

## EDITORIAL

# Mobilizing Social Sciences for improved understanding of and better response to the COVID-19 pandemic: e-research as a way forward

E-research has made several inroads into social sciences long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the world. But during the pandemic not only e-research multiplied as a brand of social research, often it became the only feasible approach to social research in the pandemic affected world. This is because physical fieldwork in general and ethnographic research, in particular, are not feasible during the pandemic due to the risks it poses to researchers and the people subjected to social research and a whole range of ethical issues confronting the social researchers at the time of this massive public health emergency and related social crisis. This editorial seeks to highlight some of the lessons learnt from e-research in social sciences during the pandemic globally with a view to chart the way forward for social science research and educational programs in Sri Lanka.

E-research encompasses the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to conduct social research using internet, or the Net as it is increasingly referred to in the literature, to access available information in the Net inclusive of social media and to generate new information about identified social issues using google form and similar internet-based data collection instruments. The potential of e-research became increasingly evident during the pandemic. For instance, social media became a significant platform for dissemination of information, including considerable misinformation and hate speech throughout the world. Social media itself became a major subject of enquiry

for capturing the public mood during the pandemic, inclusive of anxiety, fear, hate, hope as well as mutual support, charity, philanthropy, and humanitarian assistance, sharing of some useful health information and maintaining an element of connectivity in the midst of lockdowns, mobility restrictions, working from home, shutdown of schools and universities and zoom classes for students ranging from kindergarten to post-graduate education. On the other hand, online surveys became so important to monitor knowledge and attitudes about the disease, views about vaccination programs, poverty and living standards, domestic violence, psychological wellbeing, religious activity, and governance issues as impacted by the pandemic<sup>1</sup>.

In an innovative initiative of e-research funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), selected students from Brooklyn College in New York City located in the epicenter of the pandemic during its onset in the east coast of the United States, conducted autoethnographies<sup>1</sup> documenting their life experiences during the pandemic<sup>2</sup>. The inequality enhancing impact of the pandemic as it devastated the disadvantaged students from Black, Latino and Asian communities in inner-city areas of New York city were brought out from this series of studies also informing educational authorities as well as city administration about the needs of these students in respect of food security, financial support and online education during the pandemic (Reyes 2020). This is a clear example of how social science research conducted



by educated community members can contribute to public policy making through raising the awareness of relevant authorities about the actual experience of disadvantaged communities during this unprecedented humanitarian crisis of a global magnitude.

One of the important lessons learnt in this project also relates to the prospect of e-research for raising public awareness among affected communities so that they learn from each other, not only about the problems encountered, but also about ways of responding to the challenges taking advantage of networking within and among the affected communities. The Net provides an efficient and fast track tool to document research findings and share the research results between researchers and policy makers as well as between researchers and the affected communities in ways that help them to identify and advocate for policies and programs that are effective in dealing with the problems. In other words, e-research can be an effective tool for advancing knowledge and empowering communities through sharing of accurate information in an actionable format. Autoethnographies, in particular, are expected to influence the social life in ways that change it for the better from the angle of people living in the relevant communities. As against the conventional ethnographies conducted by interested visitors from outside purely for academic purposes, autoethnographies engage educated community members in a self-reflective manner in ways that encourage them to identify effective remedies for the problems encountered through their unique vantage point as community members as well as trained social researchers. Another important dimension of autoethnography is its implications for breaking the dichotomy between the researcher and the researched, the perennial and troubling heritage of anthropology and its colonial roots.

E-research calls for a social science research methodology training rather different from conventional research methodology training provided by the universities. Apart from imparting required IT skills, knowledge about ICT-based research tool kits and analytical procedures that treat and reflect on qualitative and quantitative data generated through internet, it should also provide a grounding in a variety of relevant analytical frameworks such as Actor Network Theory (ANT). As an analytical perspective ANT explores interplay between human and non-human actors such as viruses as well as society and technology interfaces that came to the foreground during the pandemic response. It is important for researchers to understand the strengths and limitations and ethical dilemmas encountered in application of e-research in social sciences. The digital divide in society is a key challenge encountered in applications such as online surveys in a country such as

Sri Lanka where internet access has increased following the widespread introduction of mobile phones with nearly 150 percent mobile phone-ownership in the population, but internet access itself is limited to some 34 percent of the population due to poor internet access in some parts of the country as well as due to problems associated with poor purchasing power and problems related to devices available in different population strata (see also Attygalle *et al.* in this issue). The experiences in the country in respect of online education confirm the multiple challenges encountered, particularly by the low-income segments of the population at a time they are simultaneously hit by risk of infection, income losses and livelihood disturbances. On the other hand, many possibilities for diversifying educational experiences through e-learning have also emerged during the pandemic (Weeratunga *et al.*, 2021).

UK's National Centre for E-Social Sciences (NCeSS) established in 2003 can be seen as a model to follow in terms of establishing infrastructure needed for facilitating e-research in the social sciences. This includes formation of suitable research hubs and nodes, sharing of data bases among researchers and funding e-research on high-priority topics of global and national interest. The research community must be geared to contribute to and critically engage with platforms of this nature supporting knowledge production needed for social development. On the other hand, if Social Sciences are to be a catalyst of social change globally, similar infrastructural services must be extended to the developing world as well.

Against this background, it is important that the social science community in Sri Lanka becomes familiar with prospects of e-research in facing the challenges posed by the pandemic and post-pandemic society. In this respect it is quite fitting that this particular issue of the Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences brings out a few studies employing some aspects of e-research. For instance, in Cinthuja's study an online survey was conducted for assessing job satisfaction among physiotherapy professionals distributed throughout Sri Lanka. In several studies, the literature survey involved internet-based procedures to screen, identify and select the relevant research publications on a topic. For instance, the article by Reis on democracy and challenges of globalization uses a systematic online literature survey using Scopus to identify and analyze thematically the key literature relating to the positive and negative impact of globalization on democratic reconfigurations in the post-modern world. The article by Attygalle *et al.* in this issue found that 30 percent of the school-going sample surveyed relied on internet as a source of information on mental health where help-seeking behavior may be inhibited by the stigma associated with mental health in Sri Lanka.

Finally, it is important to realize that there is much more we can gain from the Net in both accessing available information as well as generating new information needed for understanding social issues in the contemporary world. While advancing the potential of social sciences, e-research may also create new avenues for interdisciplinary research. E-research provides new opportunities for social networking among different members of a research team and different research teams operating from the North and the South as well as networking between researchers and the researched. Also, virtual communities of different types and daily exchanges via internet, zoom meetings, email, and tools like WhatsApp have become such an important aspect of our day-to-day social reality making the distinction between online and offline rather artificial. E-research not only charts an evolving methodological innovation in social sciences but also a new frontier in sharing social science knowledge with the public at large. These new developments should be captured in all its complexity in any contemporary social research, no matter who is conducting research, what methodology and perspective s/he uses and where s/he operates from.

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## END NOTES

1. For a recent study of the role of religion during the pandemic in Sri Lanka using e-research procedures, see Silva *et al.* (2021)
2. As a new extension of the ethnographic approach, autoethnographies use the actual life experiences of the researcher in her or his natural community as a tool for understanding the social world, having been educated in anthropology, sociology or any other social science.
3. For details about this project see, <https://www.aaihs.org/tag/autoethnographies/>

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