Digital sociology expands in China

SOCIOLOGY

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In order to explore the rapid development of digital technology and its far reaching impact on human behavior and social operations, a new branch of sociology—digital sociology—has emerged and developed at an astonishing speed. Digital sociology studies the interaction mechanisms between digital technology and social environments, and is quickly gaining popularity in China.

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Origins

In 2009, American scholar Jonathan Wynn published a short essay on the Sociological Forum, formally introducing the concept of "digital sociology." Wynn shared his experience of using digital technology in sociological research and teaching, and pointed out that digital technology presents a new set of challenges for sociologists to explore and study in depth. Since the publication of this essay, digital technology has rapidly developed across the world, and human society has now entered the digital age. At the same time, the field of "digital sociology" continues to expand, and theories and methodologies continue to innovate, far beyond Wynn's first suggestion of the idea.

Since the concept of "digital sociology" was formally put forward in 2009, it has gradually gained international recognition. In just a decade, digital sociology has developed rapidly, and a variety of specialized works have been published on this topic, enlarging the audience for digital sociology.

Meanwhile, sociological societies and organizations in several countries have launched research centers dedicated to digital studies, and many colleges and universities have begun to offer degrees and courses in the field of digital sociology. Thus, an academic community of digital sociology has gradually formed on the world stage, naturally elevating relevant research. On the whole, the emergence of digital sociology has reignited the imaginations of sociologists on many fronts, providing a new lens to observe the digital transformation of human society and interpret the relationship between individuals and society.

Two thorny issues

Though the concept of "digital sociology" has been widely adopted and has been a new focal point in sociological research, academics have not yet formed a unified understanding on the following two core questions: whether or not digital sociology should be viewed as a new branch of sociological research, and how the research scope of digital sociology should be defined.

On the first question, this paper tends to agree that digital sociology is a new branch of sociology. Only when digital technology or digitally-related social phenomena are taken as the core subject of inquiry can the research fall under the purview of digital sociology. On the second question, we have found that six core research topics in digital sociology seem to be widely published by the academic community. These topics will be discussed later in the paper.

In addition, responding to past discussions in academic circles, this paper tries to answer the question of "what is digital sociology" as follows: Digital sociology is a branch of sociology that explores the development and application of digital technology from the perspective of sociological analysis and research methods, explains the impact of digital technology on human behavior and social operation, and studies the interaction mechanism between digital technology and social environments. It is worth noting that this definition is mainly based on the development of digital sociology at its current stage. As research horizons expand, understandings of the discipline will also be expected to change.

Digital sociology in six areas

Next, based on the above definition, this paper will roughly group Western digital sociological research into six areas. First, labor economy and production. Digital sociology has conducted preliminary studies on this issue, mainly focusing on the following three aspects: the new economic form born from digital technology; the change of production mode and labor conditions in traditional industries, as well as the establishment of new labor-capital relations; the integration of production and consumption in the digital economy, and the rise of new forms of exploitation.

Second, digital politics and power. At present, the focus of digital sociology in this area mainly involves the following four topics: panoramic surveillance and power dynamics in digital society, the non-neutrality of algorithms, political participation in digital society, and the connotations and challenges of digital governance.

Third, social relations and interactions. The study of social relations and interactions has always been a focus for sociologists. As German sociologist Georg Simmel said, in order for sociology to answer the questions about how society is possible, it is necessary to study interactions between people. As of now, the widespread use of digital technology has changed the process for human interactions and the way social relations are constructed, promoted the formation of online communities, and provided new possibilities for shaping collective identity and consciousness.

Fourth, the body and self. The study of the body and the self is another classic topic in sociology. From the perspective of sociology, the body is shaped by the forces of social structures, which have an important impact on self-construction. In the digital age, both the body and the self have richer meanings. Digital sociology tries to explain the issue from two aspects: the interconnection of bodies and the quantification of self, as in digital avatars and self-constructions in virtual space.

Fifth, social inequality. The topic of inequality has run throughout the history of sociology, and digital sociology inherits this tradition by focusing on the following two questions: First, what role does digital technology play in the reproduction of existing social structures (such as class structures, gender structures, racial structures, etc.)? In other words, will the development of digital technologies exacerbate or alleviate existing social inequalities? Second, will the widespread use of digital technologies create new social inequalities?

Sixth, methodological innovation. The study of digital sociology follows the research traditions of sociology, not only in terms of the theoretical issues about the application of digital technology, but also in the innovation of research methods. At present, relevant research on digital sociology focuses on mining diverse data sources while innovating traditional analysis tools.

In recent years, the development and application of digital technology has grown exponentially in China, triggering profound changes in production and life. At the same time, the research topic of digital sociology has also attracted more attention. In terms of theoretical exploration, some scholars have engaged in enlightening studies on such issues as macro social change, the transformation of social differentiation mechanisms, new social risks, social governance transformation, and technological ethical challenges brought about by digital technology. In terms of empirical research, research around digital sociology has also developed rapidly, with diversified perspectives and rich content.

Chinese innovations

Among digital sociology essays published in the three major journals of Social Sciences in China, Sociological Research, and Society, 80% of them have been published since 2015, mimicking the rapid development of digital sociology in China during the same time period. According to the six research areas listed above, and specific research outcomes, this paper roughly classifies these findings. As it turns out, compared to the West, the development of digital sociology in China has both commonalities and uniquely Chinese characteristics, which are mainly reflected in the following four aspects.

First, current research covers the majority of topics in digital sociology, with some clear preferences, whereas other topics are still not sufficiently studied. On the whole, existing studies show a tendency to "emphasize macro society and undervalue micro individuals," extensively discussing the two themes of labor economy and production, and political power and governance, while spending less time discussing social relations, social interactions, and social inequality. In contrast, the discussion of the body and self, which focuses on micro individual life practices, is rare. Thus, the current development of digital sociology in China shows a trend of multiple-front advances and relative concentration. On the basis of maintaining advantageous fields, the research horizons can be further broadened.

Second, the research content is dis-tinctive, reflecting development and application of China's digital technology. Going forward, it is necessary to strengthen active exploration of new phenomena in digital society. These studies, in the context of China's unique digital transformation, are an important part of international digital sociology. On this basis, future research needs to stress new phenomena in China's digital society. Comparatively speaking, Western digital sociologists have shown greater interest in the development frontier of digital technology and the digital practices of young people, and have more in-depth research on new phenomena in digital society, which provides a reference for domestic scholars.

Third, while leveraging the advantages of sociology, existing research initially demonstrated an analytical perspective of multidisciplinary integration, but it needs to further break disciplinary barriers and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. As digital sociology develops in the West, multi-disciplinary integration will be an inevitable trend.

That said, the future development of Chinese digital sociology needs to further break disciplinary barriers, propose new research questions, find research methods, and carry out academic cooperation using an interdisciplinary framework, which will lay a more solid scientific foundation for Chinese digital sociology and provide more structure for the future development of the discipline.

Finally, existing research is based on traditional sociological methods, and more innovative practices are needed, especially in terms of methodology. Right now, innovative studies are scarce. Judging from the development of digital sociology in the international arena, the continuous innovation of methodology and research tools has become another distinctive feature of digital sociology, marking it as different from other branches of sociology. It is thus necessary to break with traditional research methods at the epistemological level, to identify and concretely analyze diverse data sources, to better respond to related research questions.

Although applications for digital technology have crossed national boundaries, digital sociology research still needs to consider specific social and cultural environments, and actively promote local research while maintaining an international exchange of knowledge. Future development of digital sociology in China requires broader research horizons, built on the basis of existing achievements, to grasp new phenomena particular to digital society, to strengthen interdisciplinary communication, and innovate at the methodological level. This targeted development will deepen exploration of the social transformation and societal change deeply embedded in the rise of digital technology.

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