

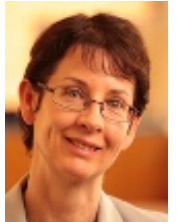
Examination of digital technologies must become central to social science research

by Blog Admin

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Sociology has traditionally played a role in commenting upon social and economic inequities, writes **Deborah Lupton**. Continuing critical examination of digital technologies and their implications for academic practice must be an integral part of sociological research.

In my previous two posts, I presented an overview of the four practices of digital sociology and looked in more detail at professional digital use. This final post in this series on digital sociology looks at the various approaches to researching digital technologies from a sociological perspective.



Analysing digital data

Titles such as 'digital social research' or 'digital social science' tend to be used to refer to conducting 'e-research' using digitalised data sets that may be shared collaboratively using digital platforms. The focus, therefore, is on the collection and use of data and the tools to analyse these data rather than on the ways in which users of digital technologies are engaging with these tools and devices as part of their everyday lives: see, for example, the [Oxford e-Social Science Project](#).

This approach is interested in the most efficient use of tools to store and analyse digital data and the ways of dealing with the constant churn of information on the web as well as the ethical issues around using such data such as copyright, privacy and data protection concerns. Research also includes investigation into how researchers engage with web archives as research tools and the reasons why they may choose not to do so. 'Naturally' or incidentally generated data that are already collected by various web platforms (for example Facebook and Twitter posts, search engines, SMS messages and even GPS data) are used for analysis. Researchers may also elicit data for their own concerns, including using web-based surveys. This approach to digital data analysis is also interested in ways of recording and analysing data for qualitative analysis, including images, videos and audio data.

The terms 'webometrics' or 'cybermetrics' have been used to describe quantitative social research using digital data sets drawn from network websites and social media sites. While these approaches seem quite widely used in such fields as information science and technology, thus far they seem little used by sociologists.

Research into how people use digital and social media

As I commented in my previous post, people are now using digital and social media platforms and devices across the life span, from infancy to old age. Many of the consumers of media have also become content producers through the use of social media such as micro-blogging and blogging platforms and sharing tools such as YouTube and Flickr.

Since the advent of the internet, many sociologists and other researchers have used data from online communities to research many varied social issues, from the use of health-related websites for patient support and information sharing to the ways in which people with anorexia support each other in their 'thinspiration' quest, how people of ethnic minority groups represent themselves online, the articulation and organisation of online activism, self-presentation, self-identity and patterns of sociability on social networking sites such as Facebook and how 'mummy bloggers' share their experiences with other mothers on the web, to name but a few topics. Another topic of research has featured how people interact with their technologies: how they deal with the plethora of information streaming forth from the internet, what they use their digital devices for, how these devices are employed at home and in the workplace and so on. Children and young people's use of digital technologies has come under quite a deal of scrutiny as well in a social context in which there is continuing concern about their 'addiction' to these technologies, their access to online pornography, cyberbullying or online sexual predation.

This kind of digital sociological research has clear overlaps with research in digital anthropology, digital cultures and cultural geographies of digital technologies, much of which is also directed at exploring the

ways in which people interact with and use digital media using both qualitative methodologies (such as interviews, focus groups and ethnographic research) and quantitative approaches such as surveys and content analysis of digital material.

Critical digital sociology

A further topic of digital sociology research is that which directs critical attention at the ways in which sociologists and other academics themselves use digital media. This is a reflexive approach that draws on contemporary social and cultural theory to analyse and interrogate the kinds of subject positions or assemblages that are configured via digital technology use as part of professional practice. While such a critical approach does not preclude professional digital use, it opens up a space for reflection upon the implications and unintended consequences of such practices.

Burrows (2012), for example, has written on the ways in which metrics such as the 'h-index' and 'impact factor' constructed via digital citation indices contributes to 'a complex data assemblage that confronts the individual academic'. These metrics have become integral to the ways in which academics, academic units and universities receive funding and are ranked against others, and in the case of individual academics, to their prospects for employment and promotion. Uprichard (2012) has commented critically on the call for sociologists to use digital data in their research, focusing in particular on data-mining of the transactional data that is produced through live-stream interactions on the web such as Twitter and Facebook posts and updates. She argues that approaches to such data are often ahistorical and thus lack the richness of context. Further, they tend to be preoccupied with questions of method over sociologically imaginative ways of analysing the digital data that are collected. Other sociologists have addressed the ethical issues of using data from online communities and forums for research, including consideration of such questions as whether or not such communities constitute public or private space or whether researchers should make themselves known to communities when studying their interactions.

Very few sociologists (or other academics) have published critiques like these thus far. However the role played by digital technologies in the academic workplace looks to increase in importance as universities are moving (very quickly in some cases, more slowly in others) towards more extensive incorporation of online teaching as part of their credentialed courses. As an academic discipline sociology has traditionally played an important role in identifying and commenting upon the social and economic inequities underpinning the workplace and other social spheres. In this spirit, as digital technologies increasingly become part of the academic world, continuing critical and reflexive examination of these technologies and their implications for academic practice and selfhood should be an integral dimension of digital sociological research.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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social science has a huge role in this.”