SOCIOLOGY AND THE INTERNET

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The Internet is helping to take the guesswork out of sociology. The World Wide Web (Web) is not an object of study for researchers it is a field of study equivalent to offline social interaction. The opportunities and variety of real-time interactions and negotiations available to social researchers demands a real-time response. Information technology is changing the observer/observed relationship. The interfaces of social interactions in a digitally intermediated world are multiple and blurred. The 21st century sociologist needs online skills, tacit knowledge and comfort migrating across the online and offline territories. Understanding and reflecting on these changes is the focus of this paper.

Contemporary sociologists are in the relatively unique position of both professional observation and participation in the birth of a powerful new form of interconnected media. It puts a tremendous stress on core research tenets of ethics, theory, and practice. As sociology adjusts to the changing forms of communication and social interaction it is almost impossible to capture any form of reliable insight into the actions and results. Capturing the state of sociological research on the Internet is like trying to take a snapshot out of a speeding car. Michel Serres speaks of such interfaces as akin to the jagged shores of the Northwest Passage, no-one sure where shore and coastline meet (Serres 1995).

Social networking sites Facebook, YouTube and Bebo provide new forms of access to the conversations and social life on the Internet. Facebook in particular adopts a very aggressive approach to owning all the intellectual property loaded on to the site by millions of users all over the world. This provides the intriguing possibility of social networks providing real-time feeds of social conversation through provision of topic and keyword based themes. Sociologists could subscribe for example to a topical conversation feed from thousands of teenagers from a specific region of a specific city with specific demographic profiles.

Massive multiplayer online games (MMO), like *World of Warcraft* (www.worldofwarcraft.com) with 5.5 million subscribers worldwide, put thousands of players in a real-time virtual world with or against characters controlled by people who could be next door or halfway around the globe[1]. Persistent worlds in these social networks and games mean that the action goes on even if your player isn't there to participate. Similarly sociological action goes on whether we are looking or not.

Academia, like all industries, is struggling to adapt to the acceleration of information creation and dissemination brought on by digitally inter-networked media. In a 2001 Annual Review of Sociology paper *Social Implications of the Internet* leading US sociologists suggest there are three

[1] One famous photo shows real-time characters waiting in a virtual queue to slay a specific monster that brought special reward. Around the world dozens of people have died from playing too long in virtual environments. Currency is virtual worlds often trades for more than the Russian Ruble on eBay.

key reasons that makes the social implications of human interaction with new digital media unique and of interest to social scientists. These reasons appear as relevant in 2007 as when they were authored. First, it offers sociologists a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to explore technology diffusion and media effects during the very early stages of the institutionalisation of a new medium. Second, the Internet offers unique opportunities for media research because it involves "different modalities of communication (interactive communication, information retrieval, group social interactions, interaction between man and machine) and different forms of multimedia (text, images, audio, video, animation)". They suggest that this "renders plausible claims that the technology will be implicated in many kinds of social change, perhaps more deeply than television or radio". Third, that regulatory, economic, and legal forms are emerging that will strongly impact the technical and normative structure of the Internet for the foreseeable future. These forms assume behavioural assumptions about the interaction of people and the Internet and should be based on more than guesswork (Dimaggio et al, 2001).

THE RISE AND RISE

Since 2001 the Internet and its presence in social systems has transformed at a remarkable rate, with the number of users doubling from 500 million to over a billion in 2006. While penetration remains relatively low in Africa, Asia and the Middle East these areas are experiencing the fastest growth[2]. Overall in 2007 17.8% of the world population accesses the Internet, up 225% from 2000 (IWS 2006). Social software has promoted the formation of new media on all topics and scales through blogs, wikis, P2P file sharing and distributed grids of community organization. In its attempt to explain and understand social action, sociology is pressured to transform and adapt theories and practices to the vast unbridled spaces and audiences opening up through new media. New reasons are emerging for social scientists to focus on the importance of promoting research and studies of social interactions in new media.

Academic publishing is at a crossroads. In 2006 the blogosphere tuned in to a blow-by-blow account of a blogging spat between Juan Cole, Professor of History at the University of Michigan (www.juancole.com/) and Martin Kramer, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (www.martinkramer.org/) that spilt over into all forms of media coverage[3]. Although the impact of the public media event is unknown Yale eventually rejected Cole for a faculty post after relentless lobbying from Conservatives against Cole's blog postings on *Informed Consent*, seen to be too critical of US and Israeli foreign policy. At primary issue is a not academic publication or Cole's peer-reviewed work but his less formal daily blog posts on real-time issues related to the Middle East (BlogScholar 2006).

The US is the current key battleground in this debate with the introduction and passage of the bipartisan *Federal Research Public Access Act* in the Senate. The legislation requires that free, online access to each taxpayer-funded manuscript be available as soon as possible, and no later than six

[2] The diversity of the global makeup of the Internet user population is often underestimated. The highest percentage of global internet users are in Asia (37%) followed by Europe (27%), North America (20%), South America (9%), Africa (3%), the Middle East (2%) and Oceania (2%).

[3] At one point at the bottom of a blog post railing against his detractors Cole posted a call for more background information on Martin Kramer. The next day that portion of the blog post is removed but Kramer triumphantly announces on his blog that he archived the original post and publishes it for the record.

months after its publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Electronic copies of the research papers[4] will be stored in databases and made publicly accessible online.

An online 2007 poll of 100 visitors to academic blogging portal BlogScholar indicates a lot of uncertainty on how or why academics are adapting to online practice. In response to the question "Why don't more academics blog?" 30% answered "too busy", 28% indicated a concern with the medium, 24% said that academics were not yet aware of the possibilities, 14% answered "not interested" and 4% said it was because academics had "nothing to say" (BlogScholar 2006b).

Sociologists must study and learn new forms of online social and public spaces. Following public consultation in 2004 Ofcom, the regulator of all UK commercial broadcast media, defined *media literacy* as the ability to access, understand and create media (Ofcom 2004). Most academics can access and understand (read) information on the Internet but fall short of being able to freely create (write). In this sense social researchers are only semi-literate in digitally intermediated communication and this can be a major limitation in practicing online research methods. More work is likely to occur in training social scientists with a desire to participate, through engagement or observation, in a digitally intermediated world.

Live Sociology is an ESRC-funded year-long project of five workshops out of Goldsmiths College, University of London combining theoretical and practical training for UK researchers in the opportunities offered by the use of new media in ethnographic social research (Live Sociology 2006). Professor Les Back leads the instructional team of sociologists experimenting with the practices of iterative and secondary analysis, reflexivity, and collaboration in sociological research methods.

Carol Wolkowitz, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick, enrolled in *Live Sociology* to learn how to access new data sources, produce and interpret pictorial data, and taping and transcribing interviews: "For sociologists all info, overtly 'sociological' or otherwise, are grist for the mill … I think actually sociology, like other fields, is incredibly path dependent, and it is not clear whether we will do the same things differently or really innovate."

Julia Frost, Research Fellow at Bristol University, is participating in *Live Sociology* out of interest in new forms of presentation and content of sociological data. For Frost new media brings exciting possibilities: "More interesting research, answer new questions, or adding a new dimension to old issues. Immense volume of data and research. Ethical minefield!"

Functional understandings of media literacy call for improved technical skills, methods and the accumulation of tacit knowledge. But none of these can be detached from the social and pedagogical relationships that surround contextual and subjective interaction with digital media.

In his theoretical framework that treats literacies in the plural as social practices, Brian Street studies how media literacies vary with cultural and social context. This research focuses not so much on skill acquisition but on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street 1984, Street 2003). Through the advent of the Semantic Web and Web 2.0, the Internet is developing into a fully operational computing platform serving intelligent applications sharing and communicating knowledge that can be understood by both users and computers. Researchers are interested not just the literacy of users but the literacy of the web itself in the form of search engines, intelligent

[4] "Papers" may increasingly take the form of multimedia podcasts, vodcasts and websites and the challenge will be how to accurately reproduce these in paper form.

agents and algorithms[5]. Social scientists researching on the Internet use reflexive practices to participate in the social practices of public spaces of the Web.

What constitutes sociological representations online? If we think of sociological representations as something *representative of what it actually is* we are often referring to media like written text, images, audio and video. The current trend in social software is to ontologies and taxonomies of information sorted by tags and automated measures of credibility. Video sharing sites like *YouTube*, *Clipshack*, *DailyMotion*, photo sharing sites like *Flickr*, social bookmark managers like *del.icio.us*, and blog aggregators like *Technorati* allow users to tag content with descriptive keywords. Consider the example of a concept like the city of *London*. Users post content tagged with the keyword 'London' and the content is automatically fed to aggregators and subscribers under that category. Tens of thousands of content items tagged 'London' are stored in digital databases a vast store of multiple sociological representations come together to define a concept. On the Internet, London is a search term.

Consider how different this route to providing understandings to the *London Project*, a project in the Department of Journalism at City University, London to create a partial socio-cultural map of London (LP 2006). Fifty-five journalists from over 30 countries wrote stories, conducted audio interviews and shot short video clips. Is there any difference between the representations of this project, developed using formal methodology and research processes and the collective representations on Technorati or Flickr? Sociologists are fond of describing sociology as the study of all things social but these examples seem to indicate a crucial difference to be resolved between *accidental* public sociological representations created without structured intent and representations created through the *practice* of sociology.

DISCUSSION

With these issues in mind ten online interviews were conducted from August 1-9, 2006 to discuss the current level of activity in sociology with sociologists practicing or aspiring to practice on the Internet (Sociology Online 2006). Participants were invited due to their presence in a social science category in academic blog directory at BlogScholar.com, managing edited by Chris Brauer (BlogScholar 2006c). The survey took the form of online interviews with contemporary sociologist bloggers and inexperienced but willing social scientists. The goal was to get general input from sociologists interested in new media on the state of activity in the field.

Mathieu Deflem, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of South Carolina, argues that all a sociologist needs to get practicing online is "a willingness to do it". He doesn't see any need for special training, just a desire to access primary data and sociological writings online. Tama Leaver, lecturer at the Centre for Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Western Australia, sees exciting opportunities for accessing new forms and collections of data online. She argues that social scientists should experience a deep immersion through personal ethnography in online spaces: "you can't really understand or analyse something like MySpace from the outside!"

[5] For reference see the developments in algorithmic analysis of music, film, and art to meet specific criteria. A service like Hit Song Science (http://www.hitsongscience.com/) offers algorithmic analysis of a database of 50 years of Billboard chart hit songs. It analyses the songs using 40 set criteria of harmony, tone, rhythm, and any other variable that can be counted. The success of the venture has spawned numerous imitators and the interest of all the big studios. Musicians can upload songs for analysis for a fee and get back a report on the likelihood of chart success. The database updates in real time with the swings in popular forms of music.

On the topic of the sociology of new public spaces on the Internet Jim Barrett, doctoral candidate in modern languages at Umea University refers to the work of Danah Boyd on "super-publics" or what public spaces look like when infused with interconnected digital media.: "What does it mean to speak across time and space to an unknown audience? What happens when you cannot predict who will witness your act because they are not visible now, even though they may be tomorrow?"

Will Davies, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research in the UK, says he adopts a 'beta' identity when publishing ephemeral, iterative or incomplete ideas on his blog. The purpose is not to generate new audiences, as many blogs have a tiny number of visitors, but to provide opportunities to connect and share. Online publishing is challenging sociology as it introduces a "publish-then-edit etiquette, rather than an edit-then-publish". The creation of "archives of the everyday" provide sociology with real-time access to sociological representations: "Rather than attempt to deduce what people want or what they think, we can increasingly read or see it, in the representation that they themselves have made of it".

CONCLUSION

It is possible that sociology as a discipline will experience the same generational shift from digital immigrants to natives as the general population. The next generation of sociologists will still be exploring issues of conducting online sociology but it is likely the focus will shift from primary discussions of the 'new' skills and formats to what is possible online.

With more engagement may come more variety and exploration of form and possibility in online academic research. Social scientists are only beginning to explore multimedia representations and the endless possibilities of convergent audio, video and text for social life. Massive online communities tagged and sorted by concepts and ideas will emerge as a reflection of the general and specific, individual and group interests of the rising percentage of the global networked population engaged online. Experiences and lessons learned from stimulating, observing and analyzing social networks will provide building blocks for more varied, in-depth and connected social research projects. Social practices and cultural transmissions will be an even greater focus of research as academics get more comfortable with online publishing, the skill requirements for participation and the variety and scope of available possibilities.

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