Global Crisis and Research Production:

Covid-19 as Shaper and Shaker or Micro-Interruption?

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Abstract

This special issue asks what happens to international research and collaboration when the research community becomes temporarily immobilized. The Covid-19 global pandemic powerfully disrupted normal ways of doing research and, therefore, created a perfect natural experiment of the ‘otherwise’ for digital qualitative research in sensitive contexts. The collected papers argue that the lessons extracted from this recent global health crisis should shape our thinking on qualitative research amidst crisis and research on crisis. The authors speak to core themes like the digital platforming of research, continued inequality in research relations, and the concept of compounding crises. The special issue reflects on the authors’ own experiences with international collaborations during Covid-19 in a multiplicity of contexts from Peru, to Pakistan, Mexico and the Great Lakes Region of Africa. This introductory essay argues that the uniquely rapid and global context of Covid-19 offered a glimpse into one possible alterity of research production. It extract lessons for the present and future, not only for global crises, but willed disruptions in research relations marked by less inequality and more balanced power relations.

1. Introduction

The global pandemic powerfully disrupted normal ways of doing research, making it a perfect natural experiment of the ‘otherwise.’ International research and collaboration were temporarily immobilized and data production and research travel were restricted by lockdowns. The Covid-19 crisis’s uniquely rapid and global spread forced one possible alterity of research production and has generated many lessons for the future of international research collaborations. The pandemic’s lessons can be applied in research on other global crises. Furthermore, its lessons can be applied to efforts at more more managed, purposeful change, that is, disruptions that purposefully invoke less inequality and more balanced power relations. It is important to consider whether the pandemic’s major mobility disruptions reshaped relations for temporary or lasting improvement. In other words, did Covid-19 disrupt deeper relations and modalities of research or merely create a ‘micro-interruption’ in the wider trend of business as usual?

This special issue proposes that the lessons learned can shape our thinking on research amidst crisis and research on crisis. The authors collectively reflect on core themes like the digital platforming of research, ongoing inequality in research relations, and the concept of compounding crises. The first cross-cutting theme investigates the increased use of online
research and its effects. The second theme investigates the impact of immobilization on North-South power relations in research and its decolonial effects (if any). Finally, the last theme considers the exceptionality (if any) of the pandemic and how it intersected with other registers of vulnerability in conflict-affected contexts. Notably, the pandemic had differential impacts across the Global North and South, so its exceptionality should always be contextualized and questioned.

In 2020, the global Covid-19 pandemic slowly started to halt life around the world. Researchers and analysts initially assumed the pandemic would kill many more people in the Global South, especially in Africa, than in Western contexts which turned out to be false (Mwambari, 2020; Okech et al., 2020). Most research institutions continued as normal until about March or April, when public health officials and the World Health Organization (WHO) warned of severe consequences if people continued to move and interact. What followed was a mixture of lockdowns, lockdown easing, and counting the dead on television screens. In universities, learning migrated to digital platforms. This continued throughout much of 2020 and, in some parts of the world, travel was restricted into 2021. Millions of people died and many more were affected with long-term health consequences.

All researchers were professionally affected. The editors of this special issue began collaborating online to discuss and explore timely questions, including the multiple meanings of global movement restrictions. Our frequent debates discussed the dilemma researchers faced, especially in international collaborations that had previously relied on scholarly travel - mainly from the Global North to the Global South. We observed that many researchers with grant-attached deadlines began conducting research online, often with partners in the Global South who had no reliable digital infrastructure at their disposal. In some cases, grants were flexible and allowed extensions. However, this was often not the case for large funded projects and smaller projects that relied on individuals’ own limited funds. Numerous such projects were affected and, in some cases, ended prematurely. We debated the gravity of these changes and the spontaneous (even ad-hoc) research initiatives that emerged, especially in international collaborative qualitative research.

These discussions culminated in an article addressing the questions preoccupying researchers, funding agencies, higher education institutions, NGOs and research organizations involved in collaborations around the world. Our paper “Covid-19 and research in conflict-affected contexts: distanced methods and the digitalisation of suffering” was published in Qualitative Research after a series of debates with reviewers who were themselves deeply engaged with the topic. The paper was well received and continues to be cited and used in classes. Many researchers responded, engaging with us directly and through social media. Some of these scholars sent long reflections on their own research collaborations from Mexico, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, and the United States—some of these contributions feature in this special issue. We selected authors who were involved in large international projects, those working across different languages and geographical contexts, and a mixture of early career and senior researchers.

The papers in this special issue build on the arguments and questions featured in our original paper and expand our reflections beyond the Covid-19 context. They address ongoing questions about the continued use of online platforms to conduct qualitative research (Eggeling, 2023; Pelek et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Hall, 2021). There are many reasons to
use online platforms, especially in conflict settings. Researchers may be restricted from traveling due to visa restrictions, limited funding, safety considerations in war zones, or climate change-related crises. We therefore expand on what it means to do qualitative research through these online platforms, especially as they continue to be available (but not necessarily affordable) around the world. In the sections below, the explore the methodological, ethical and political implications of increased digital platforming of conflict research.

All in all, while Covid-19 undoubtedly transformed research production and taught us much about the use of digital platforms, it did not disrupt deeper relations of power in research production. On the one hand, the articles in this special edition argue that the Covid-19 crisis was a turning point in North-South collaborative research. The crisis highlighted the central role that the digitalization of qualitative research could play in making these collaborations possible. The digitalization of qualitative research *temporarily* reshaped roles and responsibilities as researchers from the North became even more dependent on those in the South, who garnered more leeway in directing research at different levels.

On the other hand, while these reconfigurations should have led to more equitable collaborations after Covid-19, the authors suggest that this was not always the case. Researchers in the South continued to be affected by the same structural challenges that complicated their work before Covid-19. The pandemic’s impacts in the South must be seen as part of compounding, multiple, and intersecting crises (e.g., health, security, politics, democracy, and the place of women in society). This reality creates an unequal distribution of vulnerabilities (Machiku, 2022) between researchers in the North and those in the South (Dunia et al., 2020; Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2020). It also exposes the notion of ‘exceptionality’ itself as laden with a particular geographical vantage point and thus imposing a perspective that is not shared universally. In many contexts, Covid-19 was one crisis among others, and interacted with them in ways important to understand. The challenge to exceptionality and elaboration of the notion of compounding crises are some of the key contributions of the present special issue.

In other words, the digitalization of research produced 'micro-interruptions' (Yala Kisukidi, 2018) in the power relationships between researchers in the Global North and South (Bouka, 2019; Mwambari, 2019; Mwambari & Owor, 2019; Siriwardane-de Zoysa et al., 2023). It also forced all of us to rethink the unequal relationships underpinning these collaborations (Dunia et al., 2023a; Dunia et al., 2023b). However, deeper reflection on the epistemological and political implications of digitalizing qualitative research is needed to address its many limitations.

This introduction considers the fundamental issues at stake in the digitalization of qualitative research in North-South collaborative projects. We position the South as a “territory constructed through history, geography and time, and characterized by relations of domination and othering, which are starkly visible in racial divisions wrought on the world through slavery, colonialism and recent struggles around migration” (Sud & Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022). The new digital terrain risks simply extending these offline relations of domination.
We also argue that the ongoing digitalization of qualitative research goes beyond technical adaptations. Instead, it represents an epistemological transformation with major political consequences. While such tools may appear to be purely technical, they are embedded with logics of representation that significantly limit the type of knowledge creation that is possible. In other words, the digitalization of qualitative research involves using online digital technologies to optimize access to field data. It also relies on the intermediations of the digital in the production of specific meanings with real effects on the world. This is a fundamentally epistemological and political phenomenon that compels us to think seriously about the type of qualitative research imposed by digitalization (especially in the South).

We first review the central message of each article in this special issue. We then consider the digitalization of qualitative research beyond Covid-19 by considering how major global crises make access to information difficult and how the digitalization of research can continue to be useful. We then discuss the epistemological and political consequences of digitalization in qualitative research.

2. Contributions to the special issue: opportunities and challenges of the digitalization of qualitative research

The articles in this special issue examine three fundamental points. Firstly, they consider how Covid-19 accelerated the digitalization of qualitative research, presenting a major opportunity to reconfigure research relations between researchers in the South and those in the North (who could not access Southern fields). Secondly, this reconfiguration of relationships was an opportunity to experiment with relatively equitable collaboration between partners from the North and the South. However, this reconfiguration faced a number of challenges (during and after the Covid-19 crisis) in terms of reflexivity, concrete actions to improve collaboration, and more structural obstacles.

Indeed, Ansoms et al. examine how the Covid-19 crisis profoundly disrupted the research dynamics in a collaborative research project between researchers in Belgium and the African Great Lakes region. Reduced international and regional mobility forced partners in the North and the South to reinvent their methods. The researchers in the field - those who were physically "on site"- had never been so crucial. Their rootedness in the field foregrounded their complementary strengths in digital interactions with researchers in the North. However, this article also considers how vulnerabilities were unevenly distributed between partners. Researchers in the South continued to be exposed to difficult environments and unstable employment in order to produce data. These experiences led the research partners to reflect on new ways of working together to overcome postcolonial dynamics in North-South research collaboration. While the Global South scholars were able to showcase their skills and strengths in research, the process also revealed their vulnerabilities in knowledge production.

Rudling et al. also frame crises like Covid-19— with its sudden restrictions on Northern researchers accessing Southern research sites—as an opportunity to create discontinuities in power relations. The authors show the extent to which some researchers in the North depend on easy access to research sites in the South. The digitalization of research created room for fairer forms of collaboration to emerge after the status quo of North-controlled research was shattered. It provided an opportunity to eradicate colonial practices and address the power
imbalances that penalize researchers based in the South. It was also an opportunity to redirect these collaborations towards more ethical forms of research. However, the authors are also acutely aware of the immensity of the challenges in North-South collaborative research, from ignorance of duty of care to paternalistic approaches and funding challenges. They suggest continuing to reflect on these issues to eventually establish more equitable ways of fully re-engaging North-South research and collaboration.

Holguin et al. situate these challenges of reflexivity within the ethical complexities of digital qualitative research. The authors draw on experiences doing digital research with survivors of collective violence and the families of the disappeared in Peru. They question how a history of political violence can have a particular impact on digital research processes. They reflect on the implications and potential challenges of digital qualitative research in light of diverse dimensions of re-victimization, including survivors' processes of understanding agency, the silencing of traumatic experiences within communities, survivors' collective identifications, intersectionality, and survivors' social justice commitments. Finally, the article highlights the importance of ethical reflections throughout the investigative process and proposes a reflective research practice that aims to align digital research with the relational and social context of survivors of collective violence.

Mendez's contribution proposes a political understanding of reflexivity in the context of 'crisis-time' research. The author explains that, in 2022, Mexico ranked third for the number of Covid-19 deaths; nearly 80,000 people were officially reported missing and 52,000 corpses preserved by the state had not been identified. However, Covid-19 was not an unusual crisis for families used to searching for missing family members. Civil society groups focused on urgent issues like the proper treatment of bodies, fearing that they would be cremated before being identified. In such a context, reflexivity is closely linked to positionality. It is not a universal exercise in finding ethical answers within a "transparent and knowable self, waiting to be revealed" ("transparent reflexivity"). On the contrary, it is a political construction, that is to say, its own construction of subjectivisation, which necessarily depends on its own positionality ("critical reflexivity" of the actors). Therefore, Mendez argues against Covid-19 as an exception (cf. global and Western-centric discourse), instead positioning it as a compounding crisis—a situation that aggravated already-existing crises in contexts of chronic violence and vulnerability.

Khan continues with this political understanding of reflexivity by arguing that the researcher's feelings, position, and embodied reflexivity should be central concerns in post-COVID voice-only online interviewing. Khan also reflects on gender relations as a unique challenge when researching in a supposedly disembodied online space. He draws on his experiences as a male researcher using voice-only WhatsApp interviews to study women's affect and Taliban violence in Pakistan's Swat Valley to position remote interviewing as both an embodied and embedded practice. This understanding situates the embodied reflexivity and gendered position of the researcher in relation to research participants—a relationship largely absent from the literature on voice-only qualitative interviewing. While internet-mediated environments do offer certain opportunities, Khan argues that their ability to bypass gender boundaries has been widely over-celebrated without sufficient critical scrutiny.

Finally, in “North-South Research Collaboration during Complex Global Emergencies: Qualitative Knowledge Production and Sharing during COVID-19” Rudling et al. highlights
other political and structural challenges that hindered truly equitable reconfigurations stemming from the Covid-19 digitalization. The article considers how large multinational qualitative teams of academics and activist-practitioners in peace and conflict studies depend on teams in the South for 'local' knowledge and expertise. Using the center-periphery framework and adopting an auto-ethnographic approach, the article shows how the pandemic has not only reinforced existing structural and institutional asymmetries through reduced funding, professional uncertainty and personal loss and insecurity, but has added new ethical concerns. This has challenged multinational teams’ ability to commit to the decolonization of knowledge. The article re-affirms that research ethics and the politics of qualitative knowledge production are situated in durable Global North-South power structures.

These articles go beyond the Covid-19 context to raise questions about the ongoing digitalization of research on major global crises where accessing information is challenging. In such cases, the digitalization of research may be decisive in the creation of social science knowledge.

3. Global Crises and the Specter of Digitalization in Qualitative Research

Most contributors in this collection argue against the exceptionality of the Covid-19 moment and this also holds for online interviewing, which as a technique certainly preceded the pandemic. Yet, the pandemic was an intensification and a ‘magnifying glass’ (Khan 2024) for understanding key ethical and methodological issues. A more fine-tuned understanding is certainly needed going forward. Remote collaboration and data collection procedures continue to be developed and perfected as scholars embrace ongoing digitalization in conflict-related research. New generations increasingly turn to artificial intelligence and digital software while conducting research in sensitive contexts. Similarly, global conflicts themselves also incorporate the digital—treating digital space as another field of confrontation. All of this makes digitalization ever more relevant in the fraught and fast-evolving research landscape, especially in war zones that are increasingly difficult to physically access. Researchers continue to use WhatsApp messages and videos in areas like eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen.

Researchers embracing hybrid or fully digital platforms must be attuned to the broader political economies of digital knowledge production as they enter an arena of unequally ‘globalized’ conflicts. That is, not all conflicts garner equal digital attention, production, and learning. Ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia have been pushed out of global attention, and the under-reported humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the worst in the world. This unequal online ‘live production’ of qualitative data revolves around limited access to digital technologies and attention from key epistemic communities.

Digital platforms can be well suited to studying such marginalized conflicts and gaining access to the least accessible spaces. Duedari et al. (2021), who have carried out qualitative digital research in Syria’s active war zones, highlight the limits and contributions of such research: ‘We conducted remote interviews in three different military-controlled areas in Syria, without travelling from one area to another and talking to participants in places and times suitable for them, reducing potential security risks for all.’ Clearly, digital platforms

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1 https://kq.freepressunlimited.org/themes/media-and-conflict/difficulties-of-accessing-the-conflict-zone/
can be crucial for accessing the perspectives and voices of ordinary people living in active war zones.

However, the articles in this special issue push us to nuance the notion of access. As Khan highlights, it is fundamentally important to consider embodied reflexivity and the positionality of online researchers. Online, remote research remains ‘both embodied and embedded.’ The online researcher should be attuned to their own embodied presence and to the body and embodiment of their research participants if they are to facilitate epistemic access in addition to facilitating conventional access (in the sense of bridging distance).

Equally, we must ensure that digital space does not become yet another platform of extraction or re-traumatization. As Farfan Mendez shows in this collection, for Sinaloans in Mexico searching for the disappeared amidst chronic insecurity and vulnerability, Covid-19 comes to compound and complicate an already existing crisis rather than to introduce it. As Holguin and colleagues highlight in the case of Peru, researchers must be attuned and prevent online spaces becoming arenas of revictimization in the wake of violence. They show very effectively how crises compound each other, in this case how Covid-19 army checks and lockdowns ‘provoked re-experiencing of symptoms of fear and panic’ related to earlier counter-insurgency (Holguin et al 2024). The researchers realized that their own online procedures related to digital follow-up research risked to contribute to the re-victimisation. Holguin et al’s work is thus a key intervention in creating a more reflective research practice in sensitive conflict-affected contexts preventing ‘revictimising participants in digital research practice’ (ibid). They contribute to our understanding of the complex ways in which such revictimization actually happens in contexts of compounded crises.

In their research on Syria, Duedari et al. aimed to control for safety, consent, representativeness of voices, and psychosocial support in their study of Syria’s war zones:

We recruited a UK-licensed Arabic-speaking psychotherapist to provide on call psychological grounding sessions that we offered free to participants exhibiting distress during (online) interviews. For example, sensitive issues touching upon experiences of personal losses and sexual abuse in the community arose in interviewing a female health-worker, triggering her emotional distress. The researcher had been trained in psychological first aid and drew on active listening skills, paused the interview, and created space for silence. Afterwards, the researcher organised sessions between the psychotherapist and the participant. However, only one session took place before government bombardment of the participant’s city forced her to evacuate and ended her efforts to engage.

As this extract shows, digital research can grapple with serious ethical dilemmas and its own helplessness in alleviating not only psychological stresses related to research but also the immediate physical threats participants face. However, online psychosocial mitigation strategies, while useful, are vulnerable to the abrupt termination of online access in violence-affected spaces. Furthermore, the human experience of war cannot be fully verbalized/narrativized by respondents and/or elicited by remote research teams. To mitigate
this issue of immersion, digital research teams could include refugees from conflict zones who have a direct understanding of the area.

Active armed conflict is not the only thing limiting access to distant field sites (e.g., climate change or future pandemic crises). Digital platforms also offer solutions for individuals with disabilities and resource constraints (both temporary and permanent) who cannot always travel to conduct their research. Family responsibilities and gender restrictions may also extend this digital shift and hybrid research collection. Donor bodies and individual researchers also increasingly turn to digitalization and online video conferencing for their cost-saving aspects—in terms of both finances and time. Both UKRI’s Environmental Sustainability Strategy and Wellcome Trust’s Guidelines on Good Environmental Practice included digitalization in their public commitment to reduce the climate impact of funded research. Universities have also elaborated climate action frameworks and pledges to lower carbon emissions associated with research. Researchers are now asked to balance research benefits and risks for individual human participants and the climate and living ecosystems. Travel is unlikely to disappear; however, until green energy sustainably replaces fossil fuels, large research budgets will be closely scrutinized for their climate impact and be pushed toward climate-friendly and climate-ethical data-gathering alternatives.

For all these reasons, hybrid global research collaborations are here to stay. Greater sensitivity to climate impacts must go hand in hand with greater equity in North-South research collaborations. We need to heed the lessons of the Covid-19 ‘natural’ experiment. We cannot allow ‘business as usual’ (Ansoms et al. 2014) under a new guise—just as crises compound, so must mitigations related to access and equity concerns. To fully overcome barriers and increase inclusivity, the research encounter needs equal payoffs on both sides. This requires explicit reflections on the nature and impact of collaboration across vastly unequal geographical spaces. Such reflection needs to assess how risks, responsibilities, and benefits of collaboration are reshaped by crisis and the digital platforming of research. As Ansoms et al. explain, disruptions like Covid-19 need to be accompanied by strategies to prevent postcolonial dynamics in collaboration from re-asserting themselves in a new form.

4. Epistemological issues: digital intermediation in the production of meaning

Mendes’s work indirectly highlights the epistemological and theoretical constraints that digital methods may impose on qualitative research. She illustrates how a researcher’s absence from the field can lead to an overreliance on initial research questions, potentially causing them to overlook contextual elements that could otherwise prompt a re-evaluation or a deepening of these inquiries. From a constructivist perspective on reflexivity, Mendez demonstrates that a truly enriching fieldwork demands a researcher’s ability to be continuously stimulated by their surroundings. For instance, Mendez points out that understanding how her respondents in Sinaloa perceive COVID-19 requires linking this experience to contexts of disappearance. To connect these phenomena is to narrate a unique account of COVID-19, distinct from that in the USA where she resides. It also means generating insights that transcend the discursive frameworks typically constraining our initial hypotheses. Mendez’s research exemplifies how digital-based studies, devoid of physical field presence, struggle to break free from such limiting discursive orders, shaped by the researcher’s positionality.
Similarly, Holguin et al., in their discussion on digital research experiences with survivors of collective violence and families of the disappeared in Peru, emphasize the need to acknowledge how our assumptions influence remote knowledge production. This reflexive stance brings forth epistemological considerations by questioning the relationship between the generated knowledge and the researcher's perspective. Holguin and colleagues show that researchers are not merely external observers but integral components of the research subject. Mere reflexivity on one's position is inadequate; researchers must also delve into the contextual and communal dynamics that frame participants' narratives, which is crucial for accurately situating their meanings. Such meanings are often sculpted by the researchers' own perspectives (including ethnocentric views such as stereotypes, colonial attitudes, and victimization) and their views on the social changes deemed beneficial for the participants.

By confining themselves to the complexity of respondents' digital representations, researchers might adopt a limited interpretation of their worlds, thus generating skewed understandings.

On a more theoretical level, the digital shift in qualitative research is more than an opportunity to overcome practical limitations. It is a chance to consider how intermediaries' involvement affects knowledge production. In other words, using digital technology as an intermediary in qualitative research can affect the data we produce and the interpretation of our studies, as shown by paper by Holguin et al., Mendez, and Khan in this collection. This insight challenges the still-dominant perspective that values the immediate relationship between the subject of knowledge (the researcher) and the object of knowledge (the field), which underpins much contemporary qualitative research practice.

The Kantian rationalist approach and ontological a priori still underpin many theories and methods in the social sciences. However, these concepts have been increasingly questioned by new materialism and post-humanism perspectives. For instance, Latour’s actor-network theory proposes that objects and discourses (in addition to humans) possess agency in the semiotic process (Callon & Latour, 1995) and can be considered ‘actants.’ The basic difference between actors and actants is that the former can put the latter in circulation. Latour’s ideas question the ontological position of humans as both self-contained entities and

2 This perspective is part of a Kantian rationalist approach that sees the production of knowledge as an immediate subject-object relationship, although the subject is doubled in the Kantian perspective (Kant 2007). The epistemic rules that Kant proposes submit knowledge of reality to claims of truth stemming from a rationalist postulate that requires the exclusive or essential use of reason. Said differently, the operation of knowledge involves an essential connection between the subject being analysed and how it is perceived and understood. In qualitative research, the researcher gathers qualitative data through their various senses (perception) and interprets using their reasoning (understanding).

The rationalist idea is of an instantaneous link between subject and knowledge remains intact at the subject level, as evidenced by the Kantian 'empirically-transcendental doublet' (perception and understanding) (Foucault, 1966). However, it is based on an ontological a priori, according to which the human subject (researcher) is the only factor involved in the semiotic process. There is no intermediary between perception and understanding; between subject and object. Despite Kantian rationalism suggesting the necessity of criticism to limit the possible consequences of this hegemonic reason, reason itself is once again cited as the source of its limitation (Colebrook, 2005). This special issue is marked by its critique of reflexivity, which tends to justify the monopoly of knowledge production and its a posteriori verification (Rose, 1997).
the only entities possessing agency. A multiplicity of relationships bind the human and the non-human without ontological differentiation to produce meaning.

Discussions on the production of meaning must consider research methods and platforms. Such a proposal reverses rationalism’s notion that reason is the beginning and end of knowledge. Human cultures and technologies are co-constitutive (Paulus and Lester 2021). Technologies are not simply diffractions of something immutable ‘out there.’ They shape our inner worlds, our approaches, thinking, and affects in the world. Meaning becomes constituted by networks and mediations (Latour, 2007) that integrate several non-human factors that enter the composition of a “collective” producer of meaning. According to actor-network theory, scientific knowledge is the result of repeated interactions by heterogeneous actors (i.e., the network actor).

Such ideas help us understand digital tools in social science research as actants—non-human entities that intervene not only in research production but in the construction of meaning. The field data collected through this association of heterogeneous entities is impacted by the digital techniques and tools used. We should consider (i) how researchers in the North, their digital tools, the observations of researchers, and the stakeholders in the field interact; (ii) how, from one situation to another, knowledge is formed, deformed, and reshaped according to the tools used and (iii) how this produces a singular meaning. Recent work on ‘digital witnessing’ (Awan 2022; Gynnild 2014) and the ‘objective witness’ (Sidiki 2021)—in terms of drones, remote sensing and mapping, satellite imagery, and social media in conflict areas explores such entanglements of human and non-human and the ensuing diffraction of knowledge production.

Framing digital research tools as actors participating in the network of meaning production prompts us to re-consider what these technologies do with our data and their meaning. For example, it can be difficult for researchers working remotely to engage with issues of emotion (Mwambari et al. 2021) or capture linguistic complexities. Digital tools will always seek to standardize because that is how they are constructed.

5. Political questioning: from colonial hegemony to digital innovation in the Global South

In his paper, Khan argues that the physical presence of researchers in qualitative studies is not inherently beneficial but context-dependent. However, he also underscores that distance can pose significant challenges that must be addressed to avoid diluting the richness of data. He discusses how voice-only online interviews lack the nuance provided by the physical proximity of interviewee and interviewer. This proximity enhances the interview process, transforming it from mere data collection to an active co-construction of knowledge, as the interactions between the interviewee and interviewer generate new insights. Drawing from his research experiences in Pakistan’s Swat Valley, Khan explains that Internet-mediated methods necessitate an additional layer of cultural mediation to prevent biases in understanding during such interviews.

Indirectly, Khan reveals that without these mediations, the interpretation of the data is not only compromised but could also produce a distorted view of conflict and counterinsurgency operations in Pakistan. Without established local connections in the Swat region, the trust
required for meaningful interviews between the women respondents and the male interviewer would be absent. Yet, this does not mean that women are unable to express themselves, or that the researcher cannot derive meaningful insights from their expressions. Khan illustrates that, even in this context, while technology is useful, it produces somewhat simplistic interpretations. He notes that during interviews, elements such as pauses, changes in the interviewee’s tone, or abrupt topic shifts, significantly shape the meaning.

Recognizing these nuances is not just an epistemological choice but a political one, as it has implications for the subjects of our research. Indeed, as Holguin et al. emphasize, the interpretations and conclusions we draw from our research on vulnerable populations involve decisions about the social changes we envision for them, influencing the actual impact of our research on their lives.

Thus, Rudling et al. discuss how peace and conflict studies often perpetuate essentialist and infantilizing narratives that depict field subjects as helpless, reinforcing central-peripheral dynamics that legitimize the Global North as the epicenter of power and knowledge, tasked with rectifying the "deficient" conditions of the locals. They also highlight how expertise remains in the North while data and experiences are extracted from the South, perpetuating the criticized knowledge-power dynamics identified by post-colonial scholars.

Moreover, as Carayannis et al. suggest, the constraints imposed by COVID-19 and the resulting shift towards digital research methodologies may have intensified these power imbalances, enabling researchers in the North to control field research from afar. Control over the research process extends to controlling research directions and, ultimately, the political recommendations concerning the living conditions of local actors.

More theoretically, for many studies, the use of technologies merely serves a functionalist purpose in adapting to various constraints in the field (e.g., site inaccessibility). However, work combining social sciences and technology studies (a la Latour) reveals that the choice of tools is a political decision (conscious or unconscious). Choosing online tools will foster specific representations, induce realities about the other, and create particular problematizations (Madeleine et al., 2006; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2005). Technology goes beyond impacting meaning; it shapes how others are envisioned. This means that the digitalization of qualitative research poses political issues.

We must overcome the positivist approach to digital tools and consider their role in the political process of producing the "other." Digital tools adapt and inscribe change within a group of actors (researchers from the North, researchers from the South, respondents, etc.) and actants (social networks, IT tools, etc.). In defining meaning, they become part of a network and claim a specific action, the reality of the other. The papers in this collection begin unpacking these realities; for example, Khan explores the fundamentally embodied and multiply-embedded process of voice-only online interviewing in Pakistan. His paper illustrates how voice-only online interviewing not only shapes our understanding of interviewees' experiences but also constrains our ability to perceive aspects beyond the limitations imposed by this methodological approach.

Even in cases where both the researcher and the research objectives claim political neutrality, the digital tools used in qualitative research are never neutral (Mwambiri, 2022). These tools
have their own logic. Knowledge policy can no longer simply note that researchers from the North are omnipresent in the production of knowledge on their subjects and fields on behalf of the South. We must also investigate the logics of the discourse imposed by digital tools and their political economic effects. The hegemony of digital tools and methodologies is achieved through standardization; the world's multiple experiences are lumped into a single historical Euro-Western experience (Schoon et al. 2020). The resulting impoverishment of diversity and the imposition of meaning stems from the limits of the digital method. The digitalization of qualitative research may erase different ways to make sense of and act upon the world (Turner, 2023) by imposing a singular geographic, cultural, and political perspective.

Conversations on the digitalization of qualitative research should go beyond methodological efficiency (i.e., accessing the field) and epistemological efficiency (i.e., limiting the margins of access to the field). Digitalization also limits the possibilities of meaning, with political effects. Importantly, the methodological tools involved in the digitalization of qualitative research are not secondary and insignificant; they carry political meaning and produce specific effects—more or less discreet, often unexpected—that transform the operating methods and content of the discourses and concrete actions of the people we are studying.

Bilateral and multilateral international cooperation agencies are increasingly using qualitative research to inform their policies. These policies affect the lives and material conditions of millions of people in the South. Moreover, as the decolonial turn becomes more widespread in the social sciences, we must interrogate the colonial dimensions of these processes. Ansoms et al. and Rudling et al. offer such a blueprint for self-reflective analysis on the decolonial impacts of North-South collaboration in an era of digitalization. These authors move away from an anthropocentric approach to decolonization to consider the coloniality of Western-centric tools (Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2024). Digital technology—an instrument of political power that constructs a homogenous vision of the world and imposes concrete actions on it—must be decolonized.

The decolonization of digital research would address the economic and geopolitical implications of having digital knowledge controlled by major companies in the North (Lazem et al., 2022; Mwambari, 2021). It must also raise the issue of cultural pluralism to develop sustainable alternative technologies that respect linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity. We should pursue technodiversity (Hui, Lemmens, 2021), including the 'rejection' of invasive or harmful technology in certain cultural contexts. This will contribute to the fight against "digital colonialism" and promote solutions that respect the ecology, cultures, and languages involved in creating multiple visions of the world. We must avoid epistemicide—the "systematic destruction of rival forms of knowledge"—that imposes a determined and hegemonic meaning (Fiormonte, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis accelerated the digitalization of qualitative research and presented a major opportunity to reconfigure research relations between researchers in the South and those in the North (as the latter could not access Southern fields). The pandemic became a moment to experiment with equitable collaboration between research partners; however, a
number of challenges arose during and after the Covid-19 crisis, including in the areas of reflexivity, concrete actions, and more structural challenges.

Overall, Covid-19 did not fundamentally alter power relations in academic production, and is more meaningfully understood as a series of ‘micro-interruptions.’ As the papers highlighted powerfully, the Covid-19 pandemic created unequal risks and effects across the geographies of the world. Broader inequalities and structural violence in different country contexts created differential health impacts and threats, different regimes of constriction – simply different ‘corona rhythms’ (Farfan Mendez 2024), and different forms of collaborative configurations. In many contexts, Covid-19 was one crisis among many and an additional source of vulnerability, and as such created compounded effects. Understanding the way in which crises interact and the notion of ‘compounded crises’ is a key contribution here in articles such as that by Farfan Mendez on Mexico, Holguin et al on Peru and Ansoms et al on the Great Lakes Region of Africa and is one that must be taken further in theorisation and applied research. The perspective of compounded crises and the non-singularity and non-uniqueness of Covid-19 – Covid-19 as ‘(un)exceptional times’ (Farfan Mendez 2024) in some violence-affected contexts - reverts the Western-centric perspective of the pandemic and the pandemic as a ‘hegemonic reference’ point for crisis (Ansoms et al 2024). At the same time, as Farfan Mendez so clearly points out, unexceptional does not mean non-existent, and the additional stress of Covid-19 deepened vulnerabilities in her research sites even as it produced further benefits to the global North research, deepening research-related inequalities.

But the collection and findings with regards to Covid-19 are relevant going forward. As highlighted above, a series of major global crises are making access to information difficult. In these contexts, the digitalisation of research will be decisive and so will be a critical and self-reflexive approach to such platforming of research. As articles by Holguin et al and Khan show in very different contexts of Peru and Pakistan, digital research is embodied and embedded, and must be consciously mitigating against re-traumatization, revictimization of participants as well as forms of exclusion and epistemic erasure.

Going forward, major global crises will continue to make accessing information difficult. In these contexts, the digitalization of research will be decisive. Digital research is embodied and embedded; it must consciously mitigate re-traumatization, revictimization, and forms of exclusion and epistemic erasure. Therefore, critical and self-reflexive approaches will be essential in such platforming of research. The decolonization of (qualitative) research must seriously consider how digital intermediations affect the production of meaning. Scholars must promote digital innovation and heterogeneity to confront the colonial hegemony of the digital.

Post-humanism usefully proposes a rethink of the relationship between humans and technology (ATA, 2002). It also elevates the ethical challenges posed by the development and use of digital techniques. The post-humanist question has led to a redefinition of the human being; this implies that the rewriting of society and the epistemological conditions of this rewriting have political consequences. It demonstrates the value of "taking an interest in practices that erect barriers between the notions of human and non-human in order to better challenge our vision of these categories" (Barad 2003, 808).
The proliferation of digital technologies will upend much qualitative research. Therefore, scholars must actively promote epistemic diversity and technological plurality to ensure that the South continues to play a role in the production of meaning. We need not completely reject hegemonic technologies; rather, we should promote diversity and integrate as many worldviews as possible. Southern countries have already created avenues for technological innovation towards digital decolonization in their quest for technological independence. These include "indigenous data sovereignty" and "Big Data Sur" projects, a "non-aligned technologies" movement, projects inspired by the commons such as the "FLOK Society," the "community networks movement" in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and open access scientific publication initiatives such as Redalyc, Scielo, and AmeliCa (Fiormonte, 2021). It is now time to imagine these forms of decolonization in qualitative research. The decolonization of (qualitative) research can only arise from a transdisciplinary, epistemological, and political critique that takes seriously the production of decolonising technological research tools.

Bibliography


