

The Digital Shift and Social Research

Methods and Practices

Paolo Diana

University of Salerno

Critical Perspectives on Social Science



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Author Biography

Paolo Diana is a full professor at the Department of Human, Philosophical and Educational Sciences (DISUFF) at the University of Salerno in Italy, where he teaches Sociology, Research methods (qualitative and quantitative), Data analysis, Digital methods, Sociology of sport and well-being and Sociology of health. He holds a PhD from the Department of Sociology of the University of Salerno, and he has participated in several European projects about adult and juvenile prisoners.

Paolo Diana's areas of expertise include quantitative and qualitative research methods and data analysis. He explores new frontiers in social research, including digital methods, mixed methods, open data analysis, and complexity. His work includes topics such as immigration, deviance, youth, southern Italy and its representations, juvenile delinquency, social issues, sport, and media. He is particularly interested in the practice of teaching research methods, focusing on the relationship between new technologies and learning, e-learning, smart learning, ICT, and digital knowledge. He is also involved in the monitoring and evaluation of international and EU projects.

He has published numerous articles in academic journals and has been recognised for his excellence in research, undergraduate, and postgraduate teaching and outreach.

Foreword

The following work is the result of years of study, observation, and research that I conducted as part of the Social Research Methods course at the University of Salerno in southern Italy. This endeavour presented me with a unique opportunity to study the behaviour and needs of my students in relation to the teaching and learning of social research methods. I focused on the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, methodological practices, and fieldwork within undergraduate and postgraduate programs in sociology and social research.

During these years, I have witnessed significant changes and developments in the field of social research methodology. This experience has enabled me to adapt and refine my teaching strategies to better meet the changing demands of the academic environment and the different learning styles of my students. The lessons learnt have significantly shaped the content and approach of this book.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of publishing numerous contributions on these topics together with my close collaborators Maria Carmela Catone and Giovannipaolo Ferrari, whom I hereby thank for their invaluable co-operation. Our joint endeavours have enriched my understanding and contributed significantly to the depth and breadth of this work. This book is inspired by and builds on the numerous papers and articles we have published over the years, all of which are cited in this book. It is intended to summarize and synthesize our joint research and findings.

Compiling this work has been both challenging and enriching. It reflects not only my personal academic journey but also the collective experiences of my students and colleagues who have been involved in this endeavour. Their feedback, questions, and engagement have been a constant source of motivation and inspiration.

Finally, I would like to thank the students of the courses and workshops on Digital Methods for Social Research at the University of Salerno for kindly allowing the use of the images and elaborations from their final group projects.

I hope that this book will serve as a valuable resource for students, teachers, and researchers alike, providing them with a comprehensive understanding of social research methods and their practical applications. I firmly believe that, through continued exploration and discussion, we can advance the field of social research and contribute to the development of more effective and impactful methods.

Salerno, 7 June 2024

Paolo Diana

Introduction

This volume, titled *The Digital Shift and Social Research Methods and Practices*, is the result of theoretical reflections and empirical research carried out in recent years on distance learning in universities and the provision of courses on social research methodology. The following work is the result of years of study, observation, and research that I carried out as part of the Social Research Methods courses at the University of Salerno in southern Italy. This book is intended for a diverse audience involved in social research and education. It primarily addresses university lecturers, academic researchers, and doctoral students in the social sciences who are interested in methodological innovation and the integration of digital tools in research design and analysis. At the same time, it is also aimed at higher education instructors, pedagogical trainers, and curriculum designers, especially those engaged in teaching research methods or developing blended and online learning environments. While academics may be more interested in theoretical and epistemological debates, educators and trainers will find practical insights, case studies, and didactic strategies useful for planning and delivering social research courses. The book is designed to bridge the gap between methodological reflection and pedagogical application, offering content that is both conceptually rigorous and grounded in classroom experience.

I wanted to take the opportunity to study and explore the behaviour and needs of my students in relation to the teaching and learning of social research methods and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, methodological practices, and fieldwork within undergraduate and postgraduate courses in sociology and social research. Our efforts to systematically organise our observations and findings coincided with the exceptional situation of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting our academic system (Diana, Ferrari and Dommarco, 2021).

The ubiquitous presence of digital technology has revolutionized daily life, often accompanied by unbridled optimism about its impact. However, the pandemic has also revealed fractures in the relationship between the use of digital technologies and academic education. This book addresses the teaching of social research methodology in academia, focusing on didactic innovations. This requires a transversal view that considers the specificities of the discipline, including theoretical and linguistic issues, methodological approaches, and technical applications. The vast amount of unstructured information available through digital technologies opens new possibilities for the study of contemporary society and requires a rethinking of the traditional empirical apparatus.

The first key component of this change relates to the characteristics of the discipline, addressing both traditional and new theoretical issues, methodological approaches, and technical applications. The second component relates to understanding the needs, practices, languages, and identities of students. This includes promoting students' active participation in environments that facilitate the exchange and effective use of technological tools. Paolo Ferri (2011) describes the new generations' approach to knowledge as "open source," "collaborative," and "multitasking," i.e., working on several cognitive tasks at the same time.

University teachers must carefully select teaching tools and resources, considering accessibility, real and virtual spaces and the digital devices available to students. Considering which pedagogical approach is best suited to support student learning is crucial and is closely related to the technological components. This volume explores the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches, focusing on the design, implementation, and delivery of social research methods.

The first chapter looks at social research methodology, learning, teaching, and the new frontiers of the discipline arising from digital developments. It provides an in-depth analysis of how the proliferation of digital tools and platforms has expanded the methods available to researchers. This chapter examines the theoretical shifts necessary for the integration of digital tools into social research and explores how digital environments influence human behaviour, social interactions, and cultural norms. It also looks at the ethical considerations that arise when using digital tools for research and emphasizes the need for researchers to rethink the basic premises of their work.

The second chapter explores how digital tools can be used to increase learner engagement and promote collaborative learning experiences. It looks at strategies for promoting engagement using digital tools, creating collaborative learning environments through digital interfaces and redefining assessment practices in digital learning contexts. This chapter emphasizes the importance of using digital tools not only to engage students but also to facilitate meaningful interactions and collaborations among them, enhancing the overall learning experience.

Empirical studies carried out over the years in the social research methodology courses at the University of Salerno in Italy are an essential part of this book. In the last three chapters, these studies and their results are presented in detail to illustrate how pedagogical practices can be renewed in the teaching of research methods and how teaching methods can be evaluated simultaneously in a critical and reflective perspective, considering the possibilities offered by digital resources. These experiences include courses such as Social Research

Methodology and Open Data¹ for Social Research, as well as the Digital Methods for Social Research course. These studies demonstrate how the integration of digital resources can provide new opportunities for research practice and teaching that allow for critical reflection and greater adaptability of teaching methods. These studies contribute to creating an intergenerational educational pact that teaches new forms of communication and interaction between students and teachers that are central to reshaping teaching and learning in the digital age.

With the advent of digital technology, the landscape of social research has changed considerably. It is in this context that we present the fourth chapter: “Narratives in social research: Tradition and innovation,” which explores the evolving role of narrative methods in sociological analysis. This chapter highlights the interplay between traditional and emerging narrative techniques and emphasizes the impact of digital technology on empirical research. The integration of digital narratives opens new ways of understanding complex social phenomena and expands the scope and depth of qualitative research.

In addition, this book addresses the profound transformation of social research methods through digital technology. The digital transformation in social research requires researchers to rethink fundamental premises and adapt to digital environments that influence behaviour, ethical considerations, interactions, and norms. The book addresses the theoretical and methodological challenges, engagement and collaboration, ethical considerations, and pedagogical challenges of teaching digital social research methods. The findings from this book are intended to inspire innovative approaches to research and deepen understanding of the intricate relationship between technology and social science. This exploration illuminates the complexities and possibilities of social research in the digital age and provides a comprehensive resource for social science students, educators, and practitioners.

¹ Open Data refers to data that is freely available and can be used, modified, and shared by anyone without legal, technical, or financial restrictions. The data is usually published in a machine-readable format to facilitate access and use. Open data initiatives aim to promote transparency, innovation, and collaboration in various areas such as government, education, research, and business. By making data accessible, open data encourages the creation of new knowledge, services, and applications that benefit society (Ruijter et al., 2020; Cazzanti, 2016).

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