

Teaching the Methodology of Sociology Using Digital Resources

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Abstract

The advent of the digital era has become a serious challenge for researchers in various fields of scientific knowledge. Sociology, which tried to give an adequate answer to the question of how the modern world is changing, did not stand aside. The focus of digital sociologists is the digital society, which arises thanks to the development and implementation of modern technological infrastructure, represented by key digital technologies: communication networks, big data technologies, algorithms and complex algorithmic systems, platforms, artificial intelligence technologies, cloud computing, augmented and virtual technologies reality, etc.

This article examines the teaching of sociology methodology using digital resources. Digital sociology is also considered as a professional sociological practice, which includes teaching the discipline, carrying out scientific communications and disseminating the results of the scientific activities of sociologists.

Keywords: digital sociology, methodology, teaching, resources, platforms, network, scientific communication.

Sociology as a science of society from the very moment of its inception has been and remains extremely sensitive to social changes. It is “the real historical society in its sociological interpretation and theoretical form” that sets “that horizon of understanding” and represents “that controlling authority” that determine the meaning of sociological theorizing [1]. The analysis of the formation and development of digital society could not remain aside for representatives of social sciences, who, using various names of “cybersociology”, “sociology of the Internet”, “e-sociology”, “sociology of online communication”, “sociology of social media” and “sociology of cyberspace” [2], sought to outline the research contours of the study of society in the conditions of widespread digitalization. The digital society has become possible thanks to the introduction of complex technological infrastructure, the totality of which constitutes the essence of digitalization.

Digitalization is changing society, almost every aspect of it is being transformed. Australian researcher N. Selwyn identifies four technologies that should be the focus of modern sociology and require sociological understanding. These technologies are networks, big data, algorithms and platforms [3]. The development of Selwyn’s ideas allows us to define digital society through a description of its technological infrastructure, which is represented by communication networks, big data technologies, the functioning of algorithms and algorithmic systems based on various kinds of platform solutions. Moreover, the essence of digitalization as the driving force behind the formation and development of a digital society is manifested in the processes of networkization, datafication, algorithmization and platformization. Currently, the direction of digital sociology is actively developing in sociological discourse, where a whole range of approaches are used to describe and explain “digital social objects, phenomena and processes that constitute a relatively independent, special sphere of social life” [2].

The origin of the term “digital sociology” is associated with the work of the American researcher J. Winn [4], which discussed the role of information and communication technologies and new media in expanding opportunities for teaching sociology and conducting sociological research. This, according to the scientist, is digital sociology. Works that use the phrase “digital sociology” appear in the 2010s. in foreign publications, mainly by researchers from the UK and Australia. In the first full-length work on digital sociology, Australian sociologist D. Lupton defines this field as a sociological “subdiscipline”, the focus of which is research and theoretical description by sociologists of how digital technologies and digital data are used in modern digital society, as well as questions about sociological practice and the specifics of conducting sociological research [2]. It is noteworthy that digital sociology appeared “not as a marker of a new empirical approach - a new way of collecting data or introducing methods for conducting sociological research, but as a new way of communication in the sociological environment” [1].

Thus, in the work “Digital Sociology: An Introduction”, D. Lupton states the need to fill the gaps associated with the lack of digital sociology among the many “digital” disciplines (“digital anthropology”, “digital humanities”, “digital cultures”, etc.) [3]. She explains the relevance of digital sociology by the needs of sociologists themselves. Digital technologies are part of their daily life, an important element of successful professional practice. For sociologists, these are new tools for conducting research and new opportunities for presenting the results of their work. D. Lupton believes that digital media enhance the professional practice of digital sociologists by creating and expanding a network of professional contacts, maintaining an online profile, publishing and disseminating research results, and interacting digitally with students. Confirmation of the effectiveness of these tools is her professional activity (Sociological Life blog), maintaining profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Researchgate, etc. English researcher M. Carrigan offers her intellectual project of digital sociology [4], which examines the prospects for creating an infrastructure for the institutionalization of this direction.

In Uzbekistan, the first works on digital sociology appeared later. However, this issue is becoming increasingly popular, as evidenced by the growing number of publications and the organization of special discussions on digital sociology. Most of them are devoted to the practice of conducting empirical sociological research, as well as the study of big data technologies [5]. In the works of sociological researchers, the issue of digital sociology is not always articulated, but changes in sociology in the context of digitalization are clearly recorded. The potential of traditional research methods in sociology is currently practically exhausted, since it does not fully ensure representativeness and is extremely costly in terms of time, material and human resources. Digital transformation has posed a number of challenges for sociology related to the need to develop a new methodology for understanding social reality, more relevant to the nature of digital society [2]. With the rapid development of big data technologies and algorithms, the transition from contact to non-contact research methods becomes an obvious consequence, since they are able to provide voluminous, reliable empirical data effectively and in a short time [1].

Domestic works of a theoretical and methodological nature on digital sociology are still a rather rare phenomenon. Attempts are being made to identify and describe the theoretical origins and foundations of digital sociology, its problem field and methodological capabilities, and the tasks of the social sciences in general and digital sociology in particular are outlined in the context of the digitalization of society. There is a tendency to revise the ontological, epistemological and methodological principles of social sciences in connection with the introduction of digital methods of cognition of social reality, when the understanding of such basic categories as “thing, agent, time, context, causality” changes [4]. In addition, theoretical models of digital society are being created as analytical tools for studying current social processes.

The whole variety of research that is presented today in digital sociology is connected, firstly, with sociological research on a wide range of issues about the impact of digital technologies on society; secondly, with an analysis of the specifics of methodological developments used in applied research, and relates to professional practice of digital sociologists. The need to revise qualification requirements for the training of sociologists in a digital society is very urgent, since

at present sociologists themselves are not able to ensure the digital transformation of the methodology of sociological research [1]. The question of the prospects for professional practice in digital sociology is covered in most works on digital sociology, and also finds practical implementation in its institutionalization both in Uzbekistan and abroad.

The first studies of digital sociology were initiated by scientists from the UK and Australia, where the first platforms for discussing the prospects for its development appeared. In 2012, a Digital Sociology Research Group was established from members of the British Sociological Association, and Goldsmiths University of London was the first to offer a Master's program in Digital Sociology. The first conference on digital sociology was held at the City University of New York in collaboration with the Eastern Sociological Society in New York in 2015.

Today, the University of Southern California has a project to study the digital future. The University of Southampton and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have established a joint program called the Web Science Trust, which conducts interdisciplinary research on the World Wide Web. The Internet Research Institute was founded at the University of Oxford. Harvard University has the Berkman Klein Center for the Study of the Internet and Society. In Italy, there is a center for the study of the Internet and society NEXA, created on the basis of the Polytechnic University of Turin. In Germany there is the Institute for Internet and Society Alexander von Humboldt. In 2022, a thematic group was created on the basis of the International Sociological Association with the aim of developing and popularizing research of a theoretical, empirical, methodological and socio-ethical nature in the field of digital sociology. There are a number of periodicals that give priority to publications of research in the field of digital technologies in general and digital sociology in particular (for example, Internet Policy Review; First Monday; New Media & Society; Information, Communication & Society; Big Data & Society; Chinese Journal of Communication; Internet Histories and other publications). Thus, in 2023, within the framework of the XIII Grushin Sociological Conference, two sections were held devoted to issues of digital sociology - "Digital sociology" and "From artificial intelligence to artificial sociality: new problems and tasks of sociology." Digital sociology covers a large number of topics and problems that are related to understanding the processes of digitalization and the impact of the latest digital technologies on all spheres of life in digital society. Digital technologies have influenced the individual, his identity, and communities in a new digital dimension. It is digital sociology "as science and philosophy" that is able to identify the specifics of these communications [5]. For D. Lupton, the study of the influence of digital technologies on the construction of individuals' identity and the specifics of their social interactions is also one of the key ones. We are also talking about the role digital technologies play in the functioning of social institutions and social structures of digital society. Special attention is paid to issues of structure and agency, the false dualism of the real and the virtual, the construction of social knowledge, as well as the peculiarities of interactions in the digital environment. The institutional foundations of the digital society are examined through a study of the functioning of the most important institutions - education, medicine, media, etc. Traditional and new forms of inequality (racial, gender, digital, etc.) are not ignored. Topics of personal data and physicality are raised, self-tracking technologies are considered, and an emphasis is placed on the problems of racial and gender discrimination on the Internet. Some researchers even consider it legitimate to speak of "multiple digital sociologies" due to the wide range of topics and questions [4].

For digital sociologists, a critical perspective is extremely important in analyzing the impact of technology, in particular when studying the processes of algorithmization and datafication. Representatives of critical theory have traditionally taken a critical position in the discussion about the role of capitalism in the process of social development, placing at the center of their research the problem of instrumental rationality and the colonization of the lifeworld by the structural components of economic and political systems. Critical studies of digital sociology are aimed at studying the negative consequences of the spread of digital technologies (for example, algorithms [3] in the context of the privacy paradox, the protection of personal data, ethical problems associated with their use, etc.), including relying on traditional for sociology the topics are transformation of the labor sphere, social inequality, power and social control.

Dating as a social process is the transformation of everyday practices and interactions into digital form, available for subsequent automated analysis. The range of uses of digital data is very diverse. There are serious concerns about the fairness of how data is used by corporations or government agencies. N. Couldry and U. Mejias identify three approaches to critical data and data studies: political economy, legal studies, and decolonial theory. Within the first approach, datafication is considered as a social process associated with making a profit both through the monetization of data and its sale as a valuable commodity, and through the use of data as a means of production. All this is connected with traditional Marxist categories such as labor, exploitation, surplus value, etc. [4]. The authors also include studies of datafication in the context of the spread of platforms [5]. It also presents studies of datafication as a process of “natural” transformation of everyday life into a stream of data. A new social order is emerging, based on continuous tracking and surveillance, which creates unprecedented opportunities for discrimination and influence on individual behavior [3].

Within the framework of the second approach, the problem of privacy and confidentiality of personal data, as well as the issue of the “privacy paradox” is analyzed [3]. Research related to the analysis of the consequences of data transmission and its processing using artificial intelligence technologies (for example, self-tracking and monitoring systems in the workplace, etc.) is separately discussed here. In this perspective, the criticism of datafication is due to the fact that the individual becomes dependent on various dimensions that influence how we perceive ourselves and present ourselves to others [4]. The third approach considers datafication as a process of colonization - “data colonialism”, when data, having become the most important social resource, is extracted in the interests of certain actors (mainly global capitalist players), leaving on the periphery those who do not have such capabilities [1]. Of interest are critical studies of the social consequences of the proliferation of algorithms. Thus, R. Kitchin shows that algorithms are capable of “getting out of control”, since the results of their work are quite difficult to predict due to their nonlinearity, variability and mobility [4]. Algorithms are developed and implemented in order to create additional value and increase capital; to regulate the behavior of individuals and form their preferences; to identify, rank and classify individuals according to specified criteria [2]. We are talking about the spread of the so-called algorithmic control, through which a new picture of the world is formed, since with the help of algorithms new power and disciplinary opportunities are realized, additional mechanisms of coercion and control are created [4]. At the same time, the mechanisms of operation of algorithms and decision-making are not disclosed, and therefore the term “black box society” is spread.

It is possible to single out a whole block of works in which technology is considered not just as a means or a factor that determines social changes. Technologies are woven into the fabric of social life, are part of everyday practices (for example, Internet of Things technologies) and social interactions (in conditions of deep mediatization), and participate in communication processes (bots, voice assistants, etc.). As a result, qualitative changes occur in society, which are reflected in the concepts of mediatized reality, metric society and metric power, in the concepts of platform society, data capitalism, surveillance capitalism, etc. Each of these works presents a holistic conceptual scheme, the structure of which contains a set basic concepts that can describe the qualitative characteristics of the digital society. A brief overview of the topics and problems raised in the analysis of digital technologies and the social consequences of the impact of their spread allows us to conclude that digital sociology has a serious research potential, as well as once again pointing out the interdisciplinary nature of a large number of studies reported today.

Digital sociology is a direction in modern sociological science, the purpose of which is to study digital society, the technological infrastructure of which is represented by the latest digital technologies (networks, big data, algorithms, platforms). They define new social practices, identity features, and the everyday life experience of an individual and society as a whole. Digital sociology is called upon to carry out a theoretical understanding of the processes of digitalization, datafication, algorithmization and platformization, identifying their positive and negative social consequences. Moreover, digital sociology offers a whole range of

methodological practices and methods based on the latest digital technologies (for example, big data technologies) for conducting quantitative and qualitative sociological research. Digital sociology is also a professional sociological practice, which includes teaching the discipline, carrying out scientific communications and disseminating the results of scientific work to the general public and representatives of the scientific community.

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