (see Caliandro 2014). In my case, I qualitatively coded the registered empirical materials, thus identifying four main narrative facets of Erasmus identity: “independence”, “cosmopolitanism”, “transgression”, “sociality” (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. The narrative facets of “Erasmus identity”. Examples were translated by the author.

Narration	Contents	Example
<i>Sociality</i>	Erasmus as a social experience (parties, new friends, sociability)	<i>you can't be invited to six parties in a week! I should study...but I'm too weak, people easily convince me...it's a hard Erasmus life</i>
<i>Cosmopolitanism</i>	Erasmus as a multicultural experience (travelling, multilingual competences, cosmopolitan attitude)	<i>JUST BACK FROM SARAJEVO DAYS AGO, NOW PLANNING A TRIP TO PRAGUE THIS WEEK...[...] WHAT A FUNKING ERASMUS!?!?</i>
<i>Transgression</i>	Erasmus as a deviant experience (alcohol abuse, sex, duty procrastination)	<i>hangover and no desire to study...a typical Erasmus day</i>
<i>Independence</i>	Erasmus as a formative experience (burocracy, housework, economic issues)	<i>Mode "Erasmus burocracy anxiety": ON</i>

In the broader context of my study, meta-fieldwork proved to be very useful as a preliminary exploration of the research object, fruitfully informing my further ethnographic steps. As in the case of Marcus’ strategy of following the metaphor, tracking the user-generated discursive traces disseminated in meta-fields can give unprecedented chances to create “empirically argued new envisionings of social landscapes” (1995:109). Furthermore, the variety of narrative repertoires emerging by following the medium would be hardly accessible through a more restricted and situated contextual approach, limited to specific digital sites. In the case of my research, the collection of comparably rich empirical materials from bounded Facebook

⁹ This automated procedure is not currently possible in the case of public Facebook posts. Indeed, what one can actually download querying social media platforms through proprietary data collection tools may change over time, depending on private companies’ policies (Rogers 2013).

locations – e.g. Erasmus-related groups – would have required a much more time-demanding conventional fieldwork.

At the same time, the methodological opportunities of meta-fieldwork – i.e. exploratory character, discourse-centered approach, rapid and automated data collection – have corresponding downsides. The analysis of placeless discourses conveyed by meta-fields does not allow the researcher to grasp the richness of the contextual meanings surrounding digital communications (Gobo 2008:110), nor the complex identities and inner emotions of the actors involved (Hoybye 2015:6). Moreover, data collection tools’ output is normally a tabular file featuring requested information and related metadata, organized as variables – e.g. the texts and publication dates of the posts featuring the searched keyword(s). That is, something very distant from the usual liveness of the ethnographic research experience – which, however, resembles the inherent organizational logics of meta-field sites (see Caliandro 2017).

Given its unobtrusiveness and rapidity, tool-assisted digital data collection represents an undeniable opportunity for social research (Rogers 2013:133). Nevertheless, it carries also equally undeniable ethical issues, due to the asymmetric position of an invisible and “all-seeing” researcher (Reich 2015). Since “lurking” is a widespread practice in Internet ethnography (Murthy 2008:840), covert non-participant observations are not peculiar to the practice of meta-fieldwork on social media platforms only. In any case, digital researchers must be extremely reflexive and accountable on this matter. As boyd and Crawford remarked: “it may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet, but it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data is accessible” (2012:672).

5.2 Contextual fieldwork

After having reconstructed the main cultural facets of “Erasmus identity” through a keyword-based meta-fieldwork, I investigated how the very same collective identity was displayed and negotiated by Scandinavia-based exchange students throughout their online social interactions across a variety of bounded Facebook sites – profiles, chat conversations, groups and pages. This second research task required a contextual approach to the platform. While the imperative of meta-fieldworks is “follow the discourse by following the medium”, ethnographers engaged in a contextual fieldwork must essentially follow the people, the thing, the life (Marcus 1995), something whose existence is independent from the medium itself, something “thicker” (Geertz 1973) than a flat, moving aggregation of communicative contents.

In order to study the identity works of Erasmus students across multiple social situations, I followed my informants for several months, taking field notes and doing participant observations, in face-to-face contexts as well as on Facebook. In bridging a multi-sited digital ethnography with a more conventional offline approach, my contextual fieldwork recalls Beneito-Montagut’s “expanded ethnography” – a multi-site, multimedia and user-centered methodological outlook which recognizes the fact that “groups and relationships on the internet have diverse and complicated organizational settings, and they do not always take place in the public space or at the same site” (2011:728). Compared with a meta-fieldwork, this approach has a number of pros and cons.

First, the main advantage of a contextual fieldwork is that you can access private digital sites and social practices, while meta-fields normally comprise public and semi-public interactions only. In terms of access to the site, ethnographies of private dinners are obviously different from the unobtrusive observations of town-squares interactions. Similarly, in order to access interpersonal communications within Facebook chats or closed groups, it is not enough to digit a keyword in a search bar. It is necessary to contact the informants first, asking to be invited to join otherwise inaccessible digital settings. For this reason – as well as for further obvious ethical concerns – contextual fields ideally require an overt ethnographic observation.

Second, given the live engagement with participants, contextual fieldwork fosters a thicker ethnographic account and a context-sensitive analytical outlook. While through my meta-fieldwork I explored the spectrum of shared cultural representations discursively attached to Erasmus Programme, the subsequent contextual fieldwork offered me an in-depth angle on the interplay between digital spaces and Erasmus students’ identities. The infrastructural properties of contextual fields foster the co-creation of a shared “sense of place”. In bounded stages such as Facebook group chats – where participants are few and listed – and Erasmus-related groups/pages – featuring a relatively stable “communities” of members/fans – my informants were aware of the audience of their digitally-mediated self-presentations (boyd 2014:31). As a consequence, for instance, they emphasized the dark sides of Erasmus life (e.g. loneliness and homesickness) solely in the protected environments of restricted Facebook chats, among the closest new friends. The context-sensitive character of social life is largely invisible within meta-fields, since the metadata-induced context-collapse breaks up individual histories in a multitude of dispersed digital footprints (see boyd 2011; Papacharissi 2011). Conversely, for digitally co-present users, contextual sites are structured “places” featuring specific audiences and definitions of the situation, which ultimately shape the observed social behavior. These epistemological considerations are potentially relevant also to researchers interested in the ethnographic study of ephemeral social media publics (see Caliandro 2017) – who, depending on their research questions, may need to go beyond “hashtag ethnographies” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015), adopting a multi-sited and contextual approach instead.

A major downside of doing contextual fieldwork is well-known to ethnographers, and regards time constraints. “Following the people” means “navigating” a multitude of networked interactional settings, without the chance to materialize the multidimensionality of an ethnographic field through a simple “research search” (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003). As in the case of my study, this spatial fragmentation may also imply that relevant chat conversations and posts need to be collected “by hand”, without the help of online data collection tools (see Caliandro 2017). In addition, gaining access to contextual fields is normally more demanding than in the case of meta-fieldwork – especially if the digital sites in question are private or hidden (e.g. a “secret” Facebook group). For all the reasons listed above, a contextual fieldwork requires more time and immersion than a meta- one.

6- Conclusion

The digital environment is, on the one side, spatially segmented in a multitude of different social contexts and, on the other side, organized along streams of de-contextualized communicative contents “located” on the basis of their metadata. As I argued above, acknowledging this

infrastructural distinction can lead to two very different types of ethnographic fieldwork. While a contextual fieldwork is about “following the people” (Marcus 1995) throughout bounded digital settings, taking into consideration the specificities of social situations as well as the multidimensionality of individual lives, meta-fields need the researcher to follow the digital discourse by following the ontological properties of the medium (Rogers 2013).

From an ethnographic point of view, performing the former type of fieldwork instead of the latter is essentially an analytical and methodological choice. In my empirical illustration, these two research approaches aimed to answer distinct and complementary research questions: the first one, regarding the macro level of social representations, was addressed by an exploratory meta-fieldwork; the second one, concerning the micro level of situated self-presentations, necessarily required a context-sensitive perspective instead.

Since “the decision about when to start and stop, and where to go in between, is for ethnographers not made independently of the field, but is an intrinsic part of the relationship to it” (Hine 2008:18), researchers must be aware of the infrastructural properties characterizing digital sites, and consider how these might affect the researched social practices, as well as the practice of research. Ethnographic fieldwork must be designed accordingly, comprehending and exploiting the logics and peculiarities of digital media (Caliandro 2014:756).

Nevertheless, few qualitative researchers have systematically considered the changing infrastructural properties of the digital environment in their studies (see Baym 1995; Baym and boyd 2012). Up to now, the literature on Internet ethnography has focused almost exclusively on bounded sites populated by virtual communities (see Kozinets 2010), although this type of settings has become increasingly marginal with the evolution of the medium (Caliandro 2017). When confronted with the ephemerality of Twitter hashtags, ethnographers have been forced to acknowledge the limitations of their conventional methodological toolkit (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Marwick 2013). Researchers interested in the emergence of new types of digitally-mediated social formations – such as publics and crowds (see Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016; Arvidsson et al. 2016) – have decided not to disentangle the social and technological dimensions of the digital environment, treating them as parts of a unique assemblage (see boyd 2011; Papacharissi 2015). Here I tried to conceptually separate them, aiming to provide ethnographers with novel epistemological and methodological lenses for the digital investigation of human cultures. The resulting distinction between contextual and meta- fields of social media has the ambitious purpose to contribute to the development of a multi-sited ethnography capable to engage with a digitized world system (Marcus 1995), where both places and discourses can be navigated, tracked and “followed” (Guha, McCool and Miller 2003).

As Cook, Laidlaw and Mair point out, “the ethnographer’s field is a set of points that may be imagined as a space – as a site” (2009:60). In the qualitative study of the large, dynamic social formations observable on social media such as Twitter, Instagram and – to a minor extent – Facebook, these points are often represented by hashtags and keywords, and an “un-sited” (Ibid.:64) meta-field can be ethnographically researched by following the native affordances of the medium itself (see Caliandro 2017). Although some peculiarities of meta-fieldwork – such as the inevitable detachment between observer and participants and the use of data collection tools – may sound (at best) unconventional from an ethnographer’s point of view, they actually reflect the characteristics of the ephemeral social interactions digitally enabled by the presence of metadata. As Bonilla and Rosa remarked: “recognizing that hashstags can only ever offer a

limited, partial, and filtered view of a social world does not require abandoning them as sites of analysis. Rather, we must approach them as what they are: entry points into larger and more complex worlds” (2015:7). These worlds surely deserve an ethnographic exploration.

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