PLAN DE COURS

DIGITAL SOCIETY AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Professeur : William Housely, Vincent Wright Chair, Cardiff University
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RATIONALE

The first part of this module discusses the revolution in digital information and communication and its implications for sociology. At a general level it considers the rise of disruptive technologies that are inclusive of social media, the internet of things and distributed manufacture. Due to time constraints this part of the module will focus on social media in particular; but in ways that relate to the wider ecology of the emerging contours of digital society and the social and ethical life of methods. This entails a reprise of Wright Mills sociological imagination and arguments that this programme for modern social research is threatened, if not placed in a condition of ‘crisis’, by the digital revolution (cf. Savage and Burrows, 2007). We will then explore how the digital revolution generates opportunities for augmenting conventional social research by capturing populations typically missed by conventional social research and for re-orienting social research by rendering new populations thinkable and amenable to research (e.g. online communities cohering around social objects and problems, such as sporting events, political and industrial protests, suicide clusters etc.) and questioning their relationship to social relations off-line. In turn, the argument over digital social research as an augmentation and re-orientation of sociology, rather than as a surrogate for modern sociology, will be clarified and explored in terms of the methodological implications of applied digital social research. This necessitates discussion of digital social research strategy and its particular distinguishing quality of capturing social processes at the level of populations and in real/useful time, thereby transcending the conventional opposition between intensive strategies that capture process or the ‘locomotion’ of micro social relations amongst particular social groups in particular contexts and extensive research strategies that capture the structure of social populations but only at specific moments (i.e. ‘punctiform’ accounts of the social) and then only retrospectively. Finally, we will consider the rise of digital society and big social data within the context of networked labour, surveillance, citizenship, futures and timescapes.
Lectures

1.) **Classic Questions in Digital Times**

During the course of this lecture we will explore and identify key questions that facilitate social scientific inquiry in relation to digital innovation and change. Drawing from classic and more recent sociological ideas the lecture will focus on questions of social organisation, social change and the place of the ‘social actor’ within wider digital social relations.


**Activity:** Q/A (General)

2.) **What is Digital Society**

During the course of this lecture we explore ‘the emerging contours of digital societies’. How do they relate to key spheres of sociological scrutiny? E.g. culture, economic life, social institutions and ‘the self’? We will also consider the role of ‘disruptive technologies’ in relation to the transformation of social relations in terms of ‘the three classic questions’ for sociological inquiry.


**Activity:** Q/A (General)

3.) **New Rules of Digital Sociological Method**

This lecture will consider the consequences of the ‘empirical crisis in sociology’ (Savage and Burrows, 2007, 2009) and the challenges presented by new forms of social data. We consider the arrival of open and (potentially) public social media as a source of data for sociology and social science more generally. We consider how new data requires new methods and also how these relate to established research strategies and design in the social sciences.

Activity Q/A (Group breakout)

- What is meant by the term ‘methodology’ in the social sciences?
- What is meant by the ‘augmentation’ of social research methods?
- Can you identify an example of traditional methods that might be useful for studying digital society and/or data?
- Do new forms of social data transform social science theory and method?

4.) Disruptive Technology and Social Change

In this lecture we explore the claims made for ‘disruptive technology’ in terms of innovation and change. We will consider the emerging sociological (and related social science) literature surrounding social media, big data, robotics, new forms of manufacture and ‘smart cities’. We will then consider this in relation to theories of social change and outline avenues and strategies for further research that explores these technologies ‘in-action’ within a variety of social and organisational settings.


Activity Q/A (Group breakout)

- What is meant by the term ‘disruptive technology’? Identify examples.
- To what extent does technology drive social change?
- How is social organisation disrupted by digital technology?

5.) Big, Broad and ‘Open’ Data
Big data has been heralded as a ‘data deluge’ that offers unparalleled opportunities for the social sciences to scope and interpret massive volumes of ‘open data’ at scale in order to assess the pulse of the population in real time. This lecture will explore Big Data in terms of the 4 V’s (Volume, Velocity, Variety and Verification) consider some of the ways in which this opportunity is being framed and understood and finally consider some of the issues and problems with relying on this conceptualisation of data without suitable theoretical and methodological context. Finally, we will consider the role of ‘big data’ as a transformative social force in it’s own right.


Activity Q/A (Group Breakout)
- What is meant by the term ‘Big Data’?
- What types of ‘methods’ might be used in order to scope ‘Big social data’?
- What are the 3 V’s that relate to some of the features of ‘Big Data’?
- What are the shortcomings of Big Data for sociological investigation?
- Why is collaboration important in relation to approaching ‘Big Data’?

6.) Social Media as Data

This lecture explores some of the problems and issues surrounding the treatment of social media as data. The lecture will contrast ‘big data’ approaches’ with those that seek to explore and understand the ‘interactional’ and ‘communicative’ aspects of social media in the digital age. We will review a number of case studies and consider how interactionist approaches (see Atkinson and Housley, 2003) might inform our understanding of social media as data and as communication.

Reading: Silverman, David, ed. Qualitative research. Sage, 2016 (Chapter 16 and 17)

Activity Q/A (Group Breakout)
- What is meant by the term social interaction?
- How might we approach the study of social interaction online?
- Why might it be important to study social interaction in social media environments?
What issues surround the study of social media as both data and interaction?

7.) Ethics, Social Media Analytics and Applications

This lecture will explore the ethical dimensions of social media analytics and research. How should social media ‘as data’ be approached? How do we deal with privacy and research subject anonymity? What are the ramifications for the research process? In addition to the methodological dimensions of ‘ethical approval’ we will also consider ethical issues surrounding the development of social media analytics that may be used for interventions into social problems and issues such as ‘derogatory and antagonistic speech’ online and other ‘social bads’. Finally, we consider how we might approach frameworks for social media regulation in ethical terms drawing from a number of recent research projects undertaken in this area.


**Activity Q/A (Group breakout)**

- Is social media research ethical?
- Should social media activity be ‘regulated’ if so how?
- How might ethics inform social media governance?
- What type of social problems are generated by social media? What type of social ‘goods’ are generated by increased connectivity?
8.) Networked Labour and Digital Political Economy.

During this lecture we will explore the challenges presented by automation and social algorithms to traditional spheres of social activity. We will focus on work, but also consider some developments in health care and education, as a means of unpacking the ways in which automation and social algorithms may disrupt social economic relations in ways that bring new challenges, risks and opportunities. Finally we will consider some of the implications that this may have for general public policy and citizens alike.


**Activity Q/A (Group breakout)**

- Identify new forms of digital work
- Does automation transform the workplace? If so how? and through what means?
- Outline how work might change in the next decade
- Why are algorithms changing the workplace?
- What types of technology represent key challenges and opportunities for economic and social life?

9.) Digital Futures and the Timescapes of Modernity.

This lecture draws from the work of sociologists in order to consider the wider temporal framing and claims being made for new technologies (inclusive of disruptive digital technologies). We consider these in terms of futures and the timescapes of modernity (Adam, 2000) and in terms of both utopian and dystopian visions for ‘digital society’.


**Activity Q/A (Group breakout)**

- Discuss and identify possible consequences of new (digital) technology for the future?
• Outline 1.) a utopian vision for digital society 2.) a dystopian vision for digital society

• Critically consider ways in which human beings will have to live with ‘machines’ in the future

• How might new digital technologies ‘help’ vulnerable social groups and society more generally?


During this lecture will explore how things like social media have been used as a means of digital participation. We will explore the extent to which one is able to talk about digital citizenship and consider the ways it has enhanced but also disrupted public discourse.


Q/A – Class discussion based on Task 2 Manifestos

11.) Overview

Summary and overview.

Indicative Reading :

(1.) Digital Social Research?


(2.) Big Data and Society

(3.) Reading the Riots

Reading: Procter, Rob, et al. "Reading the riots: What were the Police doing on Twitter?." Policing and Society 23.4 (2013): 413-436.

(4.) Digital Citizenship?


Additional References


