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Digital Methods and Fields: Feminist Perspectives

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Abstract: This issue examines how digital tools, methods, fields, and research objects transform the methodologies of the humanities and social sciences while challenging the gender system. From a feminist perspective, it argues that science and technology are not “pure,” that digital calculations are not neutral, and that massively collected data do not guarantee objectivity. Operating on the principle that knowledge

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production is situated, this issue questions the gender biases that appear in the production and analysis of digital data and explores how these biases can be leveraged to develop more reflexive and inclusive research. By demonstrating how digital technology disrupts gender boundaries, this issue addresses the challenges that quantitative data pose to gender. It investigates how feminist research can enhance digital methods, promote ethical approaches, and critique the concentration of power within socio-digital platforms.

Keywords: gender, digital, feminist epistemology, method(s), feminist ethics

Le numérique comme méthodes et terrains : perspectives féministes

Résumé : Ce dossier explore la façon dont le numérique, en tant qu’outil, méthode, terrain ou objet de recherche..., transforme les méthodologies des sciences humaines et sociales et remet en question le système du genre. En adoptant une perspective féministe, il s’agit de soutenir que la science et les techniques ne sont pas « pures », que les calculs numériques ne sont pas neutres et que les données massives collectées ne garantissent pas l’objectivité. Partant du principe que la production des connaissances est située, ce dossier interroge les biais de genre qui se manifestent dans la production et l’analyse des données numériques et la façon dont ces biais peuvent être utilisés pour développer une recherche plus réflexive et plus inclusive. Montrant comment le numérique ébranle les frontières du genre, ce dossier examine les défis que posent les données quantitatives au genre. Il explore les façons selon lesquelles la recherche féministe peut enrichir les méthodes numériques, promouvoir des démarches éthiques et critiquer la concentration de pouvoir au sein des plateformes sociométriques.

Mots-clés : genre, numérique, épistémologie féministe, méthode, éthique féministe

Introduction

The aim of this issue is to examine how the digital realm—as a tool, method, field, and object of research (Bourdeleioie, 2013)—renews the methods and methodologies of the social sciences (Millette et al., 2020) and challenges the “gender system” (Clair, 2012). From a feminist perspective (Harding, 1991), we begin with the premise that science and the techniques underpinning it are not “pure.”

When the digital technology is considered as a method, the underlying calculations are not neutral. The massive quantities of data collected digitally and within digital contexts do not guarantee objectivity (Venturini et al., 2014), and the methodologies employed have “political consequences” (Proulx, 2020). A “political and epistemic gaze” (ibid.) on methods and methodologies illuminates the conditions of data production, collection, and analysis, revealing the “impure” and situated nature of knowledge (Harding, 1991). Interrogating methods and methodologies from a feminist perspective means paying particular attention to the biases inherent in the

production and interpretation of data. It also involves transforming these biases into heuristic and epistemic resources to produce more “objective” research, as S. Harding suggests (*ibid.*).

Digital technology, not merely as a method or tool but as a technological device, blurs the boundaries of gender. Computing and artificial intelligence, described as the “new engineering of power” (Crawford, 2021), are permeated by biases related to gender, class, and race, which are infused into the social fabric. From design to use, gender norms circulate through productions, traces, discourses, and practices.

Given the permeability of boundaries offered by digital technology in terms of renewed methods, fields of observation, devices, or corpora..., the challenge of this issue is to explore what digital technology does to gender and the possibilities it opens up from this perspective. Building on feminist epistemology (Haraway, 2007; Harding, 1991), the aim is to investigate whether feminist research can enrich digital methods (Hesse-Biber, 2012) and foster more inclusive approaches, thus escaping the gender biases inherent in conventional methodologies.

Additionally, it is essential to examine whether a feminist approach can transcend the binary nature of technical and investigative devices by using the identification of these biases as a source of reflexivity. Ultimately, this could make the voices of gender and sexual minorities more visible in data processing. Finally, we are interested in the extent to which feminist critique can contribute to the emergence of alternative organizational forms that counter the concentration of power in the hands of internet giants (Dulong de Rosnay & Musiani, 2020), or whether statistics and massive data raise new challenges for observing the social relation of gender.

The articles in this issue focus on three main themes: the articulation of mixed methods, the contribution of feminist epistemology to numerical methods, and the challenges posed by quantitative data to gender.

1. Relevance of Mixed Methods for Feminist Approaches

A first set of texts examines the value of mixed methods—combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as online and offline methods—for feminist research. The primary objective is to demonstrate that both gender and digital transcend disciplinary boundaries. Gender studies and the analysis of media and socio-digital platforms are evolving in an increasingly interdisciplinary context within the social sciences, necessitating reflection on the porous boundaries between disciplines and research subjects, and their fluidity. Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as bridging “online” and “offline” realms, helps move beyond dichotomies between traditional and digital research, allowing for a nuanced consideration of continuities and contextual nuances in online practices. This approach underscores the multiplicity of gender, whether conceptual or as a lived identity, and its diverse manifestations across different contexts and structures.

Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, or ‘online’ and ‘offline’ perspectives, can notably enable a more holistic approach to research (Millette et al., 2020). In the context of a feminist approach, the combination of methods can reveal tensions that prompt us to question the objectives and goals of the research, the ethics of our approach, and the potential dissonances it reveals. By adopting a feminist perspective and an approach in science and technology studies, the contribution of H. Bourdeleioe and L. Larochelle moves in this direction. Addressing anti-fatphobia and body positivity on Instagram, the authors explore how “impurities” such as biases, emotional influences, and platform design, etc. shape both quantitative and qualitative investigative approaches. The study highlights methodological and ethical challenges inherent in sensitive research topics like fatphobia, which can compromise feminist methodologies. By examining power dynamics between researcher and research participants, and between Instagram platforms and users, the authors illustrate how these factors influence data production within discourses facilitated by interviews or platform interactions. Moreover, this axis of inquiry demonstrates that while qualitative methods resonate strongly with feminist research (Luka & Leurs, 2020; Luka & Millette, 2018), quantitative methods also offer valuable insights. M. Millette, C. Nicol, and O. Corbin’s article on “Feminist Methodology and Qualitative Methods of the Study of TikTok” illustrates this point. Exploring the heuristic value of qualitative feminist methods for observing practices of resistance to anti-feminism on TikTok, their work emphasizes the ability of these methods to provide nuanced **insights** into experiences, emotions, and subjectivities. Importantly, they also **highlight that** quantitative methods have the virtue of illuminating the contextual **characteristics that** produce and perpetuate systemic inequalities, thus contributing to **social change** (Sprague, 2016¹). This research underscores the epistemological **contributions** of feminist approaches to research protocols, reinforcing the ethical **dimensions** of digital research practices. It also resonates with the article by T. Joseph and C. Bouko, who analyze the construction of feminist identities on Instagram. They explore methodological challenges in categorizing identities relevant to feminist identity construction, noting that feminist identity extends beyond simplistic labels of activism and commitment. Their observations align here with those of researchers such as C.A. Rentschler and S. Thrift (2015), who argue that one can engage in feminism (“*doing feminism*”)² without identifying as feminist.

¹ The authors indeed cite this author. Regarding Sprague’s work, see particularly Chapter 4 entitled “How Feminists Count: Critical Strategies for Quantitative Methods” (pp.95-143).

² On a related subject and on the difference between doing and saying, for example “doing activism, being activist,” see for instance: Bobel, C. (2007). “‘I’m Not an Activist, Though I’ve Done a Lot of It’: Doing Activism, Being Activist and the ‘Perfect Standard’ in a Contemporary Movement”. *Social Movement Studies*. 6(2), 147–159.

2. Feminist Epistemology's Contribution to Digital Methods

The second theme of this issue explores the contributions of feminist epistemology to digital methods. As widely recognized, the humanities and social sciences have examined feminism as epistemology, methodology, and method. From a standpoint theory perspective, feminist scholars have questioned how feminism can challenge traditional methodologies and the specificities of feminist inquiry methods (Harding, 1987). S. Harding, for instance, acknowledges that while there are no “distinctively feminist” methods, feminist research occurs under unique conditions. In contrast, I. Clair (2016) highlights the challenges posed by the nature of those interactions that take place during investigations and by the transformation of individuals' lives into research subjects within feminist science.

Several scholars conclude that feminist research enriches conventional methodological approaches and promotes inclusivity by focusing on political aspects (Hesse-Biber, 2012; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Reinharz & Kulick, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012; Chandrashekar, 2020). This second theme addresses these issues, emphasizing feminist epistemology's application to digital objects and practices. The contributions in this section prompt exploration into the heuristic value of gender: beyond being a mere category or tool of subjectivity, could gender also serve as an approach or methodology for observing non-binary gender realities in digital contexts (Bourcier, 2003)? To what extent do evolving gender boundaries in digital spaces reshape research methodologies, and vice versa? How can feminist research employ specific methods to observe mechanisms of social differentiation, categorization, and hierarchization? Can digital platforms serve as a method for enacting feminist ethics?

Titled “Reflexivity and Feminist Reflections on an Ethnographic Approach: 360° Capture and Visual Representation of Brazilian Queer Practices,” J. Fraser Emery and J. Ibanez-Bueno's article in this issue raises epistemological questions about the role of videographic devices in data collection and their subsequent potential for more enlightened and inclusive feminist research. The authors inquire whether these devices can be active partners in elucidating and interpreting research. Drawing on research using 360° digital capture to study Brazilian queer practices through a feminist lens, they reflect on the visual expressive possibilities afforded by this technology. Viewing the digital simultaneously as a tool, script (Souchier et al., 2019), and object of research, 360° capture emerges as a technological innovation for critically examining the researcher's role and position within gender and racial social relations, thereby enriching feminist approaches. Using a case study featuring a short film with two queer artists from São Paulo, the authors illustrate how visual capture tools not only shape research processes but also influence the observed outcomes through their inherent power dynamics.

This epistemological reflection continues with A. Ravier and A. Zanotti's article, which explores methodological challenges faced by ethnographers analyzing research subjects involving body and sexuality. The researchers reflect on their investigations into gay men's experiences using location-based gay dating apps like Grindr. Their

study examines the nuances of employing these digital platforms as research tools, focusing on interpretations and interactions within sexually charged digital spaces and their reintegration into hierarchies of desirability. Through comparative reflexive analysis, they illuminate how researcher presence and bodily engagement in these terrains—where investigative and sexual scripts intersect—affect emotions and shape the construction of research subjects.

Conversely, the article by E. Melvyn and É. Rossi, which explores queer representation in dating apps Tinder and HER, focuses not so much on the impact of a digital field on researchers, but rather on its effects on the people navigating that field. Through interviews and profile data analysis from these applications, Melvyn and É. Rossi illustrate that dating platforms significantly influence queer minorities, who employ diverse strategies for self-disclosure and visibility. However, these strategies often lead to tensions between one's authentic identity and the persona projected on the apps. The authors highlight how sociotechnical dynamics shape queer representation: while users craft self-presentation strategies, the algorithms of these apps tend to reinforce cisgender heterosexual norms, thereby marginalizing queer individuals—Tinder particularly exemplifies this trend.

3. The Challenges posed by Quantitative Methods and Data in Relation to Gender and Vice Versa

The third theme of this issue investigates how digital dynamics in the production, collection, and analysis of quantitative data pose challenges to gender (Luka & Millette, 2018). Gender becomes problematic when used as a measuring tool and conflated with the concept of sex (Cervulle & Quemener, 2014). While quantitative sociology traditionally relied on the official recording of an individual's "sex" (de Singly, 2012) and focused on collecting and analyzing gender-specific data, contemporary surveys increasingly deploy new methodologies to address complex individual realities. Feminist quantitative research is evolving to develop strategies that make quantitative methods more responsive to feminist concerns (Sprague, 2016).

From a methodological standpoint, can we statistically observe the social construct of gender and develop new indicators and descriptions? The goal of this approach was to examine the extent to which quantitative data can investigate gender-related issues. How can we construct high-quality data and tools that are sensitive to gender and go beyond the binary model? How should we conceptualize group dynamics and specificities? To address the issue of representativeness and tackle questions of inclusivity in data and statistical models, it is essential to devise an appropriate data policy and redefine concepts such as transparency, representation, accessibility, and ethics. As data availability and accessibility increase, promoting the use of existing data to deepen and diversify analyses of gender issues becomes crucial. Are there ongoing efforts to innovate data collection and analysis methods in gender studies to better understand the complexities of social relations?

Adopting a feminist perspective, the article by S. Alava and N. Chaouni explores the influence of social media, specifically the use of filters on body perception and beauty among adolescent girls. Supported by quantitative and qualitative data, their research demonstrates how these perceptions are constructed through interactions with digital filters and examines the power structures and inequalities embedded in social and digital practices. By integrating methodological and epistemological approaches that consider intersections of gender, class, and race, the study provides valuable insights into the connections between digital filter usage and gendered education, ultimately showing that feminist research is grounded in praxis aimed at social change (Bourdeloie & Hübner, 2023).

Aligned with the focus on change within digital realms, A. Richard's article critiques biases in automated systems and their presumed objectivity. Drawing on feminist epistemology and echoing earlier works that emphasize the biased, selective, and subjective nature of large-scale digital data (Cardon, 2013; Bourdeloie, 2013), A. Richard explores how biases in data and models, both technical and discriminatory, amplify pre-existing discriminations. Building on S. Harding's assertion (1987) that science is shaped by partial and partisan viewpoints, power struggles, and subjectivity, which need to be acknowledged to produce more objective science, A. Richard examines the implications of these theories in computer science. She exposes biases present in the data and models used, highlighting their technical and discriminatory aspects that contribute to exacerbating existing discriminations. She also demonstrates how the ethics of care and feminist knowledge inform discussions aimed at improving transparency and equity in automated systems, mitigating algorithmic biases, and enriching data science from an inclusive and critical perspective.

This discussion on biases continues with the article by P. Lemarchand, D. Hassoun, and P. Kuntz, who, focuses on respiratory function, examine the consideration of gender in medical decision support systems. This interdisciplinary team in health and data sciences illustrates that medical decision support systems – which rely on diverse data for diagnostics – are shaped by statistical models where categorizations, particularly the binary categorization of male/female, play a significant role. However, this categorization tends to naturalize gender differences, compromising the use of predictive AI models and the development of healthcare decision-making algorithms. Biases present in training data are also evident in other ostensibly alternative systems like Wikipedia. This is demonstrated by the latest article in this issue, authored by an interdisciplinary team, which examines Wikipedia as a research field to uncover gendered epistemic inequalities, particularly the invisibilization of women scientists. Employing quantitative analysis to identify and characterize inequalities, and qualitative insights into the Wikipedia community's perceptions, C. Dabestanie et al. propose actions to address these gaps, aligning with a tradition of reevaluating tools and methods in feminist geography. This article's contribution is twofold: on the one hand, the research team developed specific computational tools tailored to the Wikipedia context for their research; on the other hand, it questions the current limitations of research that lacks an intersectional