

Digital Methods for Social Science: An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation

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Digital media provide tools and space for the social interaction that has increasingly become part of our lives. They also become a promise and a challenge for social scientists interested in extending their research of social phenomena into digital space. Social media platforms produce vast data collections that can be used for a wide spectrum of social research. However, an understanding of digital tools, new competencies for collecting and interpreting digital data and also awareness of ethical challenges are necessary to apply them in practice. Digital data collection and analysis tools are embedded in commercial social media platforms that influence how data are accessed and interpreted. Social media enterprises become powerful players in the digital research arena.

Opportunities, challenges and contexts of using digital technologies and especially social media platforms in social research are discussed in this collection of papers. Written by an impressive number of contributors (26!), whose fields of competence include psychology, education, anthropology, business, digital media, computer science and sociology, the book is an attractive reading choice. It gives us the authentic research experiences of contributors so the reader can be aware of the advantages and drawbacks of such organisation of material. On the one hand, it helps to get an in-depth understanding of research issues faced by the contributors; on the other, it limits discussion to specific experiences, tools and sources. The editors have tried to overcome this fragmentation by thoughtful organisation of contributions and introductions that summarise the main themes and lessons.

The book consists of four parts. The first part “Big Data, Thick Data: Social Media Analysis” provides an introduction to accessing, processing and interpreting social media data in social research. The second part “Combining and Comparing methods” invites the reader to align traditional and digital approaches to social research. It also emphasises the need to combine traditional and digital methods to study our increasingly mixed physical and digital lives. The third part “Developing Innovations in Digital Methods” elaborates on applying traditional social methods



in new digital settings and finding new research objects, whereas the fourth part “Digital Research: Challenges and Contentions” makes the reader cautious about ethical issues of data confidentiality, the nature of digital data, the inequalities and power relations they reflect, the limitations of digital methods for studying social phenomena and so on. To summarise: the book encourages a more mature and thoughtful approach to digital methods, but it is not a step-by-step guide for the application of methods; those wishing to find advice on particular techniques will need to turn to other sources.

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Altmetrics: A Practical Guide for Librarians, Researchers and Academics

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Altmetrics is a relatively new method of assessing scholarly impact. It has generally been used for impact made through publication, hence the term, which comes from “article level metrics”. Recently, methods have been added to include impact through people, journals, books, data sets, presentations, videos, source code repositories and web pages. Originally, it did not include citation counts because it was, to some extent, a reaction against traditional metrics, but it can now do that as well as engage with other aspects of a work’s impact, such as how many data and knowledge bases refer to it, and the number of article views, downloads or mentions in social media and news media it receives. This extension of the method is explained well by Gunn in Chapter 6. This is an edited work and there are contributions from key figures in the field: Euan Adie, William Gunn and Ben Showers. Seven chapters were written by Tattersall and two by his colleagues Booth and Beecroft. The book’s opening chapters include a general introduction and a history of traditional metrics and a description of the development of Web 2.0 technologies that are generally used to measure altmetrics. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are written by Showers, Adie and Gunn, respectively, and provide some interesting insights into the evolution of the methods now used and how altmetric data are collected and used. Chapter 7 considers the use of new technologies. Chapter 8, “Resources and Tools,” by Tattersall, lists 41 resources: the major altmetrics tools and many social media platforms, some of which have an academic focus, while others tend towards the mainstream. This gives some concrete examples of techniques