

Sociology and Digital Culture

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Abstract

The society increasingly based on digital culture is already an unavoidable reality. This paper aims to contribute, in a preliminary way, to understand several of the implications in Sociology that this propagation of digital culture involves through a bibliographical review. We analyse several implications in dimensions such as the very purpose of Sociology (highlighting digital literacy and the level of democracy) and social research (addressing issues raised by the big data, the interdisciplinary dialogue between Sociology and other scientific areas, and new ethical dilemmas). We conclude that there are profound implications both in the research object and in the research processes of Sociology, which we will develop in later phases of the dissemination of this research. As a major implication, the reflective capacity of sociological knowledge is central to the preparation for this new reality, but, at the same time, also to a well-founded critical understanding of digital society.

Keywords: sociology, digital culture, digital research, society

“It is precisely because [...] social scientists are aware of issues of power, theory and critical reflection, that they are better able to mobilise new resources than is evident within empiricist big data currents which tend to rely on a technicist orientation in which ‘the facts speak for themselves’” (Savage, 2017, p. 885).

1. Introduction

Digital technology in the form, for example, of computers, tablets, mobile phones, the Internet, the use of online social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*, or the visualization of videos mostly made by amateurs on *Youtube*, but also in a less visible way for the ordinary citizen in day-to-day situation, such as in a simple payment for purchases, in industry and services, is increasingly present in today’s society, and has become an inescapable reality that shapes the cultural, economic and social context which we live in (Baldi, 2017; Robles, Torres-Albero, Antino, & De Marco, 2015; Ferreira & Serpa, 2018a; Di Giacomo, Vittorini, & Lacasa, 2018; Daniels, Williams, & Buggs, 2017; Dewey, 2017; Lupton, Pedersen, & Thomas, 2016; Poyntz & Hoechsmann, 2011; Flores-Márquez, 2016). Today’s society increasingly digitized, with a growth in Artificial Intelligence (Hinojo-Lucena, Aznar-Díaz, Cáceres-Reche, & Romero-Rodríguez, 2019), which, together, form what some call Society 5.0, in which the imbrication between digital technology and the human relationship is an increasing reality (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018a; Jaramillo, & Zuluaga, 2014; Selwyn & Facer, 2014).

All this affects the very interaction between individuals in time and space (Norman, Tjomslund, & Huegel, 2016; Jaramillo & Zuluaga, 2014; Dewey, 2017; Hinojo-Lucena et al., 2019; Shaffer, 2014).

This change has, necessarily, implications in Sociology as a science that should be considered (Dewey, 2017; Possamai-Inesedy, & Nixon, 2017; Witte, 2012; Guillén-Rascón, Ascensio-Baca, & Tarango, 2016):

Sociology was a discipline grounded in real time, real space. Although other academic curricula were quick to acknowledge and embrace the opportunities offered by the Internet and the impact of digital media to heighten long-established protocols and to radically alter methodologies and the presentation of their academic materials, sociologists sought to scrutinize that impact (Dewey, 2017, para. 2).

Today, almost all sociologists advocate that it is necessary to consider digital culture in both the social and cultural dimensions, as well as in the activity of Sociology itself (Savage, 2017). Following Dewey (2017, para. 10), this presents four challenges that digital culture poses to traditional Sociology:

1. “sociologists needed to study how users of social media define and in some cases entirely create their sense of self (dubbed cyber-self) and their sense of identity as part of a larger, albeit digital, community”;
2. “professional observers needed to define precisely the import and reliability of the massive amounts of data retrievable from Internet resources”;
3. “sociologists as professionals needed to exploit the pipeline of the Internet to create an international body of like-minded researchers with shared areas of inquiry, a network of cooperative sociologists taking advantage of the communication opportunities of the Internet”;
4. “sociologists, whatever their personal predisposition or biases toward the emerging technology, needed to recognize that an entirely new era of their science had opened and that, as a collective, sociologists needed to codify precisely how to approach the impact of social media on traditional notions of community and self, not only to gather the data but to respond critically to the instruments of social media”.

In order to respond to the challenges, some sociologists propose a specialization of Sociology – Digital Sociology, which

examines the impact of the Internet and, more particularly, social media outlets in the perception and even formation of the relationships that have long been studied within the field: friendship, love, family, marriage, community, and also the perception and definition of the self” (Dewey, 2017, para. 1).

In this emerging area, Digital Sociology is also interested in understanding how large the volume of big data of the users of digital services leave as their digital footprint, as well about the influence in Sociology itself as a reflexive science (Carrozza, 2018).

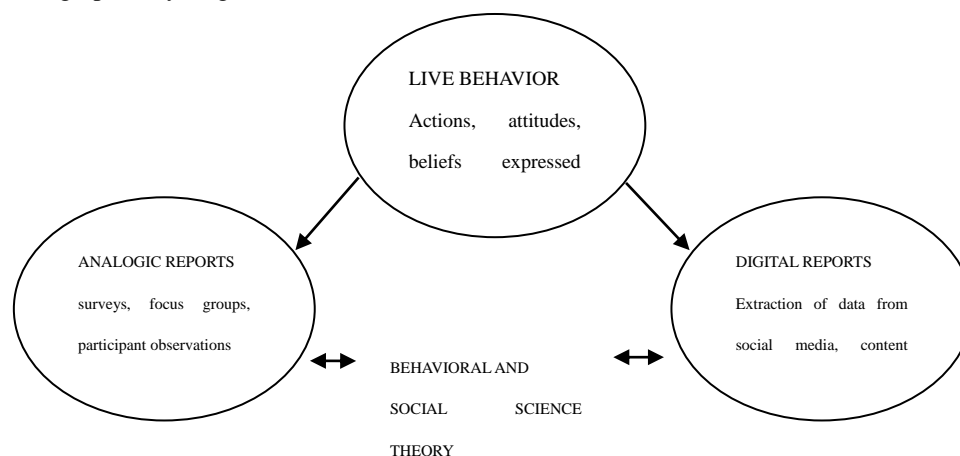
In the aim of contributing, in a preliminary way, to understanding several of the implications in Sociology that this propagation of digital culture involves, this paper is organized as follows: next section presents the methods, followed by an overview of the research on “Sociology and Digital Culture”, where the issue of digital literacy and the level of democracy are analysed, and social research (addressing issues raised by big data, interdisciplinary dialogue between sociology and other scientific areas, and ethical dilemmas). The paper concludes with some challenges concerning the influence of digital cultures in Sociology.

2. Methods

This paper aims to discuss some of the implications of digital culture in Sociology, thus contributing to a deepening of this subject. For this purpose, bibliographic research was carried out in the B-ON Database on this subject with the following terms: “digital” + sociology” and “culture + digital” in the publications’ abstract.

3. Sociology and Digital Culture

Will a “digitization of Sociology” take place?, Nascimento (2016) asks. Witte (2012) emphasizes the impossibility of distinguishing between the physical (*analogic*) world and the *digital* world in the understanding of “live behaviour” and explains his stance graphically (Figure 1).



Fonte: Witte (2012, p. 80).

Figure 1. Analogic-digital conceptual framework

With the cultural and social changes mentioned above, there is a need for an in-depth discussion of their influence on Sociology as a science (e.g., subject matter, research methodologies and dissemination) (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Birth, 2016; Witte, 2012). Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon (2017) maintain that “we could argue that this is the primary function of the discipline of sociology in the digital social realm. We are the critical voice that can expose the underlying power dynamics of the digital social” (p. 879).

From this emerges the need to reflect on Sociology in this context regarding both its present and, as far as possible, its future.

3.1 Research Object

The emergence of digital technology is influencing social life. However, we must be wary of fallacies or preconceived ideas, e.g., that the new generation necessarily has the increasingly important digital literacy skills (Robles et al., 2015; Santos & Serpa, 2017), or the digitization brings along a global democratization (Baldi, 2017), as this paper will deepen ahead.

About digital literacy as “the development and mobilisation of a set of competencies of selection and application of this knowledge in a reasoned and conscious way” (Santos & Serpa, 2017, p. 90), there is often the idea that the *digital natives* or the *Net generation* that grew up surrounded by technology almost always have high digital literacy (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Kivunja, 2014; Santos & Serpa, 2017). However, this may not be the case, but rather generate or maintain economic, social, racial and gender inequalities, among others (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Savage, 2017; Daniels et al., 2018; Selwyn & Facer, 2014).

In their study on digital inequality, Ignatow and Robinson (2017) advocate that

For Bourdieu, actors’ positions within various social fields correspond with the volumes of the different forms of capital they possess. Capital has come to be a centrally important concept in studies of digital inequality, with sociologists developing and employing in empirical research concepts such as ‘information capital’ and ‘digital capital’ (p. 952).

Characteristics such as age itself also influence the ability for digital literacy (Santos & Serpa, 2017), which potentially has negative implications on users’ own quality of life (Di Giacomo et al., 2018). For example, “The adoption of eHealth behaviours was significantly associated with younger age, more education, higher income, and urban residence. By contrast, gender, employment status, health insurance, and health status were not associated with eHealth behaviour” (Hong, & Zhou, 2018, p. 1).

On a possible democratization due to the possibilities of the digital, we must bear in mind that there are gatekeepers in the digital culture (Jaramillo, & Zuluaga, 2014), and it is critical to invest in “infodiversity” (Baldi, 2017, p. 186). In this sense, “What appears to be democratization is often a reinforcement of traditional power relations through egocentric structuring, silencing tactics and algorithmic ordering” (Possamai-Inesedy, & Nixon, 2017, pp. 870-871).

Technology is not neutral (Baldi, 2017; Flores-Márquez, 2016). The situation is much more complex. According to Nascimento (2015), “While the dissemination of digital social networks, applications and access to information has promoted forms of democratic participation and freedom of expression, they can reproduce or even exacerbate discrimination and attempts to silence socially discriminated groups” (p. 672).

3.2 Social Research

Social research also needs to be rethought (Carrozza, 2018; Jaramillo, & Zuluaga, 2014; Nascimento, 2015; 2016), insofar as digital culture is creating new possibilities for social research such as the big data, the need for a dialogue between Sociology and other scientific disciplines and ethical dilemmas, as the paper will address next.

On the big data, it is permanently (re)constructed throughout the experience of the individuals (Baldi, 2017; Lupton, Pedersen, & Thomas, 2016), with profound implications in its control and access (Tsatsou, 2017). Dewey (2017, para. 4) claims that “the Internet had become by the early twenty-first century a virtually unlimited resource bank of data that might help define, redefine, and re-characterize the elements of any given social construct”.

This new world, given its complexity, implies a closer relationship between Sociology and other scientific areas (Di Giacomo et al., 2018; Serpa et al., 2017; Ignatow & Robinson 2017; Dewey, 2017; DeSousa, McConatha, & Lynch, 2011; Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2017).

According to Serpa, Ferreira and Santos (2017), dialogue between disciplines can take a variety of forms, such as “interdisciplinarity with a broader scope and define it as the promotion and mobilisation of synergies of two or more different scientific disciplines” (p. 45).

In addition to ethical issues of a more general nature involved in any investigative process and its dissemination (Lima,

2006; Ferreira & Serpa, 2018b), the big data as information produced by researchers' activity, in terms of the level of their individual privacy and access, may raise ethical dilemmas that need reflection for their novelty and dimension (Witte, 2012; Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2017, Flores-Márquez, 2016; Baldi, 2017).

This process is even more complex inasmuch as, "Through analysing the socializing power available to individuals/groups, corporations and academics in the digital world, we argue that digital data is in fact a system of knowledge that is intrinsically tied to power relations. These power relations are structured across groupings – including algorithms and critical commentators – which in turn are attached to forms of socialization" (Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2017, p. 867).

4. Conclusion

In this context of digital culture, the critical capacity of Sociology proves to be crucial (Savage, 2017; Selwyn & Facer, 2014) in the understanding of social reality.

However, for scientific and sociological reflexivity to be exercised, it is necessary, on the one hand, for scientists to have conditions such as the existence of respect for academic freedom (Orr, 2018). Furthermore, social scientists need to demonstrate that they have digital literacy competencies. The learning of digital literacy in digital research by sociologists and other social scientists is critical (Tsatsou, 2017), in order to

investigate the emerging approaches that can be adopted for digital social research (delving into how these various approaches contribute to the production, shaping and interpretation of *the social*) and continue to interrogate, possibly to innovate, the traditional methods and their ability to respond to digital societies (Carrozza, 2018, p. 662).

In conclusion, and as sustained by Daniels (Pioneering Digital Sociology, 2014),

In sociology we're engaged in the study of patterned human behavior, and I think the Internet is changing those patterns of human behavior. So, at a really basic level of intellectual curiosity, sociologists have an obligation to see what's up with the Internet and how it's changing things. Methodologically, there are some really compelling ways the Internet and digital technologies can enliven standard sociological research [...], sociologists should be taking up digital technologies because our students have an expectation and a fluency in these technologies, but often lack the critical thinking skills to understand how to appreciate these technologies in a social context. We have real things to offer, in terms of critical analysis, to young people who may be more digitally fluent than we are" (pp. 6 and 7).

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