

Digital Sociology and Information Science Research

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ABSTRACT

Digital sociology is a new subfield of sociology that has challenged the discipline to engage with digital methods, information practices, and questions of societal data use. Such topics have been central to information science research for decades; however, renewed attention being called to them by sociologists creates both opportunities and challenges for information researchers who incorporate sociological theory or methods into their work. This panel invites audience members to consider the emergence of digital sociology and to explore what it means for information science research. Panelists, drawing on a variety of disciplinary roots, will introduce and contextualize the idea of digital sociology, explore issues related to the existing and potential intersection between digital sociology and information science, and examine tensions and criticisms related to sociological digital information research. Following a brief introduction and presentations from four panelists who are themselves using or exploring digital sociology in information research, there will be an open question and answer session with the audience, followed by World Café style small group discussions designed for attendees to share perspectives, make connections with each other, and discuss methods for future research with a sociological lens.

Keywords

Theory, methodology, information research, digital sociology, interdisciplinarity

INTRODUCTION

Digital sociology is a new subfield of sociology that challenges the formerly “reluctant” (Farrell & Peterson, 2010) discipline to engage with digital methods,

information practices, and questions of societal data use. Such topics have been central to information science research for decades; however, renewed attention being called to them by sociologists creates both opportunities and challenges for information researchers who incorporate sociological theory or methods into their work. This panel invites information science researchers to consider the emergence of digital sociology and to explore what it means for information science research.

DIGITAL SOCIOLOGY

Digital sociology is a new phenomenon that has emerged as a result of the efforts of digitally-engaged sociological scholars and sociologists of media and communication studies. The subfield currently contains four main emphases: (1) digital media use by sociologists, (2) sociological research on digital technology use, (3) use of digitally-generated data (inclusive of but not limited to “big data”), and (4) critical analyses of digital media in society (Lupton, 2015, pp. 15-16).

Much of the leadership of the digital turn in sociology to date has come from the United Kingdom, with the British Sociological Association developing a conference stream focused on digital sociology and working toward guidelines for the conduct of digital research (currently in draft form, available via Davies, 2016). Although digital sociology is explicitly interdisciplinary (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013) and there have been recent calls for greater cross-disciplinary collaboration (Le Moignan, 2015), there has been limited uptake of information science theory into digital sociology, and information science researchers have rarely been represented in digital sociology workshops, conferences, and publications.

SOCIOLOGICAL INFORMATION SCIENCE RESEARCH

Several subfields of information science have been heavily influenced by sociology, with major information scholars borrowing and building on theory and methods. Yet other subfields of information, technology, and communication research have developed cognate to sociology or incorporate elements of the latter field, including social informatics, computer-supported cooperative work, social network analysis, and Internet studies. Still other areas of

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study have drawn together information scientists and sociologists under umbrellas such as science and technology studies, socio-technical research, or science, technology and society.

Within information behavior, for example, some of the most prominent theorists of the past forty years have drawn heavily on sociological concepts and approaches. In addition to integrating sociological theory, research methods including grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), sociological discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 2003), and quantitative observational techniques such as surveys are commonly used in information behavior research. Chatman (1991, 1996), for instance, conducted research using sociological ethnographic methods, developing key theories of information behavior including those of information poverty and life in the round. Students and colleagues of Chatman carry on this tradition within information behavior research, extending and refining her concepts by integrating them with sociological theory, for example Burnett and Jaeger's information worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). Savolainen brought the sociological "practice turn" (Cetina, Schatzki, & von Savigny, 2010) into information behavior research with his work to develop and disambiguate the concept of information practices (Savolainen, 1995, 2008), work which has been furthered and applied by scholars such as McKenzie (2003).

Social and community informatics researchers have also adapted and expanded on sociological concepts, methods, and theories. For instance, scholars have drawn on the ideas behind boundary objects, social capital, social control models, social movements, social network analysis, and social worlds (see e.g. Fichman & Rosenbaum, 2014; Haythornthwaite & Hagar, 2006; Williams & Durrance, 2008), conducting research using qualitative and ethnographic methods that produce the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of a given case study also present in much sociological and anthropological scholarship. Other social informatics-connected researchers have developed theories informed—to varying extents—by sociology, such as Kling, McKim, and King's (2003) socio-technical interaction networks (STINs) or Jaeger and Burnett's (2010) information worlds. Such work, drawing on developments in sociology, information science, and other cognate fields, looks to inform research examining the relationships "between the design and use of advanced ICTs and the character of real social life" (Robbin, Lamb, King, & Berleur, 2006, p. 17).

Does digital sociology differ from or offer new perspectives on sociological information research? Although there is substantial uptake of sociological theory and methods within certain subfields of information science, are information science theories and methods likewise influencing digital sociology? While some information scientists overlap with the sociological community, are we practicing digital sociology?

PANEL PROPOSAL

In this panel, we will introduce and contextualize the idea of digital sociology, explore issues related to the existing and potential intersection between digital sociology and information science, and examine tensions and criticisms related to sociological digital information research.

Through a combination of theoretical explorations and examples from research, we will discuss questions such as:

- What is digital sociology and what are its origins?
- What are the parallels between digital sociology and information science research?
- Are some information researchers already conducting digital sociology, and if so, how?
- Are there lessons from digital sociology for information science, and vice versa?
- Are information science theories and methods influencing digital sociology, and if not, why not?
- What would it take for information scientists to build stronger connections with the digital sociology community, and is there rationale for doing so?

Following a brief introduction and presentations from four panelists who are themselves using or exploring digital sociology in information research, there will be an open question and answer session with the audience, followed by World Cafe style small group discussions (Carson, 2011) centered around a mix of pre-generated topics and ideas that emerge during the session. Discussions will make use of principles of critical dialogue (Kaufman, 2010), posing research and theory "problems" constructed to draw in a variety of viewpoints and empower new and marginalized voices. Attendees will self-select into groups based on interest in topics related to digital sociology and information science, and will have the opportunity to share perspectives, make connections with each other, and discuss methods for future research with a sociological lens.

PANELISTS

Each panelist contributes a unique perspective on the integration of digital sociology into information research, based on their own disciplinary background, theoretical orientation, and programs of research. Panelists will discuss theoretical questions related to the intersection of digital sociology and information research, as well as methodological questions based on research they have conducted.

Nicole A. Cooke, PhD, MEd, MLS is an Assistant Professor at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a faculty affiliate at the School's Center for Digital Inclusion. She holds an M.Ed in Adult Education from Pennsylvania State University, and an MLS and a Ph.D. in Communication, Information and Library Studies from Rutgers University,

where she was one of the first 12 American Library Association (ALA) Spectrum Doctoral Fellows. She was named a "Mover & Shaker" by *Library Journal* in 2007 and was the 2016 recipient of the ALA's Equality Award. Her research and teaching interests include human information behavior (particularly in the online context), critical cultural information studies, and diversity and social justice in librarianship (with an emphasis on infusing them into LIS education and pedagogy). Her current research investigates how people share and use information in online spaces, while involved in leisure and social media activities. Other research projects explore how media and cultural literacies merge with virtual ethnography techniques to produce thick descriptions of participants' online experiences and meaning making processes. During this panel, she will also reflect on the emergence of digital sociology in non-LIS conferences and spaces, and how LIS can and should become more involved in these discussions.

Devon Greyson, PhD, MLIS, is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Child & Family Research Institute, University of British Columbia and faculty in Women's and Gender Studies at Capilano University, both in Canada. A 2011 Vanier Scholar and a 2014 ASIS&T "New Leader," Greyson holds a PhD in interdisciplinary studies from the University of British Columbia. Greyson's research focuses on health information practices of youth and families, as well as the ethics and effectiveness of population health information interventions. An interdisciplinary researcher who uses sociological methods to investigate the ways health information practices affect social equity, Greyson is keen to explore the potential for information behavior research to cross-pollinate with digital sociology. Current research projects that may or may not fall within the sub-field of digital sociology, include a longitudinal study of information practices of young parents, investigations of health-related information practices of vaccine-hesitant parents, and research on social media use by health promotion campaigns.

Anabel Quan-Haase, PhD, MA, is an Associate Professor and holds a joint appointment at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies and the Department of Sociology, the University of Western Ontario. She is the director of the SocioDigital Lab and her research interests focus on how people integrate social media into their everyday lives and work settings. Her particular focus is on user engagement and the role of social context in how individuals use and make sense of messages and interactions on social media. She is the co-author with Luke Sloan of the *Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* forthcoming in 2017 with Sage. Dr. Quan-Haase is the author of *Technology and Society* (2015, 2nd ed. with Oxford University Press) and *Information Brokering in the High-Tech Industry* (2009 with Lambert). She is the past president of the Canadian Association for Information Science and a Council Member of the CITAMS section of the American Sociological Association. During the panel she will present on two

current projects that directly integrate sociological theory to motivate the research questions. One project is based on Robert K. Merton's notion of the reward system in academia and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Both of these concepts allow scholars in information study to investigate and question the parameters that we currently use and continue to develop to measure scholarly output and its merits. Sociological theory facilitates a critical engagement in information science practice and theory. In the second project, we are utilizing the theory of social capital developed by Bourdieu and Coleman to further understand how digital technologies are changing how young people acquire and share information sources. Both projects will demonstrate the value of engaging with sociological theory as a means to motivating research questions and lines of investigation in information science. Sociology cannot only provide sound theoretical frameworks, but also means and approaches to measurement.

Adam Worrall, PhD, MLIS, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies in Edmonton, Canada. Worrall's research examines the relationships and interactions between information-centric communities, information and communication technologies (ICTs), and the information behavior of their users. His particular and emerging focus is on the practice and support of information and knowledge sharing across the boundaries that may exist between communities (especially online), and the roles that boundary-spanning individuals and ICTs play in such sociotechnical practices. His research draws on literature, theories, and concepts from social informatics, sociology, knowledge management, and information behavior. Worrall's recent and upcoming work includes investigations of the roles played by LibraryThing and Goodreads, as information-centric online communities and boundary objects, in the social and information worlds of their users; the information values, information sharing, and cultural memory practices of Canadian expatriate and immigrant members of Twitter; and the social and emotional reasons and motivations that lead users to ask and answer questions, participate, interact, and share information in the Academia section of StackExchange, a social Q&A site. He will explore the potential connections and distinctions between and across the areas of digital sociology, social informatics, and information sharing behavior, including the potential for greater inter- and cross-disciplinary collaboration within this space.

STRUCTURE OF THE PANEL

The proposed structure of the panel is as follows:

- The moderator (Quan-Haase) will introduce the panel and give a brief introduction to the concept of digital sociology (10 min)
- Each of the four panelists will discuss one or more of the questions listed above in light of their

disciplinary background, use of and orientation to theory, and research program and projects (10 min each)

- Interactive Q&A with panelists (15 min)
- World Cafe style critical dialogues around theoretical and methodological questions and emergent research themes (20 min)
- Concluding wrap-up (5 min)

CONCLUSION

Information researchers should be aware of the current movement within sociology to explore and establish methods and ethical guidelines for digital research. The emergence of digital sociology may create opportunities and challenges for information science as a field, as well as for individual researchers.

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