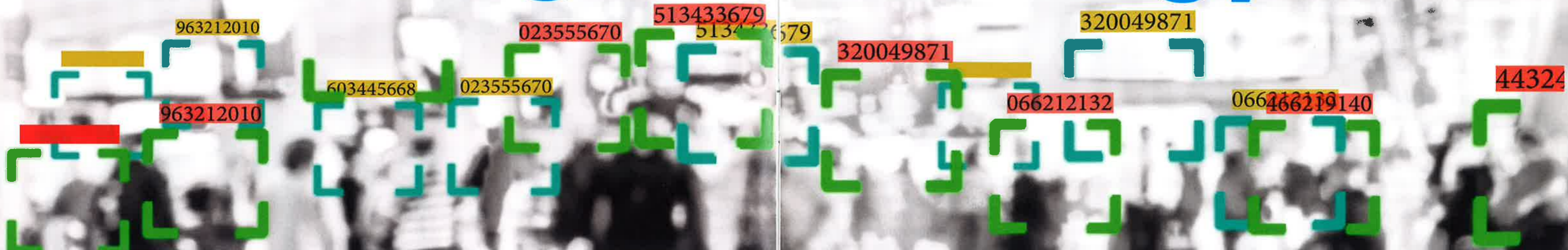


What is digital

sociology?



Neil Selwyn

How can sociology maintain its cutting-edge relevance in a world in which digital technology has become such a mainstream feature of all our lives?

EXAM LINKS

- Theory and Methods

Sociology can often seem a little slow to keep up with ongoing social change. This has certainly been the case over the past 20 years, as many people's lives have become steadily infused by digital technologies. The world is now home to billions of computerised devices, all underpinned by vast corporate platforms such as Google, Amazon and Facebook.

So, how can sociology remain relevant in an age that is profoundly digital and digitised? Many sociologists are turning to a new, 'digital sociology' as a way of refocusing the discipline on the role of the digital in social life. This article outlines six ways that this approach can add to your sociological imagination.

Is digital really the norm?

Key point: Digital sociology helps you remember 'the digital' in a post-digital age.

Labelling something as 'digital' in 2020 might come across as somewhat old-fashioned. Many people argue that we now live in 'post-digital' times, where digital

technologies, systems and processes are barely noticeable and simply part of the contemporary world.

Some social commentators are therefore keen to move beyond distinguishing between digital and analogue, online and offline, real and virtual, and so on. There is a growing sense within the social sciences that contemporary society is best understood as an entanglement of the material and the digital, of people and machines.

Digital sociologists are well aware of this. However, the emphasis on 'digital sociology' is a deliberate reminder that any idea that social life is seamlessly digital is highly problematic. For example, we continue to see huge disparities in people's access to technology. There are also entrenched differences in people's experiences of technology — especially the extent to which some social groups are advantaged and empowered by the digital technologies in their lives.

All told, the label 'digital sociology' reminds us that the digital is not a topic that sociologists can afford to stop thinking critically about. Instead, digital sociologists must strive to highlight the flaws, glitches, gaps and breakdowns that have followed now that the initial hype over 'cyberspace' and 'new media' has faded away.

From the familiar to the unfamiliar

Key point: Digital sociology makes familiar technologies strange and strange technologies familiar.

Taking a closer 'second look' at all things digital draws attention to a range of topics that you might not think are of societal significance, or perhaps you might not be aware of at all. Even if you consider yourself to be fully immersed in digital culture, digital sociology is designed to make you think differently.

On the one hand, digital sociology is a great way of 'making the familiar strange'. In other words, it highlights the social significance of familiar technologies in our lives that we might otherwise take for granted. For instance, smartphones, apps and social media use might now seem banal. But they are all associated with big societal, cultural, political and economic shifts.

Every area of sociology now has to consider new technology-related phenomena — from changing forms of work ('digital labour'), to new realms of crime and deviance (the 'dark web'), or shifting family dynamics ('digital parenting'). Digital sociology reminds us not to underestimate the long-term 'unintended consequences' of these everyday digital

Box | A selection of digital sociology resources

In the spirit of digital sociology, many relevant journals are open access. Visit...

- Journal of Digital Social Research
- Big Data & Society
- Social Media + Society

Most digital sociologists are very active on Twitter, providing a steady stream of links, emerging thoughts and occasional forays into their personal lives ...

- @BSADigitalSoc
- @DALupton
- @claudiakincaid
- @jessieNYC

A few digital sociologists maintain blogs and even podcast series...

- [MarkCarrigan.net](#)
- [simplysociologyworkpress.com](#)
- [thisisnotasociology.blog](#)

Interest in digital sociology originated in a few key texts and collections ...

- Orton-Johnson, K. and Prior, N. (eds) (2013) *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives*, Palgrave.
- Lupton, D. (2014) *Digital Sociology*, Routledge.
- Daniels, J., Gregory, K. and McMillan Cotton, T. (eds) (2016) *Digital Sociologies*, Policy Press.
- Selwyn, N. (2019) *What is Digital Sociology?* Polity.

practices. Take, for example, the impact of online social movements, such as #MeToo and #Blacklivesmatter. Similarly, think how recent major political elections are now influenced by Facebook, email hacking, memes and online disinformation. The consequences of what might appear to be trivial digital practices can surprise even the most tech-savvy observers.

On the other hand, digital sociology also helps us 'make the strange familiar'. Beyond digital devices, apps and services is a range of more advanced systems and procedures

that regular 'end users' are often not aware of. There are also many forms of emerging technology that look set to have a profound social impact, but they are discussed mainly by those responsible for developing and selling the technology. Digital sociology can reveal these 'new technologies' to public audiences and put them under sociological scrutiny.

There is some great sociological work on 'algorithmic discrimination' within artificial intelligence (the way computer programs can lead to discrimination based on social divisions such as class, gender



Sociologists are interested in emerging technological issues, such as smart homes

and ethnicity), and on the oppressive forms of 'data surveillance' (such as smart speakers recording conversations) which are supported, for example, by 'smart home' devices. Emerging technologies such as the 'internet of things' (interconnected digital objects, such as fridges and central heating systems) are also attracting closer sociological attention. Digital sociology gives sociologists a window on these 'hidden' technologies and emerging issues.

New versions of old issues

Key point: Digital sociology explores new examples of longstanding sociological concerns.

Although digital sociology addresses various 'hot topics' within digital culture and digital life, it is important to remember that this is specifically *sociological* work. Any interest in Instagram, TikTok or Baby Yoda memes must be grounded in basic sociological concerns over social structure, political economy, power relations, and so on. In this sense, digital sociology is concerned with the shifting nature of familiar social issues that otherwise tend to be overlooked in discussions about digital technology.

For example, digital sociologists pay close attention to the changing nature of socialisation, culture and identity in an age

of internet subcultures, virtual communities and the online 'attention economy'. Elsewhere, digital sociology is also focused on issues of social differentiation, power and stratification.

For example, researchers continue to map persistent patterns of 'digital exclusion' among various groups, such as older adults, the unemployed and dis/abled populations who may, for example, be disadvantaged in access to goods, services and opportunities because of their lack of digital resources or know-how. Digital sociology can tell us how these long-standing sociological concerns about inequality are both continuing and changing in the face of ongoing technological changes.

Importantly, too, these issues and problems are not addressed in a defeatist manner. Digital sociologists are committed to 'thinking otherwise' about technologies and social change. As such, digital sociology involves an active and committed search for alternative digital technologies, tools, techniques, processes and practices which may help produce greater social justice.

New versions of old theories

Key point: Digital sociology is a great excuse to look at familiar social theorists, but with fresh eyes.

Late nineteenth-century sociology rose in response to the emerging industrial era and the rise of science over religion. This means that the discipline's 'founding fathers' actually have plenty to say about technology and society. For example, the machines of modern industry form a central element of Karl Marx's account of the economic system of capitalism. Elsewhere, Max Weber wrote widely on the development of industrial, military, architectural and musical technologies.

Alongside these familiar names are less-known twentieth-century theorists who can also contribute to current understandings of technology. Current discussions of digital surveillance and control continue to be influenced, for example, by French theorist Michel Foucault's writing on the panopticon, the all-seeing central tower of prison which now has digital equivalents. Another example is the writing of Gilles Deleuze on 'the societies of control' (which looks at limitations on the everyday freedoms of individuals).

Digital sociology also follows in the wake of earlier sociological literature on technology. For example, 'science and technology studies' (which examines social influence on science) has provided 40 years of analysis of the development of innovations, from the



Sociologist also study technology-related behaviour that has become part of 'the norm'

bicycle to the Excel spreadsheet. Similarly, recent accounts of the rise of the 'information society' (in which information becomes the key resource), from sociologists such as Manuel Castells, remain very important.

Perhaps most interesting of all is the tradition of 'feminist technology studies' — for example, Cynthia Cockburn's work on the computerisation of work. This research highlights the role of technology in the reproduction of gender inequalities and injustices, as well as the likely unintended consequences and hidden costs of technology use. Digital sociologists must build on the heritage of these other sociologies.

New theories

Key point: Digital sociology pushes you to engage with new thinking and theory.

While it seeks to continue and complement these 'old' theories and traditions, digital sociology is also always looking out for new explanations and theories. While Marx and Foucault remain very useful, they were writing at very different times about very different technologies: they contain significant blind spots by the standards of 2020. For example, neither Marx nor Foucault have much to say on how digital technologies are connected with issues of race, sexuality, disability and so on.

In this sense, digital sociologists are also keen to adopt new thinking about technology from writers who might not identify themselves as sociologists per se. In particular, there is a wealth of exciting new work on 'digital' matters that crosses disciplines. Some of the best thinking here is now coming from people working across disciplinary areas such as in computing, philosophy, geography, literature and design.

For example, Wendy Chun's historical work on the early internet has pushed forward

our understandings of online freedoms and constraints and the way academics now struggle to keep pace with the speed of change in the digital world. Those studying global climate change, for instance, have consistently argued that by the time we know whether or not their predictions are true, it will be too late. Elsewhere, some great new insights are being produced by artists, whose creative work addresses digital topics. In short, digital sociologists can learn from other disciplines.

New methodologies

Key point: Digital sociologists must also push themselves to be open-minded about research methods.

Of course, there is still an important place for the continued use of the standard sociological methods of questionnaires, interviews, participant and non-participant observation. Yet, digital sociological research also tries to draw on digitally-orientated methods. These include the sociological uses of 'big data', alongside analyses of 'small data' (including data ethnography, and other approaches to investigating the intimacies of digital life). There is also growing interest in digital ethnography and social network analysis.

These methods can pose a number of challenges for social science researchers. While sociologists are often comfortable to adopt digitally-related qualitative methods, the discipline remains lacking in data skills. Perhaps the most important skills for the new generation of sociologists will be to have a good working knowledge of computer science, data science and social science.

Conclusion

In the 2020s, sociologists will have to turn their attention toward the social complexities

of the digital age. Digital sociology therefore marks a timely opportunity for sociologists to reinvigorate their craft and develop their thinking and their practice.

Digital sociology pushes sociologists to make connections with other areas that are already engaging critically on digital questions and digital settings. Digital sociology challenges us to take ownership of ideas, methods and techniques that have not traditionally been part of the sociological toolkit.

Of course, it is important to not get too carried away. Digital sociology is not a completely new (or superior) way of 'doing' sociology. The past 150 years of 'pre-digital' sociology are not suddenly rendered useless by these emerging trends. Instead, digital sociology marks a concerted attempt by a broad range of sociologists to engage fully with social settings that are now profoundly digital and digitised.

In this sense, digital sociology should be seen as a 'moment' rather than a 'movement'. In other words, it is not a unified, dogmatic set of principles. Rather, it is a loose, but deliberate, refocusing of our attention, effort and thinking.

Twenty years from now, there may well not be too much talk of a specific 'digital sociology'. But this may be because, by then, all elements of sociology will be digital. In the meantime, this is a new sociological trend that is well worth paying attention to.

KEY POINTS

- As we all get used to living in a digital (some would say post-digital) age, new opportunities are created for sociologists to explore some of the impacts this has for individuals and society.
- Digital sociology explores the disparities in access to new technologies, and the role of technology in a wide variety of important areas, such as the exercise of power, the sometimes unforeseen influence of social media, the nature of work, gender inequalities, and so on.
- Digital sociology not only offers sociologists areas of research, but also new research methods, for example in the use of 'big data'.

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Older people are often excluded from technological advances