

Digitizing Sociology: Continuity and Change in the Internet Era

While recent years have seen ‘digital sociology’ gain increasing form and attention, sociological analysis of all things digital engages the enduring concerns of the discipline, generating questions of social action, social order, social mobility and mobilization, social change and social inequalities. Digital forms of interaction are embedded in everyday life and every sector of society. Whereas early analyses separated ‘cyberspace’ from ‘real’ life, it is now recognized that the ubiquity of digital technology and the growing inseparability of online and offline interactions renders this bifurcation obsolete.

But what do we mean when we talk about the ‘digital’? The quickening pace of technological innovation makes exhaustive definitions difficult and, at best, ephemeral. Yet component features of the ‘digital’ are more recognizable. Here we include Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), computer mediated communication (CMC), the internet and the web (not to be confused!), social media, Big Data, artificial intelligence (AI), computational decision making and, increasingly, nanotechnologies. While there is an overlap between these different innovations, they are also distinct and vary in their affordances. Thus, we are talking about hardware, software and infrastructure, alongside the practices, outcomes and emergences relating to their use. Digital sociology analyses the affordances of technologies in various social spheres and how they shape and are shaped by social relations, social interaction and social structures