# Book Review: What is Digital Sociology? by Neil Selwyn

*In* **What is Digital Sociology?***,* **Neil Selwyn** *offers a new overview of digital sociology, advocating for its mainstream acceptance as a valuable expansion of sociological inquiry, while dispelling the misconception that it is a entirely new or radically different form of sociology. This is an excellent introduction to digital sociology, recommends* **Huw Davies***, that will be particularly helpful for students and any sociologist curious about the field's scope and purpose.*

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**What is Digital Sociology? Neil Selwyn. Polity. 2019.**

Sometimes it's useful to reflect on just how profoundly digital technology has changed society. Recently, while having a clear out, I found my 'Weetabix Book of Facts'. While I was growing up during the 1980s in the valleys of South Wales, this was a reference book for me to find out about history, science and nature. Although many of the constituent technologies existed back then, having all the world's knowledge available to me in digitised books and articles, podcasts, videos and encyclopaedias in an instant, through a handset that was communicating with satellites, was still within the realm of science fiction. In my lifetime, how we wage war, how we do healthcare and negotiate pandemics, how we shop, form and conduct relationships, co-habit as families, entertain ourselves, learn, consume and interpret news, participate in politics and activism, and transmit hate speech, have all been transformed by digital technology. Data about our prejudices, our weaknesses, passions and identities are commodified, processed, exploited and fed back to us like a virtual [soylent green]() so that modern [robber barons]() can accumulate wealth and power beyond the reach of nation states. Depending on our relative position within hierarchies of wealth and power, digital technology can give us agency and take it away.

Yet, by many measures the sociological study of digital technology is not part of mainstream sociology. Pete Fussey and Silke Roth have created a special issue of *[Sociology]()* on digital sociology. However, since 2008 the British Sociological Association's flagship journal has published only six articles at the time of writing that use digital as a keyword according to its search engine. Why isn't digital sociology more established within and beyond sociology?

In *[What is Digital Sociology?]()*, Neil Selwyn argues an 'increasingly blurred distinction between straight-ahead sociological work and the mass of cognate work' across other disciplines (vii) is partly responsible: digital sociology is alive and well; it's just often being done elsewhere, outside of mainstream sociology. In contrast to *Sociology*, from 2008, the journal *[New Media and Society]()* has published 314 articles that mention 'sociology' in its keywords. Many of the researchers that one of my fellow digital sociology study conveners, Chris Till, has interviewed for his [digital sociology podcast]() are doing digital sociology but don't call themselves sociologists.

Selwyn also implies digital sociology is not mainstream because not enough people know what digital sociology is. Many of those who have heard of digital sociology believe we don't need a faddish new form of 'sociology-lite'. And sociologists are sometimes reluctant to exit their 'comfort zones' (42) to embrace innovation.

In this excellent introduction to digital sociology, particularly for undergraduate and postgraduate students and any sociologist curious about the field's scope and purpose, Selwyn advocates for digital sociology's mainstream acceptance but he 'dispels any misconception of digital sociology being a new, superior or radically different form of sociology'. He doesn't call for digital sociology to 'usurp or demean other areas of sociological work', but instead to 'augment and expand sociological inquiry' (112).

Chapter One, 'Promises and Precedents', begins by building the book's case for this new field that assesses the sociological impact of digital technology. Selwyn pre-empts critics who may argue digital sociology is an inferior form of 'sociology-lite' by illustrating how technology and its effects have always been a concern for classical sociologists such as Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen. They showed that technology and our social and political lives are indivisible (which, incidentally, makes me wonder why, after all these years, tech determinism is still a thing!). He then introduces some less familiar, twentieth-century sociologists of technology, such as William Fielding Ogburn, Lewis Mumford and the 'insightful but bleak' (9) Jacques Ellul. We need a new form of sociology because 'the current wave of digital technologies is quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from the technological conditions' (19):

> however prescient they might have been, Marx, Ellul and others were not contemplating AI or the Internet of Things in their argument (19).

Next, we are offered a canter through STS including Judy Wajcman, Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant. Digital sociology's novelty and interpretive flexibility can be its strength, allowing its exponents to get down to the micro level more than their forebearers: 'digital sociology can also be more introspective and intimate than previous sociological accounts of technology' (19). Equipped with such expertise, digital sociologists can make a 'tangible contribution to building (or more specifically coding) the future along different lines' (20). With their deep technical knowledge, digital sociologists can interrogate and change for the better the 'coded architectures of software, platforms and systems and the programmed nature of what digital technologies seem to "do" of their own accord' (19).

Chapter Two, 'Digital Sociology: Central Concerns, Concepts and Questions', is about 'reframing the core technical features of contemporary technologies into sociological concerns' by 'reusing and reconfiguring fundamental questions and concepts from the past 100 years of sociological thinking' and 'looking toward new forms of hybrid theory emerging from conflations of philosophy, computational sciences, design, politics, urban geography and other sources of critical thinking' (22). Here, Selwyn answers the contention that the more digitised a society becomes, the more things that can be rendered as 0s and 1s, and the more we take the tech for granted, the less we need a specialist field of sociology to study digital technology: 'retaining the prefix of digital reflects a commitment to continuing to notice what has now largely become invisible' (23). 'Instead contemporary society is better understood as an entanglement of humanity, materiality and digitality' (24). The chapter goes on to cite many sociologists who should be familiar to followers of @BSADigitalSoc to make sociological sense of 'networks', 'platforms', 'data', 'algorithms and automation'.

This chapter's section on '*the (re)use of social theory in digital sociology*' explores digital Marxist theory, platform capitalism and digital labour as well as digital sources of resistance. Selwyn assesses the relevance of 'pre-digital' theorists including Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. He then argues:

> the best digital theory-building of the past decade stems from social and computational origins. As such, it is increasingly apparent that digital sociologists need to develop a computational as well as a sociological imagination (42).

This includes engaging with thinkers such as McKenzie Wark, Ian Bogost and Geert Lovink who come from 'gamer, hacker and hacktivist backgrounds' (42). And an 'avant garde' of theorists including Benjamin Bratton, Alexander Galloway and Wendy Chun, whose work 'is already proving tremendously generative for digital sociologists to draw upon' (44). Selwyn concludes:

> 'simply adding Foucault to Facebook is not a sufficient intellectual response to the complex machinations of the digital age' (44).

Chapter Three describes two examples of digital sociology inquiry – the areas of digital labour and digital race. This chapter includes sections on the digitisation of traditional work, new forms of distributed, discrete work and social media as sites of 'free labor' (53). The racialised nature of digital media is explored through a number of different strands, including work that addresses 'the dynamics of online interactions' (60), how 'applications and platforms are configured in ways that prompt and perpetuate racialized dynamics' (61), race and the digital formation of collective identity. Here, Selwyn cites many of the leading lights on digital race such as André Brock, Tressie McMillan Cottom, Jessie Daniels, Safiya Umoja Noble and, from the UK, Sanjay Sharma, who all discuss how the dominant platforms perpetuate and monetise racism. I would urge readers to also look up Ruha Benjamin's work. Since Selwyn writes that 'Chapter 3's indicative discussions of digital race and digital labour are intended to inspire readers to delve into *other* literatures on equally significant topics', on gender, I would recommend, for example, these books on Data Feminism and the history of women in UK computing.

Chapter Four, 'Digital Methods and Methodology', inevitably includes a dialogue with Mike Savage and Roger Burrows (2007), deals with big data and the computational social sciences, how 'commercial sociology' (71) is innovating its methods, describes the affordances and limitations of large-scale social media data from platforms such as Twitter and cites 'topic modelling' as one particular area of interest (75). Here Selwyn also discusses 'thick data', 'the digital ethnographic turn' (78) and 'ethnographies of online communities' (80). The next section on coding, programming and software development addresses the 'burgeoning trend of research based around the design, development and implementation of software and coded artifacts' (82). These are 'driving impetus for digital sociology […] to engage in design and implementation of software that is likely to push boundaries and test the limits of coded environments' (83), and to 'act to repurpose digital tools away from (and even against) commercial logics and imperatives of dominant platforms' (87). While these discrete chapters help make sense of digital sociology, the themes they address are often indivisible. For example, an awful lot of digital sociology's 'cognate work', particularly by its more positivist and computational cousins, has a problem that Gurminder Bhambra calls methodological whiteness.

The final chapter 'reflects on the craft, scholarship and practice of digital sociology' (92). 'Unlike their colleagues in some other areas of sociology', digital sociologists, we are told, 'are less concerned' with 'sociological clique' or the institution where they 'happen to be employed' (93). And, 'many digital sociologists are happy to spend time riffing ideas on Twitter and later rounding these up to a few ''blog-worthy'' paragraphs' (96). Selwyn says there is 'much to admire' in such practices, but the digital scholar is sometimes 'tone-deaf to the politics of contemporary academic work', including 'performativity and affect' and 'issues that digital sociologists are well used to discussing with regard to other people's digital media use' (105).

It's true that the ideal digital scholar is the neoliberal university's teacher's pet: the winner in the Altmetric Olympics. But, during my seven years of involvement in @BSADigitalSoc, I haven't encountered any digital sociologists who aren't acutely and reflexively aware that there 'is the growing co-opting of these forms of digital scholarship into forms of performativity, accountability and measurement-based management that now pervade contemporary academia' (106). There are more salient examples of academics who have failed this reflexivity test embodied in parodies such as @ProfBritPol_PhD.

Selwyn also argues that 'despite being well aware of the phenomenon, digital sociologists are not immune to the social media phenomenon of ''filter bubbles''' (109). While there may be some truth in this, to get a broader perspective and for research purposes many digital sociologists, including myself, deliberately venture outside our filter bubbles to observe how people with different politics, epistemologies and world views think and behave. I also feel I'm one of the lucky ones who experiences Twitter as more of 'a supportive community' than 'self-congratulatory, smug clique' (109).

However, aside from these quibbles, if after reading this book you are still unconvinced of digital sociology's value, you probably never will be. The digital turn engages every level of sociological analysis: macro, meso and micro. Therefore, 'digital sociologists should feel at ease in switching between continental and computational philosophy and in harboring interests in Marx and machine learning' (44). Given that 'digital technology is entwined with issues of race, sexuality, disability and intersections therein' (19), there is an opportunity for sociology to draw on its rich traditions and claim this space, make a virtue of digital sociology's ability to access a smorgasbord of methods and theories and become the 'go-to' discipline for the study of digital technology's effects on society (and vice versa). Borrowing a metaphor from software engineering (a 'full stack developer' can programme the front end and back end of computing systems), by addressing macro, meso and micro layers of socio-technical systems – from the algorithms they execute to their political economy to their socio-emotional consequences – digital sociology, as a discipline, offers a full stack critique of the digitised society.

Given there are so few opportunities for young people to critically evaluate the technologies that they engage with every day, the case for digital sociology has never been stronger. Moreover, particularly at a time when so much duff sociology (such as 'taboo busting' race pseudoscience) is in circulation, public interest in digital technology offers further opportunities to show what rigorous, cutting-edge sociology is capable of contributing to contemporary public discourse.

Besides digest and distribute this book, what can those of us who are convinced digital sociology has value do within the academy to institute digital sociology? It's worth noting that most of the digital sociologists cited in this book who are pushing the boundaries of sociology (including Noortje Marres, Susan Halford, Helen Kennedy, Kate Orton-Johnson, Karen Gregory, Jessie Daniels, Tara Stamm and Tressie McMillan Cottom) are women who are doing the work behind the scenes. They are often sacrificing research time, taking on extra responsibilities and fighting institutional inertia to develop digital sociology courses, form research clusters and put on events. If digital sociology is going to succeed, they need everyone's support.

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