Digital Methods for Social Science

An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation

Edited by
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Foreword

There is still no consensus about what digital social methods are. Some argue that social research methods have been digital for a long time, as computational devices entered the social research toolkit many decades ago, in the form of punchcards, and the range of quantitative and qualitative software packages that social researchers have been trained to use from the 1970s onwards. Others argue that the long-standing process of 'digitization' is taking a new form today, as digital devices are currently transforming social life in ways that precisely render it available for social research in unprecedented ways. Many agree that developments such as the rise of social media, the proliferation of mobile devices and the uptake of digital analytics across professional practices are giving rise to a new apparatus for researching social life. They also have as a practical consequence that 'social methods' are becoming ever more prominent or 'mainstream' in our societies and cultures: today, users of digital devices are almost de facto researching communities, measuring influence and so on. Social media platforms such as Facebook routinely rely on methods of social network analysis to suggest new profiles to 'friend'. And well before the rise of 'social' media, the research paper introducing the search engine Google cited the sociologist Robert Merton as an important source of inspiration in the development of computational methods for analysing the 'reputation' of web pages.

Of course, whether or not the analytic measures that have been built into digital infrastructures qualify as social research methods – whether they deserve to be called by that name – is something that we can debate and disagree about. Some social scientists insist on the difference between computational methods and the dominant methodological repertoires of the social sciences (interviews, surveys). By contrast, others have highlighted the many overlaps between methodological traditions of the social sciences and computing: methods for the analysis of conversations, networks and discourse have been developed across fields, and they have both a computational and a sociological dimension. But whatever one's view on this matter, the project of the 'mainstreaming' of digital methods raises important questions for social research. As computational methods are deployed by industry to gain insight into social life, where does this leave 'social research' as an academic, public and everyday undertaking? As the contributions to this

volume help to make clear, it is highly implausible to expect digital platforms themselves to take on all the various tasks of social research, as these platforms are increasingly configured to serve the rather narrow purposes of marketing and advertising research, leaving it partly to academic and public social researchers to develop the research designs and wider methodology that we need in order to make digital data, tools and methods work for social enquiry.

But someone has to make the first move, and the contributions to this volume show that academic, social and cultural researchers are very much up to this task. They help us to understand just how much it takes – in terms of practical astuteness and methodological investment – to make Internet-based and Internet-related methods work with other social research methods. Intellectual scepticism about digital methods – and about digital industries – is not necessarily unfounded, but it too often serves a placeholder for an unwillingness to do this work. Yes, the type of social research that is facilitated by digital platforms and the kind of 'knowledge about society' pursued by social researchers are in many ways at odds, but this only means that we must do the work of making digital data, tools and methods serve the ends of social inquiry. This volume provides many examples that demonstrate how to do this.

In the process, the contributions also show us that digital methods are not just another set of methods or just another toolkit. To be sure, social research methods have long had a computational dimension. But what we are facing today is a much wider re-negotiation of social research methodology across academia, industry and society. If something unites those who 'do' digital methods, it is perhaps that they are prepared to recognize the importance of technology and socio-technical arrangements to how we gain knowledge about social life. They recognize that digital technologies, settings as well as digital user practices and the 'research situation' all inform the 'method' we end up using in our research. As we learn how to research social life 'with the digital', we then inevitably come to re-specify what participates in the composition of method: machines as much as people, ideas and situations. How to do it? This is as much a practical as an intellectual question, and this is what makes digital methods so exciting and the willingness to engage with them so important.

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a food infection (*E-coli*) outbreak. He was a co-investigator on the recently completed Multidisciplinary Assessment of Technology Centre for Healthcare (MATCH) project at Brunel where he further developed and applied the Chorus tool suite to explore how social media analysis can bring about a better understanding of user needs relating to medical devices.

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