

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 688 p.

Book review

Life in the post-modern society, also labeled as informational, implies almost at a mandatory level the presence of technology in every aspect of our existence. We can rapidly communicate and resolve situations on the telephone, we are being “bombed” with information through mass media channels and we can solve a great deal of medical issues due to science; but how can the achievements in technology influence the academic field of social research? This is the main issue *The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research* focuses on.

Published under the guidance of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber – Professor of Sociology and director of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at Boston College, *The Handbook* gathers the work of various researchers all over the world – USA, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, etc. It is structured in five main parts, every single one comprising chapters signed by contributors from different academic fields, sociology and psychology, to computer science and medicine. Reading the volume therefore offers an original and comprehensive view over the usage of the emergent technologies in the research process.

Emergent technologies, as defined by the editor in the *Introduction* part, are “those that introduce a significant break in the way individuals, groups and society as a whole conduct their activities, as well as add new dimensions to our understanding of the social world. (...) [They] can open up new areas of inquiry, provide researchers with the tools to answer new questions, and change the landscape of knowledge building within and across the disciplines” (p. 4). Consequently, the new technologies – including Web 2.0, nanotechnologies, multimedia, mobile and geospatial technologies – can change many aspects of the qualitative and quantitative research praxis that has so far been known and applied in social sciences in a certain manner.

Not entirely based on theory, *The Handbook* also focuses on empirical aspects; almost each contributor of the volume provides practical examples presenting different case studies which allow the reader to understand how these emergent technologies can be effectively applied in order to obtain solid results in social research. While reading and understanding the various analyses from this volume, we get to realize that these technologies begin to be more and more present in disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields: sociology, ethnography, natural sciences, computer-based sciences, medicine, behavioural sciences.

The direct impact of the latest technology on the research environment is intensely analyzed by the specialists taking into account the advantages and disadvantages of their usage, comparing their strengths and weaknesses. Philosophical issues and ethical dilemmas of using emergent technologies in social sciences research constitute important themes of debating. Can emergent technologies really be employed in the social research area? Can reality be altered by means of these new practices in research? Will the methodological foundation of social research be revised or discarded? Can a new reliable methodological practice be formed by incorporating emergent technologies in traditional survey research methods? These are some questions to which contributors signing the first part chapters of *The Handbook* try to give a scientific answer, along

with other discussions regarding issues like identity, safety of personal data, dependence induced by technology, manipulation and control, and so on.

Analyzing the latest surveys undertaken, one can see that Web 2.0 innovations are being applied more and more in the practice of social research; the use of the internet for inquiring new social environments (virtual communities, e-commerce, etc.), for creating new methods of accessing and collecting data, different types of research questions that arise from this new-born reality, digital and cyber ethnography are some of the aspects highlighted in the second part of the present volume. One of the reasons for using web surveys can be found when analyzing their practical and productive side - online information can be captured in real time, it can create time-efficiency and cost benefits. Various types of recently developed technologies are being presented in the third part of *The Handbook*, such as the WiShare tool and data mining technologies (chapters 16, 17, 18), while taking into consideration the difficulties emerging from their usage. Thus, advantages and drawbacks of the emergent technologies employed in the social research field are being weighed and presented with the same importance.

Audio-visual and mobile-enhanced technologies also have a profound impact on users and researchers as well, engaging lots of benefits and opportunities for the future research. An interesting emergent technology that specialists take into consideration as being the next step in social research is the so-called “digital home” or “living laboratories”; the subjects can be observed in every aspect of their existence, from location and actions to emotions and feelings. The possibility of gathering real-time detailed information regarding aspects of mobility, economic behaviour or communication does not exclude the ethical and privacy facets or even those of sample representativeness and data analysis (part IV and V).

The Handbook underlines the importance and necessity of the future social research environment to transform and adapt its methodology and concepts in order to engage the emergent technologies in its structure. According to this, the new practice in research is perceived as being based more on interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary.

The community of researchers will also stand for future transformations. Besides the fact that people involved in the research work need to understand and apply the “traditional” scientific methods at an advanced level, they will be trained in order to be able to use new practices based on emergent technologies. Consequently, new-built issues, such as moral aspects, sampling, data interpretation and validity, will arise.

The Handbook of Emergent Technologies in Social Research represents a reliable study ground for the community of specialists in social and natural sciences and also for students preoccupied by these academic fields. The structure of the volume, its wide spectrum of solid and scientific information and the reputation of the contributors recommend *The Handbook* as being one of the starting points for documentation, understanding and applying emergent technologies in social research.