

## **Digital Sociology: Beyond the Digital to the Sociological**

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## **Abstract**

The sub-discipline of digital sociology has recently begun to attract attention among sociologists, particularly in the UK. In this paper I undertake a review of some of the most interesting features of the body of digital sociology scholarship as it has thus far emerged. Some might contend that digital sociology is simply a new name for a long-established sociological research interest in computerised and online technologies. However I argue that digital sociology as it has developed in the UK in particular has distinguished itself by developing a distinctive theoretical approach that raises important questions concerning the nature of social research and of sociology as a discipline and a practice in the age of the digital. As such, digital sociology has much broader implications than simply the study of digital technologies.

## **Introduction**

Digital media technologies based on Web 2.0 platforms and devices are becoming an increasingly integral part of everyday life for many people in the developed world across the lifespan (and increasingly in developing countries as well). With the advent of ubiquitous and pervasive computing, in which digital devices are mobile or even wearable and can connect to the internet in almost any location, digital media are omnipresent. Web 2.0 technologies and other developments in internet design and use have resulted in vast amounts of data (now commonly referred to as 'big data') about individuals being collected, stored and processed as well as offering the capabilities of sharing these data with a massive global audience.

Not only are social and other digital media now an inherent feature of everyday life for many people, they constitute and configure social life. Life itself has become technologised and mediated (Lash 2007). Users of digital media are increasingly observers and documenters of their own lives, both consuming and creating digital data. This phenomenon has been labelled 'prosumption' (Ritzer et al. 2012) to denote the dual nature of digital media use and the important role in creating content now played by those who once were passive users of Web 1.0 technologies. As Deuze (2011, 137, original emphasis) asserts, the spread of digital media into most avenues of everyday life is so extensive that we should now not talk about living '*with* media' but rather '*in* media'.

In response to these new technologies and their impact on selfhood and society, a sub-discipline of sociology has emerged in recent years, now often referred to as 'digital sociology'. While this term is new, the focus of its research is not. Since the advent of personal computers and the internet, sociologists have researched many varied social issues relating to people's use of computerised and online technologies. Such research has attracted many different names, dispersed across multiple interests, including 'cybersociology', 'the sociology of the internet', 'the sociology of online

communities', 'the sociology of social media', 'internet studies' and 'the sociology of cyberculture'.

In general parlance, reference to the 'cyber' seems now to have been 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. As part of this general discursive move, the term 'digital sociology', although a relatively new one in sociology, is beginning to replace older terms (at least in the UK context if not yet in the USA or Australia to any significant extent). This change in terminology is consonant with other disciplines and discourses on the internet, in which 'the digital' has come to replace 'the cyber' and we now see 'digital humanities', 'digital cultures' and 'digital anthropology' as commonly used. However this new title goes beyond the merely linguistic. What is particularly notable about digital sociology as it has emerged as a sub-discipline is not only its focus on the new technologies that have developed since the turn of this century, but also the development of a distinctive theoretical and critical approach. Digital sociology has much broader implications than simply studying digital technologies, raising questions about the practice of sociology itself.

It is the critical and reflexive perspective that sociology can offer that is perhaps most singular and characteristic of this discipline. Sociologists (again, overwhelmingly from the UK) have begun to interrogate the nature of researching the digital world and its implications for sociology (see, for example, Beer 2013; Beer and Burrows 2013; Burrows 2012; Featherstone 2009; Gane 2011; Lash 2007; Marres 2012; Ruppert et al. 2013; Savage and Burrows 2007). In what follows I will review some of the most interesting directions in this critical digital sociology approach, addressing such aspects as the role played by the new digital media in the emergent knowledge economy, power relations as they operate via modes of digital communication, the implications for sociological practice of digital media and the data they produce and the employment of digital devices as part of 'live sociology'. I am not able to go into detail in the space available, nor am I able to provide an overview of all of the valuable work that has been published, but I hope to provide some indication, however sketchy, of what digital sociology has to offer that is most interesting and suggestive for further research and theorising (see Lupton forthcoming for a much more detailed discussion of these perspectives).

### **The new digital media, economic value and the knowledge economy**

In recent years, several sociologists have argued that digital media have changed the ways in which economic value is produced and distributed and commodities conceptualised (Beer 2013; Burrows 2009; Featherstone 2009; Lash 2007). A digital data economy has developed, built on techniques of harvesting ('scraping' or 'data mining') digital data for commercial purposes. Many commercial and government agencies and organisations now use digital data as part of their operation. Where once it was the physical labour of workers that produced surplus value, now the immaterial

intellectual labour of the masses has monetary value, constituting a new knowledge economy in which thought has become reified, public and commodified (Thrift 2005, 2006). The practices of prosumption are major contributors to the knowledge economy, providing constant streams of information about the preferences, habits and opinions of digital technology users that can then be used for targeted marketing, advertising and other commercial promotional purposes (Beer 2009; Beer and Burrows 2013; Ritzer et al. 2012).

In the knowledge economy a kind of digital vitality has been generated, in which information and data have taken on value in themselves and a life beyond the archive (Lash 2007). Digital technologies are able to sell more to consumers through the harnessing of the enthusiasms of consumer communities, the automating and mass dissemination of 'word of mouth' and the use of algorithms to make suggestions about future purchases based on past choices. The commodity is not only the item that is sold but information about the item and its consumers as well as the communities that form around consumption which themselves generate value by producing information and innovative ideas (Beer 2013; Beer and Burrows 2013; Thrift 2006).

Power relations are shifting as more aspects of everyday life are digitised. Now that the computerised coding of people, things and places has become ubiquitous, power operates principally through modes of communication (Lash 2007). The new mobile and interactive media embodied in Web 2.0 platforms and devices are dispersed, multimodal, a web of nodes that incorporate prosumption but also constant surveillance and information-gathering on users (Beer 2013; Beer and Burrows 2013; Lash 2007). The old media exerted power over the content of the messages they disseminated but had little knowledge of their audiences. In contrast the new media not only incorporate content from their audiences but know their audiences in fine-grained detail (Best 2010; Featherstone 2009).

Where sociologists differ from many other social researchers in researching digital media is their awareness that digital data, like any other type of data, are socially created and have a social life, a vitality, of their own. They are not the neutral products of automatic calculation, but represent deliberate decisions by those who formulate the computer algorithms that collect and manipulate these data (boyd and Crawford 2012; Cheney-Lippold 2011; Ruppert et al. 2013). The data that these devices and software produce structure our concepts of identity, embodiment, relationships, our choices and preferences and even our access to services or spaces. Without the knowledge of digital technology users, algorithms measure and sort them, deciding what choices they may be offered (Beer 2009, 2013a). Algorithms and other elements of software, therefore, are generative, a productive form of power (Lash 2007).

Via the newly digitised knowledge economy and its 'neo-commodities' of data, a type of 'post-hegemonic power' operates in increasingly subtle ways (Lash 2007: 70). In his analysis of this new form of power, Lash represents it in Foucauldian terms as operating in multiple sites and as part of people's voluntary practices. Power becomes productive, vitalist, immanent to forms of life and knowledges and therefore invisible

and taken-for-granted. This 'leaking out' of power from the traditional hegemonic institutions to everyday, taken-for-granted practices, argues Lash (2007: 75), means that the age of ubiquitous computing and ubiquitous media is also that of ubiquitous politics.

### **The digitised sociologist**

Academics are themselves knowledge works and producers, and like other workers their conditions of employment have been altered in the context of the new knowledge economy. Several British sociologists have addressed the topic of how the new digital technologies and the data they produce may affect sociologists' employment conditions and their presentation of their professional selves (Beer 2012, 2013b; Burrows 2012; Gane 2011; Savage and Burrows 2007, 2009; Savage 2013). Holmwood (2010) refers to 'governance by audit' and how this managerial response to universities, with its discourses of measuring and quantifying performance and setting quantified outcomes and objectives influences the sociology practised by sociologists. The performance of sociologists and other academics and the departments and universities which they inhabit are now constantly monitored, measured and compared against norms and standards. Burrows (2012: 359) 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.

Several sociologists, like many other academics, are supportive of new media technologies that enable them to more easily share their research findings with the public, such as blogs and open access journals, thus promoting public engagement (I have written about this extensively on my blog *This Sociological Life*; see also many contributors to the *LSE Impact of the Social Sciences* blog). Others have warned that sociologists need to be aware of the 'politics of circulation' (Beer 2013b) of digital media cultures: the multitude of ways in which the content created by one author or group of authors may be re-used and transmitted via different modes of publishing (reblogged or excerpted on other people's blogs, tweeted in tiny 'grabs', commented upon and so on). Using new media technologies, therefore, the product of sociologists' and other academics' labour may be re-appropriated and transformed in ways that are unprecedented and may pose a challenge to traditional concepts of academic research and publication (Beer and Burrows 2013; Beer 2013b).

Another broader issue raised by sociologists in relation to the new digital media technologies is that of the role of sociologists as empirical researchers – the collectors and interpreters of social data. Some have contended that the face of the proliferation of companies entering the digital data economy, sociologists can no longer claim to possess superior expert knowledge about gathering and analysing social data, at least in relation to the kinds of data produced via the new media (Gane 2011; Halford et al.

2013; Savage and Burrows 2007, 2009). With the advent of big data, social research has been redistributed across a wider range of entities capable of conducting such research, as well as across a diverse array of methods and devices. Social research in any context is a 'shared accomplishment', not the sole endeavour of the researcher, including not only human actors but the technologies involved (Marres 2012: 140). This has become even more the case in relation to digitally-enacted social research, in which prosumption and automatic digital data collection has led to actors other than individual researchers producing and collecting the data they may seek to analyse.

In response to these changes, Savage and Burrows (2007, 2009) have claimed that (at least in the UK) there is a 'coming crisis' of empirical sociology', while Gane (2011) goes so far as to contend that sociology has lost its identity and its way. They argue that sociologists have less access to big data than do many commercial institutions and will find it difficult to compete with these institutions in producing, archiving, storing and analysing these data. It has also been argued that sociologists are not experienced in handling data on the large scale afforded by digital data collection and may be challenged by the technical aspects of dealing with digital technologies when attempting to research them (Halford et al. 2013; Savage and Burrows 2007).

### **Towards a 'live sociology'**

In response to the more pessimistic appraisals of the future of sociology outlined by writers such as Burrows and Savage, Back and Puwar (Back 2012; Back and Puwar 2012) call for a 'live sociology' to deal with 'lively data'. By this term they mean creative, imaginative, playful and new ways of performing sociology that are also public and critical, many of which use digital technologies.

Back (2012) defines 'dead sociology' as that which tends to render the data it analyses (quantitative or qualitative) as lifeless, not recognising the vitality inherent within these data. It also tends to employ 'zombie concepts' drawn from old sociology that do not fit well the current state of the dynamic, fluid social world. He argues that dead sociology fails to come to terms with the digitised nature of social life, expressed in a kind of technophobia expressed by sociologists for learning about or using new digital media as well as a failure to conduct research into digital technologies. A final aspect of dead sociology he identifies is its parochial nature, its failure to recognise the globalised, dispersed nature of social relations and institutions to which digital media have been major contributors.

The term 'live sociology' resonates with an energetic and forward-thinking approach that resists more negative assessments of the future of sociology. Here then is a vision of a different kind of sociological sensibility, one that retains the sociological imagination and reflexivity of previous approaches but which incorporates new modes of practice, or what Back and Puwar (2012) refer to as 'sociological craft'. This approach begins to imagine a new sociology that can confidently and creatively meet the challenges posed by big data, the knowledge economy and the digitisation of everyday life by investing in research strategies and theories that offer far more insights than can

corporate data harvesters and analysts. Sociologists' critical and reflexive perspective on social life is more important than ever in this context, particularly in the face of the grandiose claims made by corporations and government agencies that collect and use big data and their reliance on the quantitative over the qualitative interpretation of data.

## **Conclusion**

I have here been able to discuss only briefly the rich epistemological and ontological questions raised by the existing body of literature that has developed in the sub-discipline of digital sociology. What I have hoped to begin to show is that digital sociology offers much of interest and provocation for sociologists in many other fields of research and raise important issues for the discipline as a whole. In particular, ideas about how sociology can move forward by employing new and creative approaches to social research offer much of value for any sociologist to contemplate. It is for these reasons that the new field of digital sociology goes well beyond an examination of the digital to raising questions about the sociological itself.

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