Digital Methods and Fields: Feminist Perspectives

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The digital, at once instrument, method, field and object of research (Bourdeloie, 2013) renews the methods and methodologies of the social sciences (Millette et al., 2020). When combined with a feminist perspective, it also has the potential to undermine the gender "system", starting from the idea that science and the techniques that underpin it are not “pure”. The calculations involved are not neutral, and the massive amounts of data collected are no guarantee of objectivity (Venturini et al., 2014). The methodologies used have "political consequences" (Proulx, 2020). A "political and epistemic gaze" (Ibid.) on methods and methodologies sheds light on the conditions of data production, collection and analysis, in other words, on the "impure" and situated nature of knowledge (Harding, 1991). Interrogating methods and methodologies from a feminist position therefore means paying particular attention to the biases that preside over the production and interpretation of data, and turning these biases into heuristic and epistemic resources with a view to producing more "objective" research (Ibid.).

Digital technology, no longer as a method or tool but this time considered as an environment, blurs the boundaries of gender. Computer sciences, and today artificial intelligence, denounced as the "new engineering of power" (Crawford, 2021), are imbued with gender biases infused into the social body. From design to use, gender norms circulate in productions, traces, discourses and practices. The aim is to examine the new challenges posed by statistics and massive data to gender and the observation of this social relationship. Challenges are indeed posed in terms of method, as digital technology opens up new possibilities. Following on from work on feminist epistemology (Haraway, 2007; Harding, 1991), the aim of this call for proposals is to ask whether feminist research1 can enrich digital methods (Hesse-Biber, 2012), promote more inclusive approaches, escape the gender biases to which

1 The journal ESSACHESS is covered in Scopus Elsevier, ProQuest CSA, EBSCO Publishing, Index Copernicus, DOAJ, Ulrich's, Gale, J-Gate, CEEOL, Genamics Journal Seek, SSRN, GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR), MLA Directory, and DRJI (Directory of Research Journal Indexing) databases. The journal is also recognized by HCERES - French Evaluation Agency for Research and higher Education and sustained by the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie.
conventional methodologies expose themselves, escape the binarity of technical and investigative
devices, make the identification of these biases a source of reflexivity, and make visible the words of
gender and sexual minorities in data processing. Finally, from a critical perspective, we will also ask
whether, in response to the concentration brought about by the Internet giants, other alternative forms
of organization are possible (Dulong de Rosnay and Musiani, 2020).

**Proposed themes**

**Theme 1. Mixed, interdisciplinary methods and "online/offline" articulation**

This topic focuses on work that articulates several methods, disciplines and levels of analysis, within
the framework of a feminist perspective applied to the digital.

Firstly, we wish to discuss the relevance of using mixed methods, which articulate elements borrowed
from quantitative and qualitative approaches. We look forward to receiving proposals presenting
methodological considerations or fieldwork that transcend the traditional divide between the
qualitative and the quantitative. Epistemological approaches aimed at defining the boundaries,
contributions and limits of mixed methods in feminist digital studies are also welcome. As an
example, we can cite the use of network analysis to obtain a targeted corpus which size is no longer an
obstacle to qualitative study, used by Julien Mésangeau and Céline Morin in their analysis of the
social activity of the manosphere on YouTube (Mésangeau and Morin, 2021). Virginie Julliard's study
of the structuring of the anti-gender mobilization on Twitter, coupled with the study of the circulation
of images and a semiotic approach, is another example of a possible combination (Julliard, 2022). The inter-
and multidisciplinarity of the methods used can also be problematized. Gender studies, like
digital media analysis, take place in a context of strong interdisciplinarity within the social sciences.
This area will welcome proposals that address research carried out in inter- or multidisciplinary
contexts, as well as reflections on how disciplinary divisions impact our understanding of the
phenomena under study. Confrontation and discussion of models may also aim at identifying blind
spots. In his computer science thesis, Nick Doty (2020) uses an interdisciplinary approach that
combines ethnographic work with the use of statistical and computer science methods, to address the
question of gender inequalities (among others) in participation in the development of Internet
standards affecting privacy.

Lastly, proposals may address the articulation between digital and "offline" methods for apprehending
online phenomena2. The intention here is to highlight work that uses face-to-face social science survey
methods (such as in-depth interviews, in situ observation, user observation research, focus groups,
etc.) alongside digital fieldwork. In this way, we hope to go beyond the common-sense opposition
between digital practices and "real life", while reflecting on how the online phenomena observed make
sense within the framework of a wider social reality. For example, one possible investigative approach
to identifying the relevant online spaces to study in order to understand the uses of a community
consists in starting from the practices described by interviewees in different circles of sociability on
the field (interrelational network, associations, etc.). This was the choice made by Lucie Delias and
Mélanie Lallet in their study of online information practices around transidentity (Lallet and Delias,
2018; Delias and Lallet, 2019). In her thesis on the conditions of production and circulation of
"online/offline" discourses produced by the #NousToutes movement, which fights against sexist and
sexual violence, Irène Despontin Lefèvre (2022) also articulates online observation of the digital
platforms used by the collective with an ethnographic approach combining on site observations and
interviews.

Regardless of the chosen angle, the authors are particularly encouraged to implement a reflexive
approach, questioning the interest of the articulations proposed as well as the modes of data collection
and analysis developed to correspond to their research objectives.

**Theme 2. What contribution does feminist epistemology make to digital methods?**
The humanities and social sciences have debated feminism as an epistemology, methodology or method. Debates have focused on how feminism might challenge traditional methodologies, and on the possible specificity of feminist methods of inquiry (Harding, 1987). While Sandra Harding acknowledged that there were no "distinctively feminist" methods, she did concede that feminist research gathered its material under specific conditions. As Isabelle Clair (2016) writes of the relationship to the field, the "nature of the interactions that develop in the course of an investigation, as well as the investigator's transformation of the lives of others on the field(...) pose numerous problems that singularly intersect with the promotion of a feminist science" (Clair, 2016, p. 70). This characteristic feminist outlook has led several authors to consider that, by focusing on the political, feminist research enriches classical methodological approaches and their methods (Hesse-Biber, 2012; DeVault and Gross, 2012; Reinharz and Kulick, 2007; Bobo, 1989; hooks, 1992), just as it promotes more inclusive approaches (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012, p. 145; Chandrashekar, 2020).

Digital technology, as an instrument, method, field and research object (Bourdeloie, 2013), has renewed social science methods and methodologies (Millette et al., 2020). Inspired by standpoint theory, academic research has explored whether it can be mobilized, on a methodological level, for research on social media (Luka and Millette, 2018); and to what extent it is possible to adopt an ethic of care. For instance, the work of Jaércio Da Silva (2020) studies the deployment of intersectional and related social movements on the web (such as Afrofeminism).

The aim of this focus area is to emphasize the specificities in terms of approach, methodology and method posed by feminist, intersectional and gender studies. More than a category, an observable or a tool of subjectivity, could gender not also constitute an approach, method or methodology for observing multiple genders and sexualities? To what extent do shifts in observed gender boundaries modify methods and ways of conducting research, and vice versa? To what extent does feminist research mobilize specific methods for observing mechanisms of social differentiation, categorization and hierarchization? And above all, to what extent can the digital constitute a method for deploying a feminist ethic?

**Theme 3. What challenges do big data pose for gender?**

Digital technology and the new dynamics of production, collection and analysis of so-called big data pose new challenges to gender (Luka and Millette, 2018). Gender becomes problematic when it is used as a measurement tool and confused with the notion of sex (Cervulle and Quemener, 2014). If, for a long time, quantitative sociology was only able to rely on the official recording of the individual's "sex" (de Singly, 2012) and limit itself to collecting and analyzing gendered data, more and more surveys are deploying new devices to meet challenges more in line with complex, individual realities. However, from a methodological point of view, is it possible, in statistical terms, to observe this social relationship, to design new indicators and new descriptions? The aim of this section is to examine how - and to what extent - massive, qualitative and quantitative data can be used to investigate gender-related issues. How can we build quality data and tools that are gender-sensitive and escape the binary model? How can we think about group logics and particularities? To go beyond the question of representativeness and tackle issues of inclusiveness in data and models, particularly statistical models, we need to devise an appropriate data policy and rework notions of transparency, representation, accessibility and ethics. How can we meet this challenge? While data availability and accessibility are increasing, it is also important to promote the use of existing data to deepen and diversify analyses of gender issues. These efforts need to be supported by initiatives to promote and raise awareness of gender data among research staff, public officials and the general public, so as to improve understanding and use of such data.

Finally, are there any attempts to renew methods of data collection and analysis linked to the research questions investigated by gender studies, in order to better grasp the interweaving of social relations? This is, for example, what was proposed by the approach of the "Violences et rapports de genre" (Virage) survey conducted in France by the Institut national des études démographiques (Ined, 2017;
Brown et al., 2021), which "instituted the foundations of a methodology that avoids using the legal gender categories in the questions put to interviewees".

NOTES
1 ↑ On the "online"/"offline" articulation, see also Hoang, Mahéo, Mellot, Pasquer-Jeanne and Theviot, 2021.
2 ↑ See Gloria González Fuster (LSTS, Vrije Universiteit Brussel), "Vers une théorie féministe du droit à la protection des données à caractère personnel?" (20.10.21), journées du Centre Internet et Société.

References


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**Important Deadlines**

- **November 10, 2023**: submission of the proposal in the form of an extended abstract of maximum 2 pages. The proposal must include a list of recent references and 5 keywords
- **November 30, 2023**: acceptance of the proposal
- **February 15, 2024**: full paper submission
- **March 30, 2024**: reviewer’s comments to be communicated to authors
- **April 30, 2024**: submission of paper with final revisions (after revisions)
- **July 2024**: journal publication

Full papers should be between 6,000-8,000 words in length. Papers may be submitted in English or French. The abstracts should be in English or French as well (150-200 words) followed by 5 keywords. Please provide the full names, affiliations, and e-mail addresses of all authors, indicating the contact author. Papers, and any queries, should be sent to:

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