DOING DIGITAL SOCIAL (AND CULTURAL AND MEDIA) RESEARCH: WHAT STAYS THE SAME WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGES?

Tim Jordan[*]

ABSTRACT

Research into digital sociality often encounters, both in academic and non-academic contexts, the claim that there is no point doing such research because the technologies being examined change so fast that analysis can never keep up. This article criticises any such claim. First, the article examines three kinds of 'sameness' that span the introduction of different technologies: internet-based text communication, digital platforms and information as a non-rival good. In each of these contexts this article explores how looking at what changes rapidly draws attention from forms of social power that stay the same across technologies. This article then argues from this examination that it is key to examine both differences and sameness when researching digital sociality.

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[*] University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

The internet, the world-wide web, Web 2.0, the semantic web, the end of the web, 2G, 3G, 4G, 5G unix, linux, hurd, Gnu, SQL, C++, Perl, Python, Visual Basic, Java, Javascript, Scratch, Groovy, Ruby on the Rails, Go, Powershell, R, AOL, email, IRC, MSN Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Wechat, Apps, Apis, Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Napster, Kazaa, Bittorrent, iTunes, Spotify, Tide, Altavista, AskJeeves, Yahoo, Google, Bing, Duckduckgo, Baidu, Motorola Dynatac, Nokia E71, Nokia 8110, iPhone, Samsung Galaxy, Pixel, Apple, Symbian, Palm, Windows CE, Blackberry, Android: and I could go on.

It has been a time of rapid change in our technological landscape, particularly as devices become more connected, more intimate and more mobile and there is a weird poetry in remembering some of the last forty years of development in digital and internet socio-technologies by recounting names. A discipline of social research into such change has emerged at the same time, for example at a recent symposium I heard someone talking about how media studies had gotten their understandings badly wrong about information infrastructures, and they began with the period 2010-11 which is about fifteen years after scholarly work on digital media had begun. Research methods have developed during this time, for example I sometimes tell my students about doing my PhD using card catalogues to find books in the library and waiting for long periods for inter-library loans to be delivered always in hard copy (then I remember it is not much help turning into the Statler and Waldorf of digital studies). Rapid change, named often by technologies while being carried into mixed cultures and socialities, is one of the challenges of doing digital social (and cultural) research.

Rapid change is also the basis of a challenge I have often heard laid down to digital social researchers by friends and technology professionals—both government and corporate—who say regularly words to the effect: 'this technology will change before you can understand it, so there's no point trying to understand it, you just have to use it.' This claim can also be seen when governments identify successively changing priorities for research based on changing technologies (was it so long ago—in the UK—that big data was the focus and how long till AI is no longer the focus as it was in 2018 UK?). Amid such pressure not to think about what stays the same when the digital is part of change, I argue that social and cultural research about the digital needs to interrogate this claim about rapid change. This can be seen by giving some examples of how focus on change means potentially missing cultural and social continuities.

In the late 1980s across a number of psychologically framed studies and in contexts prior to the internet with networked communication generally occurring within a single business, research on networked communication and decision making reached a number of conclusions about communication using text via computer networks compared to communication when face-to-face. In computer networks, more people participated, more people were willing to respond to and criticise those higher in hierarchies, decisions were nearly impossible to reach and

people were considerably ruder to each other (Sproull and Kiesler 1993). Two fundamental issues that are recurrent when looking at social effects in relation to digital and internet technologies appear here in a sense of flattened hierarchies and of flaming and abuse online. Whenever text communication occurs researchers should be alert for these kinds of effects. In gaming immersive virtual worlds are now common, yet nearly all such worlds include text communication of some sort, putting some continuing dynamics of text communication over computer networks into the change of three-dimensional networked gaming.

More recently considerable work has been put into exploring the idea of platforms, while it is perhaps not yet clear how this work might coalesce, one of the dynamics that has emerged is about information on platforms. I explored this in relation to dynamics of recursion which argue that when a platform attracts activity it gains the ability to track and record that activity gifting to the platform a major information resource. The platform gains this information almost as a gift, or a surplus, which has been noted in the work exploring exploitation in social media which argues that the surplus is digital surplus value expropriated from the free labour of those using the platform. While these bodies of work are quite different, and my own work on the digital economy disagrees with the theory of free labour into surplus value, both agree on seeing that information flows to whoever controls a platform. This again is a dynamic which can be recurrently explored both across different platforms and in new platforms. It is also a dynamic that may be integrated in different ways in complex platforms (Jordan 2015; Dean 2012; Fuchs 2014).

The last sameness I would point to pushes back from digital socio-technologies in operation to consider a fundamental dynamic of information seen not only in corporate platforms but also in free online practices. As economists say, information is a non-rival good because the same 'bit' of information can be made available to many people simultaneously and with no degradation in the quality of the information. While economists term this a lack because lacking in rivalry makes information difficult to deal with in economic exchange, it should rather be termed the underlying dynamic of a social good; that information could be available simultaneously for complete use. This possibility has been actualised in a number of well-known and important socio-technologies, most famously perhaps in free software and its programmes like LibreOffice or Linux but also in the standards that inform the world-wide web creating a consistent but open information space and the collective research, writing and editing that makes Wikipedia (Jordan 2015, pp. 194-196; Jordan forthcoming).

While these free practices have been the subject of significant research and writing, I want to emphasise here not so much the examples across a range of different projects but the underlying commonality that what makes them possible and distinctive is their reliance on information's capacity for simultaneous complete use. The social and cultural 'free' in free software is the freedom to access the information that constitutes a particular software program and then to add information when altering that program that is in turn delivered back to all users.

Wikipedia works because anyone with access to the world wide web or the internet can read content at the same time as many others and there is the possibility of opening up the information to add to and change it. Such projects have led to a more general project in forming information commons, such as peer to peer networks or Scholz's platform cooperativism, which could deliver a wide social good based on this characteristic of information (Scholz 2016).

At the same time, the effort to make information rival, particularly for economic gain, continues and at different levels. Digital rights mechanisms are implemented to make an information good into something exchangeable and held exclusively. Films come with mechanisms meant to prevent copying and film industry representatives prosecute where they find sharing contravening their rivalry. There is here individualised non-rivalry at the level of particular information goods. There is also structural and sometimes semi-hidden non-rivalry. As mentioned above platforms are able to copy and take information about users of their platform and keep that information as their property. They may then generate more information by analysing the information they have taken or had exchanged for services. Or another example is the integration of the eme extension into the standards that govern the world wide web to standardise digital rights mechanisms, creating a mechanism for non-rivalry within one of the great organisations for simultaneous complete use. Simultaneous complete use is then another same that should be tracked across differences (Postigo 2012; Doctorow 2016).

These examples of digital social research underline how important and significant it can be to track what stays the same when our eyes are directed toward what is different. I could have drawn on other examples. For example, the network effect argues that nodes on a network become exponentially more valuable as the network grows and may in part explain how seemingly free to leave platforms can exert a non-formal lock-in. However, enough has been said establishing the ways some things may stay the same in a techno-environment of constant change. How might we understand this intersection of change and not-change, of same and not-same? The contrast so far has been between change and the same, with the same standing for whatever persists chronologically and change for what over time becomes different. Indeed, so far what I am proposing is in essence to do social and cultural research properly means, of course, to interrogate and refuse to accept that technology is somehow beyond critical understanding. The field of science and technology studies establishes this comprehensively. And, it is no bad thing to remind ourselves as researchers that when facing technologies that may be difficult to understand and are fast changing, that we should continue to conduct research that critically assesses socio-technological contexts. Yet, there is an interpretation of the challenge of constant technological change that gives us a little bit more explanation of what should be part of digital social research.

Claims about the difference and the failure of repetition are not always what they seem, neither are claims about sameness necessarily claims for an undifferentiated always-repeated identity. In this case, the claim about ongoing and

repetitive differences appearing in the world linked to altered technologies is rather a claim about the return of the same: it is in effect a recurrent claim that nothing can be said because difference overwhelms analysis. When technologists, or friends, claim that we digital social researchers cannot understand the digital world because it changes too fast they are, knowingly or not, dissuading us from analysis of that world. The claim of constant technological change is then not a claim about change at all, it is a rejection of analysis: don't worry, be happy, get a fitbit, smartwatch or whatever comes next.

Asserting that somethings remain broadly, even roughly, the same across techno-social change is then fundamentally not a claim about the return of sameness and a refusal of difference. Even in the examples I have given above there is change implied, differences appearing, within the same cultural dynamics. The claim is then not of sameness or difference but a refusal to be blocked by the fast repetition of techno-differences from the investigation and breakdown of techno-social contexts into what is remaining the same and what is differing in such contexts. A claim to exploring sameness and difference is a claim to criticality.

Drawing attention to the fast pace of digital and internet technological change can often be understood as a claim that change is not happening, there is only the state of rapid technological differentiation. The claim is that speed has overcome our ability to think about change, the maelstrom of technology has taken over and all we can do is look on (and buy more) and wonder. Analysing this claim, one that has been made to me on numerous occasions, shows that, fundamentally, its terms are misleading from its claims. Poking through its tenuous grasp on digital social research reveals not only that research indeed exists, even usually or normally exists, that grasps continuities across technological change, but that the original claim is not about change but about refusing to analyse digital technologies. The claim that we are being presented with irresistible, blinding change means that we are, instead, being presented with the same specific claim not to be critical, pointing at differentiation here masks a call to let technology run its course. As digital social researchers we know that 'technology' here means social and cultural forms of power imbricated with technologies and a refusal to think about such technologies would be a failure to understand our social worlds.

There is only a relatively small claim here, part of my argument is that digital social researchers are doing and should continue to do their analytic and critical work on digital and information technologies, refusing to isolate those technologies from social and cultural differences and power. The other part of my argument is that claims that there is rapid change that argue for this by drawing attention to information and digital technological change, are really arguing for the same thing: the inevitability of whatever world these technologies are creating. This is a philosophical dead end, difference and sameness or difference and repetition are not of this form. This is a digital sociological and cultural studies dead end, research in these disciplines already explores, establishes and analyses continuities and discontinuities in technologically mediated societies. This is a political dead end, it

incites us to stow away our criticality and leave it to those behind the technologies (because Facebook, Google, Baidu and the rest are all doing so well for all of us). Digital social research rejects dead ends and is rather a complex and critical analysis of how sameness and difference creates our socio-technological world.

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