

**Review of *Digital Sociology. The reinvention of social research.* by Noortje Marres, Malden, Polity Press, 217, 232 p., £16.99 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-0745684789**

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The title's simplicity of Marres' *Digital Sociology* is only apparent. The exercise of defining what digital sociology is (and is not) requires six chapters dense with sharp considerations, cases from literature and criticism of easy assumptions about the impact of the digital on social research and social life. Indeed, this is what the book is about: it puts central stage the role of social research in society. To do so, it questions traditional social research roles in the light of the epistemic and methodological challenges brought about by digitization. The main conundrum posed by the book is summarized in the conclusions: 'How is social inquiry possible under conditions of interactivity?'. The main argument goes that the digital is opening up a 'crisis of representation' that transforms the relationship between social life and ways to create knowledge about it. Throughout the almost 200 pages it becomes clearer and clearer that the book aims to contribute to sociology and media studies as both disciplines and epistemic communities in a challenging moment of transition.

The book is conveniently organized around six main questions, which each chapter is devoted to answer. In discussing a definition of 'digital sociology', chapter one presents the reader with many of the issues that digital social research has faced over the last years: the interaction between social research and social action, the debate about what is new in the digital, the fracture between studies on digital communities and digital sociology, the need to overcome general distinctions like that between the virtual and the actual. Crucially, it is suggested that – while the 'digital' in 'digital sociology' can refer to the topics or the methods of social inquiry – social inquiry should consider the 'digital' as both topic and method at the same time.

The reasons for this suggestion are eminently epistemological and methodological. The methodological thrust indeed characterizes the whole book, and not only chapter three, which is explicitly concerned with the question of whether we need new methods to engage with the digital. The chapter constitutes an insightful summary of the debate between proponents of the novelty of digital methods and defenders of the digitization of traditional sociological methods. It may especially help to address graduate students' doubts about a thorny issue. The position taken by the author shies away from simplistic solutions. She herself makes a step further in the debate and suggests the need to develop 'interface methods.' That is, methods that are neither old nor new, but *configurable* to engage with both computational innovations and methodological traditions in sociological research. Such understanding is meant to account for the fact that computational technology shapes in unprecedented ways not only social life, but also social research.

The theoretical scholarships on which the book builds and to which it aims to contribute are discussed in chapter two. Here, the reader is familiarized with a Science and Technology Studies approach to the 'social' as both represented and enacted. The paradox pointed out by the sociology of translation is updated to the digital realm: the more social concepts are invoked in digital platforms, the less their meaning can be taken for granted. Indeed, references to ethnomethodology's insight about the inseparability between social life and the ways social life is known are here introduced and then run across the whole book.

The understanding of the digital as both an object and a resource of social life is revealed more clearly in chapter four, where the question is posed on whether digital sociology studies technology or society. Here, again, the answer is not binary, as it brings to questioning established disciplinary boundaries between sociological analyses and media studies. Should digital infrastructures simply be conceived of as methodological resources? Or, on the other end of the spectrum, to what extent should social inquiry adopt research programs already built into social media platforms? In an echo of her early actor-network theory studies, Marres opts for radical empiricism and refuses to *a priori* define the object of digital social research. Rather, the empiricist choice suggests that asking how disciplinary boundaries are enacted throughout the empirical inquiry is a much more solid option. In the folds of this conclusion one might read the attempt to ground digital sociology as a meta-discipline concerned with the digital as both object and method.

In chapters four and five the focus shifts to social media research, while digital social life at large remains in the background. Chapter five questions the democratizing rhetoric of much digital pundits and businesses, but also the tendency to imagine participation as an autonomous sphere that should not mingle with other domains of activity. Rather, Marres suggests, digital participation reconfigures a vast administrative infrastructure for rendering publics and populations researchable and influenceable. I should admit that reading an author stressing the structural implications of participatory agency is relieving, after so many decades of democratizing rhetoric.

Finally, chapter six returns to the epistemological core. It argues that issues raised by digital ways on knowing and intervening in society are usually too narrowly framed as ethical and political. Differently, Marres suggests that they are also methodological, ontological and epistemic. The risk of not considering them as such is that issues raised by digital research slip beyond the domain of research design and method, to be niched into a separate 'ethics' tick box.

Throughout the book, Marres' writing style manages to be both pedagogical and personal. This allows the author to indulge in not too convoluted critiques of binary debates. The pedagogical intent is revealed in the many, explicative and juicy cases translated from the class board to the book pages. Yet the issues the book touches upon might be caught in their full depth by graduate students or scholars aware of the many historical points of contact and overlap between sociology and media studies.

All in all, despite a slightly marked British-centric perspective, the book convincingly and deeply addresses the many ways in which sociological and media research is prompted to embrace the increasing movement of the social towards the online. Yet it avoids scenarios of doom and provides concrete directions for social enquiry to reclaim its scientific and interventionist role in society.