

*Research Paper*

**Interviewing by Internations: A methodological discussion to explore special representation in Mali**

*Entrevistas pela Internations : Uma discussão metodológica para explorar uma representação especial no Mali*

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**ABSTRACT**

Given the exponential development in technology, researchers have more and better possibilities to conduct qualitative research through Internet. There are a growing number of contributions that take into account online interviewing, its different uses and advances. However, the relation between social networking sites and interpretative research is perhaps the less studied among the opportunities offered by Internet for investigation. In this article, we explore the benefits, disadvantages and ethical issues of interviewing by Internations, a social networking site that its main goal is to connect expatriates worldwide. Through a case study method, in which we interview five Malian emigrants on the extension of their rights of representation in the home-country national legislature (special representation), we provide new insights on how a social networking site may help to generate new knowledge. All the interviewees provide information that challenges scientific articles, books and databases, among others, that indicate Mali has a provision that enables special representation. Empirical evidence also points out flexibly, the reduction of distance and mobilisation expenses as the core advantages of the website for research.

**Keywords:** Online Interviewing, Internations, Social Networks, Special Representation, Migration.

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## RESUMO

Dado o desenvolvimento exponencial da tecnologia, os investigadores têm mais e melhores possibilidades de conduzir investigações qualitativas através da Internet. Há um número crescente de contribuições que têm em conta entrevistas on-line, diferentes usos e avanços. No entanto, a relação existente entre sites de redes sociais e investigação interpretativa é talvez o campo menos estudado entre as oportunidades oferecidas pela Internet para a investigação. Neste artigo, exploramos os benefícios, desvantagens e questões éticas das entrevistas pela Internations, um site de redes sociais cujo principal objetivo é conectar expatriados em todo o mundo. Através do método de estudo de caso, no qual entrevistámos cinco emigrantes do Mali sobre a extensão dos seus direitos de representação na legislatura nacional (representação especial) do país de origem, fornecemos novos *insights* sobre como é que um site de rede social pode ajudar a gerar novos conhecimentos. Todos os entrevistados fornecem informações que desafiam artigos científicos, livros e bases de dados, entre outros, que indicam que o Mali tem uma disposição que permite uma representação especial. Evidências empíricas também aponta com flexibilidade, para a redução da distância e despesas de mobilização como as principais vantagens do site para a investigação.

**Palavras-chave:** Entrevistas on-line, Internations, Redes Sociais, Representação Especial, Migração.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the benefits, disadvantages and ethical issues of interviewing by social networking sites. Through a case study method, in which we interview five Malian emigrants on the extension of their citizenship rights, particularly their political representation in the home-country National Assembly (special representation), we give new insights on how a social networking site like Internations<sup>1</sup> may help to provide new knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Internations is a social network site whose main purpose is to connect expatriates around the world.

Given the exponential development in technology, social scientists have more and better opportunities to conduct online interviews (Hooley, Wellens & Marriott, 2012). As Cater (2011) and Rezabek (2000) indicate, Internet has (re)shaped the ways in which we research, it has extended the reach and reduced the communication limitations of geographically scattered individuals and groups, such as migrants. In fact, Internet provides a revolutionary way of gathering both primary and secondary data (Curasi, 2001).

Online interviewing grants different ways to collect data. James & Busher (2009) have established two categories to illustrate the use of Internet in interpretative research: (1) synchronic and (2) asynchronous methods. Both in-depth and semi structured interviews, as well as focus groups through discussion forums, have gained popularity among specialists in social sciences as asynchronous techniques of online communication (Orgad, 2005; James & Busher, 2016). Likewise, videoconference platforms, like Instant Messenger or Skype, are examples of synchronic research methods (see Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Janghorbar, Roudsari & Taghipor, 2014; Stieger & Gortiz, 2006; Sullivan, 2012). The latter, unlike asynchronous methods, offers questions and answers in real time as it establishes a direct link between the interviewee and the interviewer (James & Busher, 2016).

## **2. CONCEPTUALIZING ONLINE INTERVIEWING**

The literature regarding the use of Internet to collect data is extensive. In qualitative research, multiple approaches have been produced to theoretically discuss this subject. There is a growing number of contributions that take into consideration the use of Internet for research: its different scopes (e.g. Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009; Rezabek, 2000), the development of new methods to examine and process data, as well as its ethical concerns (e.g. Janghorbar, Roudsari & Taghipour, 2014; James & Busher, 2016). However, not all the scholars that explore the relation between data collection tools and Internet maintain an optimistic perspective. Cooper (2009), for instance, forewarns that this relation requires a serious and deeper analysis.

In spite of the possible advantage of qualitative research in the digital realm - highlighted by James and Busher in the following quote: “the online interview presents both methodological and ethical potential and versatility in social science research” (2009, p. 6)-, Cooper (2009) believes that online interviewing is not as easy as it seems.

This author recommends further discussion on ethical considerations and the credibility of the data gathered by online research in order to strictly justify its use.

Internet websites may be public but the researchers can still interfere with the privacy of the users (James & Busher, 2009). Scholars, in effect, have found a higher chance of infringing ethical boundaries during online processes (James & Busher, 2016). Hence, there are several elements to take into account for online interviewing. The first element is the participants' safety and informed consent. While Moore, Mckee & Mclouglin (2015) explicitly advocate a similar behaviour regarding the requirement of informed consent as in face-to-face interviewing, authors like Hodgson (2004) suggest paying further attention to transparency in the online research process, due to the nature and context of the Internet. The second element refers to the requirement of assuring the participants' privacy, confidentiality and autonomy. Following James & Busher's (2016) argumentative guidelines, online interviews supposedly bring more risks in this area and it is important to be aware of the differences among the employed methods. The participants' trust could be affected in an interview using asynchronous methods, since they are not necessarily present when the researcher formulates the questions and waits for their answers in real time. On the other hand, scholars should consider that each channel or communication method requires previous adjustment. If a researcher expects to conduct a face-to-face interview, there should be an introduction about the methodological extent and informed consent, as well as an assurance of both confidentiality and correct use of the information. The participants must be aware of their rights before using and/or completing the data collection tool (James & Busher, 2009).

The use of online interviews, either synchronic or asynchronous, offers a diverse range of benefits: for instance, it reduces physical distance, travel costs (Edmunds, 1999) and the procedures seem to be faster than in person (James & Busher, 2016). Following the statements of Rezabek (2000), this may be, of course, an advantage in situations where the individuals involved are from a specific area and in which, particularly, the research design is qualitative due to its representativeness does not entirely lean on a probabilistic aim. "The ability to communicate electronically, becomes a great asset when geographic distances are considered" (Rezabek, 2000, p. 3).

Online interviewing also increases the participants' flexibility and it can enhance the participants' venue (James & Busher, 2016). Despite of the Internet access rate which

will be discussed below, online research can provide access to hard-to-reach units of analysis such as business travellers and professionals who have a complex office schedule to be in the (research) sample (Rezabek, 2000). Interviewing through Internet may also offer a comfortable and convenient way of collaborating in a research (Edmunds, 1999). For example, people with physical disability or with immigrant status can be part of a research without having to leave their house.

James and Busher (2016) also mention some disadvantages such as: (1) the possible existence of interruptions during the conversation product of low-quality connection (if it is an online synchronic interview); (2) an increase of the participants' distraction level; (3) unequal access to Internet; or (4) disappearance/limitations of the participants' non-verbal language.

Indeed, it is important to indicate that these benefits and disadvantages are not equally present in all cases. There are several factors that make a difference during the research process, for instance a study via Skype to interview individuals living in the United States or Western Europe differs from a study conducted to individuals residing in low-income countries, using the same research tool. In the second part of this example, we could assume that the Internet access rate would be lower in comparison to the first case, decreasing the probabilities of heterogeneity.

Another factor that distinguishes the use of online tools to collect data is representativeness (Curasi, 2001). When researchers would like to use Internet, they need to be aware of the percentage of individuals that have access to Internet. If Internet is a way to connect people, the representativeness is possibly higher. On the contrary, if certain social classes or groups are not using it, the criterion of representativeness tends to be lower. In other words, if a researcher would like to conduct a qualitative research regarding the application of a specific law of tax modification, and they plan to make using online interviews in order to know the perception of the affected population, they must be aware that their population is smaller, and probably more homogenous, than if they perform fieldwork.

### **3. SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKING SITES**

Even though the literature regarding online interviewing is diverse, there are definitely many features left to analyse and understand. The use of social networking sites is, perhaps, the less explored among the opportunities offered by Internet in this context.

Social networking sites, defined as web based services that allow the interaction, articulation and construction of links between users (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), could at the same time be very useful as data collection tools (Fontes & O'Mahony, 2008).

Nowadays, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram are the social networking sites with most users around the world (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010). Nevertheless, platforms to supply specific needs have been surging lately. Internations, a site that successfully unites expatriates all over the world, is one example.

Internations grants expatriates the opportunity of establishing contact with users from both their host society and home country. In most situations, the use seems to be social and for job-hunting, however this platform offers a broad set of ways to connect people. Users in Internations, as the vast majority of social networking sites, have demonstrated a considerable level of participation in public interest matters.

In Internations, multiple discussion forums with different goals and purposes can be found. To illustrate this, after the earthquake in Ecuador on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Ecuadorians residing abroad have created a space on this website to collaborate in the emergency supply of the most affected areas. Internations offers the possibility of interacting individually with other users via direct messaging as well. For this reason, Internations is considered as an ideal tool to interview expatriates with the purpose of knowing more about their perception regarding the extension of their citizenship rights by their home countries.

#### **4. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

In this sense, Malians expatriates formally registered on Internations are our unit of analysis, approximately 175 individuals (up to January 2016) which represents a low number, considering the total amount of 869.894 Malians in the world according to United Nations Census (2013).

Historically, Mali has had a strong migration tradition. Its multifarious circumstances encompass the undeniable strategic position of this country for the trans-Saharan trade, the discovery of the gold mines in Kayes and Sikasso (southern provinces), the ethnic conflicts in the recent decades, among the political instability and economic crises made both internal and external (e)migration, a way to survive.

After the coup d'état in 1991 in which the political regime changed in favour of

democracy, Malians authorities included several incentives for their people residing abroad. The National Conference of 1991 wrote another constitution alongside Malians residing abroad. The government officially recognized the importance of the Malians afar and granted them political rights as the external vote (Dedieu, 2013) as well as the expectancy of 13 reserved seats for emigrant representatives in the (reformed) National Assembly.

Nowadays, many scholars worldwide identify Mali as a case that has enacted and implemented this type of representation for emigrants (Diop, 2006; Imperato & Imperato, 2008; Northey, 2014; Salih, 2005), well known by the scholars as special representation. Nevertheless, as far as this provision for granting emigrant political representation goes, neither the current representatives nor any other visible-at-first-sight trace of special representation can be found in Mali.

## **5. RESEARCH AIMS**

This article thus explores the following questions:

- (1) Does special representation exist in Mali?
- (2) Has this provision been legislated and/or implemented in the National Assembly of Mali in favour of emigrants?
- (3) If yes, under which circumstances and what it occurred?

## **6. METHOD**

The research design of this article assumes a qualitative approach. It is an exploratory study where we aim to reflect on the perspectives of the participating subjects, the communication that links the researcher with the fieldwork and other members for the production of knowledge, as Flick (1998; quoted in Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2006) highlighted. We thus employ a case study method to generate in-depth information about the unit of analysis. In line with the statements of Gerring and Seawright (2008), Mali, in this context, can be conceived as a deviant case because it being the only African country that, according to the literature, has legislated and/or implemented the special representation, although on the National Assembly website and in formal documents this provision does not yet exist.

To clarify and generate new insights about this inquiry, we use semi-structured interviews to gather empirical evidence that is not available anywhere else. The

information is gathered bearing in mind the following criteria: (1) geographical diversity in the sample; (2) confidentiality; and (3) anonymity. Following the latter, the interviews are coded and identified by capital letter (e.g. A, B, C and so on).

The questionnaire presents open questions based on the literature about migrant political transnational practices. More precisely, it inquires on the Malians external voting and special representation. With this conceptual insight, mainly provided by authors as Collyer (2013; 2014), Dedieu (2013), IDEA (2007) or Lafleur (2013), we create the categories for this study (see Table 1).

Category	Definition	Sub-categories
External voting	A “voting from outside the boundaries of the state” (Collyer, 2013, p. 8). According to IDEA (2007), there are 115 national territories that allow this type of electoral process.	Type of election Access to vote Frequency of voting from abroad
Special representation	Special representation or emigrant political representation in the (home-country) national legislatures occurs when a home country grants extra-territorial citizens (Bauböck, 1994). Thus, emigrants can directly elect their representatives through the existence of electoral districts in the transnational realm (Collyer, 2014).	Level of knowledge on the representation rights Experience of voting for special representatives Contact with the representatives

**Table 1** - Identification of categories

## 7. Empirical evidence

We gathered 5 semi-structured interviews on Internations (see Table 2). All the interviewees had a legal age and have been registered to vote from abroad on the moment we interviewed them.



Interview ID	Gender	Home (City/Country)	Country	Host Society (City/Country)
A	Masculine	Bamako/Mali		Grenoble/France
B	Feminine	Segou/Mali		Riad/Saudi Arabia
C	Masculine	Bamako/Mali		Port-au-Prince/Haiti
D	Masculine	Bamako/Mali		Gaziantep/Turkey
E	Masculine	Bamako/Mali		Dakar/Senegal

**Table 2** - Socio-demographic profile of the interviewees

The quality of the answers differed according to the interests and the knowledge of the interviewees regarding the political development of their home country. Nonetheless, the participants proved to have enough understanding of the situation to contribute with the research.

The most valuable answer was obtained from the interviewee A. The participant was a political science student when the interview took part. He was aware of the technical terms, the conceptual framework of the research and the importance of this issue in the political area. In fact, he helped to establish contact with other relevant actors in Mali that ratified his perception.

The participant A also mentioned that the provision for special representation is a continuous promise from the Malian government. The current president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, according to the perspective of participant A, has offered to re-establish emigrant seats in the National Assembly of Mali when he was a candidate; however, this expectation has not been fulfilled yet.

All the participants answered the questionnaire individually via direct messages on Internations. We did not want to upload the questions in the forum of Malians residing abroad, as an intentional purpose. We sustain that this decision enable us to gather information only in one type of online communication methods (the asynchronous one). In this sense and, fully conscious of the possibilities of this asynchronous method, all the participants had a considerable level of flexibility to answer the questions. Before proceeding with the interview, the informed consent was required, the extent of the research was explained, as well as how the answers would be used, stressing that their participation was completely voluntary.

The experience of interviewing on Internations was fruitful, regarding the context of the

research undergone. The subject of this research is new and slightly explored by the scholars worldwide. In particular, the literature does not articulate a reflection on Internations like a research tool.

Internations allows contacting a growing number of people around the world. Nevertheless, many of these users do not utilize this social networking site regularly. Indeed, it is possible to find evidence, but the time that it takes to get the answers from the participants can be longer than in face-to-face setting. Specifically, it can take months after finishing the fieldwork on this website, because the responses depend on the frequency that users connect to the website. In this way, the vast majority of the participants confessed they had not checked their Internations' accounts in several weeks.

Despite the access to a great quantity of individuals, this website can represent a limitation for the research. Even though the questionnaire was sent to more than 40 people that had previously accepted to take part in the study, only 5 of them answered the questions thoroughly. This may represent a high percentage of indifference, which could be directly related to the participants' level of engagement. At the same time, the flexibility previously mentioned, can add a delay for obtaining an answer. It thus affects the in-depth analysis of specific topics.

After evaluating both the benefits and limitations that Internations figures, its use as a data collection tool could present some ethical issues, like the quality of the information and the characteristics of the registered population: people with internet access, interested in establishing contact with their peers, among others. At first sight, the use of interviews via direct messaging does not completely replace a traditional face-to-face interview, which could attain more details and better explanations from the participants. Additionally, the researcher does not perceive the interviewees' non-verbal language. These elements could be a threat to the general results of the study if interviews are the main data collection tool. This is why it is recommended to compliment the research with other *in situ* methods.

Finally, considering that the individuals' participation rate may not be the expected one, it is necessary to analyse if the information obtained is significant and will be valuable to the study. In other words, if there is the possibility of attaining results and conclusions that will contribute academically in spite of not gathering a considerable

number of answers that will allow to the generation of work hypothesis and/or new knowledge.

## **8. FINAL REMARKS**

Focusing in the relation between the (e)migrants and their countries of origin, several sources (Center for Systematic Peace, 2010; Diop, 2006; Freedom House, n. d.; Imperato & Imperato, 2008; Northey, 2014; Tripod, African Elections Data Base, n.d.) point out the existence of 13 representatives in the National Assembly of Mali, directly elected by Malians residing abroad in order to address their demands. However, all the interviewees affirmed they did not know of the existence of such deputies. In fact, the five participants declared they only vote for presidential elections and not for parliamentarians.

This evidence was useful to undergo a more in-depth research, discovering a provision to designate 13 seats in the National Assembly for the representatives of Malians residing abroad (e.g. Ordinance N° 91-076/P-CTSP, published in 1991, and later abolished by Ordinance N° 96-057 in 1996), which was never implemented. In other words, making use of Internations in this case to contrast the information obtained in bibliographical references, was successful.

In general terms, it should be mentioned that social networking sites such as Internations, which have a large amount of registered users, reduce geographical distance and mobility expenses, as well as the researcher's pursue his unit of analysis. In addition, there is a greater flexibility and freedom to respond for the participants. Nonetheless, the fact that the success of online communication media depends on the users' Internet access, supposes its first disadvantage. Its second limitation would be the level of interest and knowledge of the issue presented to the interviewees. The existence of the remaining 35 users that agreed to undergo the interview but did not answer in the end, could be translated as being unaware and/or indifference, total or partial, of the topic. It could also be assumed that their condition as emigrants is not necessary and/or sufficient for them to be aware of the citizenship rights extended by their countries of origin, or for them to be interested in establishing a direct link with it. Likewise, it is important to remember that when interviewing via direct messages, the deepening of the research topic is reduced.

Therefore, it is recommended for the next studies to contrast online with traditional

face-to-face interviews. This action may increase the production of knowledge in terms of the use and scope of Internations for the research.

In addition, Internations can be used to search respondents to further interview via synchronic online communication methods like Skype or Facetime. In this sense, we conclude that Internations contains a very useful database of respondents with certain citizenships living in different parts of the world, for scientific research possibilities. The value of Internations is still considerable in data collection worldwide.

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