Researching Identity Narratives in Cyberspace: Some Methodological Challenges

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Abstract

Cyberspace as a study object entails remarkable challenges to researchers, especially because it is an immaterial and highly changeable environment. This paper addresses some of the methodological challenges faced during a research about Lusophone identity narratives in blogs and sites in Brazil, Mozambique and Portugal, and the outlined strategies to overcome the difficulties found.

The first challenge was how to design a Lusophone cyberspace cartography, due to the fact that, on one hand, everyday there are new blogs and new sites online, on the other hand, many of these blogs and sites suddenly disappear. Then, some challenges were faced to conduct the content analyses of the selected blogs and sites. In addition, the study objects were too different to enable the use of a single observation protocol, with pre-established categories.

Furthermore, there were some questions to deal with the statistical analyses of the blogs. Initially, the researchers concluded that the statistical analyses, which in some cases depend on the collection of data within the blogs, might inflate the results obtained, for instance the number of visitors, the visitors' origin and the visit average time. Therefore, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle was a valid methodological concern because the blogs and sites observation probably would change the object behaviour. Finally, a well-known research question was addressed: how to interview the bloggers and the webmasters while minimising the impact of the interview in the blogs' content production.

Having identified and described the challenges faced during the research, the aim of this paper is to discuss some methodological ideas about how to study identity narratives on cyberspace.

Key words

cyberspace; identity; methods; Lusophony

1. The starting point: identity narratives in the Lusophone world [1]

According to some authors we live in 'the age of community', an age characterized by the need to belong to a meaningful social group (national, ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc.) which may give us a sense of shared identity and history (e.g. Anderson, 1983; Appadurai, 1997; Castells, 1997; Hall, 1997).

This work will focus its attention on Internet research methods, departing from the cyberspace narratives shared by a linguistic community. With a total of two hundred and fifty four million speakers in 2011, Portuguese is the official language in eight countries, on four continents, and the spoken language in many minority communities in other nations worldwide. It is the fifth most used language in the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2012).

Taken into account that language is one of the main elements of culture (Warnier, 2003) and one of the main codes of communication (Watzlawick *et al.*, 2010), it is relevant to study how a geographically disperse community of cultures, united by a common language, (re)create identity narratives in cyberspace. Most authors agree that identity is a complex and multidimensional concept and should not be understood as "transparent". Hall (1994) believes that we must understand the concept of identity as "production", as an always incomplete process, in which our representations of the other and our experiences are of significant importance.

Clary-Lemon (2010) states that research on identity carried out by some authors (e.g. Ricoeur, 1992; Martin, 1995; Hall, 1994) can be summarized in three dimensions. Identity is a discursive construction often revealed in the stories people tells about themselves or others, as well as recounted memories of the past. Identities are always temporary; they are constantly changing, and must be understood in relation with the other. Cultural and national identities are fragmented internally and externally, resulting from the process of negotiation of different perspectives about the similarity and difference.

Departing from these statements, and looking at identity as an incomplete process (Butler, 2000), the main goal of this research is to examine the narratives about the so-called Lusophone world on cyberspace, having as object of study sites and blogs written in Portuguese language.

1.1 Lusophone countries in the recent past and nowadays

During the last half of the 20th century, the relationships between the Portuguese-speaking countries were marked by numerous conflicts, tensions and reconfigurations. According to Sinclair & Straubhaar (forthcoming), during this period each Lusophone country was somewhat isolated from the others, except in the increasingly exposure to Brazilian television exports. In this period of time, some painful colonial memories were very present in most of these societies: the decolonization process in African Portuguese-speaking countries and East Timor, in 1975, was the latest one undertaken by a European country. In Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau, there were colonial wars for more than ten years before gaining the independence in the mid 1970s. As Paez & Liu (2011) observed, this kind of conflict is strongly important in the forming narratives of national identities.

After their independence, the Portuguese-speaking African countries have undergone several political and social changes: the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique; the political instability in Guinea-Bissau; the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia. Those changes have strongly conditioned their social and political development. In fact, in those days, none of the mentioned countries, not even Brazil – which was recovering from the problems of the dictatorship regime (1964 – 1984) and from the deep economic crises of the 1970s-80s – had

conditions to become influent nations in the international arena. Brazil's days as an emerging BRIC economy came after the mid 1990s. As a result, during the last quarter of the last century, the distance among Portuguese-speaking countries was evident, not only that they were geographically distant, dispersed in Europe, Africa, South America and Asia, but also that each one of them tried to find out their own identity, choosing to belong to other political, economic and cultural proximity systems which are not the Lusophone geostrategic space system (Macedo *et al.*, 2011). As a few examples, Angola went within African Union, Brazil was one of the founders of Mercosur, and Portugal became a European Union member.

According to the Luso-tropicalist theory, Portuguese were more open to race-mixing than other European colonizers (Freyre, 1933). This theory was selectively appropriated during Salazar's dictatorial regime in order to legitimizing Portuguese colonialism. Nowadays, thirty-eight years after the Carnation Revolution of 1974[2] and the end of the colonial/liberation war, the Lusophone rhetoric in Portugal assumes frequently the form of 'imperial nostalgia' (Martins, 2006), giving room to conflicts and misunderstanding. These conflicts unleash tense debates on everyday discourse, including in cyberspace (Macedo *et al.*, 2011).

The Lusophone bonds follow now new guidelines. The colonial relationship has been allegedly replaced by post-colonial relationships, set on 'cooperation' and 'solidarity' values, aiming at 'expanding and enhancing the Portuguese language' and preserving 'a historical link and a shared patrimony were resulting from centuries of common experiences' as proposed in the Constitutive Declaration of the Community of Portuguese Language Speaking Countries (CPLP)[3] of 17th July 1996.

Currently, all Portuguese-speaking countries, except Guinea Bissau, are living in peace and most of them are finding ways to prosperity. Brazil is one of the emergent world powers; Angola is a regional power in southern Africa; Cape Verde is no longer an underdeveloped country; East Timor recovered the independence and became a democracy; Portugal, despite its economic crises, belongs to European Union, one of the spaces with higher levels of human development (United Nations Development Programme, 2012).

Based on the assumption that identity is formed and, at the same time, expressed through relations of power (Dolby, 2006), it is important to consider these present transformations in the Lusophone world and its consequences in the construction of new identity narratives. Only as an example, the asymmetric relationship developed between Portugal and the Portuguese-speaking African countries was fed, for a long time, by the migratory flows that led Angolans, Cape-Verdeans, Guineans, Mozambicans and people from San Tome to Lisbon. Vala *et al.* (2008) argued that the "relations between receiving societies and immigrants is influenced by the representations that receiving societies build regarding their own history, namely their colonial past". In Portugal, for instance, 'black' people are still considered 'foreigners', regardless of their nationality and their efforts to be perceived as citizens on equal terms (Cabecinhas, 2007, 2010; Carvalhais, 2007).

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[2] The Carnation Revolution was a peaceful revolution which ended the nationalist dictatorial regime of Salazar in Portugal.

[3] The Community of Portuguese Language Speaking Countries (CPLP) is the intergovernmental organization for cooperation among nations where Portuguese is an official language. It was formed in 17th July 1996 in Lisbon, with seven countries: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal and San Tome and Principe. East Timor joined the community in 20th May 2002 after gaining independence.

On this matter, Cabecinhas & Feijó (2010, p.42) note that only recently there has been more debate about these issues, ensuring that "formally, we live in a post-colonial period, but colonialism persists in people's minds, shaping personal trajectories and intergroup relations".

However, transformations in the relations of power among Lusophone countries and the communication among them in the Internet bring us a new landscape. Mitra & Watts (2002, p.490) note, "…when the legitimization of power is based in discourse and texts, the speaker of voice in cyberspace is placed in a challenging position. The eloquence of the voice becomes critical to gaining a wide acceptance rather than the connection among speaker, place, and power".

2. Identity narratives in Lusophone cyberspace

Appadurai (1997) argues that the tension between cultural homogeneity and hetero-geneity is in the centre of global interactions nowadays. Electronic mediation has altered substantially the diasporic public spheres (Cunningham, Hawkins *et al*, 2000). Internet flex-ibility and openness offer infinite opportunities to the individual in terms of freedom of expression, providing emancipating opportunities (Lévy, 2002). Still, the Internet is also a space where conflicts among 'communities' can be exacerbated. Identity is becoming the main "source of meaning in a historical period characterized by widespread de-structuring of organizations, de-legitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions" (Castells 1997, p.470). At the same time, the Internet can help immigrants to nurture their diaspora and preserve their cultural heritage. Mediated social networks can provide a sense of home and tools for collective action (e.g. Tynes, 2007).

In spite of this, we live in a global communication time in which we have a new environment to develop the multicultural dialogue, a new environment where Lusophone cultures find a space to be closer and stronger: the Internet. New generations of Portuguese speaking citizens invaded the cyberspace with sites and weblogs about their own countries and cultures. As a result, in a few years, the Portuguese language became the fifth most repre-sented in the Internet in the number of users, as observed by the Internet World Stats in 2010.

We are talking about millions of sites and weblogs written in Portuguese, created from the place where their authors are living directly to the whole Lusophone cyberspace. Despite their geographical distance, their different ethnicities and their diverse ways of life, these are people who speak, think and feel in the Portuguese language, sharing their memo-ries and ideas in the same virtual space (Macedo *et al.*, 2011). As argued by Hicks (1998, p. 67), these people "… found in the nodes of the Web a sense of neighbourhood-places at which to dwell together".

Collective memory maintains group identity, presents justifications for groups' actions and enables collective mobilization by challenging the legitimacy and stability of the exist-ing social order (Licata *et al.*, 2007). Some authors suggest that social representations are organized through narrative templates (e.g. Laszlo, 2003; 2008). Their schematic nature is produced by repeated use of standard narrative forms produced by, for instance, history curricula in schools, monuments, and the mass media. It also guides people's perceptions of their group identity (Wertsch, 2002).

Studies about historical memory around the world have shown that, when thinking about world history, people tend to remember mostly wars and political conflicts (e.g. Paez *et al.*, 2008; Liu *et al.*, 2009). Two reasons seem to underline the importance of conflict in social representations: conflicts can be seen as basic templates for human story-telling (Propp, 1968), and they generate extreme positive and negative emotions. As sharing negative emotions (Rimé, 1997) allows for community-building and empathy, this may explain why negative events appear so often in social representations of history.

These emotions and social representations in the Lusophone cultures find in the Internet one of the stronger ways to put under discussion the cultural identity narratives in this linguistic space. At the same time, the Internet communication in Portuguese language improves the knowledge that each Lusophone culture has about the others.

As noted by Barlow (2008), blogs are a new cultural phenomenon as far they represent most more than a technological possibility. The author observes that blogs allow citizens to express their own ideas with no editorial previous selection. In this communication ecosystem emerges a great citizen power that escapes to media elites' authority. For instance, Cross (2011) recognizes that creative and talented people, who have never had an opportunity to be heard, took a place in mass culture while their ideas and their dreams were broadcasted in the blogosphere.

Another advantage of blogosphere is its interaction possibility as observed by Coady (2011). In fact, blogosphere's dynamics encourages information consumers to become also information producers. Rosenberg (2009) argues that all these reasons quickly made the blogosphere to win sympathy of more people than the expected for the blogs' first enthusiasts. As an example, in United States of America, in 2008, among the Internet users as a whole, 31% followed blogs and 12% produced blogs (Horrigan, 2008).

It is more interesting if we take in account the Net enthusiasts' ideas. As observed by Dahlberg (1998, p.72), they "... argue that cyberspace enables all citizens to be heard andtreated equally. Social hierarchies and power relations are said to be under cut by the 'blindness' of cyberspace to identity, allowing people to interact as if they were equals".

2.1 The digital divide in the Lusophone world

Most of the Portuguese speaking countries, cultures and citizens are located in the South hemisphere, traditionally represented as economic and politically "less developed" than the North. One of main characteristics of this gap, in our global world, is the digital divide. According to Dahlberg (1998, p.77), "There are also inequalities in cyberspace interaction (...). These inequalities can be linked to, and in turn reinforce, exclusions from the net. Access restrictions mean that net interaction is dominated by those in any society with the resources to connect: generally white, middle-class, men". Furthermore, millions of Lusophone citizens do not have access to the Internet not only because of poor technological infrastructures in their countries, but also because of their social condition that led them to digital illiteracy (Macedo *et al.*, 2010).

Table 1 shows Portuguese speaking Internet users by country numbers. According to this table, Portugal is the best-positioned Lusophone country with 50.7% of the population accessing this communication technology. Nevertheless, if we talk about the total number of users, Brazil is, by reason of size, better represented with almost 80 million of citizens communicating in the Portuguese language in the Internet, despite its lower Internet penetration (38.9%).

COUNTRIES	Population (2011 Est.)	Internet Users 31-Dec-2011	Penetration (% Population)
Angola	13,338,541	744,195	5.6 %
Brazil	203,429,773	79,245,740	38.9 %
Cape Verde	516,100	148,800	28.8 %
Guinea Bissau	1,596,677	37,123	2.3 %
Mozambique	22,948,858	975,395	4.2 %
Portugal	10,760,305	5,455,217	50.7 %
Sao Tome & Principe	177,506	31,012	17.3 %
East Timor	1,177,834	2,361	0.2 %
TOTAL	253,947,594	86,639,843	34.1 %

Table 1 – Portuguese-speaking Internet users
Source: Internet World Stats, 2012.

One of the surprises of this table is the higher than the expected percentage of Internet penetration in Cape Verde (28.8%) and San Tome and Principe (17.3%). As observed in other African countries, we could expect a low penetration as Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau present. Olinda Beja, a San Tome writer, in an interview to Macedo & Marques (2010) argues that the country's isolation and insularity, when related with a huge diaspora, increases the Internet number of users. These insular citizens look not only for a window to observe the world, but also to communicate in a cheaper way with their relatives and friends living abroad. Therefore, it is important not to forget the relevant contributions of the Portuguese speaking diasporas to the Lusophone communication on the Internet, as well as their important role in the production of hybrid identity narratives.

Returning to the digital divide, despite the low percentage of Internet penetration in some of the Lusophone countries, namely in Africa and East Timor, this penetration is higher among Portuguese-speaking citizens than among all other languages speakers, as we can observe in the next table.

Language	Population in 2011	World Population (%)	Internet users Dec, 31st, 2011	Penetration (%)	User world (%)
Portuguese speakers	253 947 594	3.7%	86 639 843	34.1 %	3.8 %
All other languages speakers	6 676 107 560	96.3%	2 180 593 899	32.6 %	96.2 %
World total	6 930 055 154	100%	2 267 233 742	32.7 %	100 %

Table 2 – Portuguese-speaking Internet users and population statistics
Source: Internet World Stats, 2012.

As can be seen from Table 2, the Portuguese speakers represent only 3.7% of world population with a total of 253.947.594. Of them, only 86.639.843 are Internet users. However, if we compare the Internet penetration percentage between the whole world (32.6%) and the

Lusophone world (34.1%), we can see how relevant are the Portuguese-speaking communities in the content development and in the communication relationships in cyberspace.

3. The methodological challenges of researching Lusophone identity narratives in cyberspace

The ongoing research project "Identity narratives and social memory: the (re)making of Lusophony in intercultural contexts" is intended to analyse identity narratives in the Lusophone space - a highly heterogeneous and dispersed geo-linguist community composed by eight countries. This research project has four different tasks to study Lusophone identity narratives: on the first task, the aim was to study virtual identity narratives in Portuguese language cyberspace; on the second task, the priority was to study oral identity narratives among Lusophone people who have migratory experiences in other Portuguese-speaking country(ies); on the third task, the research is about intercultural identity narratives among different Lusophone groups; finally, on the fourth task, this research meant to study Lusophone identity representations in historical narratives. It is important to make clear that only the first task was developed in cyberspace.

This work aims to describe the methodological challenges faced during the first task, when Lusophone identity narratives in cyberspace were studied, starting from the following questions: How is Lusophony constructed in cyberspace? How are virtual sociability networks established among Portuguese language speakers from different countries? How are national narratives constructed in the virtual sphere? How important are virtual networks for the Portuguese language diaspora?

The research process in this task had two steps: first, it was done a Lusophone cyberspace cartography with 350 identified sites and blogs which had a theme directly or indirectly linked to Lusophony; second, it was done a selection of fifteen sites and blogs on Lusophone issues for case studies: five from Brazil, five from Mozambique and five from Portugal. This kind of selection was made due to financial constrains since the study of blogs in all Portuguese-speaking countries would demand higher costs than the research budget could afford. The purpose was to research the cyberspace contribution to the Lusophone identity narratives (re)construction, starting from the Brazilian, Mozambican and Portuguese virtual narratives.

The research team knew that some new methodological issues in this research would be faced because the Internet is a more unexplored field than it seems to be. Hewson, Yule *et al.* (2003) called our attention to the ease of making methodological mistakes when we are doing Internet based research. According to these authors, despite the fact that most of methodological issues are the same in the case of Internet research as in other modes of research, there are some issues needing to be settled. As argued by Schneider & Kirsten (2004, p.115), "The ongoing evolution of the web poses challenges for scholars as they seek to develop methodological approaches that permit robust examination of web phenomena". To support these methodological challenges, the researchers started by looking for literature about Internet studies. Despite the hundreds of editions found on this subject, very few of this literature gave them the clues that they needed. Actually, most of the

research available were mainly concerned with the classic methodology of investigation. It is true, as Supovitz (1999, p. 262) observed that, "The technological advances associated with collecting data on the Web afford researchers several advantages. No longer is it necessary to mail surveys and return envelopes (although e-mail addresses may be necessary for contacting those in your sample)". However, this methodological approach did not give all the necessary clues to go far with this research. Actually, what the researchers were looking for was knowledge on methods adapted to research the Internet as a study object. At that time, they only found some dispersed experiences and ideas in a small number of scientific publications on this concern. Therefore, these precious contributions were embraced to design the methodological approach of this research.

When this research started, in 2009, there was a very few literature on the specific study of narratives in cyberspace. Fortunately, it increased in the last years, improving the knowledge on this issue.

Combining the research team previous know-how and the contributions found in literature, it would be possible to validate other authors' information and add some new ideas about cyberspace research methods with this work.

3.1. The first methodological challenge - To establish the Lusophone cyberspace cartography

The first step of the research process was to establish the Lusophone cyberspace cartography. One of the enduring problems of Internet research is how understand and map out the universe of blogs, web pages, etc. in one's area of interest. It became a great methodological challenge because of the Internet's unpredictable dynamics. Everyday there are new blogs and sites online, and some blogs and sites disappear. As Robinson (2001, p.713) note "Internet data can be ephemeral. A site may be present one day and gone the next. Sites are sometimes closed down or consolidated into other sites". Schneider & Kirsten (2004, p.115) also remind that, "The nature of the web (…) is a unique mixture of the ephemeral and the permanent". To explain their point of view, the authors (2004, p.115) argue:

> There are two aspects to the ephemerality of web content. First, web content is ephemeral in its transience, as it can be expected to last for only a relatively brief time. From the perspective of the user or visitor (or researcher), specialized tools and techniques are required to ensure that content can be viewed again at a later time. The ephemerality of the web requires that proactive steps be taken in order to allow a recreation of web experience for future analyses.

In order to deal with the ephemeral nature of the Internet blogs and sites, it was defined a period of time for the cartography to be prepared: from July to September 2010. First, all non-institutional blogs and sites which had a theme directly or indirectly linked to Lusophone issues were identified in cyberspace in order to build and to circumscribe the research *corpus*. Second, the identified blogs and sites' activity was monitored within these months. Third, these blogs and sites links were ordered into categorized tables by

countries and by specific sub-issues. Finally, this information was organized with the help of a graph-visualization software called Ucinet in order to find the networks among the *corpus* of blogs and sites. These networks are represented in graphics as cartography's 'constellations'. It must be stressed that these tables and these graphics[4] were research tools rather than a photograph of Lusophone cyberspace. The cartography obtained only represents a fragment, a kind of snapshot at a particular period of time. It is interesting to verify that Diminescu (2012) methodological steps of mapping e-diasporas confirm this approach to cyberspace cartographies.

The research team recognized that this cartography could become quickly outdated. For example, two of the blogs of the cartography, selected for in-depth case studies, became sites (precisely during the research); another one stopped because its author died (after the research); and finally another one was closed (also after the research).

3.2. The second methodological challenge - To do the content analyses of the selected blogs and sites chosen as case studies

The second step of this research about Lusophone narratives in cyberspace was to do in-depth case studies of fifteen selected blogs and sites from Brazil, Mozambique and Portugal. For this work, it was proposed an approach including texts and images' content analyses, statistical analyses of the visits and an interview with the author, or the main author, of each blog or site. This approach was previously tested in an exploratory study (Macedo, 2009). In the present research, a cyberspace narrative analysis protocol was developed in order to select three posts and three images in each blog or site to be analysed, within the period of time initially defined.

However, another methodological challenge was immediately found: the blogs and sites contents have a big diversity of forms (text, images, videos, comments, etc.) and ways and time to be fed. Each blog or site is quite distinctive and there are no rules to perform content production. This experience seems to confirm the assertion of Stanton & Rogelberg (2001, p.214) when they observed: "A great deal of methodological research is needed to truly understand how to design and interpret data collected from the Internet and intranets". Also Schneider & Kirsten (2004, p. 116) note that "Web-based media require new methods of analyzing form and content, along with processes and patterns of production, distribution, usage and interpretation". Consequently, the researchers realized that is impossible to establish a universal protocol to do content analyses in Internet and the previous cyberspace narrative analysis protocol was discarded.

The solution was to do specific content analyses for each blog or site. The selection of posts and images within a period of time was also rejected, because it was found that sometimes the most interesting posts and images were not within this interval. In

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[4] These tables and these graphics are not reproduced in this paper. This paper aim is to describe our research methodological process rather than to describe the results of the research.

order to answer this challenge, diachronic and synchronic content analyses were done, with the examination of all the contents in general and of the three most discussed posts and images in particular.

3.3. The third methodological challenge – To analyse the selected blogs and sites statistics

The case studies of the fifteen blogs and sites also supposed, as it was anticipated, statistical analysis to study the quantity, the origin and the duration of the visits to each blog or site selected in this research.

Fortunately, the researchers understood very early that including frequent and long visits to the selected blogs and sites to study their contents, inflated some statistics in each one of them: the number of visitors, the visitors' origin and the visit average time, e.g.. It was important to remember that this observation probably would have changed the object behaviour, namely in those blogs and sites less visited. The Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which demonstrated us that the observation act is enough to modify the observed object's behaviour, especially if the object is small (Barrow, 2005), was present in this research. Consequently, the researchers took it as a valid methodological concern.

To reduce the subjectivity imposed by the researchers' observations in the statistic analysis, all the blogs and sites contents were recorded. This work was done copying the contents of each blog to a Microsoft Word file. It was a hard work and it is true that some files have more than one thousand pages. At final, the fifteen files were recorded. This solution brought two benefits to the research: on one hand, it avoided the frequent visits to the blogs and sites; and, on the other hand, it gave the reassurance that researchers will always have the contents even if the blog was shut down, as it happened with one of the Brazilian blogs selected for case study. This procedure was suggested by Robinson (2001, p.713) when the author said: "All narrative data obtained from the Internet should be retained either in a file or as a printed copy. This will ensure that the data are available for further analysis or audit". In fact, this option allowed the researchers to analyse unreservedly the blogs and sites' contents with no apprehension of increasing the effects of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle or of losing web access to the research data.

3.4. The fourth methodological challenge – To minimised the influence on bloggers contents production

According to the case study guidelines, it was necessary to interview authors of the selected blogs and sites to better understand some characteristics of these study objects. However, the exploratory studies (Macedo, 2009) demonstrated the influence of the interview on the way contents were produced in blogs and sites after the contact. Once more it was found the Heinsenberg's uncertainty principle in this research.

Actually, it is impossible to do an interview without influencing the interviewee's way of thinking. The research relationship is, firstly, a 'social relationship' and therefore exerts effects on the results obtained and on the social actors involved. In this sense, the researcher cannot forget that, when he observes a given reality, he is also influenced by it. As

the 'lens' that we use for this observation is permeated by our previous experiences and our own representations, also the 'lens' of who is observed is loaded with the meanings of his/her culture. It is true that is an old and a well-known methodological issue. However, what is significant in this research experience is to observe the reproducibility of this influence effect in the cyberspace environment. In fact, some contents posted by the bloggers, after the interview, were clearly influenced by it. It would be possible to accept this as a benefit as the Anglo-Saxon ethnographers did since the late 1960's (Mattelart & Mattelart, 2002). The reflexivity, proposed by Garfinkel (1967), conceptualises the dialectical relationship between the action and the context. In other words, the reflexivity is to understand that the context influences the action content and the action also contributes to the progressively developed sense of the context. So, the result of the researcher action gives meaning to his/her research practices. By examining relationships in cyberspace among people, places, practices and things, the Internet researcher is producing a part of the research context as noted by Sterne (1999). Following this line of thought, Jones (1999, pp. 8-11) observed:

> Scholars studying the Internet must be reflexive, for (at least) two reasons. First, we have all, scholar and citizen alike, become savvy media consumers (p. 8).
>
> [...] The second reason scholars of the Internet must be reflexive is that the Internet is both embedded in academic life and owes much of its existence and conceptualisation to academia (p. 10).
>
> [...] The research process is no less part of the ongoing construction of individual and collective reality than is the Internet – and discourse within it and external to it. Framed that way, it is possible to consider the nature of research as a meaning-making process, as a version of reality ... (p. 11).

At the same time, a cost/benefit analysis told us that it is better to introduce some subjectivity in the study than to reduce the amount of data or to change the data collection methods. As argued by Santos (2003), the evidence of the researcher's interference in the studied object impelled deep reformulations in modern science. First, because the real world became to be known not as it is, but departing from the elements that we introduce into it. Second, because we have to recognize that our knowledge rigour is limited; so, we cannot expect an absolute knowledge of the world, but only probabilistic approximations of the phenomenon. Third, because the uncertainty rejects scientific determinism: the whole cannot be resumed for the sum of the parts of the research process. Finally, because the distinction between the researcher and the research object losses the traditional dichotomised relationship to be replaced by a continuous vision of both elements.

In conclusion, the interviews with the bloggers were done taking into account the reflexivity of this action, knowing that the interview would probably influence the future contents of the blogs.

4. Conclusions

Despite the extreme importance of the Internet as a communication technology in the global world, there is a long way to go on the research of cyberspace narratives. As a consequence, the literature on this subject research methodology is not enough to allow an

indisputable research design. As argued by Schneider & Kirsten (2004, p. 119), "The emergence of the Internet, and especially the web, has challenged scholars conducting research to both adapt familiar methods and develop innovative approaches that account for the unique aspects of the web".

The expectation of this paper is that by sharing this research experience, it would be possible to improve the knowledge on how to study cyberspace narratives. We all know that it is impossible to eliminate subjectivity when researchers study narratives, namely those in cyberspace. However, it is desirable to try to reduce this subjectivity, identifying and controlling it with some procedures as it was done in this research. To accept some subjectivity seems to be the way to estimate this reality; in this case, to estimate what is happening with the narratives produced in the Internet and how its contents can be understood. We cannot forget that Internet is a new communication environment which we do not know as well as we think. Actually, the unpredictable character of the Internet generates considerable challenges. Surely, Internet has much more methodological difficulties than those described in this research experience. What researchers have to do is to transform these methodological difficulties into methodological challenges. Although, it is important to recognize that the methodological approach proposed in this paper is only one of the many different ways to face the described challenges. With the recent literature on cyberspace narratives studies and by improving the sharing of new research experience, we believe it will be possible to deepen the knowledge about these issues in the next future.

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