



## CAPTED - Departmental Research Center

Center for Educational Changes and Potentials in the Digital Transition

Event of the Permanent Seminar

# PROMOTING INCLUSIVE RESEARCH IN HETEROGENEOUS DIGITAL CONTEXTS:

**Epistemological, Ethical and Methodological Dilemmas**

Milan (Italy) and Online • Nov 19 2024

## SEMINAR REPORT

Edited by:

Daniele Ciocca and Marco Sassaro, with contributions of other participants

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## INTRODUCTION

**Chiara Bove & Paolo Monti**

*CAPTED Permanent Seminar 2024-2025 Welcome and Introductory Remarks*

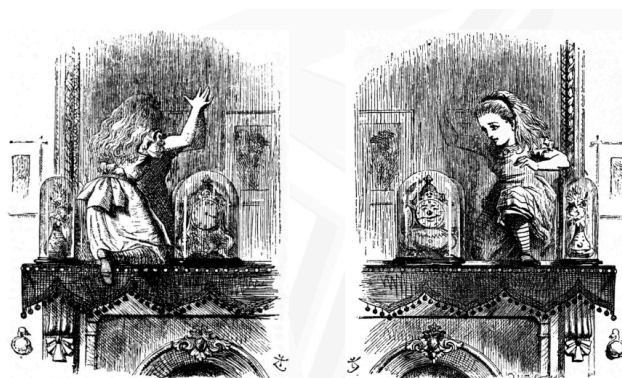
The morning began with Prof. Paolo Monti presenting the structure of the seminar and its contents, starting from the research guidelines of CAPTED, Bicocca’s research center on social, cultural, and educational aspects of the digital transition, which organized the seminar.

The crucial lines of research that inspire activities in CAPTED are:

1. the social and cultural inequalities embedded in human-to-human and human-to-computer relationships;
2. the individual and collective identities and their emergence and transformation in digital environments;
3. the nature of social relationships that extend on digital platforms.

Professor Monti’s insight is about the re-formulation of old ties, born out of traditional and physical social milieus, that reiterate themselves in digital contexts, transform their appeal and aesthetics, but remain of the same nature altogether. He borrows Luciano Floridi’s “on-life” concept, taken from his work *The Fourth Revolution* (2014), to show how digital social and cultural practices are so embedded in contemporary daily life that it proves very difficult to put online and offline activities on different ontological levels: both of them constitute the reality of today’s social agents, in ways that are often intertwined and reciprocal.

He enriched the argument by providing the literary metaphor of the mirror in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) by Lewis Carrol, where Alice steps into a parallel world through the ambiguous and fantastic nature of the mirror, which works at the same time as a reflection and a gateway to a parallel world. Similarly, the digital interface is, as the term “screen”



**...SCREENS AS BARRIERS...**  
that can set **people** apart and distort  
their relationship with the **world**.

**...SCREENS AS THRESHOLDS**  
that allow to overcome distances and  
connect **persons** and **worlds**

John Tenniel. Illustrations for *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice found there* (1871)

suggests, a barrier in the first place, separating the physical world from the ephemeral domain of bits and computer networks. The divide is also one of accessibility, exacerbated by the experience of many elderly people with smartphones or other devices. Many times the usage of digital technologies is associated with frustration, misunderstandings, and puzzlement. At the same time, the digital divide may be bridged to establish a threshold, a conjuncture that connects people with people.

Following Professor Monti's intervention, Professor Chiara Bove presented the calendar of the events related to CAPTED and the Department of Excellence in 2025, which will feature a variety of seminars and guests, such as Judith Butler, focusing on researching invisible and subaltern individuals and groups in digital contexts. Professor Bove highlighted the necessity to let researchers and PhD students share their results and methodologies, as people who are directly involved in contemporary fields of research in the humanities, thus being able to grasp the reality of the digital transition and its social and cultural transformations.

## KEYNOTE SPEAKER

### Tama Leaver

Curtin University, former president of AoIR - Association of Internet Researchers

*Questions of Privacy and Ethics When Researching Social Media*

Following the introduction, the morning session featured Tama Leaver, Professor of Internet Studies at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. Professor Leaver presented key insights from his research on the Instagram platform, beginning with an exploration of its history and the pivotal moments in its evolution in terms of appeal and functionality.

Understanding these developments, such as the introduction of the Stories feature in 2016, is essential to grasp how users adapt their behaviors to new tools and how the platform reshapes its affordances. The addition of Stories marked a significant shift, fundamentally altering posting habits and user engagement. Leaver highlighted how users continually negotiate their routines on social media, influenced by evolving platform features, emerging cultural trends, corporate policies, and new visual and economic dynamics, dealing with a cultural, economic, and political context represented by the platform itself. Professor Leaver also delved into the privacy challenges associated with platforms like Instagram. Drawing on the concept of “context collapse,” as developed by Alice Marwick

and danah boyd, he argued for a view of privacy as fluid, contested, and ever-changing, rather than a fixed or hierarchical construct.

The blurred boundaries between private and public information on social media and the indeterminate nature of digital audiences pose significant ethical dilemmas for researchers in the humanities and social sciences. While the Association of Internet Researchers offers valuable ethical guidelines, these frameworks must be complemented by a nuanced understanding of the informal, user-driven ways in which individuals negotiate privacy within their digital networks.

Such context-specific strategies are crucial for navigating the complexities of platform-based research and underscore the value of humanities-driven approaches to studying Internet use.

## KEYNOTE SPEAKER

### Edoardo Datteri

University of Milano-Bicocca

*Social Media Platforms as Epistemic Tools: A View from the Philosophy of Science*

In the second part of the morning session, Professor Edoardo Datteri, Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Milano-Bicocca, explored the intersection of Internet studies and biorobotics. He highlighted surprising parallels between biorobotics and artificial intelligence research, particularly in the ethical and epistemological challenges they pose.

Professor Datteri began with an introduction to interactive robots and living systems, emphasizing the notion of artificial systems as active agents. Despite the radical "otherness" of these systems, such as robots but also algorithms, these entities challenge us to think about whether they can possess perspectives, an increasingly relevant question in the context of AI-based technologies.

Shifting to information retrieval on the Internet, Professor Datteri encouraged the audience to consider robots as "measuring machines" that dynamically engage with their environment while retrieving data. He argued that measuring is not a passive act but a process that involves both the measuring system and its context, inevitably altering that context. Similarly, Internet information is not a static body of data; algorithms and gatekeepers actively shape the accessibility and structure of information.

Thus, Internet research should be understood as a fluid and dynamic interaction between the researcher and the non-human agents—algorithms and systems—embedded in the digital environment.

## RESEARCH INSIGHTS

### Daide Cino

#### *Beyond Common Sense: Voicing Mothers' Digital Dilemmas in Post-Media Arenas*

Following the two keynote speakers, Davide Cino, Researcher in General and Social Pedagogy at the University of Milano-Bicocca, reported on some epistemological, ethical, and methodological dilemmas of conducting research online building on lessons learned in his digital ethnography-informed doctoral study. His presentation addressed the topic of "digital dilemmas" in parenting, with a particular focus on the practice of sharenting—the act of sharing representations of one's parenting or children online. Drawing on interdisciplinary research and a systematized review of 49 studies, Dr. Cino examined how the evolution of family photography into sharenting creates new ethical and cultural tensions for parents. He highlighted that digital dilemmas, distinct from binary moral issues, emerge from conflicting values and uncertainties, and may lead to reflective learning and transformation of perspectives. Dr. Cino argued that these dilemmas are unprecedented, as today's parents cannot rely on traditional media experiences or intergenerational guidance, necessitating new cultural and pedagogical frameworks. He illustrated this through his research on parenting forums, particularly the BabyCenter forum, showing how parents collectively navigate and construct meaning around these dilemmas in an online community setting. These forums function as informal educational spaces where parents share advice, seek support, and negotiate the boundaries of their children's digital presence. Additionally, the presentation explored the methodological implications of using naturally occurring online data, emphasizing its value for capturing authentic insights while raising critical ethical questions about privacy and consent. He concluded by advocating for situational, culturally sensitive ethical practices in qualitative research, and highlighted the unique potential of online data for enriching our understanding of contemporary parenting challenges in the digital age.

### Anna Chinazzi

#### *Studying Hard-to-Reach Communities Online: The Case of Home Education in Italy*

In the last presentation of the morning session, Dr. Anna Chinazzi critically examined the concept of "hard-to-reach" populations in online research, challenging conventional understandings that often attribute this label to an inherent deficit in the population. Instead, she argued that this label frequently obscures complex socio-cultural dynamics.

Drawing on a socio-ecological framework—which explores interactions across individual, interpersonal, community, and systemic levels—Dr. Chinazzi reframed “hard-to-reach” not as a limitation, but as an opportunity. This perspective encourages researchers to view these populations as a methodological challenge that can inspire more inclusive research approaches.

Applying this lens to home-educating families in Italy, she illustrated how research hesitancy arises from specific socio-cultural contexts. Despite being a legal practice, home education lacks broad social acceptance, contributing to sensitive dynamics around notions of “good parenting” and participant engagement.

Digital methods, she argued, are particularly critical for studying home education communities. Digital spaces function as dynamic social infrastructures that facilitate social linkages, identity formation, knowledge-sharing ecosystems, and the co-construction of advocacy narratives. These spaces also revealed complex trust dynamics: netnographic fieldwork proved crucial in uncovering participants’ skepticism toward research—mistrust that might have gone unnoticed with other methods due to the self-selection of voluntary participants.

Dr. Chinazzi concluded by emphasizing the need to uphold participant agency. She urged researchers to actively address structural inequities while acknowledging and safeguarding individuals’ right to opt out of participation. She advocated for methodological flexibility grounded in a critical awareness of power dynamics to navigate these challenges with sensitivity and equity.

## **Socio-educational phenomena in digital contexts: ONGOING DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECTS**

While morning, cappuccino-fueled, contributions to the seminar revolved around research projects which experienced researchers at the CAPTED Centre had already carried out, the afternoon session presented participants with the opportunity to hear from the ongoing research endeavours of doctoral students from the Center, who now put on display espresso-fueled presentations about their happenings around digital technologies in their field.

The followings, therefore, are tales from the early stages of research involving digital media which, as such, provided the audience with interesting methodological considerations, theoretical approaches and recently collected data. Molgora, Sassaro and Ciocca, who presented in the first cluster of the afternoon, acted as the main representatives of Bicocca anthropological researchers at this seminar, while Facciocchi and Ugarte contributed to the event in the last presentation of the day from Bicocca Education Sciences.

### **PhD Student**

#### **Annalisa Molgora**

*For an Ethnography of the Digital in an Afro-Descendant Community in Brazil: Material Aspects and Methodological Issues*

Annalisa Molgora, who joined us from across the Atlantic from her field in Frechal (Mirinzal, Maranhão), is working on an afro-descendant community which had been studied many years before by Roberto Malighetti, who now assists her as advisor, and Manuela Tassan, also a faculty member at University of Bicocca. The specificity of her work revolves around the opportunity of “going back” to a field already visited by scholars and seeing “what changed”. And what changed, among other things, is digital media.

In fact, Annalisa makes a point of focusing on the infrastructural development of the small *quilombola* community: digital media as physical, material unfolding of technological implementations from television to smartphones. Not everybody, at least not at the same rate, can benefit from this kind of developments: what are the inequalities structured around the adoption of digital media in a small community which itself is an example of such phenomena in the wider context of the Brazilian state?



Annalisa is approaching these themes with particular focus on local strategies of technological adoption: Frechal residents are not passive consumers of digital technologies, but active users interested in the question of who, and how, should have access to them, as they negotiate as a community, for instance, the education of children during the global digital transition.

## PhD Student

### Marco Sassaro

#### *Internet and Time: Digital Media's Potential as a Research Tool for Today and Yesterday*

Marco Sassaro, who studies the historical stratification of internet technologies and their uses as avenues for gay men sexual identities and expression, intervened around the hassles of tackling the internet under a diachronic lens. While he had been doing interviews with various generations of queer people, he realises now that not only this is not enough to enquire the last couple of decades of internet history, but also that digital media themselves offer particularly interesting affordances to the ethnographer that need to be taken advantage of.

In particular, Marco's contribution to the seminar was structured around two main methodological propositions he intends to adopt during his second year of research in milan.

Phone elicitation during interview is the first of the two methodologies as presented by Marco, and it consists in having people walk the researcher through their phone during interviews: commenting on messages, recent uses of various applications can help decenter both the researcher and the subject's viewpoint by contrasting them with the logs of activity stored in their phone.

Internet archaeology, the second key focus of Marco's presentation, was explored with respects to what makes it so that digital media is it's own archive: messages and posts are stored in digital memory as they are produced, and constitute a peculiar form of archive where memorized data is not a copy, a translation or a transcription of what is to be archived. This feature does not have to be given too much importance, however, as the internet does forget, and the ways in which digital data becomes unavailable is often an economic and political process (Marco brings the example of the censorship of Tumblr pornography).

## **PhD Student**

### **Daniele Ciocca**

#### *Entering the Digital Field: Questions and Challenges in Defining an Ethnographic Project Within a Roblox Catholic Group*

Daniele Ciocca led us deep into digital ethnography by presenting us with the beginnings of his approach to a filipino religious organization which is based on the virtual world and video-game platform “Roblox”. In approaching religiosity and the internet among catholic groups in the philippines, in fact, Daniele came across the religious practices an online organization who operates in the virtual 3d spaces of Roblox by organizing religious ceremonies and even constituting an online parallel of catholic hierarchy, with titles such as priest, deacon, bishop and archbishop embodied by players of the community. Daniele’s presentation focused on contextualizing this early fieldwork attempt among current academic literature about virtual worlds, digital communities and role-playing games. Ethnographic works around these themes are numerous, but Daniele made sure to mentions that an accurate account of what filipino catholic players of Roblox constitute as a religious group and and how online experiences affect the religiosity of Manila’s residents (who constitute the majority of members) need to include offline, more traditional ethnographic efforts grounded in the Philippines, which he is about to begin. In his future fieldwork in Manila, in fact, Daniele’s research around Roblox will be focused on answering the following questions: What is the impact of online activities on users’ religious lives within their local parishes? What expectations, desires, and meanings do users associate with religious participation on Roblox? Does the role-playing aspect of online religiosity fulfill individual needs for expressing a religious identity?

## **PhD Student**

### **Monica Facciocchi & Lucinda Ugarte**

#### *Safe Zones and Harmful Tones: Tech-Mediated Paths of Resistance and Reproduction of Violence*

Monica Facciocchi and Lucinda Ugarte gave a joint presentation by uniting their research into a cohesive whole which dealt with the ambivalent nature of online spaces for people in seek for support and community online.

Monica, who studies the phenomenon of Child on Parent Violence (CPV), illustrated her current endeavours in interrogating the website Quora. Quora is a forum-like website where people can anonymously pose questions to the public, who can, again under

pseudonym, provide feedback and answer them. Since CPV is not a widely known phenomenon and due to the fact that few institutional support is given to parents finding themselves victims of their children, Quora is one of those spaces where people might try to find support around this theme. Monica notes, however, that answers to Quora questions on CPV are rarely the kind of support needed by affected parents: Quora is not a platform for professional social workers, but a catch-all internet forum, and its users are rarely empathetic towards who they often see as incapable parents. In fact a victim of CPV might approach Quora at first as one of the few spaces available for tabling the conversation about their child, but the platform quickly reveals itself if not harmful, certainly not adept in handling the topic - becoming a context promoting structural violence.

Lucinda's contribution compounded Monica's consideration by providing the example of LGBTQ+ migrants in Italy: Online spaces are in fact highly utilized by LGBTQ+ migrants as ways of finding community in a highly precarious life situation. Online spaces offer companionship and understanding to this population, however not without the cons of being vulnerable to identity discovery and negative comments that come with using public digital spaces.

At the end of the presentation, in fact, both Lucinda and Monica proposed a call to action regarding the need of expert-led online platforms so that social workers can be available to marginalized groups and people in need of specific care around less understood phenomena.