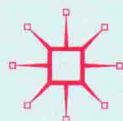


Edited By

Kate Orton-Johnson & Nick Prior

# DIGITAL SOCIOLOGY

Critical  
Perspectives



# Digital Sociology

## Critical Perspectives

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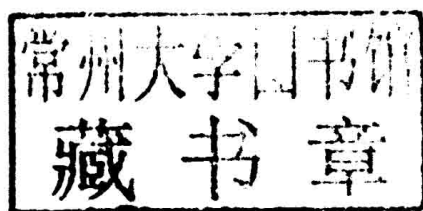
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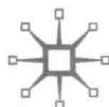
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# Introduction

*Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior*

The increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies in everyday life has fostered much academic debate about social relationships and social structures in what has been termed an 'Information Age'. Emerging from these debates is an interdisciplinary field of research concerned with the complexities and contradictions involved in the transformations which information and communication technologies (ICTs) are purportedly bringing about across cultural, political and economic practices (Baym, 2010; Bijker & Law, 1997; Jones, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Wellman & Haythornthwaite 2003). As sociologists we see exciting and important opportunities for the discipline to contribute to a growing and diverse range of empirical and theoretical work that seeks to map these changes. From cyberselves to online communities, from media war to networked inequalities, from culture to social structure, sociology and our sociological imaginations are confronted by new digital landscapes.

Internet research (IR) has provided scholars with a wealth of research that has refocused, challenged and recontextualised concepts that have long been a staple of sociological enquiry. In a relatively short but rich history IR has traced hyperbolic discussions of revolutionary and transformative futures and the potentially deleterious social consequences of virtual practices. While some might claim that we can now declare the end of the 'cyberbole' (Woolgar, 2002), the aim of this collection is not to recap or evaluate these literatures and debates. Our concern, as sociologists, was to question the position of the discipline in this interdisciplinary landscape. The collection was prompted by our own curiosity about how sociology was dealing with what we see as a new phase in IR. The very pervasiveness and normalisation of contemporary digital technologies means that few spheres of social enquiry

are insulated from some form of digital manifestation. IR is no longer the study of an exotic, esoteric or autonomous cyberspace, and we felt dissatisfied and intrigued by the ambiguities and uncertainties faced by sociologists trying to think critically about new intersections, continuities and flows between the social and the digital. We conceived of the collection as a disciplinary pause for thought, providing a space for reflecting on the ways in which the core concerns and contours of sociology are being explored, challenged, shaped and reformed in diverse and imaginative ways.

As sociologists interested in the sociology of technology and in technologies of the social, this collection is shaped by questions we have about the nature of the discipline in the digital age: Are existing sociological concepts still fit for purpose or are they now stretched beyond recognition in new applications and shifting social contexts? How can sociology re-evaluate its core ideas in an interdisciplinary landscape? To what extent is the 'sociological imagination' a sufficient basis from which to embark on investigations into digital worlds with cross or even trans-disciplinary indices? And if the discipline is found wanting, what kinds of disciplinary borrowings, combinations and clashes might we expect or even encourage?

The authors of the following chapters had an open remit to explore these questions and, accordingly, competing discourses and dialogues run throughout the collection. Together the chapters make visible the discordances, contradictions and challenges facing sociology and emphasise the diversity of the discipline and the rich field of debates that are open to sociological enquiry. Despite this diversity, a key and important commonality across the chapters is an emphasis on the need for sociology to conceptually move beyond the binary oppositions of virtual/real and transformation/continuity that have characterised much existing debate. This atavistic impulse towards dualism has structured the ways in which we understand the relationship between technology, society and culture. The spirit of the collection as a whole, and the chapters individually, is to reflect on the increasing normality and inclusion of the digital in everyday life, resisting binary tendencies and highlighting the mess *and* the continuities in new digital social landscapes. The chapters reflexively draw on the ambiguities of digital cultures to examine the ways in which technologies shape, or indeed leave unchanged, key sociological domains.

A number of the chapters advocate what Beer and Burrows (2007) have argued is key to a sociology of web 2.0 social media, better

description and more detailed explanations of new concepts and contexts posed by digital technologies:

We are of the view that the discipline would do well at the present juncture to...embrace a renewed interest in *sociological description* as applied to new cultural digitisations.... At a time of rapid socio-cultural change a renewed emphasis on *good* – critical, distinctive and thick – sociological descriptions of emergent digital phenomena, ahead of any headlong rush into analytics, seems to us to be a sensible idea. We need to understand some of the basic parameters of our new digital objects of sociological study before we can satisfactorily locate them within any broader frames of theoretical reference.

(2007:11)

We believe that this remains a valid and vital goal in seeking to explicate new concepts and navigate new challenges to existing sociology tenets. However, the task of critique is not obsolete, and the chapters in the collection act as a bridge between the descriptive needs and critical questions that are vital for sociologists attempting to understand the landscapes of the discipline.

An important emerging theme of the collection has been an emphasis on the durability of the material. This is a return to materialities not only in the sense of lived, situated actions, but also in the sense of 'thick' engagement with the devices, processes and practices that gravitate around digitally mediated lives. As such we believe that the collection acts as an exploratory starting point for debates that seek not to reinforce a position or to stake a disciplinary claim but to evaluate new conceptual tools and languages with which we can flex our sociological imaginations and with which we can raise and explore a set of vital questions on the nature of sociology after the digital.

The collection is divided into five sets of paired chapters, each focused on key sociological concerns: relationships, spaces, structures, mediations and practices. This structure does not aim to provide a comprehensive panorama of the substantive territories of the discipline. Rather the intention is for each pair to be read as a dialogue and, for the text as a whole, to foster conversation across the disciplinary grain. In this spirit each pair of chapters is followed by an afterward which reflects on the critical rethinking theme of the collection, raising questions about how sociology might remember, revisit, revise or dust down its core concepts in the light of digital provocations.

## Relationships

The two chapters in Part I tackle the domain of relationships and personal lives in an exploration of the gendered nature of digital landscapes. Jamieson, reflecting on her earlier work *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies* (1997), makes explicit the optimistic and pessimistic binaries that are entwined in the discussions of digital technologies and mediated personal lives. In revisiting classic interactionist accounts of the self in the context of a networked society, the chapter evaluates the assumption of physical co-presence in existing theoretical approaches to understanding personal relationships. Taking a critical approach to the affordances of cyberspace for new forms of intimacy and 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al. 2006), Jamieson makes an important point about the persistence of hierarchies and power relations around sexuality and gender, questioning the transformative effect of mediated interactions and relationships. Her caution points to the need to acknowledge the theoretical *continuities* of classical accounts of personal relationships, and her call for existing theoretical perspectives to undergo a 'refurbishment' (rather than a complete overhaul) emphasises the need for the recognition of historical, global and local contexts in sociological understandings of gender and identity online.

Green and Singleton develop this theme in arguing that we need to consider the ways in which gender is often rendered invisible in sociological debates around the digital. In addressing issues of '*gendering*' and '*gender-in*' social and technological change they examine the theoretical challenges raised by a networked society and argue that the sociology of technology would benefit from insights and critiques long provided by feminist sociology. Like Jamieson, Green and Singleton call for critical caution in the face of binary transformative narratives and emphasise the need for gender to remain a vital sociological lens through which one can understand mediated relationships and environments. In their empirical research on digital sociality Green and Singleton use the mobile phone as an example of the ways in which technology can inscribe and reveal gender relations, as well as being a technology that enables ways of 'doing' intimacy and belonging.

Both chapters raise interesting questions about the ways in which technologies are implicated in personal relationships and in the balance of public/private spaces and home/work domains and both force us to reflect on what freedom and surveillance may mean as part of a gendered digital everyday life. In formulating these kinds of questions,



the chapters offer possible future pathways for sociology to interrogate the complexities of mediated lives and intimacies.

## Spaces

Changing notions of space, community and connectivity have been central to debates around cyberspace, digital localities and virtual cartographies. Drawing on urban informatics the first chapter in this part challenges ontological distinctions between *place* and *flow*. While not necessarily an obvious sociological starting point, Burrows and Beer make a case for looking outside of the discipline for conceptual and empirical input into how sociology can best understand place and space. Tracing the importance of transactional data, new forms of technoculture and new practices of technology production and consumption, the chapter argues that sociological questions of surveillance, trust, risk and mobility are pushed to the fore in new debates about human action and physical/virtual spaces mediated by ubiquitous networked devices. Highlighting the increasingly complex relations between individuals, the environments they inhabit and the social-technical production of everyday life, Burrows and Beer suggest a new target for sociological analysis in the form of the 'technological unconscious' and urge for a reformulation of the discipline's vocabulary, methodological approaches and traditional perspectives towards urban life.

The second chapter in this part tackles the transient and adaptive concept of community. Here Evans argues that digital spaces and technologies, rather than becoming transformative hosts for new forms of global community, have closely replicated long-standing social networks and formations. Evans traces early debates about the utopian possibilities afforded by cyberspace for community formation and uses the notion of community as a critical tool to raise questions about how sociology can understand computer mediated communication (CMC) and mediated social relations. She argues that while different communication technologies have shaped new communities of interest, attachment and belonging they have also reinforced existing social boundaries, locales and cultures. Further challenging early hopes of innovation and liberation in cyberspace, Evans poses interesting questions about what community means in online environments of leisure, consumption and advertising, where boundaries of mass media and digital capitalism are increasingly blurred. In a critique of the 'thin' and fragmented nature of online connectivity, Evans argues that the task of sociology must be to