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**THE QUALITATIVE  
INTERVIEW IN THE  
HANDS OF THE SOCIAL  
INNOVATOR. USES  
OF QUALITATIVE  
INTERVIEWS IN  
THE CATALUNYA  
COLLABORATORIOS  
PROGRAM**

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**Abstract:** This article starts from a challenge: How can we promote social and digital innovation systems at a local level? The response we have given since 2019 through the Catalunya Collaborative Program is: promoting local communities of innovators, and social structures that we call collaboratives. From the collaboratories, the efforts and resources of the interested parties of a territory are coordinated and dynamized, and collaborative projects of social and digital innovation are promoted. To arrive at this scenario, we began by doing a double study, documentary and ethnographic, in which the qualitative interview is essential. In this article we value the strategic importance of qualitative interviews (open and in-depth) in the hands of researchers-innovators to learn about and subsequently involve the agents of a territory in the creation of a community and a collaborative. The ethnographic interviews are the first of a series of concatenated actions in the medium and long term that culminate in the creation of new social structures dedicated to the coordination of local challenges and the generation of projects. In the first place, the term collaborations and the Collaboration Program are introduced. Next, the hypothesis of the collaborative is exposed, the model we use, and how we process the knowledge acquired in the round of interviews to advance in the successive phases of the creation of this new social and symbolic construction. Finally, we present the results comparing three different empirical cases. In the conclusions, the title of the paper is taken up again: What does it mean to do an in-depth interview in the hands of a researcher-innovator? Begin to pave the way for change.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research, in-depth interviews, social innovation, local innovation systems, collaboratives.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE COLLABORATORIES

The collaborative concept was coined in the 1990s to identify a new practice: collaboration between researchers through the Internet (Wulf 1989, 1993, 1999, Blay, 1998). Since then the concept has been evolving according to places and times. This evolution has in common the collaboration of different stakeholders to solve complex socio-technical problems (Finholt and Olson, 1997; Muff, 2014). A complex problem is a problem that has several dimensions: social, digital, material, political, economic, cultural, environmental, energy, etc. in addition to technology. That is, a systemic, societal or society problem as a whole.

In Spain, the collaborative term is being used in two senses: 1) as a space for collaboration between social innovators, very close to citizens and that brings together the different citizen innovation laboratories in the country (Antón, Sánchez and Ibañez, 2020) and 2) as a social technology that allows the creation of quadruple helix innovation ecosystems in territories and thematic areas. This is our work in the Digital Society Technologies Area of the i2CAT Foundation<sup>1</sup>. In our model of collaboratories we distinguish, on the one hand, territorial, thematic and digital collaboratories and, on the other hand, a general collaboratory that supports the rest of the collaboratories (Colobrans and Serra, 2021).

In the second sense, a collaboratory is a lab of labs (a lab can be a living lab, a PolicyLab, a Citizen Innovation Laboratory, an EduLab, an EnergyLab, a FabLab, a BiblioLab, etc.) and is similar to the Innovation Hubs, the Shared Agendas or the narrative of the transition super-labs that is emerging in the EU. It is not a Top-Down initiative (as in the triple helix model) nor a Bottom-Up initiative (as

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<sup>1</sup> Foundation: i2CAT. i2cat.net

is usual in social activism) but a Middle-to-Top, Middle-to-Bottom & Middle-to-Middle initiative. that tries to put all the stakeholders of the quadruple helix of a territory on the same plane (Schütz, Heidingsfelder and Schraudner, 2019). In the collaboratories, public administrations, businessmen and entrepreneurs, civil entities and training centers cooperate in the joint solution of challenges of the territory, sector, thematic area, transition, or mission to solve one or several Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

In the day-to-day activities of these collaborators, communities are stimulated, people are trained, events are promoted, co-creation activities are carried out, and quadruple helix entities are coordinated to promote social and digital innovation projects. Since the beginning of the pandemic, this program started to run remotely, and since then, all actions have been carried out online.

## THE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

The Catalonia Collaborative Program<sup>2</sup> It has been financed since 2018 by the Secretary for Digital Policies of the Generalitat de Catalunya. Its design and execution is the responsibility of the Social and Digital Technologies Area of the i2CAT Foundation. This Foundation is a digital research center that has created a specific area of social sciences and technologies to connect digital infrastructures with social and cultural structures. On the digital side, i2CAT develops advanced digital technologies (AI, IoT, Virtual Reality and multimedia, 5G Networks, Cybersecurity) and, among other functions, acts as the technical office of the SmartCatalunya Program<sup>3</sup> that brings together the digital initiatives of Catalonia

and the Digital Catalonia Alliance<sup>4</sup>. On the other, the Catalunya Collaborative Program creates the necessary social structures for the deployment and use of digital in the territories, taking into account social challenges. The activity of the Foundation has as a backdrop the Digital Transition that the European Union is considering<sup>5</sup> as a future strategy.

The mission of the Collaborative Program is to connect local innovation with the official innovation system to facilitate the digital transformation of the country and its citizens. Its specific objectives are the promotion, promotion, creation, implementation, activation, connection, promotion of projects, revitalization and support of new innovation structures. From this Program we imagine a Collaborative Society in which, in the same way that, during the deployment of the industrial society, each town had to have electricity, a school and a library to integrate into the Industrial Society, in the Collaborative Society the challenge is that the Internet reaches every town, that in each town there is a citizen innovation laboratory, a community of innovators, and a parallel virtual space from which local stakeholders can undertake and coordinate their projects.

Since 2019, the Collaborative Program has created three territorial collaboratives. In mid-2022, it is planned to promote a fourth territorial collaboration. Two thematic collaborations are currently being promoted and three surveys have been carried out to promote new thematic collaborations. In parallel, steps are being taken to shape a large digital collaboration that brings together the different advanced digital technologies. In 2022, a support structure for collaborators has also begun to be consolidated in the form of

<sup>2</sup> Collaboratories in Catalonia. En <https://colabscatalunya.cat/>

<sup>3</sup> SmartCatalunya. En <https://smartcatalonia.gencat.cat/ca/inici/>

<sup>4</sup> Digital Catalonia Alliance. En <https://dca.cat/ca/>

<sup>5</sup> Shaping Europe's digital future. En [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/shaping-europe-digital-future\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/shaping-europe-digital-future_en)

a program of activities, events, training and project support.

## GOALS

The Collaborative Program has four fundamental objectives:

1. Create collaborations in different territories and connect them with each other
2. Create communities of local social and digital innovators around collaborators
3. Connect local innovation systems with citizens and regional, national and European innovation systems, and
4. Promote social and digital innovation projects from the collaborators

## METHOD

The method of social innovation is different from the method of scientific research and the method designers and engineers use to create new products and services. Social innovation has its own method that combines both the methods applied to discovery and to creativity and the development of ingenuity (European Commission, 2013). The scientific researcher explores his objects of study, the designer creates his products, and the social innovator establishes the social conditions so that innovation can take place, take root, and remain. Broadly speaking, the scientific researcher defines a topic, a question, a problem, and a hypothesis, and then documents, analyzes, and interprets the results. The designer empathizes, ideas and conceptualizes something that does not yet exist, and designs a prototype that he validates until it works (Brown, 2009). The social innovator, in addition to operating as a scientist in some moments of the innovation project and as a designer in others, has to ensure that his social action has results and an impact on society. The innovator uses applied

research and design to transform social reality. He is a subject that performs three functions: research, design and transformation.

In this article I highlight the importance of the first contact with the members of a future community of stakeholders, and I propose the qualitative interview method as the first of a series of concatenated steps that must end in the creation of spaces for social and digital innovation. In this sense, the interview is a first action that establishes the initial conditions of a project in the medium and long term. This approach is the one we have been applying within the framework of the Collaborative Program. Before opening a new collaboration, we carry out a round of individual interviews with the aim of learning about the problems in the area, as well as meeting relevant people, creating a collaboration, and creating a community of quadruple helix stakeholders that promotes sustainable projects. in the time.

How do we go from a situation of first contact with a stakeholder to their involvement in the co-creation and co-design of the laboratories and their participation in them? To do this, we use open, in-depth, exploratory and, above all, dialogical interviews with the various agents of the territory (academicians and trainers; businessmen, industrialists and merchants; associations, communities, networks and citizens in general; and those responsible for different types of administrations). public). This allows us to detect key agents that could later cooperate in the process of co-ideation, co-creation, implementation and activation of the collaborative. In this context, the purpose of the interview method is not only to obtain information, but to establish bonds of complicity and commitments of continuity with the people interviewed in view of their potential participation in processes of territorial, sectoral and digital transformation

through media. long term.

## **THE COLLABORATIVE MODEL**

In our model we distinguish three stages for the promotion of a collaboration: 1) The exploration of the territory, 2) its co-ideation, co-creation and co-design, and 3) its activation, dynamization and promotion of projects.

The exploration stage is subdivided into documentary and ethnographic. For the documentary, existing reports and data on the Internet are used. This is a first approximation to place the intervention. The ethnographic exploration is carried out through in-depth interviews with different active agents in the territory. These interviews provide information on what is happening in the environment, ongoing projects and experiences, lists of challenges and problems, lists of contacts potentially interested in participating in the collaboration, and lists of requests and contributions from the people and entities that represent a possible innovation collaborative in the area. All these data become part of a database that, later, will be enriched with more profiles and more information and will be used to know who is who in the territory.

The co-ideation, co-creation and co-design stage of the collaborative consists of a series of interactive workshops (usually between three and five) where the interviewees and others included in the database are invited to contrast the information provided by the exploratory study and to generate new information collectively. These workshops are carried out using the mural.co collaborative work tool. The contents used during the workshop come from the previous exploration. The three main workshops are: 1) Presentation of the results of the exploration and generation of challenges, 2) Design of the collaboration, its project lines, and its governance, and 3) Presentation

of project proposals.

In the third stage, the collaboration is activated. It is about publicly announcing its birth, its first project proposals and the start of activities. Activation implies a broadening of the stakeholder base. In the activation, the main group (which we call the Secretariat) and the Plenary (the group of people interested in the collaboration) are specified. And then the first projects are promoted, generally micro-projects that are easy to finance. Then, larger projects are promoted until they reach European projects.

From here, and once the existence of the collaboratory has been publicly announced as a social and symbolic reality (so far they have not needed a physical space but a virtual one), another phase is entered, that of revitalization. In this phase, the Collaborative Program provides activities, training, events are organized and support is offered to projects. The group of stakeholders, representing their respective entities, meets regularly to find new partners and promote projects.

## **THE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW IN THE HANDS OF THE SOCIAL INNOVATOR**

The interviews are open, adapted to the knowledge and experience of the interviewee, dialogical, and agile in their execution. "Open" means that, after the presentation of the project to the interviewee (to create quadruple helix coordination spaces to connect the agents of a territory, share experiences and promote social and digital innovation projects) and explain the reason for the interview ( to assess their potential participation in the new collaboration that is being promoted, as well as to know what they expect to receive and what they could contribute), you are invited to talk about the tasks you carry out and the challenges and problems you have to solve on a daily basis. As he responds, his specific



experience is deepened. The underlying intention of the interview is to make a list of challenges, problems, potential project proposals that could be promoted to change the state of things, as well as to identify people from your personal or professional network with whom you could collaborate at any given time. to deploy any of these identified projects. And, of course, count on her in the following steps.

“Adapted to the knowledge and experience of the person interviewed” means that they are interviews focused on the person and their support needs to do more things, or improve the ones they are already doing. Where do you stumble in the execution of his responsibilities? How would you resolve the impasse? What do you need to give continuity to the activity that you usually carry out? How, if it were within your reach, would you connect the pieces of the system to help you do your job better? In short, what would you ask a Collaboratory to do to help you in your day to day life? What would be their demands, their requests if it already existed? At this point, the interviewer is inviting the interviewee to rethink what he does in light of the introduction of a new social structure in the system dedicated to connecting the parts of a system; their propellers. He is inviting him to re-design his normality in the face of the prospect of being able to be helped by a new agency (the Collaboratory) that will connect what the interviewee does with what other people do. The Collaboratory connects the dots and energizes relationships.

“Dialogical” means that the interview is not presented as a mere extraction of information or knowledge. By being centered on the needs of the interviewee and giving them the space and opportunity to re-design workflows taking into account their specific needs and point of view, the interview becomes a dialogue in which the interviewee and interviewer they

cooperate to identify, name and describe needs that, even though they belong to the interviewee, also belong to the system.

In this sense, the interviewer, as an innovator, as a designer, engineer or social technologist, is not a passive agent who collects data but rather participates in the creative moment. With his resources, he encourages and helps the person to verbalize their needs and to generate proposals to re-design the structures and processes that he encounters daily in the performance of his work. During this dialogue, the distance between the interviewer and the interviewee disappears. At that moment (an hour, an hour and a half or two hours) they are two colleagues who know what they are talking about and who try to take advantage of the meeting to solve a problem. One makes the other think.

Finally, “agile” means that they are practical interviews oriented to problem solving. In reality, these interviews function as micro co-creation workshops. Since the important thing is the results, everything that is documentation, analysis, interpretation, conclusions and annexes, are absorbed in the same process. The most operative must remain from the interview. It is not, of course, a scientific interview in the classic academic sense of the term that requires a literal transcription, but rather a practical and operational one. The interview is used as a research instrument but also to prepare the logistics of the organization and the subsequent transformation. In these rounds there is neither the time nor the budget to transcribe or analyze literally and exhaustively what has been transcribed. The interviews are analyzed and interpreted on the spot and the annexes are completed with the help of the interviewee. Given that they are mostly online interviews, sometimes screen and document are shared and the interviewee corrects or expands the notes during the same interview. In others,

the interview functions as meeting minutes and is sent to the interviewee for ratification, correction or the opportunity to add more content. In others, the notes are taken in the form of a conceptual map that is developed as the dialogue progresses and, therefore, the researcher makes explicit the categories with which he classifies the interviewee's words. This allows the interviewee to show their agreement or disagreement with them and, in case of discrepancy, they are invited to search for the émic term that they consider best expresses what they wanted to say.

In general, each interview is analyzed and closed immediately after its completion. Without leaving time for the memory of the meeting to cool down. What does it contribute as a particularity and what does it contribute as part of a larger whole? To gain agility, the contents of the last interview are added and integrated to the previous ones. In other words, the interpretation and conclusions are written and rewritten so that, at the end of the last interview, there is an updated state of the investigation. This allows you to always have a report of the exploration ready even though the interview cycle has not yet finished. In other words, the exercise of social innovation requires a particular way of using the in-depth interview method and taking advantage of its results.

## **RESULTS**

### **THE CASE OF THE CATSUD COLLABORATORY**

The CatSud collaborative was the first to be promoted. This happened a year before the covid lockdown. Therefore, we still had occasion to apply the ethnographic method in a literal sense; as field work in situ. The CatSud Collaboratory covers an area of several medium-sized cities that add up to just over 800,000 inhabitants. We traveled to the territory, visited the entities, participated

in their day-to-day, and interviewed their managers to document the reality of the territory. In turn, they also interviewed us about collaborations and social and digital innovation, and asked us for specific training sessions that we also used to find out about their challenges and needs. In total, about 50 interviews were conducted.

During the co-design stage, five workshops were held that received the name of Base Camps. These workshops served to consolidate the main group (which would be called the Secretariat) and the Plenary (all the stakeholders), and various 'circles' or working groups. The Covid Pandemic and subsequent confinement caused a redesign of the Program and everything was reformatted to work remotely. The first result was an online training that lasted for two months and was attended by 55 people. The key to this training was that it ended with the presentation of a series of proposals for social and digital innovation projects by the participants. After the training, five of these proposals were tutored, all of which have already been implemented. The CatSud collaborative is a collaborative that we call mature. "Mature" means that it works without relying on the support of the i2CAT Foundation. They design and execute their own projects. In some the Foundation participates; in others not.

### **THE CASE OF THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING LAB**

This is the case of a local lab in a city of 60,000 inhabitants, not a colab. But the methodology that we applied was the same as in the case of the collaboratories (Exploration, co-design, activation and dynamization). Here all the exploratory research, the co-creation phase and the activation phase were executed remotely. The entire part of the revitalization and promotion of projects is also being coordinated and supported

online. The only face-to-face event occurs in the territory where the projects take place. What is happening today was detected as a need in the interviews, it was developed and took shape during the co-creation stage and, later, implementation. In this research, 35 interviews were conducted.

## **THE CASE OF VNG PEIL**

This case is not yet finished in collaboration. It began with the purpose of creating a document, a Strategic Plan for Local Innovation (PEIL) in a city of 40,000 inhabitants. However, within a few weeks, it became clear that a collaborative would be needed to ensure its implementation. Although, before starting to draft the PEIL, a round of interviews was held with the potential stakeholders. At the time of writing this article, the exploratory and co-creation phase had been completed and the PEIL was being drafted and the collaborative processes were being shaped.

Note that the methodology we use in all these cases is participatory, open, and focused on people's experience. They are methodologies generated in the environment of living labs. The experts generate content based on the interviews carried out and then the same interviewees and interested parties review it and adapt it to their circumstances. In this research, 12 interviews were conducted.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER PROFILE AS A RESEARCHER-INNOVATOR**

So far we have talked about the interview. But these interviews are done by a social scientist who is then going to act as a designer and, finally, as a social innovator to transform the state of things. This fact, this triple role is, in itself, a noteworthy novelty. The social innovator knows how to think like a scientist,

like a designer and, furthermore, like an innovator and a transformer. He is a specialist in social change who is involved in the process of change. He conducts a participatory action-research, change design process, which he then implements. His vision is systemic. For the social innovator, the interview is not an end in itself. He conducts the interview knowing that he has to create a community of interested parties, co-create the design of a collaborative with them, and promote social and digital innovation projects in the territory. In other words, he has to take advantage of the knowledge compiled in the interviews as a starting point for the following phases and add value to each new stage.

When the social innovator is interviewing the agents of a territory, he is not only discovering what exists, but he is also thinking about what could exist to help solve existing or future problems. These interviews often begin with questions and end with a creative moment in which the interviewer and interviewee cooperate to come up with a solution. In other words, the social innovator is devoting an effort to discovering and getting to know a territory, but thinking about how a new social technology (a Collaboratory) could influence the destiny of this territory. His attention is not on the interview but on everything that precedes it and everything that comes after the interview. The interview is the first of many steps that he, later, will have to carry out. These interviews leave a wake. They generate knowledge that will later be used throughout the life cycle of the collaboration.

The qualitative interview conceived this way, therefore, is the key that the Social Innovator has to open a territory, become familiar with the agents that manage it, know its status, detect its needs, discover and meet potential members of a community of interested parties of quadruple propeller. It is the way he has to begin preparing the



foundations for the creation of a new social structure that will change the dynamics of the territory. The collaborative effect is the concept we use to identify the chain of events that, one day, began with a first interview and whose traces can be seen in the projects in progress.

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