

The use of technologies by brazilian farming families: a methodological reflection

O uso de tecnologias por famílias de agricultores: uma reflexão metodológica

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Abstract *This work discusses research about the appropriation of communication technology by farming families integrated into the tobacco agro-business supply chain. The report is based on field research that was carried out with two families living in the region of Santa Cruz do Sul (Rio Grande do Sul). Given the importance of the methodology for empirical research, this reflection proves to be productive in analyzing the stages already achieved in the research as well as paving those to come.*

Keywords: *Methodology; communication technologies; media use; farming families*

Resumo *Este trabalho tem por objetivo realizar uma discussão metodológica sobre uma pesquisa acerca das experiências de apropriação de tecnologias de comunicação por famílias de agricultores integradas à cadeia agroindustrial do tabaco. A incursão a campo em que se baseia o relato foi realizada junto a duas*

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famílias moradoras da região de Santa Cruz do Sul – RS. Tendo em vista a importância da metodologia para a pesquisa empírica, a reflexão proposta mostra-se produtiva para analisar o trajeto já percorrido e para projetar os próximos passos do trabalho.

Palavras-chave: *Metodologia; tecnologias de comunicação; usos da mídia; famílias agricultoras*

1 Introduction

This work aims to carry out a fundamentally methodological discussion about the research “*Communication technologies in daily practices: the case of families related to the tobacco agro-business supply chain*” (CNPQ, 2014-2016) in order to continue empirical research on the theme. The challenge is to adopt, although partially, reflexivity (NEVES; NOGUEIRA, 2005) in the research process, analyzing and questioning practices and procedures adopted until now.

The research focuses on the reconstruction of daily practices and appropriation experiences of farming families who are integrated into the tobacco agro-business supply chain, in order to study their relations with communication technologies, including both traditional media (radio, television, newspaper and magazines) and new media (mobile phones, computers and the Internet). It is fundamental to keep under scrutiny the relationship that is established between old and new media, because such an approach contributes to keep in tension technical changes and innovations as well as social forms and cultural dynamics constituted in daily life (MORLEY, 2008; VARELA, 2010).

According to Martín-Barbero (2009, p. 148), technology is not just a thing but an “extremely powerful ‘scope’ of both languages and actions; social, political, and cultural dynamics; as well as questions about what social means today.” Thus, technology goes beyond its own space and merely instrumental character, constituting new forms of sociability and ritual functions.

ICTs, considered as artifacts/objects and means, are acquired either for functional reasons or for status and/or aesthetic choice. As means, they provide ties between families, their individual members, and the world that is outside the home. Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley (1996, p. 40) therefore consider that means are “doubly articulated in private cultures and public cultures.” Although focus is not on discussion of the theoretical framework adopted, this study is part of the scope of consumer research and the use of ICTs in a domestic context, especially those driven by the formulations of Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley

(1996). In addition to this theoretical framework, the contributions of Couldry (2009, 2010, 2013), Morley (2008), and Silverstone (2005) were adopted. All of them, in some way, understand that the technological challenge is not originated by the technology itself, but mainly by the role that media plays in everyday life, and thus, its uses and rituals.

It is necessary to understand the process of domestication that different information and communication technologies have undergone – being incorporated in the home, acquiring meaning in everyday life, and making sense in cultural, cognitive and affective frameworks of the most varied subjects. And, also to include a description of the latest process that is going in the opposite direction, as Morley (2008, p. 145) points out – the “undomestication” of media and the radical displacement of domesticity.

Regarding the interviewee families involved in the agricultural production of tobacco, workspaces and family life become merged, since it is in the home environment that much productive activity happens, with work being carried out by all family members. Family farming reveals the merger of relationships between the world of work and domestic space, which is also the environment of ICTs consumption. Bearing in mind that the context has an important influence on how the technologies are perceived, adopted, and used by individuals (MORLEY, 2008), the importance of understanding the rural context, family farming, and the region for this research are outlined, considering their historical, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics.

The field research that gave rise to this article was held in the Vale do Sol municipality, a micro-region of Santa Cruz do Sul (Rio Grande do Sul), next to two farming families. Each family was visited twice, in July and October 2014. In these meetings collective open interviews, individual semi-structured interviews, observation, and photographic records were used as research techniques.⁴ The empirical research was conducted in two steps, which correspond to the first and the second visits: a) objective data collection on sociocultural forms that covers

⁴ Respective techniques implemented will be further detailed.

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general information about family and property, inquiries about which communication technologies exist in homes, and how members of families use them, as well as what the other existing domestic technologies in the house are; b) interviews with members of the families in order to reconstitute their practices in relation to communication technologies.

Next, in this article the methodological design of the research is presented, particularly regarding data collection procedures used; a reflection on each of the collection instruments and, in specific cases, the initial handling of collected data; and, finally, notes about continuing the research are made. With the methodology playing such a fundamental role in any empirical study, it was believed that a reflection is productive in analyzing the path, choices, and decisions taken, and to lay out the next steps of the work. It was assumed, therefore, that one of values of reflectivity resides in adopting flexible research designs, which provides learning space for everyone directly involved in the research as well as for the academic community in general. By choosing this direction, this report does not seek to anticipate results or conclusions regarding the empirical research in progress.

It is important to point out that, in the specific case of this study, the rural universe is relatively unknown to these researchers, since all their social life is constituted in urban environments. This condition makes it “easier to research about unknown universes because its strangeness creates distance and forces them *to see with new eyes* phenomena that would be forgotten if such means were familiar” (BEAUD; WEBER, 2007, p. 37).

2 Field research: interviewees and tools

Empirical experiments conducted in 2014 for this research were taken as a foundation. They consist of two meetings: one held on July 17, and another on October 6. Both were based on visits to two families of farmers, V. and K.⁵, residents of Vale do Sol.

⁵ In the report, the names of the families were hidden, using only the first letter. Given the broad access to scientific texts on the Internet, identifying the families – that keep a certain proximity and social bond – was avoided.

Family V. has three members: a father (30 years old), mother (30 years old), and son (8 years old). The family's property is 11 hectares, where they grow tobacco (about 90,000 plants per year), corn, beans, potatoes, sweet potato, manioc, and pumpkin, besides raising pigs and chickens. Family K. has four members: a father (39 years old), mother (37 years old), son (20 years old), and daughter (11 years old). In the 22-hectare property, they produce tobacco, milk, fruit, honey, beans, potatoes, sweet potato, cassava, vegetables, and raise some pigs and chickens.

The procedures with the two families were the same.⁶ In the first visit, an introduction was made that it is simply called the presentation – an initial talk explaining the research and introducing the researchers – followed by the application of an individual questionnaires, including issues relating to the family, education, and media consumption; and a family form, focusing on aspects of the house and property. In the second visit to the families V. and K., individual interviews were held. While in the first visit all researchers (six) were together in each of the houses, in the second they were split into groups of two and four, according to the number of members of each family.⁷

Contact with the families was mediated by an agronomist from a non-governmental organization engaged in the micro-region of Santa Cruz do Sul.⁸ For many years, the NGO has provided services to families from the communities where the researched people live, and the agronomist knows some interviewees since childhood. He chose the two families – in a meeting previous to the visit to Vale do Sol, when the general purposes of the research was explained by the researchers and the reality of the city was described by him – who are both notable users of new communication technologies⁹.

After, the focus was on introducing and reflecting on the field experience and each of the data collection tools used, as well as the first

⁶ The introduction of the instruments will be further deepened in this article.

⁷ Family V. is formed by two adults and one child, while family K. has three adults and a pre-adolescent.

⁸ The NGO is called CAPA (Centro de Apoio ao Pequeno Agricultor – Support Center for Small Farmers).

⁹ A brief reflection on this mediation is made in item 3.1.

most comprehensive organization of some data obtained from these empirical experiences, resulting in what was called the field report¹⁰ and individual and family profiling.

2.1 Arriving in the field

Generally, there was no reports of this first contact of researchers with the respondents. Although it is a basic aspect in empirical research, it is understood that its “elementary” characteristic dispenses further reflection on its conduction; however, it is known that this first approach is fundamental and its preparation and execution is not as simple in practice as it seems at first glance.

First, it is worthwhile commenting on the mediator’s role. His research starts when choosing families to be indicated for participation in the research. He filters the type of interviewees who he will have contact with. He was not told that families had to have access to the Internet at home, for example. However, knowing what the study was about, he found important to use this as a criterion. Following the research, in a step that is not included in this article, this mediator role was no longer needed. From families V. and K., it was possible to access other families and choose more varied profiles.

Another important aspect was the fact that he accompanied and introduced the team to the farmers on the first visit. It was understood that this mediation facilitated the acceptance of the researchers by the families, although his interventions were more direct than expected, clarifying some questions that the team did not intend to explain in the first survey – such as the central interest in communication technologies.

To prepare this step, comprehensive questions were prepared to guide the conversation – and that is how it is understood, as a guide and not as a script. There were three broad questions: How is it to live here? What is the family routine like? How does the family use media? Before these questions were asked, an introduction of the survey and the researchers

¹⁰ From what each researcher saw and experienced in the field, a narrative was elaborated and shared with all members of the team.

– each member introduced himself, saying his name and professional occupation – was conducted by the mediator (agronomist).

Most of the team participated in this first field research (six researchers). This could be extremely invasive, because the large number of people was in practice interpreted as a “great visit” due to the good receptivity of the families. For the number of interviewers not to harm the organization of the conversation, a main interviewer was previously elected. She would be responsible for directing the conversation, as far as possible so that the questions were answered. The introduction lasted about an hour for each family.

2.2 Individual and family questionnaire

In order to outline the profiles of each family and their members, two questionnaires were applied in the first visit to Vale do Sol: one related to individual information (of each family member) and another regarding the family, both with objective questions. The first one was applied to each of the family members, including children, in order to get to know the individuals who compose the family, as well as to have an initial idea about their tastes, habits, and uses of ICTs. The questionnaire consists of two main blocs: *Personal data* and *Media*. Regarding personal data, respondents were asked about their residence during childhood (country or city); parents’ and siblings’ professional occupations (former and current); courses attended, respondent’s and relatives’ level of education; and their main recreational activities. The second block has questions about the media used – TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, Internet, books – and their respective TV/radio stations, favorite programs, places, times, and amount of media consumption, as well as the question *What is your favorite media?*, which concludes the questions guide.

The second questionnaire, in turn, relates to information concerning the family nucleus. The questionnaires, answered by a member chosen by the family, also have objective questions divided into two main blocks: *property* and *domestic technologies*. The goal of the first group of questions is to know if the property is owned – and if so, since when;

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what the family produces; the size of the property and those who work on it; family income; who lives in the house; and how many bedrooms and bathrooms there are. In the second block, related to domestic technologies, the families representative tell the researchers about the ownership (and quantity) of some artifacts, such as the car and motorbike (model and year); household appliances such as the refrigerator, freezer, gas stove, wood stove, microwave oven, electric oven, washing machine, dishwasher, vacuum cleaner, and air conditioning; media players – TV, radio, DVD, VCR, home theater, video game, landline, mobile, mobile with Internet access, computer, laptop, and tablet; Internet access – kind of service and signal quality; possession of satellite TV and pay TV; and newspaper and magazine subscriptions.

The questionnaires were applied by the interviewer, who put his name at the top of the page – since the team has a large number of researchers, it is important that each form is identified so that it is possible for questions to be answered. It is important to emphasize that there were discrepancies in the way the questionnaire were carried out by the researchers, which showed the importance of having more meetings in order to clarify the research tools and their respective purposes. Despite the team's efforts to develop the tools together – the fact that the researchers are from different universities and different cities – the field visit revealed that there was a different understanding of the tools.

During the application of the questionnaires, the need for each family member to be separately interviewed in a room of the house (or outside) was also seen so that the interview of one member would not interfere with the other, either because of the influence of others in responses (observed in a family in which a young woman was interviewed) or the noises that disturbed interviewer-interviewee communication.

2.3 Individual interviews

For Morley (1996, p. 261), the interview, besides allowing “the researcher to have access to opinions and statements of the interviewees,” it also provides “access to linguistic terms and categories. . . where

interviewees build their worlds and their own understanding of their activities.” Thus, conducting individual interviews was considered a natural step to deepen knowledge about the interviewees.

In general, the interview sought to contemplate the arrival and introduction of ICTs in their environments/living spaces, representations and imagination in operation with regard to ICTs, as well as the changes and continuities produced around practical life. For this, the tool was organized into four parts, created after meetings that sought to reflect on the data the team already had and on those they wanted to obtain: *experience of the incorporation of ICTs* – exploring a historical bias of media arrival and use; *experience of use of ICTs* – focusing on the uses given to technological artifacts today; *experience of use of favorite media* – allowing a more deepened knowledge of the use of a specific and preferred media; *work* – seeking to relate the use of media to the agricultural work performed.

Parallel to the questions script, a document was produced in order to clarify the objectives of the categories and the best way to apply the interview. This is a valuable resource when performing collective, interdisciplinary, and inter-institutional research, especially considering the diverse backgrounds of the researchers. The document began by punctuating the following aspects:

Observations:

- 1) It is important that all researchers have clarity of what is intended in each topic, since the interviews will be individually conducted by an interviewer, and the result will be part of an integrated set of data. Thus, it is important to ensure that questions are similarly asked and directed.
- 2) For this, a questions script was produced that will be applied to each member of the family by a different interviewer. This document looks to clarify the script produced. The script has “semi-directive” questions, which stipulates that at the end of the interview, the same basic information of each interviewee was collected. At the same time, it allows for an adaptation of interview progress according to each case.

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Even with this resource, added in a briefing before the field research, a diverse level of appropriation of the instrument was noticed. Comparing the interviews through recordings, it was perceived that not all interviewers knew the script deeply and were not able to apply the interview in a flawless, natural way. Consequently, a workshop was planned in order to develop interview techniques and to increase the appropriation of the tool produced, aiming to standardize procedures.

Finally, concerning the individual interviews, it is emphasized that the group of researchers was divided in the application of the instrument when allowing, on the one hand, the feeling of “invasion” of the domestic space to be reduced and, on the other hand, to establish a more intense relationship between the researcher and respondent. The choice of which researcher would interview each family member was made previously, bearing in mind the past experiences and skills of the interviewers.

2.4 Observation and photographic research

As a complementary tool, photography was used to register the properties, houses, and environments where ICTs are used, as well as the technologies studied. Photographic images were only an additional resource of information registration for the reality being explored and was not further discussed. There was a tacit understanding between the members of the team that images would serve as an illustration of what was being studied.

When asking permission to photograph the domestic environment, the team found resistance when recording more intimate spaces such as bedrooms and bathrooms. However, all families allowed living rooms, kitchens, the outside of the property, and the facades of the house to be photographed. Although the team naturally complied with the situation, actually, they should have paid more attention to the families' culture with respect to what is considered as fine to show – and therefore photograph – and what is forbidden or invasive.

During the data analysis period, the researchers realized the importance of photographing the devices/artifacts – and not only the place where they were positioned or being consumed – since when handling the data collected, some questions about technical specifications appeared and could have been easily answered through images. If the image existed, in this case, it would function as a methodological resource that would activate the researcher’s memory and enrich his means of observation.

Still regarding the photographic records, the importance of not taking very large photographic equipment and not using flash were also discussed and emphasized, reducing the risk of inhibition and embarrassment by respondents. The mediator (who provided the first contact with the families), during the first field research, did not follow this rule created by the group, as he photographed, with his own camera, the respondents during the application of the questionnaires and used flash without asking them for permission.

However, it was recognized that considering the photograph as document in a social research would imply entering into a polarized debate between those who consider photographs as evidence and those who consider it as construction. As put by Martins (2008, p. 15) “considering the photograph either as a sociological object of knowledge or as its tool.”

It is also important to note that the researchers themselves behaved with an attitude of careful observance. This means that from beginning to end they were alert to the details of the context of the empirical research, especially the domestic context, where ICTs are used. Valladares (2007), from the *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (WHYTE, 2005), draws on what he calls the “ten commandments of participant observation.” In the seventh commandment, the author says that observation implies “knowing how to hear, listen, see, use all the senses,” and that the collection of information is not restricted to interviews. Thus, the field research also sought to use impressions

captured by researchers through observation, which later formed the field report.

Next, there will be a reflection on the field report and individual and family profiles, which, unlike the new techniques presented, are not data collection tools, but initial procedures of data analysis. Here, a methodological exploration of them was carried out, discussing their use for the research. This ruled out concerns about the empirical data they create, and allowed for the first interpretations of the relationship of the studied families with technological devices.

2.5 Field report

After the first visit to Vale do Sol, researchers were instructed to write a field report, describing their observations and perceptions of the collective conversation held with each family and the questionnaires. As a group research, the record of each member's impressions is essential so that this information does not get lost and can be systematized and stored for sharing.

Observations about the environment and the respondents find space in the field report and are described as the researcher wants. Travancas (2011, p. 103-104), when talking about practical and theoretical ethnographic issues, explains that the researcher "is not only a transmitter of heard speeches. . . . His fundamental role is to interpret."

From this perspective, field reports give space to the subjectivity of the researcher, who is able to capture impressions and raise questions based on facts, contexts, and environments. In addition, the field report is the placeholder for criticism and self-criticism in relation to the application of research tools in the field, providing an expression and positioning space. In addition, this exercise will then constitute what Brandão (2007, p.16) suggests as the first step in the attempt to articulate explanations. In his experience, this procedure existed in the individual and family profiles presented below.

2.6 Individual and family profiles

Among the data collection and initial analysis tools explored, the individual and family profiles are the ones that come closest to a first procedure of handling, organizing, and systematizing data about the use of ICTs by families related to tobacco agri-business. They were thought as an initial step for the analysis of individual and family questionnaires, serving as a first articulation of the information obtained through these tools. Therefore, it is a procedure which enables the first textual production while taking into account the data collected, or what Brandão (2007) considers as the first most comprehensive organization of data. Again, the challenge was to standardize procedures within the large group.

Below, a part of one of the profiles is reproduced.

Profile: Carmem¹¹ V.

Daughter of farmers, Carmem, 30 years old, has been married to Demétrio for 8 years. She has a son, Pedro, 8 years old. She presented herself as “farmer, housewife, school monitor, mother, and wife”.

From the five siblings, Carmem is the only one who has not completed secondary education, although she intends to complete it. Her parents only completed the fifth grade of elementary school, but her two sisters finished high school.

About the different tasks she completes in her routine, she says that she “opens the beds” for the seedlings to catch sun, gives the pigs food, and takes care of all the housework, such as washing clothes, cleaning the house, cooking, etc. In addition, “of course,” to “curing the tobacco,” work done in the barn. Compared to Demétrio’s activities, she concludes, quite naturally, that he “is more about the issues of farming, right?”

In relation to the media she uses, she points out the TV and, especially, Globo news, which she “cannot miss.” She listens to the radio whenever she is in the shed, while working with the smoke.

¹¹ For the same reasons explained in footnote no. 6, the names of the family members were changed and only the first letter of each were kept.

The example shows how objective of the individual questionnaire relate to work, education level, and media use, which are studied in the description and data analysis step. Although the goal is not to have a single model profile, excluding personal writing characteristics and specific aspects that stand out for each researcher, a base of what is regarded as essential in the procedure was maintained. Finally, it was understood that the production of a profile allows all researchers to know a little better all respondents, since this extended knowledge is essential for data analysis.

3 Final considerations

In addition to the actual empirical exploration, that is, the data collected during visits to the families, field trips in this first phase of the research aimed, on the one hand, to introduce the researchers team to the research area, and thus, to have contact and know the reality to be studied in addition to the bibliographical documentation; and, on the other hand, to refine the tools and methodological strategies.

The first field experience also enabled the researcher team to get to know each other and see their roles as interviewers. The second field research provided an even greater interaction with families, deepening the issue of the use of media itself. It is understood that field work is an experience with a subjective dimension (BRANDÃO, 2007), whether in interpersonal relationships between researchers and respondents or between the researchers themselves and their environments. Hence, there is great importance in adopting the value of reflexivity that “should be done on the implications of this crossing of social references in order to favor a better understanding of the dynamics that are developed in interaction spaces” (NEVES; NOGUEIRA, 2005, p. 410).

From these experiences, there is the need to reiterate that the team needs to carry out the same procedures whilst preserving individualities. It is necessary to bear in mind that the group, in this case, has interdisciplinary characteristics, including members with disciplinary backgrounds of more than one area of knowledge. Thus, the challenge

of uniting procedures becomes even bigger, and this objective cannot disappear. For this, the team needs to intensify in-person meetings focused on research techniques, allowing knowledge about the tools used to be deepened and to establish a pact of action. Thus, the study conduction, it is thought, will be the more natural and as safe as possible.

Finally, on the data collected about each family, it was understood in an early planning that the two visits and the techniques used so far were enough to accumulate necessary information about the two families. However, it is necessary to deepen the exploration of these interviewees with a historical perspective. In this sense, it would be very valuable to take this first instance as the new media entry (mobile and computer, with or without Internet access), which joins with already established practices (mainly related to radio and television), causing a re-accommodation of the existing, with continuities and ruptures potentially occurring.

On the other hand, certain conclusions about the use of communication technologies by farming families, in order to understand certain appropriations from this universe, would be more legitimate when crossed with another study of the same character in urban areas. Such comparison can provide important clues about the specificities of each situation, pointing out distances and approaches for rural and urban families. These are the new methodological challenges created by the research.

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