'Unpacking the "Digital" and the "Social" in Digital Sociology'

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REVIEW

'Unpacking the "Digital" and the "Social" in Digital Sociology'

Digital Sociology: The Reinvention of Social Research, by Noortje Marres, Malden, MA: Polity, 2017, 232 pp., US $24.95 (paperback).

The digitalization of social life is increasingly at the center of the social science research agenda. For many scholars – from social sciences to data sciences, from the public sector to the private sector – the growing prevalence of digital data (from online platforms, business transactions, and massive bureaucracies) and analytic tools (machine learning, data visualizations and predictive algorithms, among others) is presented as an unprecedented opportunity to develop new forms of describing and intervening in social life. Indeed, new disciplines, such as computational social science (Lazer *et al.*, 2009), have come to embody this new era in which digital data and analytics will provide the basis for a new and enhanced form of empirical sociology. However, other scholars have become increasingly interested in unveiling how digital data and analytics are associated with new forms of control, surveillance and power (Lyon, 2014; Andrejevic *et al.*, 2015; Fourcade and Healy, 2016; Lupton, 2016). From this critical stance, digital social sciences should attend primarily to the different normative and political assumptions embedded in the different forms of data and algorithmic power.

Which position about the digital should digital sociology adopt? Drawing on the long tradition in Science and Technology Studies (STS) of studying socio-technical objects (data and digital analytics among them), and based on a detailed review of current scholarship on digital and Internet research, *Digital Sociology* by Noortje Marres proposes that digital sociology – a sociology that foregrounds the 'increasing computational dimension of social enquiry as well as social life' (p. 39) – should start from (and not avoid) the different ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues that arise in the interfaces between digital technologies, social life, and digital social research. In doing so, the book diverges from other literature which conceives (rather naïvely, as Marres convincingly argues) digital research as a set of new techniques for representing social life, without problematizing the links between digital research, digital infrastructures (online platforms and devices which produce data as a by-product) and the social worlds that are being studied. At the same time, the book presents a relatively optimistic approach in which a critical and epistemologically sophisticated engagement with digital life and tools can contribute to developing innovative ways of (re)connecting social research and social worlds. Such social interventions would start from the fact that social worlds and their analyses in digital settings are deeply intertwined (more on this later).

On a theoretical level, the book examines in detail the different assumptions, tensions and possibilities at play in the interfaces between the digital, the social, and social inquiry. The first chapters pursue an analysis of the different forms in which both 'the digital' and 'the social' are defined in different branches of digital sociology. For example, it analyzes how 'the digital' can relate to a specific topic of research, a methodological tool for researching the social or a platform for disseminating information. Similarly, 'the social' dimension in digital sociology might describe a form of interaction by a

'social' platform, a specific type of data (in contrast to 'natural' data) or an array of situated social practices related to the use or appropriation of digital objects. Instead of privileging only one definition among those that were discussed, Marres suggests that we should embrace these varied forms where 'the social' and 'the digital' are enacted in digital research by responding to the specific configurations in each case. Both 'The digital' and 'the social' emerge as a result of specific relations among digital infrastructures, forms of sociality and styles of social inquiry.

A key element of these relations which she discusses is interactivity: the fact that digital modes of knowing intervene in and constitute digital social life themselves, in more obvious ways than other sorts of social research like surveys and interviews. STS scholars (Lezaun, 2007; Woolgar and Lezaun, 2015) have long shown how digital devices make possible specific social worlds and social configurations at the expense of others. In a similar vein, the book presents several examples of how different digital platforms relate not only to specific forms of knowing the social but also to specific forms of *producing* it. For instance, Marres describes how the auto-suggest functions built into search engines not only allow specific modes of search but also, potentially, help to reinforce or disseminate racial stereotypes by automatically directing racial queries towards racist content. It is important to note, however, that for Marres the interactivity of digital platforms used in digital sociology is not necessarily a limitation or a source of bias (algorithms are not, for her, inherently racist or classist); these platforms might also open new forms of intervention, fostering new links between social research and social world(s). Engaging in these relations, however, requires that researchers are aware of the performative effects of digital devices – the ways in which they contribute to shaping the social worlds that they also help represent (Callon, 1998) – and that they are willing to reconfigure and 'repurpose' these devices.

Marres's book also explores methodological questions related to this repurposing, such as whether digital sociology requires mainly extending existing social science methods or developing new ones. On this point, Marres argues that methodological choices should take into consideration the specific and changing interfaces among digital infrastructures, forms of sociality, and social research, which are at stake in any given case. This, she argues, involves being critically and creatively engaged with digital research tools. This is illustrated by a detailed description of an empirical study in which the author and colleagues used co-occurrence analysis (a method developed in studies of scientific innovation Callon) for analyzing the associations between hashtags deployed around environmental issues on social media platform Twitter. In deploying this method, the authors wanted to go beyond the possibilities inscribed in existing Twitter research tools which focus mostly on *popularity*. They also wanted to highlight other forms of knowledge, i.e. patterns of relevance (i.e. – which content becomes consequential for various publics). In this way, Marres argues, sociologists can repurpose existing forms of knowing that are inbuilt into platforms, in order to address questions raised by digital objects of enquiry.

By examining the different theoretical fundaments of digital sociology, this book constitutes a unique contribution to recent discussions about the need to renovate social research methods (Back, 2012; Lury and Wakeford, 2014; Marres et al., 2018). Marres positions digital sociology as an approach with which to develop new experimental forms of social research and forms of engagement. That is it develop new possibilities 'for feedback and active engagement with research participants, audiences and research sites' (Marres, 2017, p. 98).

However, the fact that the book is packed with empirical examples does not mean that these examples offer clear instructions for how to translate Marres' insights into a

practical research program. This is partly because the empirical examples are used to illustrate arguments about the ontological and epistemological assumptions of digital research and objects rather than as arguments about methods which can then be leveraged as schemas to make sense of empirical data. For instance, in the previously example about using co-word analysis in Twitter, her emphasis was on illustrating how their empirical research problematized and overcame the limitations of in-built research devices in Twitter and the need of doing research 'with and against' these existing devices. This example, however, does not explain what other research designs or methods assemblages might help researchers problematize empirically such digital platforms in the suggested matter. Similarly, while chapter 5 argues that digital sociology can make a useful contribution to design and help to configure new modes of participation, especially non-discursive ones (Marres, 2012), it offers less clues about which sorts of interactive methodologies and design processes the researchers can pursue for obtaining such an experimental reconfiguration of the links between social research and participation in digital settings. In other words, the book is instructive but not prescriptive – it leads by example rather than by guidelines.

In this sense, Marres's reflections and empirical examples could be complemented with a more practical description of common techniques and methods that can be used to instantiate the theoretical arguments about the possibilities of digital sociology. This could resemble the format of a digital sociology do-it-yourself handbook that, while maintaining the theoretical stakes about digital sociology (for example, its interactivity), also translates this principle into concrete sets of procedures, techniques and devices. Taking this more practical and programatic stance would make it easier for these arguments to travel outside the author's epistemic reference group (mostly STS and micro-sociology) into other epistemic communities, and become more relevant to computational social scientists or even data scientists interested in examining the theoretical and epistemic foundation of digital research.

Following this path is certainly not easy because it involves translating the wide-ranging epistemic and ontological possibilities thrown up by the digital into practical discussions and procedures that can be grasped by wider audiences. One key risk might be naturalizing – making again unproblematic – some of the core ontological and epistemic qualities of the digital objects that are discussed in this book. The gains, however, could be worth the risk as more practical formats can make the arguments of the book relevant event to the designers of these digital objects and researchers outside of sociology. Such practical examples would also be useful tools for teaching digital technologies to graduate students, making the next generation of scholars aware of the multiple ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues that underpin their practical interventions.

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