We must make the digital world central to sociological research

by Blog Admin   July 18, 2012

How we connect socially in the digital world must now become a central feature of sociologial study. Sociologists need to learn how to use digital media for professional purposes, but they must also explore the impact of these media. **Deborah Lupton** *issues a call to keyboards.*

What is digital sociology? Why is the term not commonly used, when the terms 'digital anthropology', 'digital cultures' and 'digital humanities' have been employed for some years? I have not yet come across any book that uses 'digital sociology' in its title (there are, of course, several books that focus on various aspects of the digital world from a sociological perspective without using this term). The only course I have discovered thus far which uses the term 'digital sociology' to describe itself is a MA/Msc in Digital Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. The term 'digital social sciences' tends to be used quite narrowly to refer to the use of quantitative methods ('webometrics') to analyse digital data.

Although 'digital sociology' does not yet seem to be in regular use, sociologists have engaged in research related to the internet since its inception. They have addressed many varied social issues relating to online communities, cyberspace and cyber-identities. Such research has attracted many different names, dispersed across multiple interests, whether it is entitled 'cybersociology', 'the sociology of the internet', 'the sociology of online communities', 'the sociology of social media', 'the sociology of cyberculture' or something else again. While the term 'cyber' was in vogue in the 1990s and early 2000s, reference to the 'cyber' seems to have been largely replaced by the 'digital' now that the internet has become more pervasive, moving from desktops to devices that can be worn on the body and transported to many locations, allowing the user to be constantly connected to the net. 'Digital sociology' encapsulates the concerns previously addressed by 'cybersociology' and extends into this new era of mobile digital computer use. It is a neat descriptive term that also references other disciplines and their use of the term 'digital'.

Despite the body of literature referred to above, it has been argued that in general sociologists have been slow to take up research involving social media and to personally engage in using social media for professional practice, such as blogging and Twitter (Daniels and Feagin, 2011; see also my earlier post 'Where are all the sociology blogs?'). The sociology of digital technologies/digital sociology or whatever term is adopted must surely begin to expand as a sub-discipline in sociology, given the increasing prevalence of digital technologies. They are becoming an increasingly integral part of everyday life for many people in the developed world across the lifespan. Preschools and child care centres are now starting to advertise that they offer tablet computers as part of their facilities. At the other end of the lifespan, Wiis are used to support mobility for the residents of aged care facilities and social media devices are being introduced to older people to encourage them to engage in social connection from home. Digital sociology can offer a means by which the impact, development and use of these technologies and their impact upon and incorporation into social worlds and concepts of selfhood may be investigated, analysed and understood.

It seems to me that given the ways in which digital technologies have infiltrated everyday life and have become such an important dimension of how people gather information and connect socially with others the digital world should now be a central feature of sociological study and research. Not only should sociologists learn to use digital media for professional purposes, they should also be undertaking research that is able to explore the impact of these media in everyday life from a critical and reflexive perspective. Some sociologists have begun to do this: for examples see Gehl (2011) on the representation and management of the professional self online and Burrows (2012) on how metrics are having an impact upon academic practice and selfhood.

To summarise, here are the main activities in which digital sociologists can engage:

- **Professional digital practice**: using digital media tools for professional purposes: to build networks, construct an e-profile, publicise and share research and instruct students.
- **Sociological analyses of digital use:** researching the ways in which people's use of digital media configures their sense of selves, their embodiment and their social relations.
- **Digital data analysis**: using digital data for social research, either quantitative or qualitative.
- **Critical digital sociology**: undertaking reflexive and critical analysis of digital media informed by social and cultural theory.

This blog post is an edited version of Deborah's Storify presentation 'Digital Sociology', which includes much more detail and many weblinks to relevant courses, books, articles and blog posts as well as a list of further resources (it can be viewed here).

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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