

The rise of citizen social science raises more questions about social science than it answers



Citizen social science, whereby members of the public participate in the investigation and analysis of social phenomena, is becoming an increasingly common research method, especially to address localised social issues. [Alexandra Albert](#) writes that whilst citizen social science presents certain opportunities, the potential of citizen social science to realign the power dynamics and relationships between researcher and researched remains to be realised.

Citizen social science (CSS) refers to participatory methods, which involve people in the design and/or conduct of social research. It builds on the rapidly developing area of Citizen Science, which arguably took root in the natural and environmental sciences, where non-professional scientists voluntarily participate in scientific activities. A well-known example of this would be the [Galaxy Zoo project](#), where participants contribute online to classifying telescope images of galaxies.

The field of CSS crosses existing disciplinary boundaries in academic research, and as such, is often perceived as new or innovative, even though the concept of involving citizens in research has been in existence for some time. For example, the [Mass Observation Project](#) – a unique national life writing project about everyday life in Britain, that was initially founded as a social research organisation in 1937 by a group of people, who aimed to create an ‘anthropology of ourselves’ – could be considered an early form of CSS. Indeed, the original Mass Observation idea of a national panel was even revived in 1981 in the format of a national writing panel that continues to this day.

However, trends of austerity and [inclusive methods](#) in research are making CSS a more popular mode of enquiry in the current context. While boundary work to better understand and establish the difference and overlaps in such approaches can be important in terms of the easy adoption and potential institutionalisation of the knowledge produced, the question of demarcation is less relevant to the participants themselves. For me, the more interesting angle that CSS addresses is the insider/outsider aspects of social research, asking the question: who is a social scientist and who gets to do social research?

First, in a field dominated by the academy and methodological standards, CSS gives rise to questions around mainstream scientific notions of ‘professional’ quality standards in, and responsibility for, data collection. This is particularly pertinent since it comes at a time when participatory approaches are increasingly used to understand data as an urgent policy problem to better legislate for – for example in the case of reporting empty or abandoned houses to a local authority, so that they might be brought back into use. At some basic level, we are all analysts of the social as part of our everyday lives, but there are layers of professionalisation, expertise, standardisation, institutionalisation, power, politics and interests at play. These layers lend themselves to assumed levels of expertise. Can CSS forge new connections that transcend these hierarchies, whilst also being a leveller in and of itself in some ways?

In many instances people outside of the academy can and do, do social research even when they do not consider what they are doing to be social research, since that is perceived to be the preserve of ‘experts’. What is it about social science that makes it a skilful and expert activity, and how or why is it practiced in a way that makes it difficult to do? CSS produces tensions between the ideals of inclusion of social actors in the generation of information about the everyday, and the notion that many participants do not necessarily feel entitled, or empowered, to participate in the analysis of this information, or in the interpretation of what it means. For example, in the case of the Empty Houses project, set up to explore some of these issues discussed here in more detail, some participants suggested they did not feel comfortable reporting on empty houses because they found them hard to identify and assumed that some prior knowledge or ‘expertise’ was required. CSS is the perfect place to interrogate these tensions since it challenges the closed nature of social science.

Second, CSS blurs the roles between researchers and researched, creating new responsibilities for participants and researchers alike. A notable distinction between expert and non-expert in social science research is the critique of the approach and the interpretation or analysis of the data. However, the way that traditional social science is done, with critical analysis being the preserve of the trained expert, means that many participants do not feel that it is their role to do the analysis. Does the professionalisation of observational techniques constitute a different category of sociological data that means that people need to be trained in formal and distinct sociological ways of collecting and analysing data? This is a challenge for research design and execution in CSS, and the potentially new perspectives that participating in CSS can engender.

Third, in addressing social worlds, CSS questions whether such observations are just a regular part of people's everyday lives, or whether they entail a more active form of practice in observing everyday life. In this sense, what does it really mean to participate? Is there a distinction between 'active' and 'passive' observation? Arguably participating in a project is never just about this – it's more of a conscious choice, and therefore, in some respects, a burden of some sort. This further raises the issue of how to appropriately compensate participants for their time and energy, potentially as co-researchers in a project and co-authors on papers?

Finally, while CSS can rearrange the power dynamics of citizenship, research and knowing, narratives of 'duty' to take part, and to 'do your bit', necessarily place a greater burden on the individual and raise questions about the supposed emancipatory potential of participatory methods such as CSS. It is crucial to recognise that in many instances of CSS-based approaches, the power dynamics are not equal; nor are they really trying to be in terms of crowdsourcing approaches. Parallels can also be drawn to citizen science where participants are effectively used for less interesting tasks and roles. Furthermore, the dichotomy of the insider/outsider issue, as referred to above, is made more visible, but that does not mean it is dismantled in any way. The extent to which CSS successfully challenges the privileged position of the researcher, and to what extent many of the initial imbalances of power and inequalities are inadvertently reproduced in the process of doing CSS, remains to be seen.

Note: The above was [first published](#) on the [LSE Impact of Social Science blog](#). It draws on the [author's paper](#), published in [Humanities and Social Science Communications](#).

About the Author



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