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STUDYING ELITES OLD AND NEW: Elites in a Digitizing Society

Estudando as elites antigas e novas: as elites em uma sociedade em processo de digitalização

Estudio de las élites antiguas y modernas: Las élites en una sociedad en proceso de digitalización

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ABSTRACT:
This contribution discusses ways of sampling, recruiting, and interviewing members of various types of elites in the digital age. Enlisting tried and true examples from research on the larger literature on elites, the article shows how various recruitment and interviewing strategies may be adapted to take advantage of contemporary digital platforms in order to identify and recruit individuals who are not tied to particular workplaces or organizations. It also shows how particular recruitment and data collection procedures are suited to more traditional kinds of digital elites, namely professional digital elites, as well as the more elusive elites who populate contemporary content creation and gig platforms.
Keywords: Digital elites, research design, recruitment, methods, interviewing.

RESUMO
Este artigo discute formas de amostragem, seleção e entrevista de integrantes de vários tipos de elite na era digital. Recorrendo a exemplos comprovados em pesquisas sobre a literatura mais abrangente das elites, o artigo mostra como várias estratégias de seleção e entrevista podem ser adaptadas para aproveitar as plataformas digitais contemporâneas, a fim de identificar e recrutar indivíduos que não estão vinculados a locais de trabalho ou organizações específicas. Também mostra como determinados procedimentos de escolha e coleta de dados são adequados para tipos tradicionais de elites digitais, ou seja, elites digitais profissionais, bem como para as elites indefinidas que permeiam as plataformas contemporâneas de criação de conteúdo e de trabalho temporário.
Palavras-chave: Elites digitais, desenho de pesquisa, seleção, métodos, entrevista.

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza formas de muestreo, selección y entrevista de representantes de diversos tipos de élites en la era digital. Recurriendo a ejemplos examinados en investigaciones sobre la literatura más amplia sobre las élites, el artículo muestra cómo se pueden adaptar diversas estrategias de selección y entrevista para aprovechar las plataformas digitales contemporáneas, con el fin de identificar y reclutar a personas que no están vinculadas a lugares de trabajo u organizaciones específicas. También muestra cómo determinados procedimientos de selección y recopilación de datos son adecuados para los tipos tradicionales de élites digitales, es decir, las élites digitales profesionales, así como para las élites indefinidas que impregnan las plataformas contemporáneas de creación de contenidos y de trabajo temporal.
Palabras-clave: Élites digitales, diseño de la investigación, selección, métodos, entrevistas.

Credit

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Introduction

This paper explores the methods for qualitative data collection and analysis which can prove useful in identifying, sampling, recruiting, and interviewing digital elites, a type of elite whose power has been growing at a rapid rate. How can we gain a better understanding of this emergent type of elite who is at the center of the dramatic shifts in the economy and broader society (Torpey 2020)? More broadly, I ask how can we study these new elites to better understand how the digitization of the economy and society is affecting the stratification order.

The particular challenges of studying elites through both ethnography and interviewing has long been a concern of qualitatively oriented social analysts (Chancer 2019). The difficulties of gaining access to elite social settings, for instance, have long preoccupied researchers, even when they have successfully interviewed elites and/or observed elites across many different types of social contexts (Mears 2020, Sherman 2017, Rivera 2015). The qualitative study of digital elites pose particular challenges, as we will see, and therefore demands particularly thoughtful approaches to overcoming these familiar hurdles.

Towards a definition of digital elites

From the early days of what is now dubbed "elite studies," observers have linked elites to the institutional centers of power within society. Recent extensions of the power elite tradition (see Philipps (2024) and Christophers (2024), have identified the economic and political power elite as an extremely small, closed, and interconnected group of people who exercise power behind the scenes. When we apply this lens to the digital economy, we see the emergence of a new category of elites capturing the popular imagination. Publics all over the world are familiar with the figure of the startup founder who emerges to stardom from their Silicon Valley garage. As the digital revolution accelerates, our notion of "elites" is also rapidly changing. With each year that passes and digital inclusion increases, the sway of legacy elites continues to weaken as industries across the economy are increasingly dependent on digital technologies. From transportation to media to finance, digital elites wield more and more power over the economy and our attention.

Contemporary tech elites such as AI experts exercise vast power like other tech elites before them, often in conjunction with other kinds of elites in finance, government, and other sectors. Yet, at the same time, it remains unclear exactly who belongs in the charmed circle of the digital elite. Perhaps the best response to this question is that digital elites range from those who own and control digital infrastructure such as the electricity grid, to the "cloud" infrastructure, to those who are building AI as the next generation of computing. Other digital elites are integrating those systems into existing infrastructures from finance to healthcare to media and beyond. Finally, a different segment of the digital elite are digital prosumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) who successfully monetize digital products and services.

Given the immense economic and non-economic changes unleashed by digitization, it is fair to ask to what extent the distinction between the new digital elites and pre-digital power elites in finance, industry, etc. For, no matter the field, pre-digital elites are increasingly beholden to those who control the computational and data infrastructures which power the digital economy (Fourcade and Healy 2024). Those who own and control large stakes in these infrastructures – the digital elites - can garner enormous economic power, even to the extent of rendering other non-digital economic actors dependent "vassals" by exercising their market power as gatekeepers to the digital economy (Varoufakis 2023).

These new elites necessitate new modes of empirical investigation and study. This paper therefore explores how we can adapt existing methods to study elites in the digital era by building on successful research strategies from the larger literature on non-digital elites. Given the global nature of digital technologies, the paper pays particular attention to comparative cross-national research where elites from one country are compared to elites in other countries.

The first section of the paper focuses on sampling and recruitment issues, particularly as they apply to comparative studies of elites. The second part examines the process of data collection and analysis appropriate for the study of both pre-digital and digital elites, with a focus on how traditional methodological approaches must adapt to particular aspects of the new digital elites. As I show, whereas studies of pre-digital elites could solve sampling and recruitment challenges by relying on formal categories, organizational membership, and other markers of elite status salient to the pre-digital stratification order, studies of post-digital elites must look to digital networking sites and digital tools as well as more traditional settings to capture populations in terms of sampling and recruitment strategies.

This discussion thus offers methodological insights that may prove useful for elite researchers looking for approaches to conduct cross-national comparisons of digital elites of many different kinds. This kind of research matters because now, more than ever, digital elites hold disproportionate power in society. Moreover, comparative qualitative studies of elites are particularly rare and yet hold the potential of shedding light on important societal differences and commonalities.

Previous Literature

Much of the qualitative literature on elites has defined elites in terms of occupation, employer culture, income, and geographic placement and used these criteria as the basis for sampling and recruitment. Studies which aspire to carry out cross-national comparisons of traditional elites, such as business elites, have long used workplaces, schools, and other formal organizational sites in order to generate samples of elites and recruit participants for interviews and ethnographic observation.

When we look to the pre-digital era, we see several prominent examples. Such studies have long used these criteria in order to identify comparable units appropriate for comparisons. For example, Calvin Morrill conducted a celebrated ethnography of American business executives for the study The Executive Way (1995). Cross-national studies have also used organizational settings to structure their sampling and recruitment. In their 2002 study of British, American, and Hong Kong banking managers working in offices of the same global company, Wharton and Blair-Loy employed a partial matching strategy which allows them to stage simulated pairwise comparisons between individuals through statistical techniques which replicate quantitative matching. If each individual member of the national groups constitutes an observational case, then the best way to make valid inferences about the effects of societal context is to try to match the observational cases (i.e. the individuals) across national contexts to the fullest extent possible. This matching process lies at the heart of the structured or controlled approach to cross-national research involving individuals as the units of comparison and countries as the contextual cases (Sivesind 1997, Lamont 1992). This is particularly true for cross-national studies of elite business people and government officials.

Crompton and Birkelund first employ an employer-based matching strategy in terms of their respondents' employment contexts. Each group of employees works for different branches of a single transnational bank with a relatively uniform corporate culture (Wharton and Blair-Loy 2002). At the same time, they leverage an individual-level "biographical" matching strategy to find out how the differing sociocultural and institutional environments in the UK and Norway shape the work trajectories of comparable individuals (Crompton and Birkelund 2000). This biographical matching strategy takes individuals' sociodemographic attributes, especially age and gender, and converts these into matching parameters (Smelser 1973). Further strengthening the individual-level comparability between their two groups of male and female bank managers, they also ensure that their Norwegian and British respondents have done similar types of work for similar employers, in this case large retail banks (Crompton and Birkelund 2000: 334-6). These techniques allow them to divvy up the three sets of managers into smaller subsets corresponding to their gender and family status, thereby controlling for these sociodemographic attributes.

Another landmark study is Michéle Lamont's work comparing French and American upper-middle class men. In her landmark study of social boundary-drawing practices in the United States and France among both upper-middle class and working-class men (Lamont 2000, 1992), Lamont exploits a loose type of group-level matching strategy. Because of the variety of occupations and occupational fields represented in both her American and French groups, Lamont can claim that the differences she finds between the American and French cultural repertoires are not specific to particular occupational groups but are diffused throughout the upper-middle class populations in both countries. Thus, this strategy exploits the occupational heterogeneity of each group to identify genuinely cross-national divergences between the groups on "cultural" dimensions of comparison.

In this study, Lamont combines geographic placement with income and employment criteria. Selecting her French and American respondents from two distinct urban areas within each country (one "metropole" and one second-tier city), she winds up with two groups of conationals matched in terms of their geographic placement as well as their occupational status and their gender (Lamont 1992). Lamont is also able to make cross-national comparisons between American and French subgroups who are matched on individual-level attributes such as occupation. Her group-oriented matching strategy stages group-level comparisons first, and then takes advantage of the internal heterogeneity of the two national groups in order to stage subgroup-level comparisons. Here she compares and contrasts more closely matched American and French upper-middle class professional men sharing the same kinds of social backgrounds and other individual-level attributes (Lamont 1992).

Case Study: Comparing French, Norwegian, and American Business Elites

A great example of how these strategies can work together is my trinational study of pre-digital business elites in Paris, Oslo, and the San Francisco Bay Area (Schulz 2015, 2012). In this study both the group-level and individual-level matching strategies are deployed to address sampling and recruitment challenges associated with business elites. This study, designed as a exploratory and generative multicase study, aims at elaborating novel conceptualizations, analytic frames, and explanatory accounts rather than testing prespecified conceptualizations (Luker 2009).

The units of observation which serve as the study's observational cases, the individual men and women included in the three groups of respondents, are treated as empirically "real" units (Ragin 1992). These empirically real units, however, are also analyzed as loci for generic social processes which cut across these cases (Ragin 1992: 8). Each of these empirically real cases thus also belongs to a collection of analytical cases (Small 2009: 25). Because this study focuses on cross-national variation between widely diffused group-level phenomena such as cultural repertoires as well as biographically specific phenomena such as work habits and These various groups were assembled with the aid of several initial recruitment strategies which combined group-level and individual-level matching strategies.

First, members of each conational group share certain biographical profiles: they all attended elite institutions of higher education, all landed jobs with well-regarded employers in the for-profit sector, all are earning high salaries, and all have amassed between a minimum of five and a maximum of eighteen years of work experience. However, the groups exhibit internal heterogeneity with regard to sociodemographic profiles. Each group has a mix of people in their twenties, thirties, and forties. The respondent pool is 75% men and 25% women, a split which mirrors the demographics of the occupation as a whole.

The subgroups of corporate attorneys, engineering managers, and software developers were generated through a different initial recruitment strategy centered around employers. In order to find respondents through this recruitment channel, Schulz first assembled lists of prospective employing organizations in each of the three countries based on his knowledge of the legal and technology sectors. Schulz then contacted gatekeeping individuals at these employing organizations, usually HR personnel who dealt with the public. These gatekeeping personnel put me in touch with professional employees fitting the selection criteria. Although, gatekeeping personnel at three different companies (one in the United States and two in France) did refuse his solicitations, the others cooperated fully and put me in contact with their employees. Those employees who agreed to participate in the study, roughly 80% of all of the employees identified in this way, were happy to contribute to what they knew was a unsponsored research project. Both these individuals and these companies did insist that Schulz keep their names and identities to himself at all stages of the research process.

Finally, in order to round out the conational sets, Schulz turned to a secondary recruitment procedure, namely snowball sampling through alumni networks. The first procedure relied on elite educational institutions and employers as the primary recruitment channels. This recruitment strategy was used to recruit the investment bankers and management consultants for the general sets of conationals. In order to identify promising interview candidates from these two occupational groups, Schulz solicited the assistance of alumni relations departments at top graduate MBA programs in each country (two in France, two in Norway, and three in the United States) in order to obtain the names and contact information of their alumni who had gone to employment at one of the major management consultancies or investment banking houses. Any MBA graduate who had worked for four years or more at any of these firms was eligible for selection. Once potential respondents had been located, they were initially contacted by email and then by phone.

In order to analyze the biographically specific dimensions of comparison, the study also replicates the biographical matching strategy used to such effect by Crompton and Birkelund. Within each set of conationals is a smaller subset of respondents who are much more closely matched across countries than the members of the larger sets. This employer-based recruitment strategy was also used to assemble the fully-matched subsets of management consultants described previously. The occupationally and biographically matched subsets of conationals are matched on every important sociodemographic dimension of interest, all male between the ages of 26 and 36. Most importantly, the fifteen members each subset are matched in terms of employment/work context, as they have all spent a minimum of four years working as post-MBA/MA management consultants for one particular Big Three management consultancy, a global company with an extremely standardized and uniform corporate culture across its American and European branch offices. Because of their tenure at the firm, the members of these subsets can be said to have experienced nearly identical organizational cultures, and endured nearly identical pressures and

demands on their time and energies. This matching strategy makes it possible to arrive at a number of inferences regarding the consequences of societal context for the individual-level trajectories of their respondents in the realms of work and family life.

Data-Gathering Procedures: Semi-Structured Conversational Interviews

Next, I used examples from my study of pre-digital business elites to examine the ways in which interview data from elites can be gathered and analyzed. Additionally, I extrapolate from this experience insights which could serve to guide data collection on emergent digital elites.

My pre-digital trinational study was designed to generate analytic frames by moving back and forth from observations to theory-laden hypotheses and generalizations (Alford 1998: 27-29). It poses open-ended research questions and then gathers the maximal amount of empirical evidence potentially relevant to these questions. This process of induction proceeds largely along the lines proposed by Glaser and Strauss in their grounded theory manifestoes (Glaser 1978, Glaser and Strauss 1967). Following their "iterative" approach to induction, the study carries out repeated rounds of analysis and repeated rounds of conceptualization, bringing the theoretical constructs and the data into ever closer alignment (Luker 2009, Dey 1999, Alford 1998).

The bulk of the data gathered for my study was obtained through a series of semi-structured conversational face-to-face interviews carried out in Oslo, Paris, and the Bay Area. All of the interviews were done at a time and location chosen by the respondent. Two of the Bay Area respondents elected to do the interview in my home, and roughly 20% of the respondents in each country preferred to hold the interviews in their offices during business hours. The majority of the interviews in each locale, however, took place in public venues such as restaurants, cafes, and pubs either during the lunch hour or after work hours around 5:00 in the evening. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Special care was taken to record each interview for subsequent verbatim transcription. I conducted all of the interviews in Oslo and the Bay Area by myself while roughly half of the Paris interviews were carried out by myself and a French-speaking colleague in residence at the École Normale Supérieure who acted as a translator. With respect to the interviews carried out in Oslo with the Norwegian interviewees, roughly one-third were carried out in English during my initial fieldwork stint. The remainder of the interviews were done in Norwegian once I had acquired sufficient mastery of spoken Norwegian during follow-up stints. While it took considerable amounts of time and energy to gain sufficient proficiency in spoken Norwegian, it was well-worth the effort, as it enhanced the quality of the interviews. Although at least 60% of my Norwegian respondents spoke fluent English and about eight of them could pass for a native English speaker, the remaining Norwegians clearly preferred to do the interviews in their native tongue. Further, all of the Norwegians took it as a sign of my seriousness and commitment to the project that I had made the effort to learn their somewhat obscure language. After conducting each interview, I wrote up a brief memo listing some of my thoughts about those aspects of interview material relevant to the study.

The semi-structured interviews themselves served two distinct analytic purposes. First, they gave me access to the respondents' recollections of events, decisions, and processes going on at the time of the interview and during the past which preceded the interview, as well as their interpretations of these first-person phenomena. As other analysts have noted, qualitative interviews work well as a means of securing retrospective narratives about their "already-experienced" lives, as well as prospective expectations and aspirations regarding their futures (Gerson 2010: 233, Orrange 2007, Weiss 1994). The interviews succeeded in giving me a good sense of the events and decisions which had shaped the respondents' life histories in the domains of education, work, leisure, and family life (Elder Jr. and Giele 2009) and, indirectly, the ways in which these experiential domains connected with macrosocial structures. They provided for material which enabled me to bridge the gaps between positionalities, macro-structures, institutional logics, and interior worlds (Maynes et al 2008: 16, 41).

The interviews also served as ways of probing the cultural worlds of the respondents, attempts to elicit the more or less well-articulated ritual vocabularies and codes which individuals use to render their experiences of working life and private life meaningful and socially acceptable (Rubin and Rubin 1995). In probing the "sociocultural frameworks" (Blair-Loy 2003: 195) which the respondents used to frame these experiences, the interviews were designed to unearth the body of cultural resources (Swidler 2001) which the respondents press into service when they are asked to make retrospective and prospective sense of their engagements with working life, with their careers, with leisure, and with family life. By tapping into this reservoir of cultural resources, the interviews expose to view the stock of scripts, accounts, and narratives which the individuals have at their disposal by virtue of their exposure to a distinctive cultural environment (Lamont 2000, 1992).

While the interviews were structured in a loose and flexible manner consistent with the methodological tenets of qualitative research, they did contain some set questions which were posed in the same form to every

respondent. This rigidity was necessitated by the study's explicitly comparative approach. Further, many of the questions posed to the respondents aimed at eliciting "generalized accounts" (Weiss 1994: 73) of such experiences as overwork, moments of extreme satisfaction and dissatisfaction at work and outside work, episodes where work commitments came into conflict with private obligations, and so forth. Finally, because the interviews were intended to capture the interpretative frameworks relating to respondents' experiences of working life and private life, they incorporated a variety of open-ended, hypothetical, vignette-based and third-person questions designed to elicit respondents' general orientations and "policies" towards these domains (Swidler 2001).

Analytic Procedures: Data Reduction and Analysis

The corpus of data collected through the interviews and life calendars was subjected to a iterative process of empirical-theoretical coding. This "rolling" process allowed for a repeated tacking back and forth between the empirical and theoretical tracks of analysis (Alford 1998). Through multiple rounds of data coding and analysis, I slowly maneuvered the data and the most analytically useful and applicable "theory frames" (Rueschemeyer 2009) into closer and closer alignment with each other. More concretely, I took the behaviors, orientations, discourses, perceptions, goals, and interactions making up the actual data and put them in dialogue with a variety of conceptualizations and abstractions. While most of these conceptualizations were informed by theory frames plucked opportunistically from the symbolic interactionist, Bourdieuian, rational choice, and other theoretical traditions within the sociological field, others were devised de novo for the occasion.

Because the point of the study was to elucidate and explain contrasts and similarities between the three groups of respondents partially matched on individual-level attributes, the coding process had to make use of both theme-codes and variable-codes (Sivesind 1999). Sivesind (Sivesind 1999) defines theme-codes as codes attached to "text-bits with a more or less clear relevance for a certain theme" He goes on to write that theme-codes may signify multidimensional variation and therefore lack the structure of a variable-code. The identification of these text chunks was facilitated by the qualitative data analysis package MaxQDA, which enables the rapid coding and sorting of interview data.

As the bread and butter of qualitative analysis, theme-codes were central to the coding of the focal dimensions of comparison. They were indispensable in the coding of interview material dealing with dimensions of comparison such as hard work scripts, work hours routines, orientations towards long-hours work and business travel, experiences of negative or positive feedback from significant others regarding working life, stances towards unstructured leisure time, balancing working commitments and family obligations. Theme-codes made it possible to construct analytic frames which would structure the formulation of hypotheses relating to these focal dimensions of interest. By contrast, variable-oriented codes served a more limited function in the coding operations. These codes only came into play in the coding operations relating to the respondent's background characteristics, characteristics such as sociodemographic attributes, occupational fields, employment contexts and the like (Sivesind 1999: 365-7).

The mechanics of the coding process were simple and straightforward, but very time-consuming. The process began with the formulation of some general problematics which could give direction to my initial attempts to classify and categorize the phenomena under study in ways that would permit meaningful comparisons across the individual-level cases (Strauss and Corbin 1998). For example, the coding which I carried out in order to lay the groundwork for the chapter dealing with the evening hours began with some basic descriptive coding of the respondents' practices and orientations vis-a-vis the weekday evenings. In subsequent rounds of classificatory coding, I grouped these practices and orientations into "clusters" distinguished by clearly defined properties and boundaries (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In the next rounds of coding, I took these clusters of routines, practices, and orientations and abstracted from them essential properties which could provide a toehold for a useful theory-frame.

For example, when re-coding the interview material from the respondents who habitually worked late into the evening, I noticed that their orientations came in two "flavors." The first flavor of orientation was an orientation organized around the principle of heeding only the signals given by one's workplace social environment and one's significant others outside this environment (Schulz 2015). This orientation was characteristically American, I found. The second flavor of orientation, exemplified by the French respondents, was organized around the principle of behaving in line with expectations attached to status group affiliation (Schulz 2012). A similar bifurcation in orientational patterns appeared when I analyzed the interview material from respondents who often left the office relatively early. With respect to these instances of evening orientations, the same pattern of attending exclusively to the signals given by one's workplace environment turned up among the Bay Area respondents. These early leavers also attended to the signals of their workplace, except that their workplaces gave them the license to quit early. Again, however, many of those who respondents who habitually left their offices at 5:00 PM or before did so because they

felt it was part and parcel of a "normal" daily round. This flavor of early departure was visible among the Norwegian respondents who felt that, in leaving the office before 5:00 PM, they were acting in a "responsible" manner befitting someone who had or would have familial responsibilities requiring them to be at home at a "reasonable" hour (Schulz 2015).

New Sampling and Recruitment Strategies for Elusive Elites

As these case studies illustrates, where pre-digital elites such as traditional business elites are concerned, their organizational context plays a vital role in allowing for meaningful individual-level matching across societal contexts. This still remains true to a large extent for professional digital elites with traditional jobs, as many digital elites work in formal organizationally-anchored employment settings. At the same time, with the rise of digital prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), other kinds of digital elites have risen to prominence. These digital elites are not necessarily tied to any organization, and so they can be called *elusive elites*.

As they are not tied to organizational workplaces or educational institutions, elusive elites require new types of identification, sampling, and recruitment strategies. This is all the more important when the research project is cross-national and comparative. Fortunately, the digital age offers some new ways of tackling this challenge. In my current work I am using LinkedIn, a global social networking site (SNS) which serves as a professional intermediary to generate a respondent pool based on both workplace and network sampling.

LinkedIn is a perfect tool for the identification, sampling, and recruitment of digital business elites, both within and across countries. LinkedIn has become the social network site of choice for professionals across many occupations, employers, and countries, and has also become extremely popular among freelancers and entrepreneurs (Sharone 2017). LinkedIn provides for the application of many different search criteria for this purpose. First, within the universe of first-degree contacts, it is possible to identify individuals who work for particular employers in a particular position or role, and then to cross-check salary and wage information with sites such as GlassDoor in the United States. For instance, a targeted cross-national comparative study of AI experts could leverage LinkedIn to identify and recruit current employees and alumni of firms such as DeepMind and Anthropic, as the vast majority of professionals working at these firms have LinkedIn pages. Also, because these professionals have links to non-US professionals in the same field, when one begins with a large network, it is easy to identify first-degree contacts within a particular industry from other countries. Once individuals are assimilated into the universe of first-degree contacts, it is easy to obtain their sociodemographic information, geographic location, employment histories, and information about current professional positions necessary to assemble a group of conational respondents which can be compared to another group in a different country. Such a research design and recruitment strategy can be used with practically any occupational group, whether broadly defined, such as programmers, or narrowly defined, such as AI specialists.

While SNS such as LinkedIn can be used in order to assemble occupationally matched groups of business elites, the more elusive prosumer elites may necessitate different sampling and recruitment strategies. Online content creator elites, for example, might be considered to be individuals who are able to successfully “monetize” their online presence within and across social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, etc. Some social scientists have used online crawling methods to estimate the audience sizes and monetization potential of particular online content creators on YouTube, for instance. Rieder et al finds that, out of some 40 million YouTube channels available on the platform in 2019, fewer than 150,000 could be said to earn a replacement income corresponding to a full-time salary (Rieder et al 2023). Ethnographic researchers have already begun to focus on these elites by identifying hubs of content creation activity. For example, a recent study of elite Facebook content creators affiliated with a “content farm” which had an offline presence on the US West Coast uses ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews to characterize the activities of elite content creators on Facebook who worked as contractors for this centralized entity (Mears and Bauvais 2025).

In addition, any cross-national comparative work on these types of elites will benefit from this kind of data collection now and in the future. In principle it would be possible to randomly sample channels with over a certain threshold of subscribers and then cross-reference these identified creators with other online sites in order to obtain sociodemographic data, employment history, etc. In a slightly different way, one could use online platforms to identify members of the “gig elite” (Ravenelle, A.J. et al. 2021) who populate consumer-facing platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, Upwork, and so forth, by examining the distribution of hourly rates, and then contact these individuals through the platform.

These methods of identifying and recruiting research participants through digital platforms of various kinds suggest that even the more elusive kinds of digital elites can be identified and studied through qualitative methods.

However, in order to do so, researchers must find creative ways to enlist the digital platforms on which these elites appear and achieve their elite status.

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