

The Culture of the Digital: Pinterest and Digital Sociology

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Abstract

In this paper I use the social networking site Pinterest to demonstrate how people today are shaped by, and in turn shape, the digital tools they are assembled with. The digitisation of social life demands that sociology as a discipline adapts and adopts new ways of accounting for digital cultures. Digital sociology is emerging as a sociological subdiscipline that engages with the convergence of the digital and the social. While big data and new digital tools open up new ways of doing sociology and accounting for the social, we shan't forget the importance of critical socio-cultural 'thick description' to account for the interrelations between humans and technologies in modern digitally mediated cultures. While technology and the virtual have been on the sociological agenda for a long time, the label Digital Sociology asserts the discipline's distinctive grasp of the techno-social in the context of a proliferation of sciences that are taking claim to the ability to access and analyse the digitisation of social life.

Keywords

Digital sociology – digital culture – Pinterest – techno-social – self-formation

Introduction

In modern techno-social societies, actions, interactions, norms and cultures are increasingly mediated and entwined with digital practices. Cultural experiences are documented, shared and displayed via new media tools, which in turn shapes the experience of culture. Deuze contends that we live in a ‘mediapolis’: ‘a comprehensively mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life’ (2011: 137). Information is produced and disseminated at unprecedented rates. People share their day-to-day activities in these new mediated ‘networked publics’ (boyd 2008; 2011), creating persistent records that become searchable and replicable to invisible audiences of unknown scale (boyd 2008; 2011). The imminence of wearable computing technology and augmented reality like Google’s ‘Project Glass’, increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence technologies like Apple’s Siri, and the impacts of algorithms and ‘Big Data’ on daily life and academic research amplify the techno-social character of the modern social.

The recent emergence of the field of ‘digital sociology’, pioneered by scholars like Deborah Lupton, Antonio Cassilli, Mark Carrigan, Les Beck and Noortje Marris, indicates an exciting move in the discipline. Sociology is reaffirming its contribution to the digitisation of social life, showing its willingness to adapt its craft, and declaring its relevance in the context of a proliferation of sciences that are taking claim to the ability to access and analyse the social – computational social sciences, data science and even the natural sciences, to name but a few.

Science and Technology (STS) scholars have been active in accounting for the interrelations between humans and technologies in modern digitally mediated cultures for a long time (see e.g. Haraway 1991; Law 2008; Latour 2005). Sociologists have offered perspectives on the ‘virtual’ since the emergence of the internet and its popularisation as the world wide web in the late 1980s (see e.g. Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1997; Turkle 1984, 1995; Woolgar 2002). What is new is the label Digital Sociology. It formalises the renewed interest and approach of sociology in the techno-social. Considering new ways of theorising, analysing and utilising digital tools to account for their role in society and in the academic discipline of sociology showcases the unique viewpoint that sociology has to offer on the role of the digital in the everyday.

In this paper I explore one example - the social networking site Pinterest, and the way in which users employ it to shape, manage and display their relations to self and others - of a digital, socio-cultural text which sociologists can use as both the *object* of, and *tool* for research. I show how sites like Pinterest become tools for shaping the modern enterprising self. Hence, digital texts can be studied by sociologists, used as sociological research tools and provide techniques for shaping selves.

Pinning life into shape; shaping self

Pinterest combines social networking, picture-sharing and bookmarking into one online service. Users create themed digital pinboards on which they collect and share images sourced from all around the web. The use of a bookmarklet makes it possible to pin images to virtual pinboards at the click of a button while surfing the net. For example, a user may source a recipe online and use the “Pin It” bookmarklet to add it

to their previously created “Recipes” pinboard. When they are ready to make the meal, they access their Recipes pinboard to retrieve the recipe. Similarly, many Pinterest users collect craft and homemaking ideas, workout plans, books they want to read and places they want to travel to on appropriately themed, neatly compartmentalised pinboards. In this way, Pinterest is a simple digital tool that assists people with managing their ideas, interests and inspirations.

Beyond its organisational affordances Pinterest also provides a means of publicly flagging and memorialising ambitions and achievements. Users can follow one another without having to know or be approved by account holders. The public nature of online pinning makes Pinterest a means for people to demonstrate and share their aspirations and undertakings. For instance, many women¹ use the site to plan their weddings. They collect and share pictures of wedding dresses, venues, flower arrangements, centre pieces, hair do’s, etc. In addition to organising their ideas, they show (or show off) their tastes and ideas, and in this way flag their awareness of and success at managing (or subverting²) social norms. Many Pinterest users also maintain an “Inspirations” board, to which they pin motivational quotes such as ‘Doing what you like is Freedom; Liking what you do is Happiness’. Through their public pinning activity, users shape their understandings of self and make this observable as a work in progress. Pearson’s (2009) conceptualisation of social networking sites as ‘glass bedrooms’ captures well this public private activity.

There is an interactive component to pinning images onto Pinterest; users can ‘like’ and comment on the pins of others and repin them to their own boards. By publicly displaying their efforts to organise their lives and assemble ideas, inspirations and

aspirations that guide their conduct, digital pinners open themselves up to the critical gaze of their followers. Comments and ‘likes’ from others provide indications of how successfully a pinner portrays the well-rounded, enterprising life they seek to display³. The awareness of their ‘invisible audience’ (boyd 2011: 49) undoubtedly affects the way in which pinners conduct themselves. The perceived expectations of others, and the desire to adhere to these expectations, shape day-to-day conduct and understandings of self.

Lupton (2012) has explored the affordances Pinterest offers to academics. She indicates that the site can be used to collect and share images related to current research interests and teaching materials. Furthermore, she suggests that Pinterest boards can become sources of data that researchers can study to develop understandings of digital and commodity cultures (Lupton 2012: 11 – 12). Hence, digital technologies like Pinterest provide tools and resources for sociological research. They can support practical academic endeavours like developing teaching and research practices and circulating work in progress, as well as offering rich opportunities for new research. As sociologists, we need to study these texts and their cultures in order to understand hybrid techno-social modern landscapes, further legitimising the role of sociology in this to date under-theorised social domain. And as we do this sociological work *on* the digital, *using* digital tools, we also shape our understandings of ourselves as sociologists; we engage with our work, that of others and the digital social landscapes we operate in, and navigate our place within them.

This brief outline of the way in which Pinterest is used in the digital cultural sphere has highlighted three layers to online pinning activity: It is a means of organising day-

to-day conduct; a way of demonstrating interests, ambitions and achievements to others; and a tool for interacting with others in order to navigate social norms – by flagging wedding ideas, teaching practices, academic interests, cooking endeavours, workout plans and life inspirations, users seek to demonstrate (or subvert) normative behaviour and in this way establish guidelines according to which they live their lives. Thus, Pinterest becomes a technique of self (Foucault 1988) – a specific practical activity through which people assemble themselves in line with external expectations, influences and rules, and their own desires and aspirations.

The digital companion

Pinterest represents one techno-social hybrid assemblage. Sites like Pinterest accompany and memorialise the mundane daily lives of their users. Experiences become documented and shared with an invisible, temporally and spatially removed audience via such tools. A traveller updates their Facebook status (“Finally – made it to London. So tired but excited”), checks-in their exact location on FourSquare, shares a photo of themselves drinking English Breakfast tea on Instagram, follows the Twitter feed of a local sightseeing company (@Viator_London), and pins the image of a Harrods Guardsman Teddy Bear onto their ‘Things to buy in London’ Pinterest board. Experiences become multi-mediated, intertextually lived out and flow seamlessly from the social to the digital, rendering previously made distinctions between the online and the offline obsolete.

Social networking sites (SNSs) have also become enrolled in a variety of wider social, political, cultural, and academic contexts, which cannot be expanded upon in the confined space of this paper (see Gorman 2012; Kes-Erkul and Erkul 2009; Madrigal

2011; Shirky 2011 for some examples). Rose (2003) has explored how information and communication technologies (ICTs) contribute to converting the rational-economic expectations of neoliberal governments into the subjective personal aims of citizens. Digital tools like Pinterest encourage users to self-manage their lives, maximise their potential –as cooks, brides, hobbyists, athletes and professionals –, become well-rounded individuals, engaged with cultural, natural, intellectual and physical activities, constantly seeking to improve and perfect themselves and display this activity publicly. Hence, they govern their relations to self and others.

The call for a digital sociology

While areas like the digital humanities and digital social sciences have been blossoming now for some years, digital sociology has been slow to take off (Di Maggio 2001; Casilli 2012; Daniels and Feagin 2012; Lupton 2012). Earlier in 2013, Mark Carrigan and Emma Head founded the British Sociological Association's Digital Sociology Working Group to address this lack (Digital Sociology 2013). In June 2013, Carrigan established digital sociology as a tangible concept in the world wide web of knowledge by creating a Wikipedia entry on the term (Wikipedia 2013). Teaching courses on digital sociology are slowly popping up (Goldsmiths University of London 2013; University of Warwick 2013).

Lupton (2012) identifies four areas for digital sociological activity that account for the analysis of the digital world *by* sociologists and the use of digital tools *for* sociological research. She suggests that digital sociologists should use digital media to enhance their own 'professional digital practice' (2012: 5) by networking, publicising and sharing research and teaching ideas; to analyse digital data; to

understand how ‘people's use of digital media configures their sense of selves, their embodiment and their social relations’ (2012: 5) and; to reflect critically on digital media use through social and cultural theory.

While the recent rise of digital sociology acknowledges that digital tools and practices contribute to shaping day-to-day life and relations to self and others, current conceptualisations of digital sociology may not be entirely new concepts in the study of societies. STS scholars for a long time have sought to account for the relations between technological innovation, social, political and cultural circumstances, and social/scientific research. Most notably, but by no means exclusively, Donna Haraway (1991), John Law (2008) and Bruno Latour (2005) have explored, in their own ways, the role technologies play in everyday life – a role that is relational and non-distinct from the involvement of other actors assembled and enacted in networks. Law notes that ‘a concern with technology is braided into sociology’ (2008: 623). Yet, the emergence of the field of ‘digital sociology’ indicates that sociologists are taking seriously the reconsideration of practices and craft of scholarship in the discipline itself, and the objects and methods of their study in a digital context.

While the development of new methods and the use of digital tools to support and publicise academic work are important aspects of doing digital sociology, it is just as vital to apply socio-theoretically founded, critical ‘thick descriptions’ of digital cultures that account for the mutual interrelations between digital tools and their human users, as well as for the historical backgrounds of these new tools. Pinterest provides an obvious example; cork boards for collecting and visually displaying images, ideas and inspirations are not an invention of the internet age. They were used

in the past and have been translated into digitally mediated contexts. While studying these digital tools can offer insights into modern social practices, we need to remember that ‘new and emerging technologies ... initiate old questions in new circumstances of what these technologies mean’ (Henman 2013: 300). People have always employed tools to aid them in navigating the complexities (and mundane occurrences) of their day-to-day lives (Latour, 2005, 1991; Michael 2006). Hence, studying digital society requires remaining aware of the places these tools have come from and the complex, interrelated roles they play in shaping and being shaped by their human users.

Digital assemblages

As our social worlds become increasingly digitally mediated, new ways of thinking about the social become necessary. The use of Pinterest to organise daily life, flag achievements, and shape relations to self and others exemplifies the increasing immersion of modern subjects in digital cultures. The establishment of digital sociology confirms the conscious turn to this new digital culture within the discipline. While there have been scholars at the intersection of sociology and STS who have engaged with the study of techno-social assemblages for a long time, sociological methods and theoretical approaches are being reinvented and adapted to engage critically and comprehensively with the culture of the digital. Big data and digital tools open up new ways of doing sociology and accounting for the social, yet we shan’t forget the importance of critical socio-cultural ‘thick description’ to account for the interrelations between humans and technologies in modern digitally mediated cultures. Pinterest provides one example through which to investigate how the digital forms part of wider practices of subjectivation, relations between actants and

processes of governing. The historical roots and mutual interrelations between digital tools and their human users provide a means of accounting fully for the cultures and affordances of the digital and its place in the discipline of sociology.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that the Pinterest user-base is largely female. According to Duggan and Brenner (2013), women are 5 times more likely to use Pinterest than men.
2. Exploring non-normative behaviour on Pinterest lies beyond the limitations of this short paper. A noteworthy example is that of anorexic women who use the site to collect images of their extreme idealisations of a beautiful body. While Pinterest banned ‘thinspirational’ pinning in 2012, pictures of emaciated bodies and dieting tips still circulate on the site.
3. Others highlight the absurdity of striving for the picture-perfect life portrayed on Pinterest. The blog *Pintester* (Foust 2012), for instance, tests recipes, hair and beauty tips, inspirational quotes and other ideas posted on Pinterest, generally to reveal their unattainability. The blogger humorously states: ‘I spend far too much time on [Pinterest] planning weddings I will never have and designing rooms I know I will never do’ (Foust 2012), further attesting to the unfeasibility of living up to the idealisations posted on Pinterest.

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