Scoping the Virtual World. Identity Reshaping as an Epistemological Prerequisite for Research

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Abstract *The experience of 'being in' the virtual world facilitates the creation of new 'personae' or just enables the innermost uninhibited 'presence' of an individual. Once inside this cultural environment, a social scientist has to engage in a phenomenological endeavour over the individual and social impact of the Internet, before tackling the actual fieldwork. Becoming a part of virtual reality offers the opportunity of reconsidering one's own identity and, furthermore, of exploring the various identities of other individuals who are more or less familiar to us in the real world.*

This challenging epistemological environment raises a self-implied questioning of the validity of data gathered here. Each virtual community is a creator and a promoter of its own cyberculture, more or less linked to existing traits in the real world. An additional instrument seems useful, if not necessary, to grasp the ethnographic quality of fieldwork in the virtual world better: an 'a priori' intellectual lens capable of helping the researcher in social sciences to anticipate and manage the possible diversions that the virtual environment could inflict on the collection and, ultimately, on the validity of data. This instrument, both 'etic' and 'emic', should comprise a body of inquiries that lead to a self-questioning about the congruence of means and intentions of the researcher, while recording and sharing various experiences in the cyberspace of today and the metaverse of tomorrow. This approach should also consider an appraisal of the extent to which the evolutionary trends of cyberspace and metaverse – designed by private multinational agents – might preserve the cultural complexity of the human being apart from its status as mere 'user' of digital platforms.

Keywords *cyberspace; social phenomenology; telepresence; virtual reality; digital anthropology*

Introduction: The long journey of *Cyberspace* into *Metaverse*

Who is to say that an artificial intelligence (AI) linked to a three-dimensional printer could not create, in a foreseeable future, its own physical world? It could just as easily

negotiate a salary for its services, open a bank account and make some smart investments, pay its taxes and utilities, buy a piece of property and, ultimately, start nesting. Till then, people and machines have plenty of opportunities to get to know each other better while navigating cyberspace or exploring virtual environments, laying byte by byte the shapes and colours of the metaverse.

The internet represents, in advanced societies, an omnipresent and omniscient tool, which gradually, in association with AI expressions such as Chat GPT, seems to also be gaining omnipotence. An individual in front of a computer, a tablet or a smartphone engaged in a conversation with another is actually participating in a dialogue of four. Electronic devices, by means of their software, often leave their own fingerprint on the communication process – examples are the annoying mishaps the autocomplete software can instil in text messages. All of this is amplified considerably when dozens of people are able to simultaneously join the same conversation. However, this prospective cultural change – through the impact of dazzling advances in digital technologies – might give hope that our online presence could improve the real world into an – 'upgraded' – more empathic society as a whole. Acting in this non-physical space opens the way to the possibility of reconstructing oneself while exploring the identity of other people.

The ever-expanding world of connected groups and individuals relying on a myriad of simultaneous exchanges of information via the internet is generally referred to as 'cyberspace' or, in a broader sense, the 'virtual world'. A person must obtain a digital identity and, according to one's needs, join a virtual community to gain access to this 'man-made universe'. From a technical point of view, the virtual identity encompasses a unique and complex digital marker given by the device itself (media access control code or International Mobile Equipment Identity), the address of the internet service provider (Internet Protocol), a username and, accordingly, a profile – required in order to access some specific web services or integrate a social network.

Social Media has the potential to become a major source of information and entertainment for anybody who owns a computer, a tablet or a smartphone and can use the Internet. Cyberspace represents an ideal environment for displaying the most hidden or unexplored resources or features of someone's personality (which, as it stands, are not always positive). Or, it may unleash a ludic impulse to fashion random characters just for the sake of it. The anonymity and the possibility of creating several personal profiles might also contribute – like in a process of phenomenological reduction – to the intuition and/or expression of a more intimate identity, of the core essence of an individual – apart from everyday conveniences and constraints. Therefore, online environments offer social scientists the possibility of grasping and analysing new forms of sociability facilitated by digital interaction. Furthermore, this medium provides new challenges for reconsidering even the most profound apprehension of intersubjectivity.

This chapter addresses the change into perspective brought to anthropology by immersion into the virtual world. Emerging from the metaphysical and philosophical approaches to the ontology of humankind, anthropology strives to put forward scientific knowledge about the specific traits of a particular community. It is a discipline which emphasizes the epistemological gain brought by a researcher's subjective trained perspective. However, in the case of new communities developed through digital networked technologies, the classic academic training for ethnographic fieldwork seems insufficient, if not inadequate. The virtualization of more and more human activities (from medicine and various manufacturing industries to client services and even politics) raises a major challenge for the epistemological relevance of classic ethnographic fieldwork. For now, a hybrid approach (integrating a virtual community and also having face-to-face encounters with at least some of its members) remains fruitful. However, the progress of the metaverse will, for all means and purposes, lead to a massive migration of social scientists to the virtual dominion.

Scoping the virtual world, experiencing this new intersubjectivity realm, implies having to unequivocally submit oneself to an identity reshaping process. In this digital environment, the relationship Ego-Alter comes inherently through the mediation of electronic devices whose technological bias cannot be overlooked. This cybersymbiosis has the potential of inducing a circumstantial reification of the interlocutor value system, hence, a fundamental lack of trust. An a priori phenomenological perspective on 'being' in the virtual world has the potential of leading an anthropologist to perform an authentic epistemological itinerary on cultural outcomes of virtual communities.

Being there … a virtual presence is all you need

Presence in a collective digital environment (e.g. social media platform or online virtual reality networked software)[1] requires an epistemological challenge for an anthropologist, which can only be tackled from a phenomenological perspective. The return into the non-virtual world – necessary in order to proceed to a comparative analysis – implies a forthwith auto-reflexive search of the feeling of 'being there' and, consequently, of the possible bias induced by the particularities of the technological equipment which ensures the mediation or even the immersion.

1 In this work, I have employed the 'virtual world' in the broad sense of any digital environment ranging from the first Advanced Research Projects Agency Network connection to the most advanced and integrative evolution of the metaverse. I refer to virtual reality only in the case of simulated digital environments (such as Counter-Strike, Second Life or Mesh) with professional or entertaining purposes.

Jonathan Steuer (1992) states that presence implies that focus is given to the mediated environment rather than to the immediate physical environment. The term refers "to the perception of those surroundings" (Steuer 1992, 5). In other words, the cognitive system is invested in the digital universe to the point where it is captured in an "illusion of nonmediation" which can only occur concomitantly with the media user's willingness to suspend disbelief and their knowledge of prior experience with the medium (Lombard and Ditton 2006). "An 'illusion of nonmediation' occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment and responds as he/she would if the medium were not there" (Lombard and Ditton 2006).

In this relation with the virtual world, the term employed currently by social scientists for conceptual clarification reasons is 'telepresence' as promoted by Marvin Minsky (1980). Telepresence implies a sense of being in a mediated environment (Draper et al. 1998), sensing the other during a mediatized communication (Bracken and Skalski 2010) or just being in a machine-generated world: the "sense of being physically present with virtual object(s) at the remote teleoperator site" (Sheridan 1992). Sheridan returns to the term 'presence' for the larger virtual space (the totality of mediated experience) – which could comprise "three variables: the extent of sensory information, control of relation of sensors to environment, and the ability to modify the physical environment" (Sheridan 1992, 4). As digital media use increases, it provides an increasing feeling of "social presence" (Westerman and Skalski 2010).

While acting in the virtual world, an individual can instantaneously connect and have a belonging experience to groups larger than ever possible with human physical abilities. Zhao introduce the term 'telecopresence' for the situation when people are able to "share a community of time without sharing a community of physical space" (2015, 114). He explains that in telecopresence, "individuals are physically remote from one another, hence 'tele'; but in the sense that they are able to reach one another in real or near-real time through electronic mediation, the individuals are temporally together with one another, hence 'copresence'" (Zhao 2015, 115). Mediated immediacy is understood to be a continuation of the mediatedness of the physical/lived body's experience of its environment (Lindmann and Schunemann 2020).

David Chalmers defines virtual reality as immersive, generating "perceptual experience of the environment from a perspective within it, giving the user the sense of 'presence': that is, the sense of really being present at that perspective" (2017, 312). This view is completed by Slater and Wilbur (1997), who make a clear distinction by ascribing the term 'immersive' to technology and 'presence' to a user's subjective experience. Immersion describes the extent to which the computer displays are capable of delivering an inclusive, extensive, surrounding and vivid illusion of reality to the senses of a human participant. Inclusive (I) indicates the extent to which physical reality is shut out. Extensive (E) indicates the range of sensory modalities accommodated. Surrounding (S) indicates the extent to which this virtual reality is panoramic

rather than limited to a narrow field. Vivid (V) indicates the resolution, fidelity and variety of energies simulated within a particular modality (e.g. the visual and colour resolution) (Slater and Wilbur 1997).

Immersion related to presence, in the sense of 'being there', encompasses a reflexive pathway leading to the most suitable paradigm for an analysis of current cyberspace and tomorrow's metaverse, which is phenomenology and postphenomenology. Don Ihde (1990) coined the term 'postphenomenology' as an adaptation of the intellectual practice initiated by Husserl and continued – among other well-known philosophers – by Heidegger, Schütz and Merleau-Ponty. Ihde envisioned the development of information technology and the integrative trend of man-machine relationships but refuted a total merger. Even as an embodiment (I-technology) -> world technology (e.g. a pair of glasses) must be recognizable as such. The hermeneutic relationship 'I -> (technology – world)' and alterity relationship 'I -> technology – (-world)' help explain the different situations and significance of instruments to our species. Considering all these aspects, Ihde states that humans can be immersed in technology as much as physical reality allows: "I am immersed in the surrounding world, but this immersion is as flexible and dynamic as the panorama about me. This is the chiasm, the intertwining of the flesh of which Merleau-Ponty spoke in his last interpretations of perception" (Ihde 1990, 46). Postphenomenology identifies the ways in which technology mediates human-world relations "by co-constituting the subjectivity and objectivity of experience" (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015, 20). Gardner and Jenkins analyse experiences of digital technologies on a phenomenological basis and find that participants in their experiments react in "varied, embodied ways, translating the data representations into more complex narratives inspired by their embodied experiences" (2015, 24).

The presence in the computer-mediated virtual world has been the object of investigation and analysis for researchers coming from different branches of the humanities for the last three decades. For some, the quantitative measuring and the experimental approach was the most accurate method of investigation. For others, an in-depth analysis with ethnographic fieldwork was the way to acquire critical data. In order to follow the second path, the use of an epistemological strainer was deemed necessary. As a result, phenomenology became one of the most suitable frameworks for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative social investigations offering fruitful concepts such as "intersubjectivity" and "lifeworld" (Schütz and Luckmann 1973), "*Dasein as being-in-the-world*" (Heidegger 1996), or the "bodily experiences" (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Being in cyberspace is ultimately a way of 'being-in-the-world'. Once immersed in a digital existence, the integration in the network represents an opportunity for one's *Dasein* to perceive and share with another – 'experience the other as other'.

Alfred Schütz described the possibility of a life-world as being in a direct relation to intersubjectivity, which comprises our current experiences marked, to some

degree, by the experiences of our predecessors (a model perfectly applicable to the virtual world). The social reality which is in our grasp is called the *Umwelt* (environment), where we find our consociates – those who have touched our existence directly at some point. Outside this sphere, there are contemporaries – those who exist in our time but are not (yet) known to us, the predecessor (who passed before our time) and the successors (who will not be born before our passing away). "Someone enters into the sphere of consociates as they approach you and engage in intimate interaction. The world of contemporaries is thus an open horizon of possible consociates" (Schütz 1967, 144). Schütz has the merit of adapting the epistemological approaches of social sciences to the school of thought initiated by Husserl and continued by Heidegger.

Hardesty and Sheredos adopt Schütz's paradigm of social reality with reference to the everyday life-world and apply it to "parallel spheres of social reality that arise in the virtual worlds of multiplayer online games" (2019, 368). According to Hardesty and Sheredos (2019, 369), we can drop the assumption "that everyday spatial proximity is required for face-to-face interactions". Ollinaho's (2018) analysis of "the virtualization of the life-world" focuses on how the paramount reality of everyday life has itself been transformed and now also entails virtual worlds. Our active attention is demanded not only by the paramount reality of everyday life in Schütz's sense but also by virtual worlds. "Through virtualization, another zone of primary relevance other than that of 'here and now' has been erected and has become a part of the life-world of normal persons engaged in the world of daily life" (Ollinaho 2018, 4).

The 'brave new' citizen of cyberspace

The internet offers the possibility of overcoming the obstacle of physical distance when people want to meet and creating new forms of solidarity or advancing common projects. Although these transformations offer new possibilities for constructing public or personal rhetoric and ideology, they can also be targeted by new forms of manipulation. The key players of cyberspace (driven by the pursuit of profit) will always try to shape ideas and opinions of their audience and, ultimately, modulate the decision-making process – a fact that everybody should be aware of – when accessing the virtual world.

In the age of 'feeds' and 'wikis', classic media is no longer the most important provider of information – as it cannot separate itself from an institutional framework, that of an agent which delivers its cultural products to a passive audience. The new online means of information, be they forums, blogs or social media platforms, create the possibility of an ongoing perception reshape or fine-tuning regarding various events. News can be changed directly and spontaneously by those to whom it is addressed. This can happen without the bias of professional analysts or commenta-

tors. This new information and these communication technologies hold an intrinsic promise: they have the potential to provide the opportunity for someone to become famous overnight. This is the essence of web 2.0 – the era in which internet is in permanent transformation under the influence of ideas and opinions of contributors – the outcome of this phenomenon being the creation of "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993). Web 2.0 – a term attributed to Darcy Di Nuci and popularized by Tim O'Riley and Dale Doherty in the early 2000s – encompasses the diversification of communication platforms leading to the ubiquitous social media. Web 2.0 sites "constitute proliferating spaces in which the multiplicity of encounters, intuitions, ideas, uncertain projects, with no tomorrow or with a bright future, esoteric, talkative or influential exchanges, etc., constitute a kind of essential backdrop to give the actors the feeling of being part of the same community, however different they may be" (Aguiton and Cardon 2008, 81).

Sharing ideas and opinions nowadays has become easier than ever with forums or social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Keeping in touch and alleviating the longing for someone is made possible through text communication or audio-videoconferencing (e.g. WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom). However, all these networking software products have a dark side. Walking hand in hand with the idea of 'instant popularity', they nourish the vanity of their users fiercely. Moreover, by conceiving a way of monetizing the popularity through publicity, the moral challenges are even bigger. Virtual space seems to be increasingly marked by territoriality instincts and ownership desires.

Territoriality (Klopfer 1969, 81), a central concept for ethology, relates to the dominant-aggressive behaviour of an individual towards the rest of the animals from the same species living in a given space. Human beings have manifested this behaviour since ancient times over private or collective properties. In the information technology era, virtual space offers human individuals a new substrate to manifest their territorial behaviour, but this time, more strongly impregnated with a symbolic dimension, being closely related to the skill of projecting a popular image associated with fame and credibility.

Having a website, a blog or a video channel (individual or hosted by e.g. YouTube or Vimeo) could become, more important for someone's identity and 'social presence' than owning real estate. The popularity gained from this type of virtual territory can be much more fertile than agricultural land or a real estate lot. And the new and rewarding occupation of an 'influencer' is there to prove it. A great help in increasing digital visibility is the '#' sign with keywords attached to a message intended to assign it to a common thread and speed up thematic identification – which can link social media products to audiences previously beyond their reach.

The use of the computer as the primary means of communication has led to the emergence of a phenomenon similar to that of a "public sphere" (Habermas 1962), but in this instance, a digital one. Karin Knorr-Cetina notes in her studies

of exchange traders who spend their working day in front of screens that: "Their bodies and the screen world melt together" (2009, 64). Such groups are formed not only around the need to communicate, but also as a 'community of interest' – where members "exchange information to get answers to personal questions or problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, to share common passions or simply to play" (Henri and Pudelko 2003, 485). As Lindemann and Schünemann mention, in this type of community, "although participants rarely meet each other face to face, they nevertheless experience their communication as an encounter with others in a shared space. This space is established by text-based communicative gestures" (2020, 647).

The argument that the internet could create a meaningful civil society depends mainly on its ability to generate 'social capital', which refers to: "components of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitates mutually beneficial cooperation" (Putnam 1995, 67). To this day, however, the vivid interactions of a virtual community cannot be a substitute for the need for physical contact. Licoppe describes a difficulty to acknowledge "strong ties" formed over the Internet: "The liveliness of these debates is … a symptom of the difficulty of conceiving of the establishment of strong ties without moments of physical copresence" (2004, 139).

However, there are situations in which such communities develop spontaneously – as a reaction to an event of broad interest. This is the most common way through which, by the power of online communication, virtual communities (Rheingold 1993) arise. Such a collective emotional complex manifested as a spontaneous cyber-solidarity experience ignited by digital exchanges over a significantly dramatic social event can be included in the phenomenological analysis with one condition: having Schütz and Merleau-Ponty as conceptual torchbearers.

The last decade has proven that internet can serve as an arena for the political participation of people who are otherwise not politically engaged. Non-governmental organizations defending the rights of different categories of individuals have found here the best forum in which to express their claims. Even marginalized groups can find new impetus here to become more active. Virtual communities often demonstrate civic engagement through initiatives that address issues of public concern. Xenos and Moy have shown that "human interaction based on web resources has indeed significant political properties" (2007, 708). A particular case of the influence of social media on political positions is its ability to transform itself into an incubator of civic movements. This space provides the perfect setting for spontaneous cyber-solidarities. Several public actions, such as Occupy (Wall Street), Indignados and, more recently, Gilets Jaunes, have been born from the coagulation of ideas and opinions expressed on different social media platforms.

A virtual community is not inherently conceived as a prelude to face-to-face meeting. Hence, with the exception of a real-life community (e.g. professional, neighbourhood, educational), there are seldom direct encounters. Nonetheless,

in the case of communities built upon a phenomenon of instant cyber-solidarity around a dramatic event, the physical encounters (in the form of public manifestations), while random, are unavoidable. However, even in this case, there is a protocol of exchanging opinions and requests among members and those who are trespassing on the 'netiquette' are pointed at and even banned.

The culture of the virtual world has a certain number of repercussions for the social environment: it can provide a particular look at oneself and constitute, at the same time, a source of community cohesion in real life. The different online social behaviours can be attributed to user characteristics, such as the need to belong or for popularity. Since these psychological factors are related to the habits of people who reveal their feelings or thoughts in public and private digital spaces, it seems essential to examine how online users present themselves: including, for example, the amount of detail or the level of intimacy.

In this context, the most anticipated development of the internet appeared – Web 3.0 (the Semantic Web – metaverse) promoted by simulated society platforms such as Horizon Worlds or Second Life – which allows individuals to create and experience their own ideal world with a sensorial immersion amplified by virtual reality headset devices. Web 3.0 represents the pinnacle of internet personalization, facilitating so-called total control over every stream a user may receive. Whether this control is genuine and the flow corresponds to an individual's real needs is an important topic of debate for civil society representatives and social scientists.

The growing interactivity of virtual communities opens up promising new avenues for studying the outcome and propagation of collective emotions (Levy, 1998), the massive use of the internet being the cause and the outcome. Cyberspace represents an excellent opportunity for the most introverted individuals to have a public voice – even by a minimal gesture of affirming 'Like', assigning an emoticon or sharing something online. At the same time, these frugal standard expressions bring, for most users, the perverse effect of inducing an emotional superficiality and a sort of cyber-conventionalism.

Scoping the virtual world – methodological challenges

Personal identity can be challenged when accessing the virtual world. In terms of reshuffling the digital persona, anything goes here: an individual can take advantage of this opportunity to reshape one's identity. An internet user can fashion any profile by changing every aspect of their particular features: age, gender, cultural or social background, or even physical appearance (with fake photos or stolen home videos). It is the quintessence of the postmodern view of identity and personality. Players, for example, can look however they like, can have the house and the job of their dreams and even create their own life partner, to some extent, in virtual worlds of games,

such as Minecraft or Roblox, or substantially in metaverse manifestations, such as Second Life or Horizon Worlds. Their historical perspective is no less fluid, ranging from an ancient past to a distant future.

Having a universal binary essence (Miller 2018), any digital product online or otherwise makes rapid customization of its form and content possible according to its user's desires. A member, a 'conferencee', uses an online persona inside a virtual community with the purpose of "addressing, befriending, and developing fairly complex relationships with the delegated puppets-agents of other conferencees" (Stone 1991, 105).

The study of the virtual world has – as its main theme – the way in which new technologies influence the culture of certain groups or society in general. This involves the study of the transition to a "post-corporeal world with new social logics and sensory regimes" (Escobar et al. 1994, 216), but also means appraising the fundamentals of the relationship between humans and AI and grasping the social impact of the integration of AI's emerging technologies. Digital anthropology was envisioned in the early 1990s, when Escobar introduced the term 'cyberculture': "As a new field of anthropological practice, the study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural construction and reconstruction on which new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape" (Escobar et al. 1994, 211).

Classically designed ethnographies rely on the idea of location. The researcher visits a community from elsewhere and tries to integrate there for a period long enough to observe and describe the different aspects of its daily life. The structural and functional issues of virtual space trigger a questioning of this paradigm. Even before the arrival of Internet, it was the post-WW2 globalization (i.e. the development of communication technologies and the intensification of the circulation of people and goods by ever faster means of transport) that has created the premises for a process of cultural shift with major impact on anthropological research. The cultural reality of a globalized society called for a new approach: a multilocal ethnography – a complex fieldwork built from an objective need to move between different sites. Manuel Castells, in his work Network Society (1996), envisaged the move towards the study of networks with a wide opening of theoretical perspectives. Unlike the classic 'research site', a network is a very dynamic structure, capable of expanding almost without limits. In the same way, it is necessary to prepare for an increased epistemological rhythm: a flurry of short-term fields around the same subject on networks of similar or different communities, rather than engaging in a long stay of exploration, immobilized in the same place *à la* Malinowski.

One of the first problems that virtual ethnography has to face is the validity of data provided by the subjects approached during online research. First of all, it is necessary to guarantee the confidentiality of these subjects. Of no less importance, is making sure that subjects' identities are real and unique, thus overcoming the problem of multiple identities within a virtual community. In real life (except a twin mis-

match or pathological cases) you cannot meet the same person twice in a day and accept you encountered a completely different one just because you are told so. The lack of face-to-face or any visual contact enhances the risks of receiving 'embellished' or false information from our counterparts. The accuracy of information on, for example, age, gender and nationality proves more difficult to verify in this instance than in real life. Creating a digital persona represents the perfect opportunity to reshape an identity by changing all aspects of formal characteristics: age, sex, ethnic origin, occupation, marital status and even physical appearance (by posting retouched or borrowed photos or videos). As Mantovani notes, "[v]irtual reality is a communication environment in which the interlocutor is increasingly convincing in terms of physical appearance, yet increasingly less tangible and plausible in terms of personal identity. This paradox results from juxtaposing a convincing simulation of the physical presence of the other, and the disappearance of the interlocutor's face behind a mask of false identities" (1996, 197). As in the case of real-world ethnographic journeys, the virtual research tends to be more accurate as time goes by and the integration in a particular online community increases. Gaining trust equals a deeper access. Long-stay research and an internally consistent community are nurturing this process in traditional fieldwork. Unfortunately, these conditions are very difficult to meet in the case of virtual ethnography.

A big challenge also lies in the evaluation of emotions experienced in the context of the use of social networking platforms. Future research should consider the longitudinal emotional effects at the individual and collective level and optimize the validity of the results by taking into account the fluid sociotechnical characteristics of the constantly changing virtual world. The AI software has been shown to be able to analyse and even predict, to some degree, the emotional states of individuals and groups. These systems, equipped with extended representations of the structures of social networks, can prove to be useful companions for a researcher looking for scenarios for approaching and analysing the various online communities.

Furthermore, in order to effectively insinuate oneself as a participant observer in cyberspace, to have a 'presence' of some sort of significance for the other members of the community, a researcher needs also to create a persona. This endeavour raises an ethical dilemma – the subject of an ongoing debate in social sciences while studying the virtual world: how far can an anthropologist go by appealing to an embellished profile in order to gain more favourability from various subjects? Does allowing some natives from Papua to believe that the anthropologist they just encountered is related to the white spirit of an ancestor (Leavitt 2000) is more acceptable than participating in Second Life as an active worldwide explorer and show host? Most of all, can there be any correlation made between the answers provided by a subject and the actual personal features they assume? Are these features still relevant for ethnography in such a particular environment?

Each way of conducting online interviews or observations has its own advantages and disadvantages. The study of the virtual is confronted with the disappearance of a major source of data: the vast majority of communications being the textual gathering of information in nonverbal language (facial and postural emotional expressions) is almost impossible. Emoticons and GIFs barely manage to drive the receiver towards real body language impact. Thus, textual online communication can prevent the feeling of 'being there' by lacking instant replies (e.g. brusque interruption by the other, simultaneous overlapping dialogue, choir or echoing remarks) or nonverbal expressions (gesturing, posturing, mimicking). The prevalent textual communication used on social media platforms has a deep impact on ethnographic research (Garcia et al. 2009). Therefore, digital anthropology will gradually enhance the semantic value of its data.

Researchers, as participant observers, are not spared by the emergence of one's emic metamorphosis while accessing the virtual world. This is an essential part of the methodological specificity of digital anthropology. In order to avoid an axiological contamination in a space where one cannot rely 100 per cent on their senses, an anthropologist must promote a virtual imago which should encompass an honest and socially open individual – who does not add their personal bias to the manipulative potential of the cyberspace life-world.

I had the opportunity in my research to study firsthand, through interviews and participant observation, several protest movements in Romania (among which the #REZIST was most persistent) and all their event planning made through Facebook. All observations and interviews I carried on took place both online and in situ (i.e. Victoria Square, Bucharest). The study aimed to provide an original perspective of the involvement of young people in the debates regarding issues of public interest and particularly the participation of students in actions that could be labelled as 'civic commitment'. The main objective was to highlight, through the ethnographic method (observation and interviews), as many aspects as possible regarding the context underlying the initiation and organization of virtual communities that manifested in public space through protest movements and the role that social media platforms had in the formation of spontaneous solidarities and civic awakening. Participatory observation, one of the main methods used by anthropologists, provided important data about the public events in Bucharest during a four-year time frame (2015–2018).

A series of pertinent opinions regarding the impact of 'new technologies' on social commitment were gathered and important reflections on other similar events around the world (such as Occupy and Arab Spring). However, field research that involves participation in protest movements involves certain risks that can prevent, complicate or contaminate data collection. Crowd psychology is inherently affected by a state of suspicion towards possible 'infiltrators' and the label of an agent 'in civilian clothes' is applied almost automatically to people using photo-video equipment

(as is the case in visual anthropology) without press credentials. Additionally, personal or equipment integrity can be put at risk in the event of a mêlée with the police. On the other hand, an empathic support for the cause can affect a researcher's objectivity.

Constant participatory observation of the online and in situ activity of the Facebook platforms titled #CorupțiaUcide, #REZIST and #GeeksforDemocracy highlighted several aspects. The intense communication between followers strengthened their commitment, a fact shown through initiatives for different activities, such as photo/video uploads, placard ideas and various announcements. Protesters demonstrating a highly responsible public attitude is manifested: concern for keeping public space clean, preparing and distributing hot tea. The performative hypostasis of the movement was shown through the involvement of some grandiose-dramatic aspects of the protests – the flag of Romania and the European Union (visible from above) formed with mobile phones and coloured paper). An investment in the public perception of the #REZIST movement abroad was also noticeable through the use of banners in English and online messages addressed to European Union institutions and foreign embassies

The diversity of messages and modes of expression in public demonstrations (allegorical floats, street dramatizations, video-mapping) are the product of lucid creativity enhanced by online interactions. This environment serves as an incubator for progressive and even revolutionary mobilizations. This phenomenon was well-understood by the participants in the 2015–2018 protests: they sought to be as present as much as possible on audio-visual or online information channels, generating positive news.

A social movement is nurtured by public support as long as its cause is deemed legitimate, and its representatives stand firmly against any opponent and raise awareness by initiating public events and topics of debate using various communication technologies. Today, this is more possible than ever as email online forums, blogs, dedicated websites and social media platforms are used to strengthen the movement, acquire resources and instigate direct action.

Conclusion – Questions about a possible future for social sciences in the 'brave new world'

Visiting new realms, even for a short period, cannot remain without some sort of a conscious or unconscious mark on someone's world-view. While encountering almost entirely different communities than those to which they belonged, explorers, conquistadores, missionaries or simple tourists found themselves, to some extent, in front of a reassessment of personal values. 'Long-term overseas travellers' – anthropologists – developed a scientific discipline that thrived on discovering cultural

differences. However, their intellectual openness did not trigger or facilitate a total shift of their core values.

The new realms based upon digital technologies set new challenges for conducting an ethnographic journey. Senses and logical reasoning can be deceived more easily here. An epistemological adjustment becomes necessary and the phenomenological and even postphenomenological (Ihde 1990) paradigm seems the most appropriate model to be employed in this case – as it allows someone to pierce the very essence of personal traits.

'Being there' in a virtual world, navigating from cyberspace to metaverse, gives an anthropologist the possibility of studying a versatile, almost limitless cultural environment. The scope of such a freedom of action brings out, subject to the researcher's conscience, the necessity of a process of identity reshaping, to be carried out prior to the actual empiric endeavour. The anthropologist becomes a shapeshifter, a metamorph, not in a deceitful way but in a more accommodating one, to the other community members. Consequently, encountering other 'presences', being the participant observer inside a virtual community, represents the most authentic way to appreciate the sizeable impact digital technologies will keep on having on humankind.

Once evolved from the passive internet-user status ascribed in the 'web 1.0' age, the contributive aspect of social media (Loader and Mercea 2011) raised hopes that cyberspace could become that realm free of censorship, opened to public debate, envisioned by the very first students using the internet. Since the 1990s, studies on the significance of the computerization and digitization of information have focused on socio-political aspects (Kling 1996; Katz 1997), communication technologies (Dizard 1997), cultural aspects (Hershman Leeson 1996; Rochlin 1997) and psychological issues (Turkle 1997). The fact that Turkle expresses concern about how we are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face is of particular interest (2012, 11).

"Digital technologies in continuity and in a more radical way than classical artifacts, modulate the relationship between organism and the environment […]. This is reflected on us, on the way we perceive ourselves, on our sense of being there" (Cantone 2022, 2). However, the virtual realm for the foreseeable future has a status of non-autonomy in relation to the non-virtual: a casual one (depending on the hardware equipment) and a 'contentual' one – narratives and semantics being "always dependent on the everyday world in which virtual is embedded" (Malpas 2009, 135). Presence can be considered a subjective experience of being bodily or physically located in a mediated environment (Hofer et al. 2015).

As Steuer (1992) argues, presence, more specifically, telepresence, is defined as the awareness of being in an environment, therefore, the subject is forced to perceive two distinct environments simultaneously when perception is mediated by commu-

nication technology: the physical environment in which they are present de facto, and the environment as presented through the technological medium.

Having a 'sense of being there' does not necessarily imply a high level of perceived realism and, thus, a high level of physical presence, and even a short journey into cyberspace is sufficient enough to prove it. Immersion is an excellent term and concept to describe the sensation that cyberspace and metaverse users/inhabitants have – that of being present in an alternative environment, in a different realm. As defined in Biocca and Levy (1995), the concept describes a feeling of 'being there': the user is surrounded by an alternative reality demanding their full attention (Murray 1997). Berger argues that "actors synthesize a single hybrid space, in which the virtual space and the space of the body and its physical surroundings are linked to each other" (2020, 616). The design of virtual worlds with ontologies different than the real world are tailored to elicit a particular effect on the immersed user. The power of virtual reality to change ourselves in this manner is usually attributed to the capability of the medium to induce a feeling of presence in the computer-synthesized worlds (Slater and Sanchez-Vives 2014).

"Through culture, humans are always already virtual; ethnography has always been a kind of virtual investigation of the human, and can therefore play an important role in understanding cybersociality" (Boellstorff 2008, 249). The scientific journey into the cultural traits of virtual space is not a new field. It was born almost at the same time as the Internet. But the major shift that can be seen on the ground, with the mass isolation imposed under the threat of the spread of COVID-19, is that the epistemology of virtual space research is becoming a discipline in itself among the social sciences. Its main topics will probably even emerge into new disciplines. It is probable that, in the very near future, the study of, for example, e-democracy, virtual economy and telemedicine, will produce as much bibliographic material each year as their counterparts studying the development of social life in physical space. Just as with the establishment of a lingua franca of the Internet, at least in virtual space, globalization will triumph, and *ethnos* will be replaced by *logos*.

Methodological standards for internet research cannot be static, as technologies and the way they are used are constantly changing. Therefore, new frameworks must emerge as changes to the nature and use of social media make them necessary. The researcher should ensure that an ethical approach is taken to the collection, analysis and reuse of data gathered on social media platforms, as each research context may be unique, with its own ethical challenges.

The aim of such an endeavour would be to create an a priori instrument capable of helping the researcher in social sciences to anticipate and manage any possible diversions that the virtual environment could inflict on the collection and, ultimately, on the validity of data. This instrument should lead to a self-questioning about the congruence of the means and intentions of the researcher while recording and sharing various experiences in the cyberspace of today and in the metaverse of

tomorrow. This approach requires, first of all, an appraisal of the extent to which the evolutionary trends of cyberspace and the metaverse, designed by private multinational agents, would be able to preserve the cultural complexity of the human being – apart from the status of a mere user of digital platforms.

A researcher must, firstly, submit to a phenomenological journey to engage better in an ethnographic approach aimed at virtual communities; one must get rid of the customs of the real world and start a reflection on the social impact of the internet in its evolution, on the identity of oneself and others. We do not find ourselves in a world contextualized by the 'social contract', but in the one managed mainly by private actors, whether they are multinational companies or independent collaborative agents. Finally, all these opportunities to integrate into an alternative reality, such as virtual space, should not encourage anomie, a life outside the rules. Ultimately, the consequences could be tragic both on an individual and social level.

Physical and cultural differences always lead to a plethora of attitudinal reactions everywhere in the world. Certain attitudes were deemed unacceptable during the development of human society, and modernity required an almost total acceptance of differences. All the same, this does not represent a sufficient reason to integrate into a world, be it virtual, where any difference which can generate digital presence happens to become a question of contextual choice, without any reference to the cultural origins of an individual. This will only further contribute to cultural homogenization. A researcher looking at the actions of human beings cannot help but reflect on whether it is worth designing a social universe that does not contribute to highlighting and enriching the background of an individual or a group.

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